

“A Phenomenology of Violence”

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In Violence In/And The Great Lakes: The Thought of V-Y Mudimbe and Beyond

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There has always been violence. There will always be violence. Although possibly true, these statements fail to grapple with the sheer number of people brutalised, terrorised and killed in the Great Lakes region. According to one source, around 38 000 people die each month in the eastern Congo due to war-related causes (Lemarchand 2009). If the killings in Rwanda and Burundi are included, approximately 5.5 million people have died in this region from war-related causes since 1994. The inevitability of violence also does not excuse the long history of muted response from the international community to the crimes against humanity and human rights abuses committed in the Great Lakes region. Popular judgements of the violence as ‘incomprehensible’, ‘unimaginable’, ‘unspeakable’ and ‘evil’ temper efforts to intervene or to recognise our moral responsibility for the victims. Along with such judgements are attitudes such as: *The situation is complex. How do we help what we cannot comprehend? Anyway, how can anyone begin to ‘fix’ such atrocities?* Less commonly, people mention shame for the violence of colonisation that complicates any heroic effort to rescue people in the region. How could any response be straightforwardly and selflessly humanitarian given the well-chronicled colonial exploitation of the Congo, or the potential for future exploitation and profit from the abundant natural resources? Wouldn’t any gesture naturally be met with scepticism? Especially given the failure to respond to the Rwandan genocide of 1994, this shame is very real, complicated and not easily swept away.

I would like to argue that the failure to protect victims of violence is not related solely to the history of the Great Lakes region, or to racism or colonialism, but reveals aspects of the deep psychology of Western modernity. The people of the Great Lakes region are learning first-hand how victimisation is often handled in modern, shame-avoiding, capitalist democracies. The shame of violence, as well as the feelings of vulnerability and self-loathing that shame characteristically calls forth, are often dissociated from the modern individual’s awareness. Furthermore, the denial of shame not only keeps people from feeling their own suffering, but also acknowledging the suffering of others.

Following the Rwandan genocide, General Paul Kagame spoke of the failure of the international community to emotionally witness the impact of genocide on the Rwandan people:

Sometimes I think this is contempt for us. I used to quarrel with these Europeans who used to come, giving us sodas, telling us, ‘You should not do this, you should do this, you don’t do this, do this.’ I said, ‘Don’t you have feelings?’ These feelings have affected people” (in Gourevitch 1998: 337).

The contempt Kagame identified may well be real and could be the result of the demand for an emotional response. In the United States, denial of victimhood seems to be part of the phenomenology of violence. Indeed, the failure to protect the most vulnerable, or to even acknowledge their suffering, appears to be a central aspect of the individual’s unspoken education for becoming ‘modern’.

In this chapter, I provide a depth psychology perspective of the violence perpetrated in the Great Lakes region, as well as of the passive violence committed by the West when it fails to sufficiently intervene and protect victims and potential victims. The phenomenology of violence presented here draws from my experiences as a trauma-focused psychotherapist and from lectures given by Professor V-Y Mudimbe in an advanced graduate seminar at Stanford University titled ‘Phenomenology of Madness’ (Mudimbe et al. 1997). I have had the great pleasure and honour of working with Professor Mudimbe on this and other projects throughout my career (see, for example, Mudimbe, Iwele and Kerr 2007). Yet, it was the ideas he shared in these lectures and the guidance he gave me in the development of my own research agenda that initiated my belief that psychological ruptures and the denial of emotions such as shame are central to the phenomenology of both madness and violence (Kerr 2000, 2010). Through the reflections on violence as implicit in the formation of Western thought, Mudimbe’s work has been foundational to my search for psychologies that foster people’s humanity. As I grapple with how the West contributes to violence in the Great Lakes region, I am also searching for ways to return humanity to the area. As a student of Mudimbe’s, I inherited a respect and regard for humanity and for all life that I am compelled to pay forward.

The centrality of shame for violence

As a specialist in the treatment of psychological trauma, I have worked with both men and women in the United States who have long histories of violence, sometimes reaching back to their first days of life. Furthermore, many of my clients are minorities and often disenfranchised by the capitalist system. As well as childhood abuse, they have suffered the violence of racism, classism and/or sexism. Each of their histories includes several of the following phenomena: homelessness, domestic violence, sexual assault, incarceration, prostitution, attempted murder, armed robbery and/or involvement in gangs. Throughout their lives, they have struggled with drug addictions. All have been victims of violence, even the perpetrators.

