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# A Chronology of Compassion, or Towards an Imperfect Future

(For Barry, whose last name I still don't know)

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This poetic piece is a response to the question, does a goal for reconciliation betray truth or truth reconciliation? It disassembles and dislocates the logical and regularized ways in which we have tried to forge a path towards a future after war. Poetry, I would argue, provides an inroad towards recognizing the chaotic reality of life after war and the near impossible task of finding solutions that will assuage the pain from the past and provide justice to the survivors. This attempt to locate the place between (or outside) truth and reconciliation is presented as an annotated poem, with the creative aspect introducing and debating the issues and the academic notations providing a bolster for the positions. The poem is divided into three discernible parts and has two points of view, one of which is italicized and from a first-person point of view.

Part one sets the location in postconflict northern Uganda, where I come from. Having witnessed the effects of the war through the media and personal accounts of friends and relatives, the war between various rebels (notably the Lord's Resistance Army) and the government of Uganda has become the most enduring metaphor for struggle in my own life as an Acholi woman living in the diaspora with a fleeting sense of home located in a warzone. I combine a number of stories to create a contemporary representation of the quotidian for a fictional ordinary citizen in Gulu, one who was likely abducted by rebels at some point during the war. I use this unnamed character to present arguments for or against truth and reconciliation as a requirement for moving forward.

Part two presents my intention, which is to show that truth and reconciliation, like warring siblings, are only useful in limited doses. They can be harmful to the process of attaining healing, which I believe is the optimal goal – not truth and not always reconciliation. I use the following questions as guides: Who benefits from the truth? How much truth is necessary for reconciliation? All of it at all times? Are there concessions to be made for those whose painful experience must be recurring with every telling? Much as truth telling is an important part of reconciliation, it is possible to reimagine truth as a drug – it might save lives, but in inappropriate doses it can also kill. For me, like remembering and forgetting, truth must be taken in with restraint and respect, just enough to propel us forward towards healing. The whole truth and nothing but the truth must remain contained as inside a courtroom, with lawyers and judges and other contesting

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representations of memory, tradition and law. Reconciliation as the only goal is a noble idea but it diminishes the experiences of the survivors, especially the harsh situations imposed by the oppressors. And often, as has been highlighted by others, there was no prior relationship to begin with that is worth reconciling. The challenge, therefore, is to create a whole new understanding of the current circumstance that hinges on an imaginary of place and peace without the burden of the past bearing on the everyday.

Part three presents the current challenges on the ground in northern Uganda and imagines truth and reconciliation working as tools conducive to healing. 'Children Are Nodding,' a poem in that section, was created in response to KONY2012, the viral video that shattered world records but failed to sustain public interest in northern Uganda. In the context of this larger work, the poem works to reorientate the reader to the reality on the ground, a reminder that theories and debates, like the goal of truth and/or reconciliation, must sometimes be set aside for practical solutions to what will be a long healing process in northern Uganda.

I continue to be inspired by Gloria Anzaldúa,<sup>1</sup> who believed that there was much to be learned from the borderlands. This poem comes from that place.

## Betraying the Sun

*And who were they again? Who were those people with their lanky selves, walking like lions away from the light? Who were those people with dark, dark skin, wide eyes yellowed from staring at the sun? Who were those people with toughened palms and cracked feet betraying a lifetime of gardening, no, farming and animal husbandry and building maintenance and child rearing and family gatherings and celebrations and births and deaths, cycling on and on? Who were the people with gap-toothed smiles and women with shorn heads? Who were those people who wore pala and let their men wear long red locks in braids down their backs? Who were those who wore leopard skin about them? I forget. They were once here, weren't they?*

1.

So now you pick your ghostly selves and move through days and days, some blaring hot, others rainy, but each beginning with a cool morning breeze and ending with a fast falling sun.

These are the days of dawn and dusk.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> One of the first openly lesbian Chicana authors in the US, Anzaldúa (1942–2004) published poetry, essays, short stories, autobiographical narratives and children's books, as well as edited several literary anthologies.

