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LANGUAGE LESSONS: POEMS FROM RWANDA



"A Fruitfull Life" by Emmanuel Nkuranga

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LANGUAGE LESSONS: POEMS FROM RWANDA

“Language is power, life and the instrument of culture, the instrument of domination and liberation.”

~ Angela Carter¹

Language and literacy are often examined in the context of social justice; as educators, we believe that literacy can enable us to enact socially just practices and that literacy opportunities can and should be made available to all. But the transformative power of language and literacy goes beyond literate practices to the very ways language is used – for social justice, and for social injustice as well.

In my recent work in Rwanda, I observed these uses; the more I learned about the history (distant and recent) of the country, the more I began to understand about the role of language in the planning and carrying out of the Rwandan genocide as well as the uses of language as a powerful force for social destruction, for international inaction, and later for recovery, healing, and moving back into life.

I didn't set out to think about the role of language in Rwanda, except as it pertained directly to the project in which I was involved; yet in my work – spanning more than half a decade – those themes came through, again and again.

This is the story of that emerging understanding.

April, 2014 marks twenty years since the start of the genocide against Tutsi that devastated Rwanda. Three months of unimaginable violence left the country in shambles; out of a population of roughly seven million, nearly one million Tutsi and politically “moderate” Hutu were killed by their fellow citizens; another one and a quarter million Rwandans became refugees. Fields were untended and businesses were closed; schools and churches were abandoned; entire villages were destroyed. Men, women and children were among the victims. Men, women and children were among the perpetrators as well.

At first, there was no acknowledgement by the West that a genocide was under way in this small country in Africa, despite repeated evidence of both the planning and the carrying out of the ethnicity-based mass murder of civilian populations. Even after the extent of the killings could no longer be denied or ignored, the West was slow to intervene, responding only after the fact with predictable horror and misguided attempts to provide aid – too little, too late, often in the wrong ways or to the wrong people.

For many in the West, the Rwandan genocide was distant and perplexing. Cast as another case of “tribes” in Africa that had turned on one another, the genocide was termed a “civil war” rather than a carefully-planned and methodical attempt to exterminate an entire ethnic group. The designations “Hutu” and “Tutsi” were often confused by and confusing to Westerners, and few understood the country's history: that the terms “Hutu” and “Tutsi” in pre-colonial times

¹: This quote is from p. 77 of Angela Carter's chapter “Notes on the Frontline” in Michelene Wandor's 1983 edited volume *On Gender and Writing*, which was published in London by Pandora Press.

had been class or economic markers for groups that successfully co-existed (Hutu being farmers, Tutsi being the wealthier owners of cattle), and that with the introduction of colonial powers and European ideologies, these malleable markers (the boundaries which could be traversed by marriage and changes of fortune) had been concretized and instantiated into fixed ethnic categories. In the 1930s, Belgian leaders put into place the ethnic identity cards that sixty years later were used to determine who should live and who should die, and European rulers – for their own benefit – exploited and fed a sense of distrust and hostility between the groups.

Both in colonial and in post-colonial Rwanda, language played a key role in creating and maintaining tension between Hutu and Tutsi. Language was used to construct the minority Tutsi as “Other” and to demonize members of this ethnic group to their fellow citizens; language was later used to stoke fears and incite violence. Hutu publications vilified Tutsi and advocated escalating aggression against Tutsi neighbors, co-workers, family members and friends. Hutu radio spewed genocide ideology, promoting ethnicity-based hatred, then facilitating the resulting violence. As the genocide progressed, Hutu radio was instrumental in identifying and locating Tutsi in hiding so they could be killed. Thus, language was used to dehumanize, humiliate, and terrorize, to promote genocide ideology, and to justify – and even enable – ethnicity-based violence.

Outside the country, language also played a role in the response by world powers to the situation in Rwanda. Western countries used language to avoid responding to the genocide; in fact, the word “genocide” carried with it such weight that had it been used to describe the events in Rwanda, the U.S. and U.N. would have been obligated to intervene. To avoid such engagement, the daily killings of tens of thousands of people were termed by the U.S. to be “acts of genocide” rather than genocide itself, and U.N. “peacekeepers” were limited by title and mandate to “keep peace” rather than to use force to stop the violence. Avoided was any term or turn of phrase that would have required action and could have saved lives; instead, the careful use and manipulation of language allowed the genocide to continue to take place.