Few people ever hear about my clients' histories of violence, unless they somehow make headlines. Then they momentarily grab attention, but are quickly forgotten again, as if violence is the order of things for people who live on the fringes of society. My clients – their actions and their lives – are often also greeted with words such as 'incomprehensible', 'unimaginable', 'unspeakable' and 'evil'. When I examine the West's response to the violence in the Great Lakes region, I see rough similarities to the way my clients are left to struggle with violence and the effects of violence. In many regards, although not as severely, these Americans are treated in ways similar to how people subjected to violence in the Great Lakes region are being treated by the West: their injuries often go unaddressed or are even ignored and they are often left responsible for their housing, food, education, health care and, perhaps most importantly, safety.

According to the American historical novelist Russell Banks (2008), race is the 'un-narrative' that drives my country's neglect of its most vulnerable members. Yet, as a white woman who grew up in a profoundly sexist (and racist) time in the history of the United States South and who has experienced violence as well as marginalisation due to my own struggles with victimhood, I tend to broaden the context beyond race. I see a psychological split that is fundamental to the deep psychology of the United States. This split or rupture originates in violence and is also the foundation on which the roles of perpetrator and victim are played out. Banks wrote about this split and how central it is to the United States' psychological landscape:

We are in a sense a schizophrenic people. I don't mean that we have a split identity. We're at war with ourselves. And this explains, I think, why we so often march off to war against others – as horrific as foreign wars are, they are much easier for us

at home than it would be to face the internal battles of being at war within ourselves. Anything to avoid the war within ourselves that is still actively forging our identity, a war whose outcome hasn't been decided yet; and until it is, we won't really know who we are (2008: 27).

When I hear that some people believe that one of the greatest obstacles to healing the wounds of genocides and conflict-related atrocities in the Great Lakes region is the fact that perpetrators and victims are expected to continue living as neighbours, I imagine an unspoken assumption that either the people in the Great Lakes region have not yet developed enough to manage their aggressions, or that they lack the necessary mobility and physical distance to escape the psychological consequences of violence. Nowhere have I heard it questioned that managing violence is fundamentally what becoming 'modern' is about – not because people are inherently violent, but because modernity seems to be a form of 'civilisation' that thrives through the propagation of defences against fully acknowledging and remediating the consequences of violence. One example of how this occurs is through the split identity that Banks describes as characteristic of the United States.

Some of the conditions at the root of the conflict in the Great Lakes region occur in other places around the world, too – problems such as reduced access to farmable land, the breakdown of traditional social networks and large numbers of young people without direction or opportunities for meaningful and profitable work. Such conditions can ignite criminality and disregard for another's humanity, especially when an individual feels cheated by life, while at the same time being exposed to the political and social advantages of extreme wealth. Furthermore, since the end of the Cold War – which has resulted in a flood of smaller, relatively inexpensive weapons into the marketplace – the stage for conflicts is less often the isolated battlefield or aerial assault than it is within communities, where rebels and soldiers prey on civilians, brutally raping women and abducting children for the purpose of filling their armed ranks.

Rather than revolutionary armies dedicated to a noble and legitimate cause, rebel groups in the Great Lakes region have been described as functioning more like criminal gangs, who swell their numbers by recruiting young boys and girls when these children are most vulnerable to the pressures of group identity for their sense of ethics and morality (Lemarchand 2009). These children may be threatened with losing their own lives and/or those of their family members if

they attempt to escape the rebel groups who ‘recruited’ them, or if they were to resist perpetrating acts of violence, which often includes killing innocent people.

The reliance on child soldiers in conflicts in the Great Lakes region is particularly troublesome. Child soldiers learn to meet their needs for attachment and safety through the dominance and exploitation they must mimic as dependants on armed and violent groups. As social beings, our basic human need for attachment and safety, preferably met by family bonds and communal ties, is both biologically and socially predetermined (Wallin 2007). Children have limited internal resources for resisting attachment needs, which makes them particularly susceptible to behaving horrifically if doing so will contribute to their sense of belonging and safety. Furthermore, power and dominance become ready substitutes for healthy bonding, particularly when they represent the shared aspirations of the group. For many child soldiers, a shared love of power and the avoidance of feelings of vulnerability and shame become a unifying bond, one that psychoanalyst Sandor Ferenczi has described as ‘identifying with the aggressor’ – a common psychological method for meeting dependency needs when a caretaker is abusive. This is how many armed commanders of rebel groups have been described in their treatment of child ‘recruits’ (Ferenczi 1988; *The Children’s War* 2010).