<sup>2</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, in *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (London: Cambridge University Press, 1977), argues that the mirroring of habitus and seasonal activity is reflected in the environmental changes that people make in order to make sense of their daily lives. Dionne Brand, in *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging* (Toronto: Random House, 2001), presents the threshold as the point of leaving and the door to the place of no return, as a psychic space to which we yearn to return. No such physical space exists, however; only metaphorical spaces exist. I would like to present contemporary northern Uganda as a threshold, between the

You're thinking about today's errands as you go through days and days of money for rent, money for food, money for school fees, money for medication, money for paying the hospital stay for the cousin sister uncle aunt mother grandmother daughter son best friend who carried you on the back when you were shot in the side and wouldn't leave you to die in battle.

You think about work that can pay for all this.

You think about the impossibility of getting such work.

You think about scars.

You think about money all the time.

You think about headlines that highlight the billions of shillings invested in northern Uganda.

You think about what you have heard about truth and reconciliation commissions in Rwanda – how it worked, how it can work for you and your people. You think about the trial of Thomas Kwoyelo.<sup>3</sup> You suck your teeth.

Enough times around and around – truth, justice, truth, justice, truth, justice. Maybe truth and reconciliation can work out. Maybe court trials can work, or maybe not.

After all, who has the truth about what happened? How can the truth help to reconcile? Or how can reconciliation happen without the truth yammering away in the background, like a small child who will not let up crying until we stop all conversation, pick it up and pay close attention?

You think about how it is that hardly any of that money<sup>4</sup> trickles to the ground but hangs about suspended in the red dust that blows up when the SUVs drive by in a big rush labelled with the organizations that are here to do good things.

You think about good things.

You think about your amnesty card and how you must keep it safe.

You think about school for a moment and then forget – the children come first and their school fees are still a dream unfulfilled.

You think about the shakes that have started in your hands as you make beads for sale.

You think about the constant pain in your chest.

You think about options, what options?

night of war and the possibility of days lived in peace. Such is the fantasy of peace in northern Uganda – that someday we'll return to that morning, to the way it used to be.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Kwoyelo, a former Lord's Resistance Army commander, was charged with 53 counts of crimes against humanity before the International Crimes Division Court in Uganda. In September 2011, the trial was halted after all five judges agreed that refusing Kwoyelo amnesty was unconstitutional.

<sup>4</sup> The rapid development in Gulu town has been linked to remittances from the Acholi diaspora and investment dollars from local well-to-do people, as well as the immense amount of money that keeps pouring into northern Uganda through the government's Northern Uganda Social Action Fund (NUSAF), for example. According to the now archived Uganda Clusters website, a \$100 million investment by the World Bank, managed by the government of Uganda though NUSAF, has not translated into significant change on the ground.

You think about witchcraft for a second and then forget it. It doesn't matter. You didn't come this far to be grounded by the idea that all this was sent to you and everyone, well most people around you, by an unforeseen power that can be bought from beyond Kigumba on the other side of the Nile.

It wasn't always like this – the epitome of suffering. It wasn't always so.

*The warmth of the sun seeping into your skin is no proof of deprivation, of months and months of clammy, cold days. The warmth of the sun on your skin is a kiss, a fleeting one; the kind that might make you smile, a small smile. It won't send you into tailspins, damn you into paroxysms of grief; it won't kill you if you understand that you need it to live. You don't need sun rays on your skin day after day after spots after wrinkles like the other kinds of fallout from being alive. It only means something for a moment. Only for a moment.*<sup>5</sup>

Before independence, we heard it was pure optimism that saw many people send their children to school because in those days the prospect of a good life was possible with an education. So our grandparents went to school, they all did, well most of them did.

Some soared, shiny with brilliance, effecting change every time they spoke, signing their names to papers and documents that built roads and schools and hospitals that are still standing. Others blazed out in the glory of their brilliance. Such don't live longer anywhere, and how can they over here in this place stained with never-ending nightmares?

Some garnered enough to get a spot in the bureaucracy, climbing at a slow pace, waiting for a pension that would allow them to live in comfort in the homestead.

Some went into business, others accounting, security and soldier work. Others joined the convent or seminary, continuing the good work that the missionaries were intent on doing, never mind the poverty stricken in their own home countries.

The poor became redefined by their achievements in formal western education and the war in those days was the one fought between those who wanted to maintain their traditional ways of life and those who believed that we needed to find our place on the world stage and stand with others fluent in world languages and literatures and dances and currencies.

