



PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

GENOCIDE, PHILOSOPHICAL FETISHISM, MOURNING, AND TESTIMONY

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This article was first drafted prior to the devastating retaliation on the population of Gaza for the Al Aqsa Flood killings by Hamas, the relentless violence of which has been unfolding for over a year and that many have been calling a genocide. The article was originally in part prompted by the increased prominence of the ultranationalist right in Israel from 2022 onwards, as will be indicated further on. It was also originally motivated by my wish to re-engage with Achebe's critique of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* to address certain epistemic and psychological pretexts of colonial genocide.¹

I first engaged with Achebe's essay "An Image of Africa: Racism in *Heart of Darkness*" in my book *African Literature, Animism and Politics* (Rooney 2000, 66–7). On that occasion, I endorsed Achebe's position that African indigenous cultures are not adequately represented in European literature where my concern was with how postcolonial theories shaped by European Enlightenment philosophies served to foreclose African spiritual philosophies that implicitly or explicitly accompany liberation struggles. However, since then my concern has been that certain aspects of Achebe's critique could serve to deflect attention from Conrad's analysis of colonial genocide in terms of how *Heart of Darkness* entertains the notion of radical evil beyond the formulations of the banality of evil.

In his reading of *Heart of Darkness*, Chinua Achebe accuses Conrad of "dehumanising" Africans, specifying a particular passage of the work as follows: "Herein lies the meaning of *Heart of Darkness* and the fascination it holds over the Western mind: 'What thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours...Ugly'" (Achebe 1997, 785). The extract that Achebe abridges is: "like yours—

the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough" (Conrad 1999 [1899], 64).

Firstly, it is paradoxical that Achebe considers Conrad's affirmation of a common humanity (however "ugly") to constitute a dehumanising gesture, where Conrad's implied position is one that is highly sceptical of the idea of modernity as civilisational progress. Secondly, I wish to propose that Achebe arguably misreads this passage of *Heart of Darkness* through failing to attend to the novella's orality.

Heart of Darkness is a theatrically spoken text, as it is narrated by Marlow to a group of acquaintances on a sailing yawl anchored on the River Thames. Regarding the previously indicated passage that Achebe finds offensive, it is a question of how you *hear* it. I believe that Marlow is addressing the interjected prejudices of his audience, the presumably British or European men to whom the story is being delivered. The passage would then read along the following lines: "Ugly [you say]. Well, ugly if you insist, but I would counter-insist that they are just as human as we Europeans are." Throughout *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow can be seen to struggle to persuade his ignorant audience with their racist prejudices that the barbarism of the Belgian colonisers is far worse than anything ascribed to the Congolese tribes, including the historically documented instances of cannibalism. Thus, Marlow is at pains to argue that those presumed to be cannibals exhibited commendable restraint, even when starved of food (Conrad 1999, 69), while the sadism and cruelty of colonisers like Kurtz lacked any ethical restraint whatsoever (Conrad 1999, 86).

The theatrical dimensions of *Heart of Darkness* can be linked to the text's status as a testimony with regard to the atrocities witnessed by Conrad in the Congo. Desmond Tutu, in his foreword to Yaël Farber's *Theatre as Witness: Three Testimonial Plays From South Africa* proposes: "Theatre is the ambitious sister of testimony. It strives to heal through truth" (Farber 2008, 7). For the purposes of this analysis, there are two particular aspects of the theatricality of testimony to draw attention to. In her introduction to Yaël Farber's testimonial theatre, Amanda Stuart-Fisher maintains that Farber believes that the healing power of communicating one's story depends crucially on the presence of a *listener* capable of acknowledging their actual reception of the story (9–17). The presence of an audience establishes that the testimonial delivery is engaged in a real process of transmission that potentially allows for the retrieval of collective solidarity as a means of restoring the dignity of the victims whose human existence has been negated.

