Affective Travel: Terror and the Human Rights Narrative in Véronique Tadjo’s The Shadow of Imana

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Travel writing, this paper argues, is linked to human rights discourse because it constructs genocidal spaces through an ethnography of mourning within its narrative of witnessing, the creation of new contact zones of suffering and violation, and generating an affective literacy about the world as constituted by genocidal spaces. It examines Véronique Tadjo’s The Shadow of Imana, a travel narrative about Rwanda, for this purpose. Beginning with the assumption that human rights demand a narrative, it explores two major components of Tadjo’s work. It is proposed here that Rwanda is constructed as a ‘genocidal space’ because it is a space of human rights violation. The first part of the paper deals with Tadjo’s ‘narrative of witnessing’. This ‘narrative’ is generated through two modes: the semi-ethnographic ‘observation’ mode and the deeply subjective. The narrative also constructs an ethnography of mourning through representation of ‘sites of mourning’. Further, it also enacts individual stories of terror. It is in this last that the individual subject emerges—and the individual, as Michael Ignatieff and others have argued, is the locus of human rights. The second part of the paper develops the idea of ‘affective geographies’. Adapting the notion of ‘contact zones’ from M L Pratt, it argues that the emergence of ‘new’ contact zones is built on the recognition of suffering. This ‘contact zone’ is one where Tadjo encounters violations, deprivation, death and mourning. By folding the singularity of suffering terror into something larger (an ethnography), Tadjo’s travel narrative enables the creation of an entire archive of feelings, and this is the affective geography of the world. By widening our knowledge of suffering about the world, travel writing creates an ‘affective literacy’. This ‘affective literacy’ induced by narratives such as Tadjo’s, is the source of the discourse of human rights.

For some time now I have been interested in the multiple genres of human rights discourse, especially its literary and other forms of narratives. I take as a point of departure, Joseph Slaughter’s argument that human rights discourse demands a ‘narrative’ (1997 and 2006)—often a claims narrative documents violations. Schaffer and Smith (2004) have argued that ‘storytelling’ by victims constitutes an important

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component in human rights discourses. Building upon these sets of arguments, I have studied elsewhere various genres in human rights discourses, and have analyzed their narrative techniques and conventions (Nayar, 2008 and forthcoming). In this paper, I turn to a genre that has never been considered—except as an offshoot of journalistic reportage—a ‘storytelling’ about human rights: travel writing.

The paper has two considered aspects: a ‘storytelling’ about human rights and travel writing. The paper has two informing assumptions: that human rights demand a ‘narrative’, and that travel literature ‘is’ a human rights narrative.

Travel is about spaces. Particular sites of travel—Sudan, Rwanda, the former Yugoslavia, Bosnia, Afghanistan and now Iraq—and writing about such travels constitutes an ‘affective geography of the world’. What does travel in a land scarred by genocide produce as travel literature? Or, to put it differently, is there a ‘travel literature of trauma, horror, atrocity and therefore of human rights’? While journalistic accounts of war-torn Bosnia and Sarajevo (e.g., Zlatko Dizdarovic’s Sarajevo: a War Journal, 1993) or, in an earlier era, Vietnam, have circulated, ‘travel literature coming out of an individual’s journey through what, for want of a better term, I call a “genocidal space,” has been comparatively rarer. In such a thin genre, a travel narrative by a non-white traveler in a Third World nation assumes even greater significance because it reverses the standard structure of travel (from white ‘to’ non-white and from First World ‘to’ Third World). In this paper, I examine a text that records travel experience in that most horrific of genocidal spaces: Rwanda.

Véronique Tadjo’s The Shadow of Imana: Travels in the Heart of Rwanda (2002) records her experience of traveling through Rwanda—by then the site of one of the worst humanitarian crises of the 20th century—in 1998, with the explicit intention of “exorcis[ing] Rwanda ... to go to that place where those images we had seen on the television had been filmed” (p. 3). Rwanda, where the massacre of the Tutsis by the government army in 1994 is known as the ‘genocidal space’ to rival, arguably, the Holocaust, dominant Hutus had resorted to in a ‘genocidal space’ in Rwanda, arguably, the Holocaust, Bosnian and post-colonial nations.

