

Book Reviews

Cloak and Dagger

Black Earth Rising, TV series, 8 Episodes, written and directed by Hugo Blick, co-production by BBC 2/Netflix, 2018.

It is not difficult to understand why the events of the Rwandan Genocide in 1994 lend themselves easily to representation in film. The genocide provoked an enduring desire to understand why its organisers were so effective in propagating the violence and why the UN, among others, failed to intervene effectively despite the events unfolding in front of its observers. *Black Earth Rising*, an eight-part television series aired by the BBC, is one of the first mainstream television series to approach the issue from a broader perspective, focusing on events in and around Rwanda after the genocide. It was screened in a prime-time slot for UK television and was a frequent feature of media commentary for weeks. It received largely positive reviews, in particular because of its unusually complex approach to post-conflict politics. Despite this, I was hesitant about watching the series. Fictional stories inspired by ugly truths around international political involvement in the global south are a popular theme for mainstream film and television productions. These are often excruciating to watch for the wrong reasons. The tendency to critique contemporary western involvement while unselfconsciously presenting problematic, even neocolonial, stereotypes can be particularly grating.¹ Despite sincere intentions, these stories rarely escape the stereotypes about Africa that the Kenyan writer Binyavanga Wainaina forcefully protested in his article 'How to Write About Africa'.²

Set against this standard, *Black Earth Rising* is a sophisticated production, delving into the complex politics of Rwanda and the east-central region of Africa in the decades since the genocide. The fictional story focuses on a legal investigator, Kate Ashby (played by Michaela Coel), a troubled Rwandan survivor of the genocide, now working in London and employed by Michael Ennis (John Goodman), an American-born barrister. Kate was found as a small child by a humanitarian worker in 1994 among the dead at the site of a recent massacre in Rwanda. Kate's adoptive mother is a well-known British prosecutor for cases held at the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR). Early in the series, Kate's mother decides to lead an attempted prosecution of military leader General Simon Nyamoya, a Tutsi and former soldier of the Rwandan Patriotic Front's (RPF) army. As a member of the RPF in 1994, Nyamoya is credited with helping to bring the genocide to an end. He is badged as a warlord by the media, in command of mercenaries involved in the ongoing conflict in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and entangled with the mining and mineral trade in the region. This unfolds much to the chagrin of Kate, who views her mother's involvement as a personal betrayal, given her own history of loss at the hands of extremist Hutu *génocidaires*. A tragedy then interrupts the judicial proceedings at the ICTR and, as a result, Kate and Michael become the two main, antagonistic figures intent on understanding a conspiracy that centres around the actions of high-ranking figures in the Rwandan government. The series intertwines the fictional story with observations about

1 Notable examples include *Black Hawk Down*, *Blood Diamond*, and *The Constant Gardener*; all follow this familiar model, in which Africans, typically poor and forlorn, are the backdrop to the actions of a white saviour.

2 B. Wainaina, 'How to Write about Africa', *Granta*, 147 (May 2019), 40th birthday special, Essays and Memoir, available at <https://granta.com/how-to-write-about-africa/>, retrieved 6 July 2019.

the real state of contemporary Rwandan and international politics. The specific focus is on the complexity inherent in prosecuting crimes of genocide and war under international law.³ This is set alongside a reflection on the European colonial and neocolonial occupation of Africa and the insalubrious actions of governments with interests in this region.

In *Black Earth Rising*, as in reality, these issues sit in the background of a debate about the RPF's governance of Rwanda. That is, whether the RPF's success in driving Rwanda's infrastructural recovery and its proficiency in addressing development indicators is justification for an authoritarian turn and for its continued involvement in the conflict in the DRC. The RPF emerged as a rebel army formed by Tutsis displaced from Rwanda during earlier cycles of violence and prevented from returning by the Hutu-dominated regime. From 1990 to 1994, the group were engaged in war with the Rwandan government. In 1994, the invasion reached its apex, with the group moving through the country as the genocide unfolded. Its presence displaced and disrupted people intent on carrying out attacks orchestrated by an extremist Hutu political elite, and RPF soldiers stopped some of the massacres. Within Rwanda, it refers to itself as the 'army of liberation', and to those outside the country it makes reference to this standing when challenged. The difficulty is that it is exactly this history that leaves it open to criticism. The RPF has vehemently rebutted accusations of war crimes and crimes against humanity, including retributive or strategic killings of Hutu civilians and refugees during the civil war and afterwards. Despite its birth as a Tutsi army, it has avoided discussion on any ongoing division based around ethnic categories, something made all the more difficult because public references to ethnicity in Rwanda were declared illegal in the years following the army's transition into government.

The possibility that the RPF leadership could be tried for crimes committed during war in the 1990s has haunted the party since its inception. Several members have been issued with arrest warrants by national governments in Europe in the years since the genocide, although no trial has resulted. Rwanda's recovery and its aspirations for economic growth are dependent on continuing foreign investment, and much of the largesse extended to Rwanda by western institutions rests on an ability to defend the good quality of the RPF's moral compass. Claims that the party's values and actions are incongruous are frequently and angrily denounced by RPF officials, an exercise in skilled public relations management brilliantly embodied in the series by Lucian Msamati as David Runihura, special adviser to the president, and Abena Ayivore as the fictional President Bibi Mundanzi.