... after the first Obote days, after Idi Amin and Binaisa and Lule and the second Obote days ...<sup>6</sup>

*Oh, it was a blindsided love, those days that the old ones talk about – the kind that wore blinkers and focused on the finishing line. Run! Run! Run! It was the kind of love*

<sup>5</sup> Primo Levi describes the wilful resistance, albeit futile, against the heralding winter of 1944, underscoring the difference in experience of those who have 'been there' and those for whom nature is a constant and language of free men is inadequate. 'Yesterday the evening sun went down irrevocably behind a confusion of dirty clouds chimney stacks and wires, and today it is winter ... our way of being cold has need of a new word.' Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, trans. Stuart Woolf (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993), 123.

<sup>6</sup> Milton Obote, the first prime minister of Uganda, was overthrown by Idi Amin in 1971 but elected president in a highly contested election in 1980. He was president until 1985, when he was overthrown by a junta. The period 1980–1985 is sometimes referred to as Obote II – his second time round.

*that saw nothing else until the sun started to set, the hollering died down, the crickets screaming and folks going home. Happiness and optimism and laughter brimming full and pouring over the horizon – those were the glory days. We thought we'd cross the finishing line together, laughing, laughing. We thought we were people. We thought we would accomplish much, much more. Now we're flailing in the dusk and the sun's falling. How did we betray the sun? How?*

You think about the roles you must play – performances of authority, of helplessness, of decidedly unabashed gratitude, of nothing and nothingness – after all who do you think you are? Who do you think you were?

2.

*How did we think we were to betray the sun? It's that insistence isn't it? That we're right, that we should be right, right now and every day. That we're infallible; that every day brings light to prove our might; that flowers bloom anyway; that children are born; that lovers love with the kind of passion that threatens the earth off its kilter; that we are right anyway and that the sun deserves our smiles.*

## A Chronology of Compassion<sup>7</sup>

As if after all this, it'd all come to this place – where elders would negotiate and you'd step on eggs one time and the *cen*<sup>8</sup> would rise into the mist never to return.

The *cen* are here.

What more physical manifestations do you need after you've stumbled on random tibiae and femurs and tripped over skulls, still toothed, in open grassy fields?

What more physical manifestations do you need all these years after the war, and bombs lie waiting, only to detonate when kin, or neighbours, or people you don't even know are blown up on a regular enough basis and that only deserves a shrug from others who hear of it?

What more physical manifestations do you need than heaps and heaps of stones waiting to be crushed by women, men, children who should be in school but can't because the whole family has to be employed, or nobody has dinner?

What more physical manifestations do you need?

The *cen* are in your dreams, a lot, not every day.

The *cen* are in the neighbour's child, now seized by epileptic fits since the daughter returned from the bush. Who knows what she did over there to whom?

The *cen* are now in the constant nodding<sup>9</sup> of children being harvested in the hundreds.

<sup>7</sup> 'A chronology of compassion' is taken from Kimberley Theidon, 'Justice in Transition: The Micropolitics of Reconciliation in Post-War Peru,' *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 50(3) (2006): 445.

<sup>8</sup> Acholi for a haunting, ghostly apparition, usually evil.

<sup>9</sup> The nodding disease is a little-known affliction that is killing children in northern Uganda. The American Centers for Disease Control and Prevention theorizes that it may be the effect of a river worm. Mary Romaniec, in 'Uganda's Children Are Dying! Are Pharmaceutical Drugs to Blame?' *Acholi Times*, 9 April 2012, notes that similar effects have been described in children from Finland after H1N1 drug trials by GlaxoSmithKline. She also notes the lack of funding and rigour in the international review board process in Uganda.

It'll suck the will you thought you needed to listen to stories, even you  
*condenados*,<sup>10</sup>  
 even you looking for accommodation from the government, a sympathetic ear  
 for your pleas.

Yes, they are people,<sup>11</sup> too  
 Yes, they have rights  
 As if yours, rotting in the ground, your people had no rights

But we must move on, pull through this. So we give more, we must.

After all, we're all survivors of the same war  
 After all, we all lived through the same big guns and little guns  
 After all, we were all exposed to the same stories of harm and death  
 By our own children and neighbours<sup>12</sup>

The truth, like a gate, holds us back, even though it is only a tree  
 With a trunk erect like God's middle finger, stretching out to heaven

The call is to learn to reconcile, with freedom from these nightmares<sup>13</sup>  
 And a tree with a trunk the size of thirty men's torsos  
 That could have been buried in its roots

But we must move on, pull through this, with those that would seek  
 atonement.