1 The term ‘genocide’ was coined in 1944 by Raphael Lemkin to describe the destruction of a nation or ethnic group. The most accurate definition appears to be the one of Martin Shaw who defines it as “a form of violent social conflict, or war, between armed groups that aims to destroy civilian social groups and those groups and other actors who may impinge on the identity” (2001, p. 154).

2 Postcolonial studies have consistently failed to address the ongoing ramifications of ‘independence’ as a shared banner, in postcolonial nations: many nations have lapsed into a “hegemonic masculinity” that has wrought slavery, oppression and, as in Rwanda, genocide. Postcolonial studies continue to examine the experience of women within postcolonial societies. In an incipience where women have the capacity to resist the trauma committed by the postcolonial state, Tadjo’s The Shadow of Imana is a text that questions the notions of trauma committed by the postcolonial state. However, in what follows, the focus is on trauma and not another essay—but rather to see it as a unique form of resistance.
Genocidal space is constructed through the exploration and identification of sites of mourning. It is genocidal space that also, therefore, becomes the site of human rights. Travel writing in this case is therefore, the identification of genocidal space and the construction of a space where a particular discourse—human rights—is suspended. If space is constructed through acts (as contemporary space theorists like Henry Lefebvre, 2000, have argued), then it follows that particular kind of acts generate particular kinds of spaces. If all space is lived and constructed through social and cultural practices, then Rwanda is a ‘genocidal space constructed through the violation of human rights’.

Travel writing about Rwanda modulates into and implicitly generates a narrative of human rights mainly by producing what I term a ‘narrative of witnessing’. Tadjo makes this intention explicit later in her work when she writes: “Yes, to remember. To bear witness. That is what remains for us in our attempt to combat the past and restore our humanity” (p. 85).

Travel writing here is linked to human rights discourse because it constructs genocidal spaces through an ethnography of mourning, creates new ‘contact zones’ of suffering, violation and empathy, and finally generates an ‘affective literacy’ about the world.

The paper has two parts. The first explores Tadjo’s travel writing as a narrative of witnessing with sections on witnessing, the ethnography of mourning and the link of terror and subjectivity. The second discusses the travel narrative as being explicitly about human rights.

**Travel Writing as a Narrative of Witnessing**

Travel narratives have always been about recording sights and experiences. Observation, therefore, is central to the travel narrative. Indeed, as critics have noted, observation linked to discovery, and eventual conquest, has always been the privilege of the white explorer in the Asia-African space (Brantlinger, 1988; and Pratt, 1992). The ‘observing I’ is invariably that of the European subject, with the native being the ‘object’ of this recording gaze (Pratt, 1992). If travel is the construction of the subject (the seeing ‘I’, as Helga Quadflieg, 2004, p. 29, suggests) and the perceived object, then do different forms of travel generate ‘different’ ‘models’ of the ‘I’ and the object? That is, does the fact that Véronique Tadjo is traveling as an ‘African’ in an ‘African’ genocidal space construct a model of the observing ‘I’ different from a European one? Does the form and site of travel inform the kind of subjectivity and self-construction, or is the self the same always? If the politics of seeing in European travel narratives is about conquest and empire, they serve a different purpose in Tadjo’s narrative.

As noted earlier, Tadjo sets out to Rwanda with the intention of ‘exorcising’ the horrors of the place. Her travel narrative, I propose, is simultaneously a therapeutic and an exploratory one. Her travel is a journey of mourning and one of discovery. As she puts it: “I am not afraid of knowing” (p. 10). Discovering the horror that is Rwanda, remains the cornerstone of the therapeutic process. Tadjo herself is emphatic on this point: “I did not want Rwanda to remain forever a nightmare, a primal fear” (p. 3). And later: “I needed to lance the abscess, lay bare the wound and bandage it” (p. 3).
To Travel, To Witness

The Rwandan landscape, problematically, offers a different order of experience and sights, one that does not let the observing eye of the traveler record anything: “From a distance, the city seems to have forgotten everything, digested everything, swallowed everything .... The stars keep their secrets to themselves. Nothing can pierce the impenetrable darkness” (p. 9).