The second reason for the connection between theatre and testimony that I wish to highlight here concerns the relationship of the witness or truth-teller to language. In her essay, "Testimony: Beyond the Language of Truth," Nora Strejilevich, writing out of her experience of state terror in Argentina (1977), argues that testimonial discourse is not eventually about the deposition of data and information (even as facts matter in a legal context). Rather for Strejilevich, while law courts demand precise objective evidence, the truth-telling of traumatic experience "should allow for disruptive memories, discontinuities, blanks, silences and ambiguities" (Strejilevich 2006, 704). This is explicitly a matter for Strejilevich of a literary discourse, presumably as opposed to a literal one. Yet this literary quality of the struggle to narrate the unbearable and unfathomable is, I would

suggest, significantly marked by the orality of a witness-speaker who in the moment of speaking dramatizes the inadequacy of language to utter what they seek to convey. This oral hesitancy is strikingly characteristic of the narrative of Marlow, with its dramatized gaps, discontinuities, silences and ambiguities, as he struggles to communicate less a sequence of events than an experiential horror that is pervasively mysterious. Strejilevich maintains of her own testimony in its Argentinian context that her driving concern has been to capture “the mystery of the horror” (713).

In *Heart of Darkness*, the difficult yet urgent need to find words for the undeniable yet radically disorientating reality of the horror contrasts starkly both with the banal platitudes of colonial bureaucracy and with Kurtz’s frequently emphasised boundless eloquence that for all its dazzling loquacity is said to be thoroughly deceitful; not so much a performance of truth-telling but a commanding linguistic fabrication of so-called truths.

One aspect of Achebe’s argument that is very pertinent for this essay is his suggestion that *Heart of Darkness* uses Africa as a stage for a “metaphysical battlefield” (Achebe 1977, 788), although I would suggest such a staging does not necessarily imply the ulterior motive that Achebe attributes to it; that is, as a supposed philosophical displacement of the genocide Conrad witnessed. I wish to affirm that while *Heart of Darkness* can be read as the staging of a metaphysical or philosophical allegory, signalled by Marlow’s hint that the meaning of his tale is not a kernel within it but contained in a halo or orbit beyond it (Conrad 1999, 33), it also constitutes a reckoning with the evil of colonial genocide as opposed to an avoidance of such.

It has been noted that the Buddhist pose and passive attitude of Marlow imply that Conrad may have been aligning his narrator with the Buddhist-influenced Schopenhauer (for example, Alpert 2017, 1). However, yet to be entertained, as far as I know, is that if Marlow could be correlated with Schopenhauer’s Buddhist inclinations, then Kurtz could be correlated with aspects of Hegel’s philosophy: this amounting to Conrad’s metaphysical battlefield. Conrad, through Marlow, is at pains to establish Kurtz as no mere ordinary colonial functionary but as a “universal genius” (Conrad 1999, 55), a kind of colonial mastermind. He is given to us as immensely learned across all fields and as rhetorically hugely impressive (75). Kurtz thoroughly believes in his own and Europe’s enlightening forces while he is also consumed by a venomous hatred of Africans, scrawling across his civilisational pamphlet the genocidal exhortation: “Exterminate all the brutes!” (78).

Would Conrad have known Hegel’s writings on Africa? Familiar with Schopenhauer, he would almost certainly have known that Schopenhauer despised Hegel, Schopenhauer writing of Hegel’s supposed genius as nonsense and jargon, comprised of: “stringing together senseless and extravagant mazes of words such as had previously only been heard in madhouses” (Schopenhauer 2015, 633). For Schopenhauer, Hegel constituted a pretentious and bewitching influence on younger generations, the way that Marlow depicts the naïve Russian “harlequin” boy as hypnotised by his “idol” Kurtz. If Conrad had read Hegel on Africa, he would have been aware that Hegel had explicitly depicted Africans as inhuman “man-animals” who needed to be enslaved

to civilise them through Westernisation, eradicating their African origins and belief systems (see Rooney 2000, 175–76).

If the correlation of Kurtz with Hegel has any plausibility, the implication is that Conrad does not consider genocidal colonialism as something that can be divorced from lofty idealist European philosophy as if colonialism were a mere atypical aberration. The unethical trajectories of history would rather be implicated in a certain problematic philosophical imposition. This notion that colonial practices may be correlated with certain European or Western epistemologies (thus, not only ideologies) has been significantly explored by both African philosophers such as Emmanuel Eze (1998) and by Indigenous scholars such as Sandy Grande (2015) and Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2015).