Eventually, post-genocide, language was employed as a means of working toward healing. Telling stories helped survivors remember, come to terms with, move through, and eventually find some measure of peace with the past. Imagining that an audience might be listening allowed survivors to put their experience into words in the hope that, perhaps, their tellings could make a difference in the future. “Never again” – the heartfelt phrase that had been uttered following another genocide of the 20th century – became a phrase of hope in Rwanda as well, though that hope was admittedly faint given the bend toward amnesia already evidenced in the world.

Language also became one of the primary means to bring about any sort of post-genocide restoration or justice. *Gacaca* courts (local tribunals in which community members were directly involved) allowed survivors to face the accused and tell their stories; restitution often involved acknowledgement, confession, and, occasionally, apology. Retelling stories at the yearly national Remembrance has become an ongoing way for the country itself to bear witness, learn, hold accountable and move forward; writing, speaking and performing have become therapeutic means of working through trauma, of informing the world, and of educating a future generation.

To that end, in 2006 I made my first trip to Rwanda. Like many in the West, I had little knowledge about the country or its people; my dim sense of the events of 1994 was shaped

mostly by the Hollywood film, *Hotel Rwanda*. I had difficulty differentiating between the terms “Hutu” and “Tutsi;” I had no real understanding of the country’s complex pre-colonial, colonial, or post-colonial history.

I went to Rwanda to design and conduct, with Rwandan and U.S. health care professionals, a series of workshops using narrative writing to facilitate healing among genocide survivors. As a writer and teacher of writing, I knew firsthand the healing potential of writing; my colleagues and I developed a model for the workshops that combined a multi-stage process writing approach with a therapeutic writing model.

The participants were university students who were each survivors of the genocide and who each worked with other survivors in various capacities; together the group co-planned, participated in, and prepared to later facilitate their own versions of the workshop.

Our work together was an example of a powerful use of language to bring about healing and change; the participants stated as one of their goals that they wanted to put forward their stories in the world, and after we concluded our time together the participants continued to work on their own narratives as well as working with other survivors using the workshop model we had developed.

As a published poet, I too found myself using language as a means of understanding and change. During my time in Rwanda, I took notes, gathered images, and turned my jottings into poems. I travelled to Rwanda multiple times over the next several years; eventually I received funding to complete a poetry collection, and in 2012 I returned to Rwanda to share the manuscript with my colleagues there.

The collection is titled *Requiem, Rwanda* (in press), and a more full account of the writing project and the process of turning my own notes into poems can be found in the book’s epilogue, “Writer as Witness,” where I grapple with the complexities of my role in the project and the process of turning my experiences into poetry.

Throughout my work in Rwanda, as a writer and literacy educator, I was sensitive to the complicated and ongoing role of language in the genocide. The many uses of language were evident to me from the outset, and they continued to inform my work and my poems throughout the project. I did not intend to write about language, but looking back, I see that many of my poems call attention to the use of language to bring about genocide; to the complexities of telling and retelling stories – including my responsibility listening to the stories of others; to the role of language in bringing about healing and change; to the limitations of language and my own sense as a Western woman of the relationship between language, privilege and power; and ultimately to the centrality of language before, during and after the genocide.

Language used to set the stage for and carry out genocide.

My earliest poems from Rwanda were not really poems at all; they were attempts to understand and deal with what I was encountering. Early on, I tried to make sense of the means by which ordinary people could, in great number, be mobilized to kill. These were not soldiers; this was not a war. Civilian men, women and even children betrayed and murdered those around them – people they’d known all their lives, including members of their own family.

The killing didn't happen in a vacuum. Language played a powerful role, initially to dehumanize—to convince killers and victims alike that one group of people deserved to die. It was a small step from language to action, a move that allowed ordinary people to learn to kill (or to accept that their death was inevitable), and to view killing as nothing more than a job—work to be done, day after day. By labeling it such, the horror and inhumanity of the enterprise was reframed and undertaken as a daily responsibility.

Genocide: I Begin to Understand

*acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part,
a national, ethnical, racial or religious group*

—Genocide Convention 1948

It begins in a schoolroom,
on a street,
in the market, at a shop:

*Inzoka, inyenzi.
You are animal—
you deserve to be killed.*

It requires no training, merely
a lifetime to learn.