Tadjo’s problem is precisely this—the concealment of the truth of horror beneath the façade of a peaceful nation that has ‘forgotten everything’. So what does the traveler observe and record? Tadjo unsurprisingly takes recourse to the tropes and rhetoric of discovery, concealment and revelation in order to emphasize her role as observer-traveler. Her tropes are inaugurated in her opening paragraphs: “To forget Rwanda ... was to walk in darkness, feeling your way with outstretched arms to avoid colliding with the future” (p. 3). This rhetoric of seeing and visibility now merges into the description of the Rwandan landscape.

Tadjo writes:

We have to remember that time of endless night, return to that time of great terror, the time when humans, face to face with their destiny, had not yet discovered their humanity. Their steps were guided by obscure fears ...

For one day we must stop in our tracks to look ourselves in the face, set off in search of our own fears buried beneath apparent serenity. (pp. 9-10)

The observing ‘I’ is, in a sense, thwarted because it is unable to ‘see’ the horrors of the past: “traces of the war are rare in the town” (p. 10). Tadjo, therefore, quickly expresses the need to explore deeper and further, like a true explorer: “The truth is revealed in people’s eyes .... You need to get under people’s skins. See what is inside” (p. 11). The tropes of penetration and exploration are classic discovery narrative modes, and Tadjo’s retrieval of these modes links her work to the conventional travelogue.

In the first 10-12 pages, Tadjo has set out her strategy: observation and documentation of the visible, and delving beneath the placid surfaces to discover the horror buried beneath. Together, these two modes constitute what I shall term the ‘narrative of witnessing,’ which is The Shadow of Imana.

The narrative of witnessing in Tadjo’s work is a mix of these two modes, veering between the semi-ethnographic ‘observation’ mode (the standard mode in travel literature, Rubiés, 2002) and the deeply subjective, affective one. Witnessing, I argue, is the result of the confluence of these two modes—providing the documentary and factual evidence, while casting these within affective contexts of seeing, experiencing and memorialization. The first is a collective mode that discusses suffering in terms of large numbers and communities. The second, subjective mode, zeroes in on individual instances to show personal portraits of damage and pain.
Having prepared the grounds for such a narrative of witnessing, Tadjo proceeds on her journey.

**The Ethnography of Mourning**

The power of Tadjo’s travel narrative lies, I argue, in its near-archaeological—I use the term deliberately, since on dozens of occasions, she is at the site of mass graves that have been recently uncovered—mapping of ‘sites of mourning’. She is a traveler who witnesses mourning, both individual and collective and *The Shadow of Imona* is a travel narrative of mourning. With this Tadjo constructs Rwanda as a genocidal space.

Tadjo’s first observations are completely in keeping with the traditional travelogue:

Nyangata Church.
Site of genocide.
Plus or minus 35,000 dead.
A woman bound hand and foot.
Home: the town of Nyamata.
Married.
Any children? (p. 11)

Or another, soon after:

Ntarama Church.
Site of genocide.
Plus or minus 5,000 dead. (p. 14)

The tone of these instances is that of reportage: a bare, unadorned recital of facts. Kofi Anyinefa reviewing Tadjo’s book argues that the ‘very factual and sober manner’ of the narration is an ‘antidote to the morbidity of the spectacle itself and to her visceral emotions’ (Anyinefa, 2005, p. 138). I believe, on the contrary, that the factual narration prepares the ground for an intensity of response.

In her opening sections, Tadjo converts the discovery of a murdered woman’s body into something more iconic: “She is there as an example.... On show so that no one can forget. A mummified victim of genocide” (p. 11). The reference to ‘show’ and ‘example’ suggests a spectacle. It is a visible topos of mourning, for mourning must have an identifiable body, remains or topos (Derrida and Dufourmantelle, 2000, pp. 111-112). More of such topos of mourning is sketched: of buried bodies (Tadjo, 2002, pp. 12, 14, 15 and 17) and underground vaults built by the survivors for their dead (pp. 12, 14, 15, 16 and 17).

