

Folklorising the Newsman: The Memoirs of Geoffrey Nyarota

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Summary

Geoffrey Nyarota, the author of *Against the Grain: Memoirs of a Zimbabwean Newsman* (2006) is well known in Zimbabwe's media and political circles as a troubling and troubled, and now self-exiled journalist. His name is controversially folklorised as synonymous with the growth, tensions, and fate of the Zimbabwean story as told by newsmen. He is not known as a writer of books. His memoirs, advertised as long-awaited, and their arrival coinciding with the much-hyped long "winter of discontent" for Robert Mugabe's political party, is uncannily in active conjunction with the politics of the times. Nyarota's memoirs are not an ordinary collation of life histories, recollections and musings, but are in many ways an attempt at self-folklorisation. This places him in direct competition for authorial resources with the metanarratives of the nation, along which he writes his story, and against whose grain he also writes. What then should we learn about this newsman? While his memoirs help us to understand some of the ways Zimbabwean nationalism has congealed into a frightening narrative and space, Nyarota's story is a metanarrative of some sort, which should be undone to reveal the figure that hides behind it as a truth-seeking, but forgetful and compromised newsman. This essay traces not only the conflictual relationship between the personal of the memoir-writer and the public histories, but the very similarities – however they are established in conflict – between the narrativised histories of the nation and of the person. It is not just the notion of the self-in-society in autobiography, nor its susceptibility to chronology and multiple lives that is of interest to this essay, but its similarities to what it disavows. Is the nation therefore a sum total of its memoirs?

Opsomming

Geoffrey Nyarota, outeur van *Against the Grain: Memoirs of a Zimbabwean Newsman* (2006), staan in die media en politieke kringe van Zimbabwe bekend as 'n lastige en gekwelde en nou ook selfverbanne joernalis. Sy naam word op kontroversiële wyse in volksoorlewerings verbind met die groei, spanninge en lot van Zimbabwe soos dit deur verslaggewers vertel word. Hy staan nie as 'n skrywer van boeke bekend nie. Sy memoirs, wat as langverwag geadverteer is en saamgeval het met die "winter van onvergenoegdheid" vir Robert Mugabe se politieke party waarvan daar groot gewag gemaak is, staan op vreemde wyse in aktiewe verbinding met die politiek van die tyd. Nyarota se memoirs is nie 'n gewone versameling van lewensverhale, herinneringe en mymeringe nie, maar is in vele opsigte 'n poging om homself in die volksoorleweringe te verewig. Dit bring hom in direkte mededinging om outeurshulpbronne met die metaverhale van die nasie, waarnaas hy sy verhaal

vertel, en teen wie se grein hy ook skryf. Wat kom ons dus omtrent hierdie verslaggewer te wete? Hoewel sy memoirs ons help om in sekere mate te begryp hoe Zimbabwiese nasionalisme tot 'n skrikwekkende verhaal en ruimte verstar het, is Nyarota se storie 'n soort metaverhaal wat uitmekaargehaal behoort te word om die waarheidssoekende dog vergeetagtige en gekompromitteerde koerantman daaragter bloot te lê. Hierdie essay speur nie net die konflikterende verhouding tussen die persoonlike verhale van die outeur en die openbare verhale na nie, maar ook die ooreenkomste – hoe hulle ook al in konflik gevestig word – tussen die oorvertelde verhale van die nasie en dié van die persoon. Dit is nie alleenlik die nosie van die self-in-samelewing in outobiografie nie, en ook nie slegs die vatbaarheid daarvan vir chronologie en veelvuldige lewens, wat hier van belang is nie, maar die ooreenkoms met dit wat daardeur ontken word. Is die nasie derhalwe die somtotaal van sy gedenkskrifte?