I would now like to suggest that Conrad explores two forms of evil in *Heart of Darkness*. The one form is what Arendt termed the banality of evil. However, while for Arendt the identification of the banality of evil replaced her earlier ideas about radical evil, Conrad juxtaposes the banality of evil with radical evil. First of all, Marlow is astounded by how colonial bureaucrats, such as the accountant, are fastidiously able to carry on with business as usual while just beyond their office windows Africans are dying visibly all the time from the persistent violent colonial abuses they are suffering (Conrad 1999, 44–45). This bureaucratic indifference as complicity is tantamount to the banality of evil, or perhaps more accurately, to the evil of banality.

Arendt's concept is derived from the research of Raul Hilberg who examined how German bureaucracy paved the way for the Holocaust. However, for Hilberg it is *not* that evil can be itself banal (Hilberg 1966, 150), but that banality can facilitate evil. It is because Arendt equates evil with banality that she gives up on the notion of evil as radical or extreme. Moreover, Arendt was excited by the discovery of the very *banality* of evil, and this could be because it allowed her to separate high German culture, particularly its philosophical tradition from Hegel to Heidegger, from the barbarism of the Holocaust (see Wolin 2015, 56–57).

As for Conrad, if Kurtz can be aligned with Hegel in certain ways, then the implication is that Hegelian philosophy is complicit with the politics of colonial history. While Hegel's philosophy of course predates the Belgian genocide, Hegel's attitude to the genocidal occupation of America is worth noting. Hegel maintains that the indigenous people made themselves just "vanish" (the word he uses) before the European settlers due to what he deems the "crouching submissiveness" on the part of the indigenous (Hegel 1991 [1837], 82–83).

In *Heart of Darkness*, it seems irrational that Kurtz, who apparently despises Africans, ends up "going native," so to speak. Marlow attributes to the African wilderness a mysterious, brooding spiritual presence that serves to out Kurtz as someone who is thoroughly "hollow at the core" (Conrad 1999, 86). For all his book knowledge, he may be said to be lacking the freedom of spirit and spontaneity that Marlow witnesses in the local African culture (41). On the one hand, Kurtz is very possessive in a materialistic sense with his horde of ivory and rapacious assertions of "mineness" (76). On the other hand, Kurtz would go beyond this in seeking to claim the African spirit that he lacks, hence

his ludicrous and disastrous attempt at becoming African, “going native.” In order to explain this, it is necessary to reflect on the dynamics of Hegelian dialectic.

As I have argued elsewhere (Rooney 2020, 14–15), Hegelian dialectic operates through the internalisation of what presents itself as other to it. Hegel writes: “The European spirit opposes the world to itself, and while freeing of itself from it, sublates this opposition by taking back into the simplicity of its own self the manifoldness of this its other” (Petry 179, 61). His dialectic is therefore a form of colonisation as usurpation in that the internalisation of the other eradicates them through replacing them. Lacan interestingly speaks of Hegelian philosophy as plagiarism (Lacan 2007 [1973], 22–23), and it can be said that the plagiarist internalises the other’s knowledge to present it as their own, in an act of usurpation of the actual author (and their sources). It is a cutting-off of the lines of transmission. More specifically, Magee argues that Hegel had a lifelong largely clandestine reliance on Hermetic philosophy (as derives from Ancient Egyptian thought), widely drawing on it without acknowledging his sources much of the time (Magee 2001).

Earlier I touched tangentially on the bond between plagiarism and colonial usurpation. Plagiarism functions like commodity fetishism in that both present the copy as if it were the original. Commodities are manufactured copies or clones of a template and yet they appear on the stage as if they have conjured themselves out of thin air, that is, as if they were self-authoring. Similarly, the plagiarised work is a copy that disguises its status as such and presents itself as auto-inspired. What I am calling philosophical fetishism in this essay is a case of the commodification of thought and ideas, presenting idealist philosophy as having a self-originating power, bewitchingly so.

The Hegelian internalisation of non-Western philosophical traditions is not merely an intellectual operation in that Hegel is not content for philosophy to be a belated reflection on historical events that precede it. Rather, history is *itself* supposed to be a rational or philosophical operation that unfolds itself with an auto-correcting power. If history is itself dialectical, then the colonising usurpation of the other, one that takes the place of the other, is potentially genocidal. That is, for the usurpation to be secure and successful, the drive is towards the eradication of the other as other. Regarding German fascism, as the Germans fashioned an Aryan identity for themselves, internalising the Oriental as somehow an inner property of the German nation, the Jews as Oriental others stood as a reminder of the failure to actually internalise the Oriental, and this is arguably what issued in the drive to eradicate totally the Oriental as outsider (as opposed to what is thoroughly and securely internalised) (see Rooney 2020, 36).