The ethnography of mourning is this identification of sites of individual and collective mourning: places and spectacles of grief and bereavement. Rwanda becomes a space where numerous people mourn the numerous dead. The ethnography of mourning—and Tadjo’s painstaking cartography of the sites of mourning in Rwanda—is instrumental in making Rwanda a genocidal space.
In Tadjo’s narrative, the section titled, “The Wrath of the Dead” occurs halfway through Tadjo’s narrative, and is, I believe, the most powerful indictment of what happened in Rwanda. The opening of this section is worth citing in full:

The dead were paying regular visits to the living and when they were with them, they would ask [sic] why they had been killed. The town streets were filled with spirits moving around, whirling in the stifling air. They jostled the living, clambered on their backs, walked alongside them, danced around them, followed them through the crowded alleyways.

The dead would have liked to speak but no one could hear them. They would have liked to say all that they had not had time to say, all the words whose utterance they had been denied, cut from their tongues, torn from their mouths.

They were in every neighbourhood. You could feel them as they scurried past people.

The spirits were hurrying home to visit everyone they had known, in the places that they had loved and which were still their own.

And even if nothing remained but houses in ruins, they needed only a stone to rediscover the days gone by.

They floated among the living who went on leading their daily lives, and whose memory was starting to fade. Wounds remained embedded in their flesh, but those wounds were slowly closing over their nightmares. (p. 41)

Tadjo goes on with this narrative of the dead returning for some time, and then describes the arrival of a soothsayer who declares that ‘the nation is in mourning’ (p. 48).

Jay Winter, in his work on mourning in Post-World War I Europe, argues that the allegory of the dead returning was integral to the culture of grief and the condition of mourning. Part of the explanation for this allegory, argues Winter, could be that there was a great desire to bring the dead home, to put the dead to rest, to retrieve the dead and give them a secure and identifiable resting place (Winter, 1998, pp. 15-20). I wish to tie Winter’s notion of the desire for a ‘proper’ resting place with what Jacques Derrida (2000) has proposed as the necessary ‘topos’ of mourning.

I propose that Tadjo’s dream-allegory is an ethnography, a spectacle of mourning. Soon after the account of the dead walking the streets in Rwandan towns, Tadjo cites the soothsayer-diviner who arrives there. The soothsayer asks the survivors to find proper resting places for the dead: “What we must do now is bury the dead according to our rites, bury their desecrated bodies ... We must bury the dead so that they may return to visit us in peace, and hide their decay and their blinding nakedness ...” (p. 45).

The soothsayer wants the topoi of the dead marked out so that the survivors can go on living. But memorials, as Winter argues, constitute a ‘representation’ of states of grief. What Tadjo reports in her account of sites of mourning within the genocidal space of Rwanda is the expression, portrait and representation of the unspeakable. Tadjo’s
ethnographic account is the language of mourning—but a collective one. As one survivor tells Tadjo: “It’s hard even if you haven’t lost anyone because it’s a collective grief which will probably stay with us all our lives” (p. 108).

There is also a different ‘version’ of the sites of mourning—and this is the Gacaca system of justice. Reviving this traditional system of justice within the Rilissa prison is, in Tadjo’s words, “to give back to communities their spirit of independence” (p. 97). In other words, it attempts to bring back a pre-colonial and pre-genocidal culture so as to offer the survivors a sense of independence. Ananda Breed has argued that legendary theater and cultural practices like Gacaca in Rwanda “create(s) an imagined precolonial unified nation of peoples” (2008, p. 34).

However, I also propose that it is within this staged system of justice that another spectacle of mourning, guilt and shame emerges. How can, asks Tadjo, the survivors “hear witness to the cruelty that has been inflicted upon them as well as the suffering of those who are dead?” (p. 97). The site of justice is a spectacle of mourning and impossible mourning, of guilt and an impossible justice or impossible redemption. Tadjo herself does not seem to be sure that justice is served through an ancient system because the ancient system did not know horror on this scale: “Did the ancestors know the crime of genocide?” (p. 97).