Introduction

Geoffrey Nyarota, also known as “Geoff” by newsmen, colleagues, friends and foes, is a controversial folk figure in the Zimbabwean media. His name is synonymous with at least two newspapers in Zimbabwe, the *Chronicle* (state-run) and the *Daily News* (privately owned and bombed by state agents (Nyarota 2006: 255-266; *Daily News*, January 29, 2001; *Herald*, January 29, 2001)) and later shut down by the state in 2003. He edited the *Chronicle*, after having reported for the *Rhodesian Herald* before Independence in 1980. When he lost his job at the *Chronicle*, he moved to the *Financial Gazette*, a private weekly, where again he was relieved of his editorial job. In 1999, he co-founded *The Daily News*, on which he imprinted his evolved personality and political vision. He was again fired. Beyond this, and through these rival newspapers, Nyarota is linked to at least two developments in the unfurling of the Zimbabwean story. First, he was editor of the state-run *Chronicle* based in Bulawayo, at a time when the state was massacring “dissidents” in Matabeleland and Midlands provinces. 20 000 people (The Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace 1997) are reported to have been killed by the state’s North-Korean-trained Five Brigade, several dozens (ibid.) were killed by the “dissidents”. Nyarota is accused of being complicit with the actions of the state. Second: his name is synonymous with the much-recounted Willowgate scandal, which he unearthed, and which represented a turning point in the relationship between state-owned media and its major shareholder. The scandal, unearthed in October 1988, involved the abuse of privileges by government ministers, the former nationalists and liberators, who bought cars at reduced rates from the state controlled Willowvale Mazda Motor Industry and sold them on the market at inflated prices. The government of Robert Mugabe reluctantly appointed a commission of inquiry led by Justice Wilson Sandura, which actually took its job seriously. It prosecuted and embarrassed corrupt members of Mugabe’s government, the most senior being Enos Nkala, who had led the campaign against “dissidents” in Matabeleland. Nkala resigned

from government. As widely reported Nkala has now threatened to write his own memoirs, which he wants published posthumously. Where Mugabe frequently threatens the opposition with violence and death, and actually celebrates the physical “bashing” and disfigurement of his opponents by his ruling party as well as state agencies, his erstwhile comrades threaten to unseat him with biographies and memoirs. These threats to use (auto)-biographies as bayonets against Mugabe, especially during a time when there are factions within his party who would like to see him dethroned, have resulted in his widely reported plea to his enemies after the publication of Edgar Tekere’s book. He argued: “[T]he machinery is not biographies” (*Newzimbabwe.com* accessed on 24 October 2007) but people’s votes. It can be argued that apart from a divided and unimaginative opposition and a crisis-driven economy in free fall, the more telling challenge and dogged opposition to Robert Mugabe’s legacy is an unauthorised and unexpected political memoir. It is within the context of narrative as contested patrimony that Nyarota’s memoirs should be understood.

Nyarota published his book at a time when the Zimbabwean crisis, at least as a chronotope, is productive of a variety of life-history genres. The novel is currently rather dormant and enervated as it is more difficult to imagine breeds of fiction that can outgrow the crisis-inducing fictions of the state and its opponents. There has been a plethora of biographies and auto-biographies, interwoven with and inspired by the current struggles in Zimbabwean politics. The most recent and memorable, though badly edited, being that of Edgar Tekere (2007), the former secretary general of Mugabe’s ruling party. Robert Mugabe reacted angrily to Tekere’s book, and pointedly accused it of being used as a torpedo against him in the succession battle. Tekere was dismissed from the ruling party. Encouraged or provoked by Tekere’s book or/and Mugabe’s reaction to political memoirs written by black members belonging to factions of his nationalist movement, more former nationalists have come out in the open and threatened to write their own life stories as correctives to political distortions, or as forms of expiation as well as competing and competitive confessions. I expect a fair crop of this kind of writing will dominate how and what we shall read in the next few years. It is not accidental that the disgraced Enos Nkala is now a born-again Christian, who would like to write his own confessions of history, and let them speak for him in his after-life. These emerging memoirs both by Mugabe’s former and current colleagues depart from the whipped-into-line narratives of Mugabe’s ruling party and imagined nation, which Mugabe as chief priest ritually conjures and performs in obituaries of hand-picked heroes at their burial. This essay is therefore a provisional commentary on what is emerging as an alternative intervention in the life of writing in Zimbabwean politics as adumbrated in Nyarota’s memoirs. I regard it as work in progress.