Through their stories and into your ears and inside your bodies  
 Stories swirling round and round your bloodstream and until you become them  
 Until we're all the same, we're all the same, we're all the same caught up in the  
 Interpreter's<sup>14</sup> words  
 To make sense  
 To shake the tree, the whole tree and nothing else seemed to matter

What?

When those stories hit you, let it refract back like a prism  
 It is a magic tree, this tree of truth  
 Let it shoot you in the eye, blind you to what lies before you  
 Let it pierce your heart and cure you of the aches, the memories

<sup>10</sup> Theidon, supra n 7 at 434, describes these as the 'condemned dead who were sentenced to an afterlife wandering the earth and never finding peace.'

<sup>11</sup> A *New Vision* newspaper headline for 10 May 2012 reads, 'Ex-LRA Commander, Col. Kamdulu Pleads for Mercy.' The space allocated to voicing the plea for the notorious leaders of the Lord's Resistance Army underscores the irony with which the media silences the victims of that war.

<sup>12</sup> Theidon, supra n 7 at 436, refers to these as 'intimate enemies.'

<sup>13</sup> Nightmares may be indicative of the unforgiven and the need for reconciliation to get rid of *cen*. The outbreak of nodding disease in northern Uganda may be a manifestation of a social haunting.

<sup>14</sup> Interpreters in the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission often performed in English the stories they heard in a different language. Debates about the challenging nature of their work (translating emotions into syntax) have abounded since. See, for example, Catherine M. Cole, *Performing South Africa's Truth Commission: Stages of Transition* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010).

Those long gone pasts in which you seem to remember that there was love  
 (After all, there wasn't much else anyway)

And as we forgive those who trespass against us,<sup>15</sup> we must move on, we must  
 move on, divvying up parcels of confession to you others:

The judge, the high priest, the collared priest, the padre, the rabbi, the imam, the  
 elder, the preacher man proselytizing brimstone and fire<sup>16</sup> – yes, you too

Take this one and this one and this one and this one and this one but not that one<sup>17</sup>

Preach forgiveness  
 Write a play<sup>18</sup>  
 Sing a song  
 Dance

We must reconcile  
 We must reconcile  
 We must reconcile

We must forgive all those who trespass against us, so they can wear their for-  
 giveness on their foreheads, half-tainted with truths that we'd rather not have  
 taken in whole.

Must we forgive everything?  
 Must we try?

So we move on and pull through the vision of the moss-bound tall tree  
 In this forest of things that happened all that time ago  
 So we repent, O Lord, and in this thy tender mercies guide us to remember what  
 we must forget and to forget that which we should not have to remember

Re – con – ciliate  
 Re – con – ciliate  
 Re – con – ciliate

<sup>15</sup> From 'The Lord's Prayer,' *Holy Bible: King James Version* (New York: New American Library, 1974), Matthew 6: 9–13.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* This commonly referenced image comes from Corinthians 15: 24–26: 'The lake of fire, which is the second death, will be demolished, destroyed, when the kingdom is delivered up to God.' The idea of life after death that is proselytized parallels the hope for normality after mass atrocity and war.

<sup>17</sup> In 'The Real Black Man is Dead,' Esther Armah defines emotional justice as that which gives 'voice to hurts – present and historical – to speaking the most intimate truths, not being held hostage to a generational inheritance of untreated trauma and to shaping your future and not being shaped solely by an unresolved past.' *Huffington Post*, 20 July 2012. Her uncanny definition of this kind of justice, much like *cen*, speaks of something unresolved and haunting that affects the present and the future. However, for Samuel Pillsbury, emotions in law can be separated, controlled and rationalized to effect justice, albeit within limitations. Samuel H. Pillsbury, 'Emotional Justice – Rationalizing the Passions of Criminal Punishment,' *Cornell Law Review* 74(4) (1989): 657–658.

<sup>18</sup> Theidon, *supra* n 7 at 436, identifies ritual purification as one of the 'central tenets of transitional justice.'

Take only what we need, only what propels us forward – gravestone markers, or none

Graves, or none

Bereft or empowered by the blood of whom?

No. Not Christ. Not this time

Bless us, O Lord, in this thy tender mercies and take us through with those who seek reparations to pay for:

Time  
Blood  
Anger  
Children lost  
Land  
Housing  
Belonging

Jewellery, art, songs unsung, stories untold, moments of tender hands in the night

lost after that day when they shot him in full view of everyone; when they raped him; when they burned him; when they tortured his mother; when they finally touched that bit of him that was convinced that he had to seek a gun and so he stormed out into the forest, only to be led back in shackles and shot in full view of everyone else.

