

White Dreams of Black Flesh: Representations of Intra-African Violence in *Shooting Dogs*

Sarah Olutola
McMaster University

Abstract

This essay questions how Western filmic narratives of the Genocide against the Tutsis, in mobilizing fetishistic images of dead and suffering black African bodies, support the affective dimensions of the very humanitarian projects that may contribute to real Africans' exposure to geopolitical machineries of death.

As James Ferguson writes in his book, *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order*, "Western societies have found in 'Africa' a radical other for their own constructions of civilization, enlightenment, progress, development, [and] modernity [...] 'Africa' in this sense has served as a metaphor [...] a 'dark continent' against which the lightness and whiteness of 'Western civilization' can be pictured" (2). Western humanitarianism has historically flirted with this objectifying framework. Indeed, there is a definite problem when the language of humanitarianism discards what Mahmood Mamdani calls the notions of law and citizenship, and adopts the more apolitical concept of 'protection' (18). This kind of humanitarianism proceeds on the predication of saving Africans from themselves, casting the West as saviors.

One can clearly see such mythologies at work in films and documentaries detailing African genocidal violence from a Western perspective. In this essay, with a focus on the Genocide against the Tutsis, I will examine the BBC film *Shooting Dogs* and the CBC documentary, *Shake Hands with the Devil* in juxtaposition with other Western media images of the genocide. Of course, by performing a close reading, I hope to illuminate how Western narratives of African history works to obscure the ongoing Western ideological frameworks of colonial power and global dominance, as well as the political and economic developments that led to the incident. However, I am primarily concerned with the particular way each film depicts the violence and death characteristic of the genocide.

Visual representations of violence can function in a variety of different ways. Indeed, according to Heike Härting in “Global Humanitarianism, Race, and the Spectacle of the African Corpse,” in terms of the representations of violence performed upon African bodies, the resulting pity and fear elicited from Western audiences allows for the dead African body to “function as an exhibited commodity to create a consensus of affect that helps reproduce Africa as an object of humanitarian aid” (66). However, beyond this, the visceral shock experienced by the audience upon watching these acts of atrocities (with Africans, of course, as the targets) may also function as a bizarre form of pleasure, transforming this violent objectification of Africans into a kind of war porn facilitated through their ideological othering. This implicit devaluing of Africans and the intense focus placed solely on the imagery of violence and resulting dead, emaciated and manipulated black African bodies paradoxically contributes to the implicit devaluing of actual black African lives, which may in turn explain “the decreasing international commitment to putting a stop to genocidal violence in Africa,” the curious lack of concern for the surviving victims of such violence, and thus the lack of real attempts to create lasting, substantial peace in war-torn African areas (Härting 62).

Through analyzing these films, I hope to show how “the written and visual narrativization of racialized violence” (Härting 61) and the continuous viewing of African bodies only in terms of Western fantasy inevitably leads to the inability to connect the social, economic and political realities of various African societies to today’s increasingly neoliberal global structure (Ferguson 6). This reinforces the believed necessity of humanitarianism while validating the “restructuring of global security measures and military spending, frequently articulated in the UN’s new and controversial politics of global responsibility and humanitarian intervention” (Härting 62). Indeed, not only does the discursive divorcing of humanitarianism from politics help sustain the unequal economic and political relations that produce the conditions of genocide, but the increased emphasis on military intervention may lead to more violence inflicted upon African bodies – military, racial violence performed by soldiers who are “more like conquerors than humanitarians...their actions [underscoring] the meaning of Black bodies both here and there, historically and in the present” (Razack 4).

Keywords: Genocide, Rwanda, Africa, documentary, representation, humanitarianism

Work Cited

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