Newsman and the Struggle over Telling

Nyarota documents his role in the unfolding story of post-1980 Zimbabwe. He writes in a preface to his book: “This is history from a personal perspective – an account of the first quarter-century of the republic of Zimbabwe from my own close observation and harrowing experience as a journalist” (2006: xi). He had worked on parts of the manuscript “intermittently since 1980” (p. xi). It must have taken him nearly 25 years to write the book. Zimbabwe attained political independence in 1980. Nyarota’s manuscript was in various stages of incubation for 25 years, making it a trope of the growth of the nation and the individual, and a record of its teleological progression into “nothingness”. This of course is an over-worked ontological conception of the absurdity of African history much rehearsed in Afropessimism. The fact that he was only able to “resume writing in a more focused manner” once he had arrived in the United States of America at the end of January 2003, after his “hurried and unscheduled departure from Zimbabwe” (p. xi) confirms the recuperation of self in exile. But the markings of a progressively deteriorating postcolony were already legible not only in the ways the new nation stumbled into a genocidal civil war, but in the ways it disregarded the Fourth Estate. Nyarota, while acknowledging that the quality of journalistic training was very high in Rhodesia, where he trained, and where “there was a public expectation of omniscience in those who provided the daily news” (2006: 56), notices trends in political management of the media which made it difficult to distinguish between the Rhodesian regime and Mugabe’s regime. The only difference lies in the intensity of the demands placed on the journalist in the new nation. “But for post-independence journalists, the expectations of the new ruling elite under Mugabe would create immense practical problems and professional challenges. The demand for loyalty from Zimbabwe’s media intensified in inverse proportion to the popularity of Mugabe and Zanu (PF), especially as the new millennium ushered in an era of vibrant political opposition and demand for wholesale change” (p. 76). But that is a trend recorded in fiction and music as well. Its staple is despair. What makes Nyarota’s story different?

When challenged to state the central thesis of his book by Jonathan Moyo,¹ a former minister of information who oversaw the implementation

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1. Moyo wrote in a review of Nyarota’s book: “My expectation was that your book would add new methodological and theoretical insights into media politics, press freedom, media propaganda, human rights, transparent and accountable governance, human rights [repeated by Moyo!], democracy and the rule of law among other relevant thematic concepts” (Moyo 2007: 2). The text of Jonathan Moyo’s intervention ripples with ironies that have characterised his own life as a political changeling. He came into social and political prominence first as critic of Robert Mugabe’s policies; and then

of repressive media laws in Robert Mugabe's government from 2000 to 2004, Nyarota (2007: 2) argued: "I should emphasise that I set out to write about the predicament of an independent press struggling to expose rampant corruption and abuse of authority on the part of Zimbabwe's political elite". He sought to do this via the more capacious and free form of memoir writing, in which the persona is a character to be performed as life and history. Jonathan Moyo, unable to tolerate generic idiosyncrasies and plurality, and more accustomed to the rigour of academic research and treatise, and wont to reach for "the public record" and to check "the record", wrote in a review of Nyarota's book:

That your book is full of these narcissistic things is very bad Geoff. But what is worse is that you have absolutely nothing thematic or substantive to say or advance about things which some of us thought are supposed to be the reasons you are said to be an award-winning journalist. I mean thematic or substantive things like press freedom, human rights, democracy, the rule of law and tolerance to name the obvious important cases There is no new methodology or theory beyond your narcissism. So what are you Geoff?

(Moyo 2007: 9)

Nyarota notes Moyo's "prodigious critique" of his book and the accompanying "gratuitous insults" (Nyarota 2007: 2) aimed at his person. He, for the record, did not set out to "add new methodological and theoretical insights into media politics": "I set out to record my memoirs, including my role in exposing the gross abuse of human rights by politicians and in fighting rampant corruption among Zimbabwe's ruling elite" (2007: 2). But the central contention is not about historical record, but what Nyarota believes is an unavoidable trait of the genre he has chosen to carry the weight of his experience in.