The targets
are women and children,
the weapons
are rape and AIDS.

To commit genocide, simply forget
your victims

are human. Forget you
are human as well.

Inzoka: snake
Inyenzi: cockroach

Six Seconds

One hundred days, one million people:
ten thousand deaths per day.

The killers consider it a job:
“Gukora akazi,” they say to each other;
“Kujya ku kazi,” to their wives.

They work by day, sleep at night.
The job requires speed,
so they press on.

Ten thousand a day,
fifteen-hour days—
that's 666 per hour:
the mark of the beast.
Round down.

Six hundred per hour,
ten per minute,

six seconds

to chop a limb, slice an artery,
start the graveward journey with rape,

to pile stones on the living,
force a husband to kill a wife,
or a woman her child,

to pour gasoline, strike the match.

Breathe in, breathe out—one is dead.
Breathe in, breathe out—another.

Every six seconds

for one hundred
interminable
days.

Gukora akazi: Do the work.
Kujya ku kazi: Going to work.

Many of my poems about the genocide grow out of stories I heard or read. "Eucharist" is a poetic response to accounts of the roles that priests played in the genocide. In previous times of conflict, churches and schools had been places of refuge and safety when violence against Tutsi occurred; however, in the 1994 genocide, when thousands of Tutsi gathered in churches and schools (and they were deliberately encouraged to do so), they were systematically slaughtered. While there are heroic stories of clerics who sacrificed themselves to protect the parishioners in their charge, there are also horrific stories of clerics who participated in, allowed, and even facilitated the murder of those seeking refuge. Again, language is the pivot point to genocide in this poem, where the act of offering Eucharist, and the words of the priest (in blessing, in damning) set the stage for and make possible the mass murder of those gathered for safety.

Eucharist

has always been about betrayal—
the Judas kiss before death.

Some priests were complicit, they say,
offering shelter

then opening doors
for the killers to come in.

One blessed the bread
then unlocked the gate:

*I have other Christians.
You can have these.*

Language used to tell or retell stories.

While in Rwanda, I was highly aware of being a white woman from a Western country, working alongside survivors of a genocide my nation had done nothing to prevent or interrupt. Listening to the stories of others was complicated; writing was complicated as well. The stories I heard were filled with unimaginable pain, and the speakers were sometimes broken, sometimes struggling, sometimes courageous, always powerful reminders of the history they had survived.

I wasn't the only one who was moved by these stories. On my first trip, I was sitting in the bar of the Hôtel des Mille Collines (the real-life Hotel Rwanda), when the man at the table beside me, who had been working on his laptop, suddenly put his head in his hands and began to sob. The entire bar was riveted; later I learned that the man was former *New York Times* reporter Stephen Kinzer, who was working on his book, *A Thousand Hills: Rwanda's Rebirth and the Man Who Dreamed It*. In his book, Kinzer relates the first-person testimonies of many survivors of genocide—testimonies he was transcribing that day in the hotel bar.

Like the man in the bar, I, too, was moved by the stories I heard. I, too, felt the weight of listening and telling, and I was highly aware that while I could take in stories that moved me deeply, they were never my stories; rather, they were the stories of those who had survived and, sometimes, of those who had not.

The telling or retelling of stories is a theme in many of my poems as I sought to come to terms with both the challenge and the responsibility of being a white woman, an American, a writer and an academic working in Rwanda.

At the Hotel Bar

the American
is typing up his notes.

Now he eats fried chips,
now he drinks draft *Primus* as he works.

Now he turns from the keyboard,
his hands over his face.

His sobs wrack the room.

Canticle for the Bones of the Dead

mass
grave

when the cantor sings
 who sings back

separated from your name

the voice that is yours is scattered
 marrow dried to dust

yet
I believe

you have something
to say

Witness

I write your story
on bones.

I write your story on bones
and skulls. On bones and skulls
and teeth.

I write your story in tears
not my own.

If I lift my foot,
you will see the sole
stained with your blood.

Where my words go
they leave a scabby trail.

No horrors haunt
my sleep; no bloated dogs
pace my empty rooms.

I cannot touch
your aching phantom limbs.

I tell your story in a voice white

as bone—a voice white
as bones, skulls and teeth.

Language used for healing and connection.