I have worked with perpetrators of violence, including people who have attempted to commit murder. Before they can identify with their own histories of victimisation, it is not uncommon for them to reminisce about the exhilaration they had felt in having power over their victims. But, as a rule, they also do not know how to become non-aggressive individuals. They feel cut off from humanity, impotent and obsessive in their approach to ‘normal’ life. Hatred and an us-versus-them mentality often resurface when they get close to a deeply denied shame that seems to haunt all of them. According to psychiatrist James Gilligan, who spent his career working with convicted murderers in the United States, an avoidance of shame motivated the killings committed by every one of the murderers he interviewed for his book *Violence* (1997). For them, violence became a defence against feeling the shame associated with past experiences of having been a victim, which usually involved severe childhood abuse.

Here it may be important to distinguish between shame and guilt because they function differently, but are often confused. Typically, what we call ‘guilt’ refers to those feeling-states associated with remorse for having failed to uphold one’s own ethics concerning right and wrong. Guilt is a response to the relationship between oneself and one’s personal notions of what it means

to live a good life and to be a good person. As such, it is often associated with our treatment of others, such as the experience of ‘survivor guilt’ that often plagues people who have survived atrocities, while others close to them perished. Such people sense that, as ‘a good person’, they should have done more to save victims, including sacrificing their own lives.

In contrast, ‘shame’ is a common emotional response to feeling devalued, even degraded, by others. At its core, shame is the fear of disconnection. As such, it has evolved to support prosocial behavior and acting in ways that secure membership in a group and, through that, one’s survival. Shame also functions to (re)inforce social hierarchies. The demonstration of shame typically signifies submission to a more powerful person, group, aggressor or even the status quo (Kerr 2008). It thus indirectly builds social bonds. Shame signals to others that one is aware of having failed to respond as expected and that one is aware of existing power differences. The humiliation, sadness, fear and anger that shame causes reduce the likelihood that a person will in the future repeat the actions that led to feelings of shame. The expression of shame signifies that one is no longer a threat while, at the same time, contributing to the aggressor’s increased sense of power. But for the person feeling shame, this powerful emotion can also ignite feelings of envy, jealousy and even pride as a defence against feeling inferior to another.

Shame takes on a more defensive role when it occurs in response to chronic abuse. Rather than an emotional motivation to honour group norms or avoid power struggles, the emotional impact of shame is avoided, if not completely dissociated, from awareness. Especially when abuse is chronic – in cases of severe childhood abuse, for instance – a child’s awareness will likely split off from feelings of shame and the overwhelming sense of fear he or she experienced while victimised. By splitting from awareness the shame, fear and anger that arise during abuse, the child is able to remain attached to the caregiver, thus continuing to meet dependency needs during those times when the abuse is not occurring. However, when feelings of shame are later elicited – including when the child becomes an adult – these feelings can also trigger unconscious reminders of the abuse, including feelings of degradation and fear. One consequence of this is that shame loses its potential as a prosocial emotional state and instead produces *anti-social* behaviour. Aggression now becomes a powerful defence against the threatening experience of once again feeling like a victim and of being degraded.

The psychological dynamics that emerge between an abused child and the offending caregiver are complex. In fact, they are phenomenologically similar to what is experienced during

any state of captivity in which both abuse and care are received from a person or persons within a larger context of terror. The psychological effects of captivity have been explored in the context of domestic violence, prisoners of war, cults and other social groups in which demoralisation and subjugation are accomplished in part through the exploitation of dependency needs (Herman 1997) and where an individual's submission is maintained by intermittent rewards for compliance and good behaviour. Colonisation, too, seems to gain power through the same psychological mechanisms.

The intergenerational transmission of violence

In the case of colonialism and the struggle for freedom, the intergenerational transmission of traumatic experiences – especially through psychological defences such as splitting and the avoidance of shame – continue to organise the psychological defences and belief systems of later generations and contribute to bonds between survivors. And in the Great Lakes region, the crimes of colonisation are legendary for their brutality (Hochschild 1998). During colonisation of the region, dependency on the colonisers was enforced through horrific abuses of power that seem to have fostered psychological splitting in the psyches of the peoples of the Congo and influenced their conduct and interactions. This was exacerbated by the colonial Belgians' exploitation of differences between Hutus and Tutsis in the Belgians' attempts to reproduce Western social hierarchies in the region as part of a regime of indirect rule.