This impossibility of mourning has another dimension. Tadjo concludes her narrative by declaring: “Rwanda cannot be exorcised” (p. 118). The spectacle of mourning, in a sense, is not only about the genocide but about what happens after: the revenge killings. Tadjo notes what happened: “History was going into reverse. The executioners were becoming the victims, the victims the executioners. As if violence would never cease to engender violence” (p. 115).

In another Rwandan travel narrative, Ancille complains: “We are dying a second time: killers and victims have simply changed” (Mujawamariya, 1995, p. 33). It is this reversal of roles that constructs Rwanda as a place of perpetual mourning.

Mourning, with identifiable sites of grief and the dead, is a collective practice that constructs Rwanda as a genocidal space.

**Terror, Singularity and the Subject**

If mourning is a language, then perhaps the clearest articulation of it occurs in individual stories. Tadjo weaves the ethnographic and collective accounts of mourning and terror with individual stories. The story of “The Young Zaïrean woman who looked like a Tutsi” (pp. 88-92) and the story of Josephine (pp. 105-108) that intersperse the accounts of large-scale massacres are a deliberate narrative strategy that at once captures the magnitude of the genocide as well as the singularity of each individual’s suffering. If the first shocks us with the vast killing machinery of the Hutus, the second provides a more ‘intimate’ view of suffering.

What constitutes Karl or Seth or Josephine as subjects is their ability to mourn. Mourning is the ‘language’ in which their ‘individual’ subjectivities can be constructed. At the
conclusion of their individual narratives, therefore, a subject has been constructed. If pain is the boundary condition of humans (Scarry, 1987), then the exploration of that border occurs within the language of mourning. Subjectivity, ironically, is constructed at the precise moment when the individual is able to claim—that is narrativize—the destruction of their (and their loved ones’) subjectivity.

Human rights has to be, invariably, about individuals because it is about the protection of an individual’s agency (Ignatieff, 2001). It is also based on the ability to claim rights and to articulate wrongs. That is, there is a vocabulary, a language and a narrative of human rights. Second, as Homi Bhabha (2001) has argued, the construction of the liberal subject within human rights is based on the idea of freedom of choice, a freedom to reevaluate one’s life, to ‘change one’s life course from this moment on’. I shall take this second point first.

The language of mourning in Josephine or the young Zairean woman is thus the articulation of: (i) their subjectivity; and (ii) their claims to human rights. Yet, no individual narrative ends on this note of mourning in Tadjo’s account. Every single survivor articulates the hope of change and improvement.

In Isaro’s narrative, the man she meets (Nkrunya, whose family was supposedly massacred by a group led by Romain, Isaro’s husband) tells her: “We must carry our memories of them [their loved ones killed in the genocide] within us and let those memories become part of our daily lives... It is up to us to rebuild life” (p. 57).

Karl notes his children’s “immense desire to live, to see life go on, perhaps little by little, they will be able to break the chains of his grief” (p. 75). Josephine tells Tadjo: “but perhaps our children will be able to live in freedom, without fear. They, perhaps, will be able to live again” (p. 108). Even the report on the genocide, prepared by the Human Rights Watch (2006), sees its documentation as future-directed: “Honoring the victims requires us also to continue investigating, documenting, and analyzing how the genocide was prepared and executed, so as to be better prepared to avert similar horrors ‘in the future’” (unpaginated, emphasis added).

It is this emphasis of every victim on the need to change one’s life, ‘to live again’ as Josephine puts it, that constructs their narratives as human rights narratives.

The narratives within Tadjo’s account shift between two crucial poles, of collective grief and individual suffering. Together they constitute a subject. However, it is because this subject in mourning also seeks a change, and the freedom to change, the course of her/his life, that the speaking voice becomes a subject ‘in’ human rights discourse. Thus, the shift is from a subject in mourning to a subject of human rights.