While Moyo enlightens Nyarota on the desirability of checking the record and priestly devotion to *fact fact fact*, Nyarota requires free play with Moyo's conception of fact and the public record. Nyarota wants to record himself as a fact existing in life and history. He does not want to be Moyo's idea of the public record, which in the grand narratives of Zimbabwe, could mean foregoing one's foibles and eccentricities. The memoir is the most suitable vehicle to carry the experiences of an obstreperous and unconforming newsman such as the figure of Nyarota represents. He writes,

from 2000 to 2004, as Mugabe's most reliable and energetic spin doctor, during which time he justified Mugabe's ruinous policies. He was fired from government by Mugabe after being accused of being involved in a "palace coup" plot. He reinvented himself again as Mugabe's critic and a champion of transparent and accountable governance, and regularly dispenses critical advice and political opinions through the independent press that he sought to destroy as Mugabe's Minister of Information.

adding a new methodological and theoretical insight into the writing of memoirs, something that escapes Moyo's enquiring mind:

Memoirs, by their very nature, are narcissistic – how can they be otherwise when they are the story of a life? My memoirs are no more narcissistic than those written by Joshua Nkomo and Ian Smith Nor will my memoirs be any more narcissistic than those of Prof [Jonathan] Moyo himself, who has indicated in the past that he intends to write a book based on his experiences.
(Moyo 2007: 2)

As if anticipating such a riposte from Nyarota and other critics, Moyo reluctantly but savagely prophesies: “Anyhow, I hope your book will be reviewed by competent people soon. But I can tell you without any prejudice or fear or favour that your book is plain trash. It does not add anything to human civilization, let alone to literary development” (Moyo 2007: 9). Moyo is chagrined by what he considers Nyarota's fabrications, factual errors and misrepresentation, and much of his review is animated by his devotion to bringing Nyarota's memoirs to face the fact of the record.

What should be underlined immediately is the contest for modes of self-writing and ways of telling. Moyo, an accomplished academic himself, known for his meticulous attention to detail, and his indefatigable self-slave-driving in the pursuit of knowledge, comes across as too hidebound to comment on the work of memory, such as a memoir.

He cites the fabrications and misrepresentations as reason to question the validity of this work of memory. He writes, more puzzled than enlightened: “If you tell such lies, with such technical support [of other editors], why should anyone believe anything else that is in your book? Indeed, why should anything that you write be believed?” (Moyo 2007: 5).

There are of course many errors of fact in the book. They range from failing to record accurately the year Joshua Nkomo died (1999, not 1998!) to misrepresenting the official status of a politician and judge (Chief Justice, not Minister of Justice!). Moyo painstakingly dredges these embarrassing errors to public light. They do not represent errors in terms of the substantive aspects of the issues or arguments but infract the principles of journalism that Nyarota celebrated: the verification of fact, and the expected omniscience his Rhodesian media trainers inculcated in him. In this respect, Nyarota is corrupting the credos of the Fourth Estate as handed to him before independence. And, in the same way as the political elite is accused of progressively ruining the “jewel of Africa” that they inherited from the colonisers, Nyarota is also rendering questionable his ability to safeguard the national patrimony figured as the media. Moyo suggests how Nyarota can rescue his career. He points to the talismanic function of “the record” and fetishises the archive. As is often said of the monomania of certain sections of the civil society in Zimbabwe who believe every crisis in Zimbabwe can be reduced to the function of the constitution, for Moyo the

way to truth is the verification of fact. “This can be easily verified by checking the record” (Moyo 2007: 5) is his shortcut to the resolution of all conflicts to do with the representation of fact. The “record” becomes the basis of establishing what is falsehood and what is acceptable, and what counts as a good account of oneself and others.