Many Tutsis and Hutus likely internalised a psychological rupture between aggressor and victim in which the debased group – in the original scenario, the Hutus – were degraded to the lowest rung of the social ladder. Rather than witnessing their culpability, perpetrators of colonisation would blame Hutu victims (along with Tutsis and other ethnic groups) for the violence committed against them, enlisting both science and religion (Mudimbe 1988; Hochschild 1998) to rationalise their atrocities and split from awareness the inhumane and shameful nature of their actions. However, the Tutsis sometimes were allowed to benefit from their identification with the aggressor (or, actually, the aggressor's identification *with them* through the Hamitic hypothesis), which initially led to greater opportunities for Tutsis within the Western capitalist system. Yet, from a depth psychology perspective, both Hutus and Tutsis learned to identify with the aggressor and feared the experience of being victimised. In other words, both groups internalised the

psychological split between aggressor and victim through their subjugation to the conditions of colonisation.

This rupture between the psychological states of aggressor and victim seems to continually play out in the dynamics of violence in the Great Lakes region. Any one group can assume the role of aggressor as long as another group is available to assume, or be forced to assume, the role of victim. As René Lemarchand observes:

Ethnicity has a capacity to be manipulated for the pursuit of preeminently immoral goals, to profoundly alter collective perceptions of the 'other.' It can be distorted using images whose purpose it is to draw rigid boundaries between good and evil, civic virtue and moral depravity, freedom and oppression, and foreigners and autochthons (2009: 50).

From a depth psychology perspective, ethnicity becomes a tactic for escaping an unstable and emotionally threatening internal rupture by projecting the unwanted aspects of the self, including shame, onto opposing ethnic groups. And this, of course, was exactly how many of the colonisers of the region reacted to indigenous Africans – as shameful, if not lacking humanity, and thus deserving of the most atrocious treatment.

Phenomenologically speaking, to be a victim of violence or any traumatic experience is to experience a rupture. Since the work of French psychiatrist Pierre Janet in the nineteenth century, it has been known that traumatic events overwhelm not only our minds, but also our bodies and that in the process much of what was experienced during the trauma is split from conscious awareness. Recent studies of traumatic stress (for example, Ogden, Minton and Pain 2006) have identified the biological mechanisms through which this fragmentation occurs. Thinking about a threat while it is happening slows down survival responses, thus energy is diverted away from the frontal lobes, which is the part of the brain responsible for higher-order cognitive processes, including creating coherent narratives of events. With the frontal lobes shut down, there is no way of integrating overwhelming sensory information into a meaningful and linear narrative of the trauma. Instead, emotional reactions are split off from sensory memories, muscle memories, perceptions and thoughts registered at the time of the traumatic event. Consequently, survival

comes at a price: fragmented memories in search of integration haunt many trauma survivors long after the danger has passed.

If the society that the traumatised individual inhabits does not foster integration and healing from traumatic events, the largely unconscious, split-off images, emotions and thoughts associated with past traumas are more likely to be projected onto others, who are then identified as the source of ‘inexplicable’ suffering. For persons with severe histories of abuse and victimisation who themselves later engage in violence, the split-off experiences of subjugation frequently get projected and are then acted out in brutal and dehumanising ways that intensely shame the victim (De Mause 2002). What is so profound about this process is the co-ordination of the human body’s experience of trauma with the social group’s response to trauma. The significance and depth of this connection, and how it relates to social exclusion and victimisation, was a major point of Mudimbe’s lectures on the phenomenology of madness. In that regard, he made an important observation that also applies to violence: ‘When we speak of madness [or violence] in our culture, we tend to understand it as a dysfunction. Yet that dysfunction can be understood as constituting a system in its own right, a system of resistance, a system of reaction to an untenable situation’ (Mudimbe et al. 1997).

With reference to Michel Foucault’s *The Order of Things* (1970), Mudimbe portrays madness as generated within a system of thought that inscribes the bodies of the subjects of madness, as well as the social body that projects madness onto some of its members:

How do we perceive, how do we understand, how do we analyze this phenomenon that we tend to perceive as dysfunctionality, as abnormality, even as madness? I propose a grid from the work of Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, in which he suggests that all our disciplines today, and the history of our disciplines, can be understood thanks to a table of three pairs of concepts: function and norm, conflicts and rules, signification and system (Mudimbe et al. 1997).

Mudimbe also stresses that language is the most influential of the disciplines governing how we become subjects as well as objects of discursive practices. Madness and violence are both partially produced through language and formulate texts in their own right. Their subjects are victims of language’s capacity for abstraction from the particular and unique experiences of the individual –

a practice that Jean-Paul Sartre associated with *bad faith* and that Foucault explored in terms of *biopower* (Sartre 1965; Rabinow 1984). Mudimbe also locates this tension between the particular and the abstract in the work of Ferdinand de Saussure:

We might be today living a last moment, a new one, which is dominated by language, by the symbolism and the power of language; more exactly, by the tension introduced in our minds at the beginning of this century by the Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, who first elaborated this new paradigm which dominates us. On the one hand, language exists as an abstraction, including concepts and institutionalized discourses, and on the other hand, a concrete actualization of that abstraction, which is speech. This is the tension between *langue* and *parole*, in French (Mudimbe et al. 1997).