Thus far we have seen two important contexts emerging within the Rwanda narrative of witnessing: an ethnography of collective mourning, and the narratives of individual terror. Both, I have proposed, constitute a language of mourning and enable the formation of a subject. In the following section, I want to situate the work of mourning within the culture of travel.
Travel Writing and Affective Geographies

Tadjio’s travel narrative itself is the work of testimony, which gathers multiple subjectivities of mourning and eventually of human rights. Her narrative serves as the forum—like a truth commission or a judicial hearing—where the unspeakable can be spoken, where the claims of the victims can be made. There is also, I believe, another element that makes Tadjio’s work important. As a traveler she comes from outside the immediate context of Rwandan politics, culture and history. She thus, serves as a conduit for the information within to go out. Tadjio’s narrative is a ‘route’, on which travel the victims, the genocides and the stories.

While this argument shifts the focus onto the meta-narrative conditions of reading Rwanda, I believe it is important to understand the contexts in which “Rwanda” can be ‘read’.

The New ‘Contact Zones’

Travel writing is a genre that enables the empathetic listener and observer—Tadjio, in this instance—to record her/his encounter with the Other. Travelers enter ‘contact zones’ (in M I Pratt’s apposite phrase) and meet the Other. What I propose here is that travel narrative converts a genocidal space into a ‘contact zone’. The ‘contact zone’, Pratt reminds us, is made through the interactive dimensions of encounters. It is the space of a set of ‘relations’. In this case, the new ‘contact zone’ is built on the recognition of suffering. This ‘contact zone’ is one where Tadjio encounters violations, deprivation, death and mourning. The ‘relations’ here are, as Pratt theorizes, unequal: between an observer from the ‘free’ space and the violated victim in the genocidal one. It is the encounter with victims that shapes Tadjio’s experience of this genocidal space. This new ‘contact zone’ marks the beginning of an affective geography of the world.

The new ‘contact zones’, therefore, are those where we meet the object, the terrified subject of the violation of human rights. If travel writing is about the subjective self (as critics of travel writing believe), and subjectivity is about witnessing the Other (Oliver, 2004), then the new ‘contact zone’ generates a travel narrative of human rights based on witnessing the ‘suffering of others’.

Tadjio demonstrates that for an African traveling into Africa, the native is the ‘body of suffering’, and her response is therefore not a desire toward or curiosity for the exotic/erotic ‘object’ but one of empathy. The body in the travelogue of genocide is the body of trauma. Every individual instance in the travel narrative provides a different episteme, a new frame of knowledge, and one that is not informed by colonial, white or erotic contexts.

Travel writing in genocidal space enables the ethnography of terror and human rights violations, functioning as a narrative of witnessing. It becomes a useful genre because it

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3 Pratt defines ‘contact zones’ as “the space of colonial encounters, the space in which people geographically and historically separated, come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality and intractable conflict” (pp. 6-7). I have expanded the notion to include cultural encounters where the Other is made visible to the observer.
marshals evidence—including the recording of violated bodies, bodies denied rights and stories of victims. Travel writing therefore becomes a witnessing—mnemonic device that can serve the purpose of testimony in the discourse of human rights.

Tadjo’s travel narrative also achieves something else. I have already cited her opening comment: her intention to “exorcise Rwanda ... to go to that place where those images we had seen on television had been filmed”. Tadjo, I argue, converts two-dimensional representations—the TV screen, the newspaper—into something more concrete: bodies, burnt houses, ruined cities. In this, the travel narrative is a necessary supplement—I use it in the Derridean sense of both completion and excess—to what we have ‘heard’ or ‘seen’ of Rwanda. It becomes witnessing of a very material kind: the skulls, the poverty of refugees, the emaciated and ruined bodies, the shells of towns and, most importantly, the very material conditions of fear and loss. Travel writing here is witnessing of a wholly different order: it completes in a very corporeal-material terms the plain ‘images’ when Tadjo records her horror (we, as readers, have to rely on Tadjo’s own narrative, of course). I am not debating questions of authenticity here, but proposing that Tadjo’s travel ‘writing’ of genocidal space must be taken as a necessary extension of what we have seen-heard of Rwanda.