Plagiarism is in itself of course not equivalent to the barbarism of genocide. Rather, what is at stake is a mutual possessive dynamic, one that is akin to a kind of inheritance-denying soul theft (this as far more drastic than just cultural appropriation). Genocidal colonial racism specifically concerns how the settler immigrant tries to usurp the native through internalising the native while trying to make the actual native disappear. For example, white pride Americans can be seen to enjoy posturing as shamans, from the Ku Klux Klan wizard men to the recent “QAnon Shaman,” while the actual shamans are Native Americans. Joseph Pierce writes of the QAnon Shaman: “White supremacists like Angeli pose as Indians in order to create an image of themselves as inseparable

from the land itself. They imitate indigenous people and they justify their actions by imagining themselves as the natural heirs to a land retroactively emptied of Native Americans" (Pierce 2021). Pierce, as a Cherokee nation citizen, further comments, "It is a desire for indigeneity without indigenous people." Addressing this possessive assertion of belonging on the part of settler Australians, Moreton-Robinson further observes: "Kehulani Kuananui argues that Hawaiian identity is also appropriated by white people as a way of indigenizing their presence" (Moreton-Robinson 2015, 59).

When I first wrote this article with the hypothesis that Conrad posits Kurtz in terms of Kurtz's claiming indigeneity for himself through the genocidal erasure of African people and their inheritances, I was unaware of Rob Lemkin's film *African Apocalypse* that explores a specific historical correlative for Kurtz in the figure of Captain Paul Voulet, a French soldier sent by France in 1898 to consolidate French colonial dominion along what is now the Niger-Nigeria border. In the course of this mission, Voulet (like the fictional Kurtz) descended into barbaric sadism destroying the African villages on his route, brutally slaughtering thousands of Africans and sometimes displaying their heads on stakes. When the French learnt of Voulet's barbarity they sent another expedition in pursuit of Voulet to dispense with him. Voulet remained unrepentant and declared: "I am no longer a Frenchman. I am an African" (Lemkin 2020). His genocidal drive thus entails the fantasy of taking the place of the other.

Genocide is not merely the extermination of a group other, as happens in war in general. Genocide also constitutes a fanatical refusal to mourn the other, to acknowledge them even in death. That is, for the desired eradication to be complete, even the dead body or bodies must be disavowed, as if such a person or such a people had never been. It is a denial of the other ever having had a place in human history and thus the pretence is that there is no one to mourn.

Given the previous, one of the responses to the victims of genocide is rightly to insist on the mourning and memorialisation of those who have been killed, but what about the perpetrators? Who broaches the mourning of the evildoers? There is a certain political practice that seeks to deny mourning rites to those deemed to be on the wrong side of history. Both the corpses of Eichmann and Osama bin Laden were disposed of at sea after their executions. There were minimal burial rites but no proper burial as a site of commemoration and no mourners. The message is that such people deserve eradication without mourning, as remains problematically in keeping with the genocidal logic of total purgation.

In *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow does allow Kurtz to be mourned when he withholds from Kurtz's fiancé the truth of Kurtz's barbaric actions in Africa thus allowing her to continue her adoration and mourning of him. He does not withhold the truth from the audience of his testimony, so it is not ultimately a case of disavowal on his part. Rather, he allows Kurtz his dismal sole mourner, and while Kurtz's actions are presented as abominable, he is too complex to be presented as a one-dimensional caricature of evil especially given his sincere deathbed recognition of his culpability. In addition, Marlow gives us to understand that the violent perversions of the colonial present will

most certainly be resisted by the African revolutionaries of the future, as represented by the spiritual leadership of the African woman who urges her people to revolt (Conrad 1999, 95).