Yet, as Mudimbe so incisively observes, to be objectified through knowledge and to be the subject of abstraction carries with it its own violence:

There is something like a moment of dissolution, which passes from the object to the knowing subject. You prepare your technique, you advance, you possess, you digest, you understand, and you get knowledge. And, indeed, from there we can understand the concept of sadism, that is, the pleasure of possessing. Possessing a human body, possessing a knowledge (Mudimbe et al. 1997).

However, with regards to both madness and violence, the rupture of thought from the body may be the seminal rupture through which both massive killings and indifference to the suffering of others commence. This rupture between mind and body coincides with the origins of modernity, especially the work of René Descartes and his Cartesian method.

The violence of the Cartesian method

The Cartesian method, as described by Mudimbe, is foundational for prioritising thought and language over lived experience:

We see, all of us, the sun rising in the morning and going down at the end of the day. We see it, we observe it as objective, yet in our classrooms and in our papers, we say that it is not true. We teach our children not to believe what they see because it is not true. We introduce a heliocentric model explaining that it is the earth that goes around the sun. This is a good way of preparing a radical disbelief. Who to trust? Am I speaking to you right now? Am I dreaming? Am I here? I can doubt everything and I should doubt everything but the only thing that I cannot doubt is that I am doubting, that I am thinking. This is the Cartesian *cogito*, the foundation for our way of thinking (Mudimbe et al. 1997).

Over the centuries, the value of the Cartesian method has been inflated (and vilified) with regard to its status as an intellectual achievement. But I would like to argue that Descartes's method is really an *emotional* 'achievement'. For, as much as Descartes can be considered a central architect of the European Enlightenment, so too must psychological defences against alienation and the effects of violence be seen as the root of the Cartesian method and, consequently, the foundation for Western modernity. Rather than formulating a radical distinction between soma and psyche or a defence against tradition and superstition, Descartes was simply attempting to stop his own unbearable suffering.

Descartes was only 25 years old and a soldier when he first formulated the Cartesian method. Although it would take seventeen years before he penned his philosophy, it was a younger, more vulnerable Descartes – caught in the ambivalence characteristic of youth and struggling with life as a soldier – who saw reflective wisdom as a way to distance himself from feeling overwhelmed by his imagination, emotions and senses. Initially, the method was his bridge back to sanity (Davoine and Gaudillière 2004). However, rather than becoming a novel practice for keeping madness at bay, Descartes's method would become an epistemic foundation for Western modernity – itself a maddening world that would become increasingly violent, in part because of the paradigm introduced by this method.

As a young man, Descartes was a freelance fighter for the Duke of Bavaria during the Thirty Years' War. When he first discovered the method – really, a grasping at straws – he was on reprieve from battle due to a hiatus of aggressions during the deadness of winter. As an intellectual, he had been feeling alienated from his fellow fighters. He had a zest for life and freedom, but he

was also extraordinarily brilliant and was beginning to see philosophy and science as his true calling.

In this unsettled state, both physically alone and psychically alienated, Descartes reached the edge of madness. On the night of 10 November 1619, he had two consecutive nightmares:

In the first, ghosts stir up whirlwinds and infernal spirits bent on his downfall. In the second, there is a horrendous noise followed by sparks of fire dancing around his room. A pain he felt upon waking made him fear that some evil demon was at work, trying to seduce him (Davoine and Gaudillière 2004: 93).

Such dreams are not unusual for soldiers who regularly witness death and explosions. They speak to the power of our imaginations to both hold overwhelming imagery as well as make sense of what we are too frightened to confront in our lived realities. The *imaginal* – that psychic process where dreams, perceptions, memories and fantasies can confront one another without the limits of the real – is also the space for making meaningful what would otherwise remain incomprehensible. And although we moderns (thanks, in part, to Descartes) perceive the imaginal as largely a projected, disembodied space (much like the Internet), for pre-modern populations, especially, perhaps, the indigenous populations of pre-colonial Africa, the imaginal had always been fostered and lived through myths and rituals shared by the collective.