There is a way in which Moyo’s response to Nyarota’s modes of self-writing can be considered quibbling. But there is also a dilemma: memoirs are not the place for fabrication. Memoirs are memories, and a politician, or anyone, cannot legislate against certain ways of remembering and recounting what is remembered. This is precisely why Nyarota’s and Tekere’s memoirs are upsetting to the living subjects they remember and record. In an environment characterised by the bashing and eviction of those whose aspirations and narratives do not cohere with that of the ruling father of the nation, memoirs are the most likely candidates for silencing. In a political environment where the struggle is about how one should be remembered, a book of unauthorised and unchecked memoirs is most threatening to those who understand the power of the archive to give life after death or to deny it. The struggle about memoirs is therefore a struggle about life and the narrative after life. To distort the record in remembering is to disfigure the life of the remembered. It is to do several things in moments of amnesia, feigned, partial or real. It acknowledges the power that can be wielded by those who remember and record. Memory, and its representation in memoirs, becomes a tool of subversion, the “machinery of biographies” Robert Mugabe feels unnerved by. It is important to note that Mugabe has not been fazed by the uncomplimentary memoirs and pseudo-biographies written about him by white writers. He has shrugged them off in one movement of his hand: *what do you expect of them?* But he found it politic to ban Joshua Nkomo’s (2001) memoirs of the liberation struggle and the “dissidents era”. Nkomo’s book, like Tekere’s, caused discomfort, because it was rather an illustration of kinds of contests over memory as power and patrimony. Nkomo claimed the title of “Father of the Nation”: Mugabe is the son who laughed at his father, humiliated him, and drove him out of the house of stones, the eponym of Zimbabwe. Nkomo’s book was only published in Zimbabwe after his death in 1999, because of what has often been called Mugabe’s necrophilia, which he displays in his eulogies of dead heroes. Jonathan Moyo reacts angrily, and is insulting throughout his review of Nyarota’s book, precisely because he is worried about the ways he will be remembered in Zimbabwe. In response to Moyo’s review, Nyarota writes that his portrayal of Moyo is based “on his record as Minister of Information, and on his own damning words. I will refer him and readers to the same National Archives he refers me to in his review ... the fact still remains that he caused irreparable damage to free thinking and freedom of expression in Zimbabwe” (2007: 3). The media, the same that Jonathan Moyo controlled and directed when he was Information Minister, create and construct memory, and illusions of remembering by masquerading as

“public record” or the archive. Nyarota is aware of the variegated uses of this public record and archive, and knows that they need not be obeyed, nor do they need to structure one’s life and perceptions.

Moyo conveniently forgets the same archive, in which chunks of his life are deposited, by himself as writer about himself and others, and by others as writers and recorders of his life and of others’ lives. Memory, as history, is written as needed. It is not compulsory to produce all of it. It is a performance: the context and circumstances structuring that context are more important than the mere reproduction of a compliant “record”. Nyarota’s memoirs are perhaps an instance of that refusal to comply, to reduce one’s life to a mere impersonal, retrievable public record or archive. They show the instabilities that an insurrectionary memory constitutes in the remembered subject, and in remembering subjects.

Christopher Thurman (2006: 110) writes: “life-writing, by engaging with the histories of particular people, can foreground and promote the need to respect the dignity – what perhaps we should call the quiddity – of each individual”. He notes the kinds of falsehoods created about the knowableness of public or celebrity figures. Moyo must have betted on “knowing” the award-winning Geoff, must have lived on the “false promise of familiarity, or even intimacy” (Thurman 2006: 110), the illusion of the public archive, and is shocked that it can be used in less predictable ways.