The purpose of my early travel to Rwanda was to use narrative writing to facilitate healing. Language was at the center of our work: the language of planning together, the language of testimony, the language of reflection. Over the years, I returned to write my own poems, but also to check in with my Rwandan colleagues – to learn what they made of our work together, what had come of it, where it had gone.

Rwanda as a country has found a language of the future, for the future; I was immersed in that language, personally and professionally. Language bound me to the colleagues with whom I worked; our interactions changed me, and their stories shaped mine in ways that were profound and far-reaching.

Gorilla Family Amahoro

The scar on the tracker's cheek
extends his smile lopsidedly, or perhaps
creates the illusion of a smile.

It is not his job to help me. He is for
the gorillas, lives with the troop called *Amahoro*
in the mountains of Volcanoes Park.

But with his left hand he takes mine,
guides me up the slippery path, across stinging
nettles, over young bamboo and underbrush

to the place where the silverback
has stopped to eat, to the gathering
of juveniles, females, and babies.

This is the family he knows,
and he speaks to them with rolling guttural
growls, which they return.

In his right hand, he wields a *panga*
with skill, a lifetime of practice, expertly slicing
through vines and vegetation to clear my way.

A weapon of destruction or a means of escape?
I feel safe in the hands of the man
who speaks no language I can understand.

I have nothing to offer him in return
but a smile and a word—
the name given the family surrounding us

here in this far corner of Rwanda:
Amahoro. *Peace*—a nation's wish
borne on a primate's silvered back.

Amahoro: Peace
Panga: Machete

Gifts

Over coffee and milk
we say goodbye.

Keza speaks of the work
we will do. Ana speaks
of the plans we have made.
I breathe into the space
around my heart,
as if to clear room for all
I did not want to learn.

I do not talk of our work;
I say nothing of our plans.
Instead, I tell the stories
of the bracelets I am wearing—
one from my daughter, one
from a friend.

Five years I have worn them,
never taking them off.

Now I slip them from
my arm. They lie silver
on the dark table, then silver

against the skin of women
I have grown to love.

I touch my unfamiliar wrist,
unspeakably alone
with all that has been lost.

Second Language

Over time, Kunda's greeting has shifted
from formal to familiar.

In Kinyarwanda, she says

*Mwiriwe is for strangers,
Wiriwe for friends.*

In Kinyarwanda, she says

*Friendship is a foot rather than a hoe
that prepares the ground for planting.*

In Kinyarwanda, she says

*A gift is a bird and you must let it out.
If it flies away, I will help you catch it.*

This woman, whose parents and siblings
have all been killed, watches me leave.

In my language, she says

Good-bye, Sister.

Kinyarwanda is the national language of Rwanda

Mwiriwe: Hello (formal)

Wiriwe: Hello (informal)

The limitations of language.

During my time in Rwanda, it was clear to me that while language did facilitate interactions and create connections, most often it served to isolate and set me apart from those around me. It was not merely that I could not speak Kinyarwanda. As a literacy educator, I believe that language shapes how each of us sees the world and engages with it. I was often wordless, for many reasons—some about language and translation, most about an Otherness I didn't know how to mediate or was not able to bridge.

I did more listening than speaking—sometimes with understanding, sometimes out of respect, sometimes because I was deeply moved, or overwhelmed, or unable to speak. And while I knew that language set me apart in Rwanda, I also knew that when I returned home, language would fail me again, and once more I would be unable to convey my experiences through words.

Mute

My other life has gone
silent, asleep
under familiar constellations
I can no longer see.

It is amazing, the stilling of the soul
when it wakes without words.

Stillness feels so much like peace;
peace, so much like grief.
In this land of ghosts, I encounter
my own.

Amakuru

Each morning, Glori greets me:
Amakuru—How are you?

How was your dinner
how is your room
how did you sleep?

How can each night
cool breeze
smooth sheets
mist of dreamless sleep

be good,
when each day
what I see and hear,
the horror and beauty,
the ache and the grace,

splits me apart?
—curse or gift
curse *and* gift—

By day's end, my throat is closed
to words and breath.

But each morning, I answer Glori:
Ni meza—I'm fine.

Amakuru: How are you?
Ni meza: I am fine.

The Lives of Others

Nothing is only itself:

in each brick, a story
of mud, grass, and sun,
in each tree, a story
reaching back to its roots.

The seed of the avocado
carries out to the world
what its leaves have taken in,

a young girl hides a coin
in the oleander, saying aloud
her wish, her prayer, her incantation
of rage.