With the term ‘myth’ I am not referring to manufactured stories or lies meant to propagate political agendas or ideologies as present aggressors in the Great Lakes region have been accused of doing (Lemarchand 2009). Rather, I am referring to the stories passed down through generations, which signify the ethos of the culture and expectations of its members. Such myths are part of the communal practices and traditions that not only create cohesion between members of the group, but also model the different roles each individual will assume over their lifespan – child, maiden, warrior, parent, crone, elder and so on. These myths and rituals contribute to processes of social and individual integration and, traditionally, have been central to the manner in which indigenous cultures reintegrated following traumatic events, while also limiting the likelihood of extreme power differences emerging from within the group (Fabrega 2002; Levine 1997; Pelton 1989).

Mythological figures such as Legba of West Africa, Loki of Norse mythology, the Trickster of the American Winnebago Indian tales, Krishna in India, Hermes for the ancient Greeks are all symbolic of social worlds where violence played or continues to play an active role in creation and becoming. In worlds ordered by myths and the cycle of life, where violence is both the threat of destruction and the source of creation, violence is a life-destroying force, yes, but it is also one of the greatest motivations for personal and social regeneration. The point here is not to morally condone destructive acts or cruelty, but to recognise the possibility of violence, or otherwise traumatising events, in most lives and thus the necessity of creating societies that take seriously both violence's destructive impact *and* the need for re-establishing cultural and individual integration following violence and other traumatic events. Violence is a more formidable foe when you are prepared to witness and feel its effects.

When something traumatic happens to a person, and what occurred remains unsynthesised with the rest of the life story, the unarticulated bits of memory haunt the survivor, much the way a phantom limb recalls the disastrous injury that led to loss. Trauma births its own world, one that exists beside the regular, expressed order of things, where life stories are normalised, validated, even valorised. In trauma's otherworldly realm – the imaginal landscapes of our minds – travel the fragmented narratives of what transpired, but also of what failed to transpire: escape from harm, facing down threat, regaining a sense of safety. Here we find the birthplace of grief, but also of creativity, the origins of trauma stories, and also of their erasure, all vying for connection with what can no longer be – or become – now that trauma has claimed its space. Modernity seems to perpetuate dissociated imaginal states, which, rather than contributing to change and integration, become states of escape and fantasy. In modernity, these dissociative states replace the more malleable and transient imaginal worlds that myth-based societies accessed as avenues for reintegrating body awareness with split-off memories of trauma and for reintegrating traumatised people back into the collective.

What made Descartes's Cartesian method so radical, as well as dangerous, is that for the first time a method was offered for legitimately dissociating from those imaginal contents of the psyche that emerge as a result of violence, but without reconnecting with the human body or the 'body' of the collective. One could now effectively dissociate from awareness many of violence's psychological and physical traces – or so one was led to believe – without repairing the inevitable ruptures that are the natural outcome of overwhelming fear and incomprehension. This is the

legacy of Western modernity. It is a psychological colonisation. The Cartesian method replaces practices that might move psychological and social ruptures towards integration with an acceptance of rupture as the natural order of things.

We inherited from Descartes and Western modernity a tourniquet between mind and body that limits our capacity to acknowledge our own suffering and that of others. Centuries of practising radical doubt has left Cartesian, Western individuals susceptible to denying their own embodied existences, as well as their humanity and the humanity of others. Thoughts and language without meaningful connections to emotions and the body are always at risk of being empty speech. This ‘nowhere land’ between body and mind – an experience that lacks the obligation to witness another’s humanity – is the crucible in which colonialism was forged, genocides continue to be perpetrated and so-called ‘ethnic’ conflicts gain traction.

The following remark by Mudimbe relates to the West’s maintenance of the split between embodied or so-called *pre-reflective awareness* and the potential for thought as radical doubt. In his lectures on the phenomenology of madness, Mudimbe stressed that the distinction between reflective and pre-reflective awareness not only impacts on us as individuals, but also organises the practices, rules and norms that govern social possibilities. He witnessed how society is organised much like the embodied experience of selfhood. Together self and society inscribe and reproduce one another:

We might live in or inhabit our cultures, exactly the way we inhabit our personal bodies. And this is a reflection, a meditation on norms, or knowing rules, of knowing – to put it more explicitly, a meditation on a tension existing between the two types of knowledge distinguished by Heidegger in his *Discourse on Thinking* (1966); that is, on the one hand, a calculating thinking – the way we relate to nature, to things, to beings, to others – we calculate in order to understand, in order to domesticate; on the other hand, a meditating way of thinking which is a waiting – here I am just waiting, meditating and trying to understand . . . Abnormality comes from that tension when we don’t go by, we don’t act according to the background that we call pre-reflexive (Mudimbe et al. 1997).