And her?<sup>19</sup>

What to do with that woman, those women who so convincingly illustrate that newish English term – femicide?<sup>20</sup> Broken by bayonets, torn by shards of beer bottles and condemned to sit in their own shit forever – what branch of truth deals with that kind of reality?

And so we must move on and pull through with those who show remorse  
As if

## Towards an Imperfect Future

*And so? So what? What's a sunny day with children laughing, neighbours gossiping in Babel and your feet stone cold and unable to take a step outside? What's a sunny day when it threatens you with happiness, with a small smile, with memories of moments when you threw back your head and laughed and laughed until tears rolled down your face and your belly hurt?*

<sup>19</sup> The image of the permanently scarred victim represents an unending victimization for both the reformed perpetrator and the victim, which complicates the situation for Theidon's *arrepentidos* – the 'repentant ones.' *Ibid.*, 446.

<sup>20</sup> 'Femicide' was first coined in Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Norton, 2001).



3.

### The Children Are Nodding

The children would like you to take their picture

The children are smiling, laughing

The children are nodding, nodding

Yes, they want sweets

What children don't?

The children are nodding, nodding

Yes, their mother's home

They take you by the hand

Lead you to the homestead

Laughing, skipping

The children are nodding, nodding

Yes, they're doing well at school

Yes, they're fine

Yes, they like their presents

The children are nodding, nodding

Look up at the sky

Beyond the pale

Way beyond the pale

The children are nodding, nodding

The children are nodding, nodding

The children are nodding, nodding

They can't stop

The children are nodding, nodding

The children are seized at the neck

The children are nodding

Their eyes are locked at the back of their heads

Whites showing, whites showing

The children are nodding, it's evening

The children are nodding, we can't sleep

The children are nodding, they can't eat

The children are nodding, we can't work

The children are nodding, they can't go to school

The children are nodding, we tie them up

The children are nodding, and dying off fast

The children are nodding, nodding

The children are nodding, nodding

The children are nodding, nodding

The children are nodding, nodding . . .

*Not yet, my girlfriend says, not yet. Not yet uhuru,<sup>21</sup> the book said. Not yet tomorrow, the moon declared, silver like, sliver. Not yet certainty. Not yet spring. Not yet morning. Not yet dancing until the drum's vibration pulses though your body and down to your feet threatening to tear the earth's fabric. Not yet flimsy kisses, forgotten in the next minute. Not yet mindless hands roving. Not yet uhuru. Not yet my home. Not now. Not yet.<sup>22</sup> All our stories told and untold*

There's a trembling in the word that hovers in our throats suffocating, suffocating – breathe, let it go.

Words float about in the ether and enter our heads again, grabbing our throats again, threatening a tremendous thunder that would shake up the whole earth and send us into a tailspin and throw this planet off kilter.

We can't tell it all

*I thought I'd miss home. I thought I'd miss you. I thought I'd miss myself. I thought I'd miss the sunshine; that I'd forget the days we held hands into the morning. Instead, I hear the disintegration inside as things fall apart. I hear drums in the distance. I see giant ostrich feathers on the heads of dancing men. Sweat glistens and pours off the backs of the dancers. Gyrating hips, grass skirts swinging back and forth. I thought I'd miss the stories you used to tell, but the rhythm of the bicycle spokes on calabashes – chaka chaka chaka chaka – and the dust rising is a calm in my chest. We live again. We live again. We live again.*

<sup>21</sup> This is the title of Oginga Odinga's memoir about Kenyans' struggle for independence from the British. *Uhuru* means 'freedom' in Kiswahili. Oginga Odinga, *Not Yet Uhuru: The Autobiography of Oginga Odinga* (London: Heinemann, 1967).

<sup>22</sup> E.M. Forster, *A Passage to India* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1924), ends with the horses of two men taking decidedly different paths, suggesting that the fate and/or relationship of the British and their colonies are not inextricable and inevitably linked. It is impossible for the oppressor and the oppressed to have an equitable friendship. In this case, the possibility of reconciliation after war is dependent on more than the search for what happened in the past. It requires a wilfulness to project the relationship forward from the present, not from the past.