Note the curved flute of the calla lily—
how it rings the flower's center
like the scar around the sightless eye
of Jean de Dieu

who each morning brings me
coffee, milk, and two
hard-boiled eggs.

Murakoze, I say—
to the flower, to the man,
to the milk and eggs.

Murakoze to the brick
and tree and buttery fruit.

Murakoze to the girl
bent over the bush's begging hands.

But I mean to say more.
I mean to say this:
each story holds a question

that is more than itself.
And each story is its answer.

What, then, can I do but listen?

Murakoze: Thank you

Inoculation

If I drink dirty water, if I'm bitten by a dog,
if I'm stuck by an unclean needle
or cut by a rusty knife,
if a mosquito pierces my white skin—

for typhoid, yellow fever, malaria, rabies,
meningitis, tetanus, and hepatitis B

I am prepared.

But all the vaccines, all the weeks
of bitter white pills, cannot protect me
back in the amnesia
I call home.

The centrality of language.

Language was always at the center of my work in and about Rwanda: my language and the language of others. I came to understand how language had been a tool to set the stage for and bring about genocide, how language is used to tell and retell stories, how language makes possible the beginnings of healing, and how —very often— language as a communication act falls short. Angela Carter writes, "Language is power, life and the instrument of culture, the instrument of domination and liberation," and indeed, that is what my work in Rwanda taught me as well.

My faith in the potential to use language for healing took me to Rwanda, and a new sense of the power of language —for social justice as well as for injustice— is what I carried home. This final collage poem, "Language Lessons," looks at the role of language from multiple perspectives and contains within it much of what I learned about language along the way.

Language Lessons

Language is power,
forming clouds over each speaker's head—

rain blessing,
the mother-tongue

eloquence we are born into,
our first inheritance and gift.

*

The colonizers brought their own
words, worn smooth:
cushioned consonants, languorous vowels,
seduction shaping the sounds—

the language of love.

*

I don't want to hear how the French
armed the *génocidaires*,
trained them to fight,

lured out those in hiding,
promising *safe now* as killers approached.

These roots of black bloodshed
are white, polished blades
hidden among words.

*

Abel's brother is bleeding to death
with a thousand others in a church.
He takes Abel's hand, places it on his open wound.
Rub the blood on yourself, he says.
Lie down. They will think you are dead.
Abel listens and lives.

*

Emery says the names of those who died are a song;
the names of those who saved others are a poem.
Remember the names, he says.

*

On display in Kigali
is a piece of the moon,
taken from the Sea of Tranquility
which is no sea at all.

The fragment, a gift from the U.S.,
bears this note: *One World—One Peace.*

*

The guard at the hotel door
teaches me his words for the world,
a map drawn in his own hand
to help me find my way.

*Hello, good-bye, good morning,
good evening, thank you, tomorrow,
how are you, I am fine, and umbrella.*

*No words for genocide, Hutu, Tutsi,
machete or death.*

*

*Mukundwa, whose name means Beloved,
marries Hakizimana, God saves.
They are survivors.*

*But who will speak for the fathers now?
How can their clans unite,
form ties across family lines?*

*They have never kissed.
In a church of witnesses
his fingertips roll up her veil,
revealing to all the face of love.*

*At night, she cannot stop her tears;
over and over her heart
recites the names of her dead.*

*

*Behind rows of microphones,
the American on stage
cannot say genocide.*

*We have every reason to believe
she says instead, that acts of genocide
have occurred.*

*How many acts of genocide
does it take to make genocide?*

*There are formulations that we are using
that we are trying to be consistent in our use of...*

*I don't have an absolute categorical description
against something, but I have the definitions,
I have a phraseology which...*

*In the time it takes
to speak these non-words—
 throw a grenade into a church,
 set a school on fire,
 toss a live toddler into a latrine.*

*

During the hundred days there was only
the sound of death. What else could be said?
Every breath was a prayer.

Even the birds were silent.
Even the stars, mute.

*

Ernest tells of one who murdered children
and ever after could not escape the voices
of children in his head.

Ernest tells of another who murdered his own friend,
buried him in a pit. The victim's voice
would not be stilled.

The killer dug up the body,
walked around with the skull, talking back.

*

Language is the last thing we have.
Bitter on our tongues, it remains.

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