The point Mudimbe makes about domestication is important to highlight. The implicit rules and norms of modernity drive the capacity to use thoughts to alter feelings and to use the intellect to dominate emotions and the body, altering the interaction between pre-reflective and reflective awareness, which in indigenous cultures leads to the creation of meaning within a context of shared values and with an awareness of the ‘voice’ of the body. The norms governing the production of Cartesian radical doubt resist limitations placed on the individual by the ethos of the culture, as well as by the state of being embodied. Indeed, *guilt* is an expected response to the failure to control the body and the emotions and, according to Foucault, is central to the experience of madness in modernity. Furthermore, the expression of guilt is expected as a precursor to integration with the larger community. The following observations by Jerrold Seigel include quotations from Foucault’s *Madness and Civilization* (1988):

The new doctors ‘substituted for the free terror of madness the stifling anguish of responsibility,’ instilling in the patient an organised sense of guilt that made him or her ‘an object of punishment always vulnerable to himself and to the Other; and from the acknowledgment of his status as object, from the awareness of his guilt, the madman was to return to his awareness of himself as a free and responsible subject, and consequently to reason’ (Seigel 1999: ix).

Similarly, the Western legal system also expects guilt as proof of culpability and evidence of reform. Yet, given what is known about the centrality of shame for perpetrating violence and the inability of violent offenders to confront the atrocities they have committed without first dealing with their own experiences of victimhood, modern societies finds themselves in a state of paralysis. For, to expect criminals to express guilt for their actions is also to expect them to feel ashamed. However, for the accused, unless they have changed their relationship with the dissociated victim within themselves, on a pre-reflective level they likely feel ‘abnormal’, as Mudimbe puts it, as if they are once again becoming the victim.

Without first grappling with their own victimhood, aggressors remain split by the pre-reflective rules and norms governing the psychological production of both aggressor and victim, which for aggressors excludes feelings of shame. Furthermore, this resistance to ‘performing’ shame and relinquishing the role of the aggressor, in part explains the West’s failure to

meaningfully intervene in the Great Lakes region or to work in ways that could lead to resolution and the reintegration of communities. Modern, Western societies are themselves organised around the perpetuation of the aggressor-victim rupture. Even benevolent solutions can be experienced as emerging from within an aggressor-victim complex that is projected onto all Westerners, which may explain the increasing number of attacks on humanitarian workers in conflict regions throughout the world. Furthermore, it could be questioned whether Western powers can identify viable solutions to violence in the region, given the centrality of aggressor-victim dynamic in the collective psychology of countries such as the United States.

It is noteworthy that Mudimbe's reflections on how we inhabit our cultures and the way we inhabit our bodies has anticipated current research exploring how the human body actually conforms to the norms and rules governing the social body. For example, in his book *On Deep History and the Brain* (2008), Daniel Lord Smail makes a connection between global capitalism, social hierarchies and the body's reaction to threats. He argues that capitalism exploits the body's basic survival responses by creating the conditions of psychological domination *as well as* providing relief from the feelings of powerlessness that capitalism and social hierarchies engender. According to Smail, capitalism generates stress through its unpredictability and hierarchical power structures, but it also alleviates stress by producing an economy organised around the production and circulation of addictive substances and practices that numb or manipulate emotions.

In the dynamics of violence, the rupture between the reflective and the pre-reflective, and between *langue* and *parole*, is part of the reproduction of power. The perpetrator holds the position of reflective awareness and radical doubt. The violence enacted is, in part, justified through concepts and beliefs that fortify dissociative stances towards the embodied existence of the Other inscribed by language. Such stances, which are created through radical doubt and the prioritising of abstract concepts over lived experience, are not entirely emotionless, but rather inscribed within a limited set of emotional possibilities. As Mudimbe remarks:

Looking at the other as if the other were just a thing, the way a table is a table, the way a stool is a stool: that's indifference. Hate – hate is this projection of the other, I reject you, I hate you, you don't exist for me; and desire, which is a sadistic orientation – to desire, to possess, to objectify, so that I can enjoy your reduction into the state of a stone or a table (Mudimbe et al. 1997).

Similarly, victims are inscribed and limited with regard to how they may respond with their bodies, as well as with language. Whereas the perpetrator inhabits the space of abstraction, hate, possession, desire and objectification, the victim is confined to speaking from the space of lived experience and must contain the shame for being degraded, as well as the guilt for failing to safeguard their own humanity (and often those of others less ‘fortunate’ than themselves). The victims also inhabit the rupture between mind and body, which can be witnessed in their attempts to narrate what has happened, for this rupture both fragments and regulates the stories that can be told about violence.