An Affective Geography of the World

The 19th century, argues Alan Lester (2002), saw the making of a ‘global humanitarian imagination’. The condition of the world’s underprivileged drew the attention of the European powers, who then went out to alleviate misery worldwide. In short, the Europeans were aware of a global context and condition of suffering. I propose that such a ‘global humanitarian imagination’ is once more made available to us through memoirs and stories of human rights, stories that emerge in the new ‘contact zone’ of the travel.

The new ‘contact zone’ is where affect begins its ‘presencing’ (as Heidegger termed it), the borderland where life and death meet and where the traveler encounters the most alien of foreign bodies: the dehumanized, brutalized ‘human’ bodies of the Tutsis. Tadjo sees the Zairean woman this way:

With her coppery skin, her high cheekbones and her sad smile, she is speaking in a voice so soft that you have to strain to hear her. She speaks very fast, not wanting to stop .... In fact, she is lost in another world as she relives those terrible events. (p. 88)

She records Karl’s portrait of his brutalized wife, Annonciata—“the woman who had seduced him with her energy and high spirits was only a shadow of her former self” (p. 74). It is this portrait of a suffering body that maps the new ‘contact zone’. By folding the singularity of suffering terror into something larger (an ethnography), Tadjo’s travel narrative enables the creation of an entire archive of feelings. It is an archive of feelings also because for the Rwandans displaced out of ‘their’ country—and displacement is about travel—Rwanda is where their family, their loved ones, lie buried. The topos of burial of the loved is where the Rwandans’ journey begins.
Tadjo records the responses of Karl, Josephine, the Zaïrèn woman and others to their homes and places of their loved (and dead) ones and thus underscores the ‘roots’ of contemporary Rwandans. The soothsayer who said the survivors needed to properly bury their dead precisely proposed this: the creation of a topos of mourning from where the journey out of genocidal space begins. The resting place of the family is literally ethos: “the city of country where relatives, father, mother, grandparents are at rest in a rest that is the place of immobility from which to measure all the journeys and all the distancings” (Derrida and Dufourmantelle, 2000, p. 87). Rwandans who ‘travel’ out and away from this genocidal space—Tadjo’s narrative, incidentally, begins with an encounter with a refugee Rwandan in Durban, South Africa (p. 5)—are mapping their distancing from this immobile site where their loved ones lie buried. Tadjo’s travel narrative is therefore the frame for several other kinds of travel too: it is a history of traumatic travel forced due to the denial of human rights. Travel writing is the perpetual displacement of mourning because the sites of mourning (Rwanda) are those from which they have traveled away. If, as Derrida proposes (2000, p. 111), a mourning that occurs without a place (topos) is interminable, Rwandans in exile (such as the attendant Tadjo meets in Durban) do not have a place to mourn: their dead lie interred in a ‘foreign’ land, so to speak (they, the survivors have since left). Hence, their mourning never ends (tragically, as Tadjo notes, there are many survivors who do not know ‘where’ their dead lie, since mass graves and deliberate burning of bodily remains have ensured there is no ‘place’ to mourn).

It facilitates the move ‘outward’ for individual instances like Rwanda. Travel writing’s basic structure of comparing the strange with the familiar enables the traveler to shift from the particular to the universal, as Tadjo does here. With this move, it makes one particular instance a metonym for human rights violations across the world. Tadjo ensures that Rwanda as a genocidal space becomes larger than the actual geopolitical territory when she writes: “Yes, I went to Rwanda. Rwanda is also here in my country. The refugees are ‘scattered all over the world’, carrying within themselves the blood and fury of the abandoned dead” (p. 37, emphasis added).