Finally, I would briefly like to touch on the contemporary relevance of my reading of *Heart of Darkness* with reference to the current case of settler colonialism in Israel-Palestine. In 2023, the far-right Israeli finance minister Bezalel Smotrich made a speech in which he asserted that the Palestinians as Palestinians do not exist: “there’s no such thing as the Palestinian people.” At the same time, he claimed “I am a Palestinian,” fantasising himself and his family to be “real Palestinians.” (Staff 2023). This is a striking instance of the colonial logic of the appropriation of indigeneity precisely to erase the indigenous, as explored in this essay. It is also the case that former Israeli leader Golda Meir (originally of Ukrainian roots, as is Smotrich) claimed that Palestinians did not exist while she emphatically asserted: “I am a Palestinian” (Ahmed 2023).

Amira Haas, reporting on Israel’s 2023 bombardment of Gaza, considers it to be more than revenge in that it can be aligned with Smotrich’s open advocacy of the expulsion or extermination of all Palestinians (Haas 2023). The far-right in Israel also (with echoes of Hegel on Africa) refer to Palestinians as “human animals,” and West Bank settlers have used the Kurtz-like battle cry of “Exterminate the beasts” (Gunter 2024). At the same time, in tandem with the current violence against Gazans, Israelis on Tik Tok, as reported by Selma Dabbagh, have posted images of themselves dressed up as Palestinian Arabs in *kuffiyehs*: as a form of mockery yet also suggesting a stance of appropriation as usurpation (Dabbagh 2023).

Coming back to *Heart of Darkness*, as already indicated, Conrad posits genocide in terms of a total lack of restraint (Conrad 1999, 94). Although this might suggest that Kurtz becomes barbaric when removed from the civilizing forces of his own society, this is not really the import of Kurtz as himself the supreme representative of Enlightenment Europe. Rather, Conrad serves to anticipate Zygmunt Bauman’s analysis of the Holocaust where Bauman (in keeping with the earlier insights of Adorno and Horkheimer) maintains that the Holocaust must be understood as the very product of modern rational society, a society for which reason is paramount in the performative realisation of its social engineering designs. Bauman writes: “Modern genocide is an element of social engineering, meant to bring about a social order conforming to the design of the perfect society” (Bauman 1989, 91), and he also discusses the “rationality of evil” (202). The lack of restraint consists of the crazy rationalisation, so to speak, of extreme means such as genocide as necessary to achieving the desired end of the ideally cohesive community, cleansed of all the scapegoated forces that supposedly threaten it.

Bauman states of modern genocide: “*The design gives it the legitimation; state bureaucracy gives it the vehicle; and the paralysis of society gives it the ‘road clear’ sign*” (Bauman 1989, 114, italics in text). Thus, this kind of genocide is the *intentional* enactment of an idea or an ideal. (Marlow tells Kurtz’s fiancé, called “the intended,” that his last words were her name, thus conflating “the intended” with “the horror,” Kurtz’s actual last words.) In an important recent testimonial essay on the Gaza genocide, Atef Alshaer speaks of how Israeli (and White House) “discourse-engineering” gives evil

the “appearance of banality” to conceal the extreme inhumanity that is deliberately, systematically implemented in technologically sophisticated ways (Alshaer 2024, 8–9).

Coming back to the opening concerns of this essay, theatrical testimony emerges in contradistinction to the performativity of genocide. The performative, specifically as regards its philosophical formulation by Austin, concerns a *literalising* operation whereby linguistic claims are said to actualise themselves. Thus, the mere claim of the coloniser to be the native is intended literally to accomplish what it asserts. Beyond this, the violent enactment of ideological designs is a performative literalisation of those designs. While Baumann speaks of social engineering, Israel's bombardment of Gaza has also put into operation a sophisticated AI targeting machine called Lavender, as reported on by Yuval Abraham (2024). Lavender uses abstract generic modelling to posit suspected Hamas affiliates so as to turn these suspects into literal targets for their eradication, including the killing of all those in their vicinity.

While such uses of the performative seek to engineer reality through intention, construction and design, theatrical testimony necessarily attests to a reality that is outside of linguistic fabrications. With genocide, this concerns re-establishing the inheritances and lines of transmission that genocidal perpetrators have sought to violently occlude. These lines of transmission concern not only those deprived of their inheritances, but also those who disavow history. The opening lines of a poem by Rafaat Alareer (a Gazan English lecturer), written shortly before his assassination by the IDF, are:

Look in the mirror.
The horror, the horror. (Alareer 2024, 27)

Notes

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Biography

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