This is where the issue of the International Criminal Court (ICC) at the Hague is relevant to a discussion of the series. The ICTR had the capacity to bring members of the RPF to trial for crimes committed in the 1990s, but failed to do so. Hampered by the need for co-operation from the RPF in order to try Hutu *génocidaires* and lacking sufficient drive to meet the demands of justice at the expense of political diplomacy, the ICTR repeatedly and somewhat futilely deferred to national courts or to the RPF-led Rwandan government. *Black Earth Rising* foregrounds these difficult questions around the efficacy and ethical cogency of both the ICC and international involvement in Rwandan affairs in general. The ICC, for example, is hosted by a western country and supported by western institutions from countries with a history of violent colonial occupation and exploitation of Africa. It has also clearly failed to operate with political neutrality. The conundrum is summed up by an

³ Nyamoya's fictional story in the series bears close resemblance to the factual story of the militia leader Bosco Ntaganda. In early July 2019, the ICC found Ntaganda guilty of war crimes and crimes against humanity in the DRC. See J. Burke, 'DRC Warlord "The Terminator" Convicted of War Crimes', *Guardian*, London, 8 July 2019, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jul/08/drc-rebel-commander-bosco-ntaganda-the-terminator-convicted-over-war-crimes>, retrieved 15 July 2019; see also <https://www.icc-cpi.int/drc/ntaganda>, retrieved 15 July 2019.

audience member at one of Eve Ashby's speaking events, who asks, 'isn't what you do just the latest example of self-righteous western paternalism?'

It is unfortunate that this conundrum is also the reason I found *Black Earth Rising* so discomfiting. Part of the difficulty in creating a series like this is the demands of a production commissioned for a mainstream television audience. The series is, at heart, an espionage thriller, a beloved mode of storytelling in Britain. The first cloaked assassin appears before the end of Episode One, and they rarely stop rolling up after this. Mixing fact with fiction, the genre plays on real anxieties about current public threats, working to define as 'the other' whomever that may be at the time.⁴ In this case, the series manages it on several levels, playing on fears around international terrorism, illegal (and legal) immigration and the unbridled power and pomposity of the west's elite.⁵ The unfortunate result, of course, is that it is the African characters who are also subject to this 'othering'. It is worth bearing in mind that, although the writers go to great lengths to present scenes from the genocide sensitively, there is graphic violence throughout the fictional story, and almost all of it involves African characters. Stereotyping in the presentation of Rwandan and African characters is persistent, and, where characters do have more depth, the writers often fall back on cliché.

The series offers a fictional story based on real events. The ambiguity with which fictional and factual aspects of the story are combined is very discomfiting at times. The culmination of the plot surrounds a clandestine mass grave in eastern DRC associated with the execution of Hutu refugees. Although the setting and associated names are altered, this is not fiction: the RPF has been accused of massacring thousands of internally displaced Hutu at the Kibeho camp in south-west Rwanda in the 1990s and of denying humanitarian and judicial organisations full access to bodies and graves after the event took place. In one of the final episodes, there is an exhumation of a grave. It is realistic and deeply uncomfortable. Similarly, the trauma that Kate expresses is painfully well-presented and very real, affecting many of those people who lived through the country's recent violence. Is it ethically sound to present all this as entertainment? And somehow to excuse this by using creative slight-of-hand to ensure that the real is ever so slightly behind the fiction? These are not trifling questions, given the devastating part that myth and rumour have played in perpetuating the difficulties that Rwandans now face, which westerners have long been involved in prolonging. Furthermore, the visual has been part of both the execution and confrontation of the genocide from the outset. The violence inflicted on the bodies of victims during the genocide was deliberately made visible by perpetrators, and then later by survivors as they attempted to impress upon outsiders the scale of the massacres. Revulsion inspires fascination, and this is also the reason that Rwanda and its past draws such interest, particularly from external observers. It is hard not to accuse the series of playing on the visual draw of these events to entice an audience.⁶

Ethical preoccupations aside, this is an engrossing series. This is undoubtedly due partly to a phenomenally talented cast. There are more offensive and 'othering' narratives couched in investigative 'faction' routinely broadcast on television – why quibble over the moral

4 O.S. Buckon, *Espionage in British Fiction and Film since 1900: The Changing Enemy* (Lanham, Lexington Books, 2015).

5 Allegations that have circulated in the media about the RPF's activities have an easy association with this genre. For example, in 2014 the RPF was widely accused of assassinating its own 'spy chief': see <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2019/jan/15/rwanda-who-killed-patrick-karegeya-exiled-spy-chief>, retrieved 16 October 2019.

6 It would also be remiss to write this review without pointing out that Rwandans themselves have produced numerous films that speak to the genocide and associated issues. Although a longer commentary is, unfortunately, beyond the scope of this review, films made about and in Rwanda ('Hollywood') by Rwandans proliferate. The country recently launched its own film festival. It would be interesting to compare *Black Earth Rising* to films produced and shown in Hillywood, many of which are written and directed by Rwandans with first-hand experience of events. See Rwanda Film Festival website, available at <http://rwandafilmfestival.net/>, retrieved 15 July 2019.

cogency of this well-meaning series? The problem is that the show is intent on pushing a moral message. As if aware of its own shortcomings, the implication of embodied guilt or perhaps horror is replete in the narrative. Almost all of the recurring main characters have physical and/or mental illness that is made a feature of in the script; at one point, an association between guilt and cancer is actually referenced in the script. People frequently vomit, sometimes inexplicably, as if to remind us bodily that this is indeed a story of horror and not an entertainment.⁷ The writers seem very preoccupied with this need to present a moral lesson, and not just for the BBC viewer. The concluding sections present a sickly judgement on the most appropriate way for the RPF to respond to its accusers. It is difficult at this point not to feel the weight of those accusations of western paternalism. A true representation would have left the entire issue hanging, quietly stifled by the machinery of bureaucracy, murky and unresolved, as in real life.

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⁷ A similar affliction affects the main protagonists in the controversial film by Joshua Oppenheimer, *The Act of Killing*, about the perpetrators of the 1965–66 massacres in Indonesia – perhaps the homage was intended.