One way to impose predictability and conjure desired narrative outcomes, for Moyo, will be to silence the discordant memories about oneself, or to insist on being remembered or in this case *memoired*, in ways that guarantee preferred patrimonies of narrative. Another way, which Moyo suggests in his review of Nyarota’s book, will be to suggest a template for writing to control or anticipate the outcome and conclusions. Moyo believed Nyarota would write on “media politics, press freedom, media propaganda, human rights, transparent and accountable governance, democracy and the rule of law” which are largely unreflected, caricatured thematics of the current donor-funded civic and opposition movements in Zimbabwe. These thematics, shrilly insisted upon as panaceas to the Zimbabwean crisis, are often content-free. Moyo would have known how to silence Nyarota by making him lose his voice in the cacophony of clichés. Nyarota notes the “self-interest” in Moyo’s review, and senses another attempt to silence him. Indeed Moyo, who helped shut down Nyarota’s vociferous *The Daily News* when he was Minister of Information, regrets that “your book is now in bookstores and only you and your publisher know who is distributing it and how” (2007: 10). The paranoia surrounding Moyo’s review of Nyarota’s book, and the reception of that review by Nyarota, is symptomatic of a larger, deep-seated malady in Zimbabwean politics. First: Nyarota is right to intuitively infer self-interest in Moyo’s “prodigious critique”. This is the same man, as Minister of Information, who shut down his newspaper and drove many journalists out of their jobs. He can be trusted to do the same

with Nyarota's book: it is still an aspect of media and is about the media. Nyarota suspects that "Prof Moyo's strategy seems to be to cause the public to boycott the book so that they do not read what I wrote about him and his former colleagues in government. His review is, therefore, motivated by self-interest" (2007: 2). Moyo anticipates Nyarota's line of self-defence: "Finally I am aware that your initial reaction to this open letter was to say that it is an attempt to silence you. Far from it. There is no way I or any other reader can silence you by merely reacting or responding to what you have already published" (p. 9). But of course, Nyarota is aware that his newspaper was shut down, and at some point bombed, after publishing, not before, news not liked by the state. In any case, freedom after expression is not guaranteed. But Moyo, once a good spin doctor, turns the tables on Nyarota: "Only you and your friends can try to silence your readers, like myself, by blackmailing or somehow intimidating them into keeping quiet about any factual error or misrepresentation they find in your book. That kind of blackmail or intimidation would definitely not work on me" (p. 10).

Entanglement and Expiation

One area in which blackmail and intimidation are used to silence memories and opponents is in the remembrance of *gukurahundi*, the Shona understatement for the genocide masterminded by Robert Mugabe's Five Brigade in Matabeleland and Midlands provinces between 1981 and 1987. While there is a spirited attempt by memoir writers such as Edgar Tekere to distance themselves from Mugabe's rule, and perform an act of self-cleansing, the same impulse is replicated in most of the figures closely associated with Mugabe at some point in history. Enos Nkala is quoted in *Newzimbabwe.com* as saying that "we produced a creature that destroyed this country" and "we made the mistake to appoint Mugabe ... I do admit I was part of the mistake" (2007a: 1). Tekere himself, once a close friend of Mugabe, regrets having propelled Mugabe to power, calling it "an unfortunate happening" (*Newzimbabwe.com* 2007a: 1). Memoirs appear to be the most convenient mode for such self-extrication from entanglements of history. Memoirs become forms of expiation. Jonathan Moyo is suspected by those close to Mugabe to be writing damning revelations of the workings of Mugabe's mind. But he has not managed to successfully free himself from his role as one of the most feared hangmen of the media in post-2000 Zimbabwe. He has not adequately or convincingly atoned for the wreckage he created in the private media. Hence the strongest and silencing critique of Moyo's motives and standing as critic of Nyarota's book is that he has no authority to speak of freedom of expression or its infringement or fabrication, as he is damned by his past.

In answer to such disabling references to his past career, Moyo has brought down the weight of Matabeleland history to blackmail and

intimidate Nyarota who was editor of *The Chronicle* during the massacres in that part of the country.

The pain of Matabeleland is deep, and unassuaged. It is a nightmare. It is unspeakable. It is difficult to account in conventional forms. So far, only Yvonne Vera has managed to write a novel (*The Stone Virgins*, 2002) based on the experience of its trauma. Most of the fictional work on this area of our experience struggles to grapple with its immensity. But the most simplifying rendition of it has been to think of it solely as Robert Mugabe's responsibility. Hence calls for him to apologise or to have him arraigned before the court at The Hague. In the same way that some writers and civic leaders believe the constitution is the answer to all Zimbabwe's woes, some also believe an apology from Mugabe, or his prosecution, for crimes against humanity, might resolve the pain of Matabeleland. I do not have space to argue this point, but only to state it.