In *The Antelope’s Strategy*, a book about living in Rwanda after the genocide, Jean Hatzfeld shares an interview with Joseph-Désiré Bitero who planned and led co-ordinated killings of Tutsis in the district of Nyamata. For Bitero, the idea of ‘Tutsis’ – itself a concept amplified by colonial Belgians in their attempt to mirror Western social hierarchy in the Congo – came to represent memories of oppression, marginalisation and their own experience of victimhood:

We believed that the *inkotanyi* [the Tutsi-led Rwandan Patriotic Army] once installed on the throne, would be especially oppressive – that the Hutus would be pushed back into their fields and robbed of their words. We told ourselves we didn’t want to be demeaned anymore, made to wash the Tutsi ministers’ air-conditioned cars, for example, the way we used to carry the kings in hammocks. I was raised in fear of the return of Tutsi privileges, of obeisance and unpaid forced labor, and then that fear began its bloodthirsty march (in Hatzfeld 2009: page 118 of 291).

These fears – and the images, memories and abstractions that fuelled them – erased bonds between neighbours, pastor and clergy, teacher and pupil, doctor and patient, in an attempt to exterminate an entire ‘ethnic group’ – itself an abstract portrayal of the victims.

Innocent Rwililiza, a Tutsi who survived the genocide and also lives in Nyamata, is talking about the crucial issue of who can speak for the dead. His words address the limits on the capacity of concepts to grapple with the experience of victimhood. Implicitly, he reclaims the uniqueness of every human being denied by acts of genocide and all acts of violence:

There are facts and feelings we can manage to describe, and others, no; only the dead could report them if they were here, and we must not describe these things in their name. Why? Because they alone here fully experienced the genocide, so to say. It's not possible to speak in place of the departed, because everyone has a personal way of telling that story. Marie-Louise has her own way, Berthe hers, Jean-Baptist his. The dead have theirs, which would be even more different, since they would be telling their story while holding death by the hand (in Hatzfeld 2009: page 132 of 291).

Furthermore, during the killings – and the actual state of being victimised – there were no thoughts; there was only the body and the drive for survival. The violence of being hunted had literally killed the sense of self. Again, quoting Rwililiza:

What did we think about during all those days [of genocide]? I have no answer. We were like puppets up there: we only ran, ate, rested, waited. Our intelligence was in shock. I don't remember now, I have no answer. I can't come up with anything, I don't even want to try anymore. I really can't remember if I thought at all. We were living a new existence. We were desolate, we were just stunned. It's impossible to say why no thoughts came to mind. When you get right down to it . . . we weren't alive enough for that (in Hatzfeld 2009: page 65 of 291).

Language is one of the most powerful ways through which we know ourselves and communicate our uniqueness to others. Concepts and ideas also contribute to self-expression and, depending on how they are used, can lead to justice. But they also can dehumanise and lead to crimes against the humanity of another. Of course, concepts and abstractions, per se, do not lead to violence. Rather, opportunities to dissociate from lived experience, which are fostered by abstractions, reside on a dangerous and slippery slope to denying the uniqueness and humanity of another.

Conclusion

When I read about violence in the Great Lakes region, I often feel overwhelmed by feelings of despair. It is easy to lose hope, even though, as a psychotherapist, I am part of a discipline

sometimes referred to as the ‘hope-manufacturing business’. However, because I have witnessed people regain their humanity following a lifetime of violence and degradation, I am fortunate to have reservoirs of hope on which to draw. Yet, I also know that the first step to healing the effects of violence is perhaps the most crucial and that the first step consists in regaining a sense of safety. This safety must exist in the actual environment and, especially, in the social environment. Yet, safety must also be established within the individual’s thoughts, emotions and body. For this internal work, curiosity and mindfulness is a central part of the process. There is no space for judgement, shame or guilt – at least, not in the beginning. These emotions resurface later, when the person feels whole again and when he or she is ready also to witness the wholeness of others. Only then can emotions such as shame regain their prosocial role within the collective.

The challenge, of course, is how to create the conditions that foster safety in the social environments of the Great Lakes region, which can then become the foundation for healing and wholeness. In this regard, I question if the West can meaningfully contribute to fostering peace and healing in the region. I fear that without acknowledging the central role aggression plays in Western psyches and societies, violence in this and other regions of the world will continue to bear the weight of Western projections, and will too often remain *incomprehensible, unimaginable, unspeakable* and *evil*. Hopefully, the time is near when the people of the Great Lakes region show the West how trauma is resolved and peace regained, thus escaping the dehumanization that arguably has been colonisation’s most lasting legacy.

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