Here Tadjo suggests that while she may be a traveler in a genocidal space, that space has expanded to fill the world. The ethnography of mourning constructs a humanitarian disaster, and Tadjo is clear about this: “we must ‘all’ bear responsibility for this humanitarian failure” (p. 34, emphasis added). It allows the traveler to discover that this particular genocidal space is only one of many. As in conventional travel writing where the strange can only be read in comparison with the already familiar, travel writing on genocide quickly becomes a comparison of horrors. Travel writing here is the route to something more than the immediate massacres.

Thus, Tadjo concludes her narrative with a meditation which moves from Rwanda to something beyond: “Danger is ever-present, lurking in the memory, crouching in the bush in neighboring countries ... We need to understand. Our humanity is in peril” (p. 118).

Tadjo’s reflections on Rwanda modulate into questions of ‘neighboring countries’ and finally, humanity as a whole. It is perhaps the structure of genocide itself that allows one
to inflate the immediate into the universal. Travel writing, whose very generic convention believes in comparing worlds, facilitates this move: from Rwanda to humanity itself. From an ethnography—by definition limited in space—of mourning and horror, Tadjo shifts to a ‘global’ condition of violence, terror and trauma. Rwanda, one might argue, has traveled out. We get in Tadjo’s work a universal ‘contact zone’ of suffering, and an affective geography of the world. This affective geography is the expansion of Rwanda-like genocidal spaces across the world: all those spaces where terror has reigned, and human rights violate—Bosnia, Sudan, Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, Argentina... and our responses to them via a consumption of narratives such as Tadjo’s.

Travel writing such as Tadjo’s generates an ‘affective literacy’ (a term I adopt from Mark Amsler, 2001). ‘Affective literacy’ is the strong emotive and somatic responses to a text. I suggest that it is not possible to ‘consume’ narratives such as Tadjo’s without experiencing strong emotions of shock, horror, anger and pity. If, as Schaffer and Smith (2004) have argued, stories of human rights violations generate responses of affect, awareness and action (p. 225), then Tadjo’s travel narrative about the genocidal space is a crucial component in our affective literacy of what happens around the world. ‘Affective literacy’ induced by narratives such as Tadjo’s is, this paper proposes, the source of the discourse of human rights.

Travel narratives of genocidal spaces enable the making of what Laqueur has termed a ‘moral imagination’: the capacity to feel the “exigency of wrongs suffered by strangers at a distance” (2001, p. 134). It is in the global circulation of local wrongs via narrative that human rights discourse finds its activists and its greatest purchase. The ethnographies of mourning, the sites of disaster and the genocidal spaces are the information-contexts of the discourse of human rights. Without these stories/narratives there would not be a global human rights ‘regime’ (even though news reports and journalism about the Rwandan genocide were not always fair in attributing blame to the Belgian colonization of Rwanda, and instead invoked categories of the ‘dark continent’ and tribalism as causes for the horror—see Niranjan Kamik’s 1998 study of the New York Times coverage of Rwanda for a reading of the politics of news representation in this case). The ‘contact zone’ in travel writing, Pratt reminds us, is made through the interactive dimensions of encounters and ‘relations’. In the case of the genocidal space, it is a relation of affect: of being moved and shocked by the narratives of human rights violations.

My use of the term ‘contact zone’ serves the purpose of suggesting that the new ‘contact zones’ are genocidal spaces, and spaces of affective relations. Genocidal space, this paper suggests, is ‘constructed’ by the action of violation/denial of human rights. It is a ‘contact zone’ where the recognition of this violation elicits an ‘affective’ response. These are spaces where the response to the suffering of the Other, a listening to the brutalized Other’s stories marks the mapping of the world in a new way by pointing to the genocidal spaces and, more importantly, creating the space where the discourse of human rights can be launched. Travel writing is therefore a genre where the encounter with the savaged Other enables the affect that promotes a human rights campaign.
Travel writing here is linked to human rights discourse because (i) it constructs genocidal spaces through an ethnography of mourning within its narrative of witnessing; (ii) it creates new contact zones of suffering and violation; and (iii) it generates an affective literacy about the world as constituted by genocidal spaces. If human rights discourse depends on victim narratives, then The Shadow of Imana, moving between Rwanda and the rest of the world, is the space where we meet these narratives.

References