I find in Nyarota's memoirs an example of the complex predicaments of entanglement and expiation. His memoirs point to the ways in which narrative can be used for purposes of atonement and the realignment of a life after historical folly. I would like to suggest that Nyarota's memoirs belong to the genre of expiational and inspirational writing, which records the individual's sinking into the mire of history and triumphing over it through narrative acts. The *Chronicle* represents two movements from "sin" to "redemption". As editor of the *Chronicle*, Nyarota is implicated in and accused of inciting government to intensify the crackdown on "dissidents". Soon after the signing of the Unity Accord between the leaders of the so-called "dissidents" and Mugabe's party in December 1987, Nyarota performs a self-resurrecting act by reinventing himself as a conscience-stricken patriot lone-rangering against government corruption and misrule as evidenced by his controversial investigation of the Willowgate scandal. This is the moment of redemption I speak of when the same newspaper is used to bite the hand that feeds it in order to assume a new moral and political conscience.

Nyarota makes good his escape from the entanglements with unseemly power, in which he appeared a blind but active pawn. But Oscar Nkala, Nyarota's detractor, returns him to a position he would rather not speak from. He writes:

No-one denies that Nyarota was indeed a media icon at one time, if we discount suggestions that his hands could be tainted with *Gukurahundi* blood, but it is not fair of him to attempt to use this as a poor cover from which to launch a self-cleansing campaign. The *Gukurahundi* trials have not begun. The fact that Nyarota is the first non-government person to try to clean off alleged links with this dirty past raises more suspicions than it allays. It is a historical fact that the guilty are always afraid. The control of state media during a time of upheaval is tight and whoever gets that appointment would be a trusted Zanu PF cadre.

(Nkala 2007: 3-4)

In the first place, the difficulty with the pain of Matabeleland for anyone who is associated with fanning it directly or indirectly, or anyone who would like to comment on it, is that it invites stark reactions. You must immediately declare your regional, ethnic and political affiliations. It is a situation that invites and insists on either/or reactions and declarations of positions. There is no way one is encouraged to see things from the position of the “dissidents” and that of Mugabe and not be called a perpetrator, whichever position or eyes one uses. These ossified positions encourage an equally damning silence on the part of the “perpetrator” (dissident or government). So, one is damned for speaking, and damned for not speaking. What to speak is already figured. Situations like this produce insincerities. The uniqueness and intensity of the pain is comparable to the experiences of Jewish suffering in the Holocaust and pogroms. The remembrance of suffering and pain of Matabeleland, to echo Achille Mbembe elsewhere (2002: 240), is made “sacred at the risk of making it taboo”. In a situation like this, Mbembe notes how “the privileging of victimhood over subjecthood is derived, ultimately, from a distinctively nativist understanding of history – one of history as sorcery” (p. 245). In any case, the power of history as sorcery is illustrated by how difficult it is for any meaningful political party, and even Mugabe’s ruling party, in Zimbabwe not to speak of the pain of Matabeleland in expected tones and accents, whether for good or bad. Votes are won and lost depending on the kinds of speech acts that one performs and the quality of empathy one exudes when in the presence of the memory of Matabeleland.

I want to suggest that there is one way that Nyarota’s memoirs can be considered revolutionary. He does not try to evade his responsibilities to this historical pain, known or unknown at the time but, in a sleight of hand, tries to displace these responsibilities onto the whole nation by explaining it away as an inevitable function of Mugabe’s despotism, or what anyone enjoying and benefiting from Mugabe’s kind of power would do. He cites the 2005 Operation Murambatsvina (an urban slum-clearing exercise dubbed Operation Clear “Trash” by the Mugabe regime) as a good example of how Gukurahundi (the genocide) could potentially be visited upon everyone in the country.

Gukurahundi could just as easily have been a Manicaland phenomenon, with some elements of Five Brigade possibly being conscripted in Matabeleland. Much later, in 2005, there were widespread allegations that Ndebele agents had been deployed in Harare during the iniquitous Operation Murambatsvina, which rendered hundreds of thousands of people homeless when their shacks were destroyed. Mugabe consistently exploited the real or perceived ethnic polarization between the Shona and the Ndebele to strengthen his own political hand.

(Nyarota 2006: 132)

Nyarota cites members of the Ndebele ethnic group who as politicians or academics, were happy to justify the genocide in Matabeleland. He does not forget to recall Jonathan Moyo's own words in 2002, words reminiscent of those of Mugabe's regime during the genocide: "Where the army is deployed, people should not expect a picnic" (2006: 134). This can easily be considered as encouraging the government to massacre civilians. Curiously, as if to say the genocide, or the trap of genocide, and the desire to cause it, is shared between Shona and Ndebele, Nyarota writes: "I am Shona. Ironically, Moyo is Ndebele" (p. 134). There is much to be said about this seeming mutual entanglement and mutual damage between Shona and Ndebele, a feature of contemporary Zimbabwean politics. But Nyarota uses the space of his memoirs to perform these entanglements and seek atonement: "Notwithstanding all of this, I accept full responsibility for the performance, including the shortcomings, of the *Chronicle* on my watch" (2006: 141). Oscar Nkala and Jonathan Moyo, spirited detractors of Nyarota's memoirs, and members of the victim Ndebele tribe, have not quoted this direct and unambiguous act of contrition on the part of Nyarota. Moyo himself has not apologised for actively destroying the independent media and causing mass unemployment while he was Minister of Information. Mugabe has only called the genocide "a moment of madness" in which rationality cannot be expected, and therefore full and open contrition is unthinkable.

Conclusion

Nyarota's narcissism directs him to root himself in history as a fact of his life informed by socially responsive individualism. His memoirs, however incomplete or biased as Jonathan Moyo points out, "open up an experience of the self-in-society unrecorded elsewhere" (Arnold & Blackburn 2004: 23). Nyarota's memoirs are therefore an instance of how the individual's quest for truth a quest for personal and national healing and regeneration is in itself. In spite of the obvious and acknowledged instances of narcissism, of a man cherishing himself as his own gift to life and to his profession, of a man idolising and folklorising himself as the quintessence of journalistic suffering and triumph, I find his memoirs chiming with the rhythms of a nation in the process of self-renewal. Much as he vies with grand national narrations for self-making, such as the ways in which he tries to link himself to the suffering he went through during the liberation struggle in order to justify his invention of a patriotic journalism, he is a writer who can use what Deborah Seddon (2005: 95) called "critical and emotional intelligence to interpret the situations, people, and conversations which are the raw material" for the explanations he gives about his place in society. Nyarota writes his memoirs in order not to just build himself a viable past and a

hopeful future, but to bridge that past with readings of the present. It is a present opened up by the possibilities of plurality and multiple origins. The proliferation of memoirs and life histories, as David Arnold and Stuart Blackburn (2004: 5-6) have observed elsewhere, “should not be seen as therefore a narrowing down or even a disavowal of grand themes, even if the immediate source material and subject content are more focused. Rather, life histories enable us to render more intelligible precisely the complex of forces at work in modern societies and to reflect further, and from more solid foundations”. *Tisu anhu acho* (“We are the people who are the nation”) as a Shona popular saying goes: the nation itself is a complex entanglement of historically rooted selves, and therefore the sum total of its memoirs. *Against the Grain* is a reminder of the struggles about telling and narrative as patrimony in a nation made up of self-replicating stories massed against each other. Nyarota’s folkloric position brings to the fore the body of customs, legends, beliefs and superstitions generated and passed on by the media as inherited and invented in contemporary Zimbabwe. His memoirs constitute a figurative narrative of The Lone Ranger seeking to right narrative injustices. In that sense they are multiply rooted in the individual and national quests for narrative disobedience in the face of pandemic brutalities celebrated in the grand narrative of national sovereignty, land and freedom.

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