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**Marcos Farias Ferreira**

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# Good Bye, Johnny Weissmuller

Marcos Farias Ferreira



Fig. 1

I have always thought of home not as a location, with its concrete, unmoved foundations deep into the ground, but more like a momentum – a move or dynamic thrust – embodying the endless, hopeless attempt to become one with a fragmented self and a fragmented world. Home not as an entity but as a fluid state of personal affairs, embodied in the locution ‘being at home with something’ rather than ‘being at home somewhere’. In my lifetime, ‘being at home’ has been a mental state gradually more unconnected to physical anchors and foundations, even if many places have become meaningful to me and even part of me.

On that sunny morning of August 2014, I found myself aboard an overpacked raft in Lake Kivu, one of the African great lakes extending along the Albertine rift – the western side of the Great Rift Valley – right into the heart of Africa. An imaginary line divides the lake between Rwanda, to the east, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, to the west. Early that morning, I had left Kibuye, halfway in the Rwandese side, towards Gisenyi in the north, on the border with the Congolese city of Goma, after working four weeks at L'Esperance, the Adventist orphanage located in Western Rwanda.

The waters were calm and the raft managed to sail by sight, undisturbed, up the eastern coast of the lake, going ashore now and again to pick up or debark passengers. Leaning on the raft's bow for the whole journey, there I was shoulder to shoulder with other passengers, my eyes and mind jumping ceaselessly from the faces, sounds and gesticulations of my raft companions to the vigorous fluctuation of a big Rwandan flag, at the mercy of the morning wind like a figurehead on the bow of a classic vessel. This vague state of numbness and tranquillity was interrupted every time the raft came ashore and new passengers had to be accommodated inside or debarked. Then, the fragile balance of bodies and objects so hard to attain aboard was disturbed, and a row of frantic individuals with their parcels and animals erupted in and out of the raft, breaking the order of things and imposing a new one. Lying in the middle of a methane lake on that August sunny morning, I remember thinking about how the state of things aboard that raft summed up perfectly the impressions, the feelings and reflections I had collected and put together during the previous four weeks.

For those four weeks, a camping tent on a steep hill overlooking lake Kivu had been my home, and my daily routine in the orphanage often aligned, conditioned or disturbed by the morning sun, heavy rains and the new strangers passing by or staying for days. I had been in Africa before, but never for such a long time nor with the task of living, working, laughing, eating or travelling side by side with locals as this time. As faces and voices aboard the raft intensified and became real again before my eyes, I realised nothing of that had to do with Tarzan's Africa, as it were. This was no movie scenario, and unlike the hoards of African supporting characters in the cardboard primordial jungle, petrified each time they heard Tarzan yell, I could distinguish behind each soul aboard that raft the struggling master of their own lives. I had not debarked in the continent in search of the idyllic scenarios and postcard views, wonders or adventures in a virgin land, too often sold to the dilettante Westerner by travel agencies all over the world. But what I found there was no heart of darkness either, to draw on the Joseph Conrad's novel I had brought with me to Rwanda. The Africa I had in front of me was far more complex and diverse than the flat land invented by the Western gaze and delivered to me in the long Saturday movie sessions of the early 1980s, aired by the Spanish television. It was the vibrant land of men and women, and many children, taking life in their own hands.

As it often happens when we spend time paying attention to someone or some scene for a little while, I soon started learning to recognise and differentiate my raft companions, ascribing to each one a defining character trait according to the winks and blinks I could spot, their gaze or the ways they talked and interacted with each other. Staring at my fellow travellers on the bumpy raft that day, I retrieved the idea of travel as a vital,



epistemic/learning method based on the strengthened conviction that the complexity of the real is revealed to us in the gaze of those we are called upon to recognise through the most uncommon encounters. Directing my gaze to the improbable neighbours that found themselves aboard the raft that day, I also retrieved the faces of all those I had met during the previous weeks in Rwanda and recalled how I strived to distinguish what hid behind them – their joys, their expectations, frustrations and sufferings. Either at long walks on the top of the hills or in the urban setting of the capital Kigali, on foot or at a speedier pace on top of a moto-taxi, the Rwandans I had met or those I had just passed by – or the moto-taxi drivers I had shared a bike seat with – appeared now on my mind as sharing with me the confined space of a raft, not much bigger than the one I was taking from Kibuye to Gisenyi on that August morning.

Among these crowds there were always enough candidates to be Johnny Weissmuller, the actor playing Tarzan in the black and white movies produced by MGM in the 1930s – a handful of Westerners trapped, as it were, in the spider web of my research gaze and interest. Born in 1904 as János Weißmüller, in the Austro-Hungarian Banat, he is a defining character of the twentieth century, filling the imagination of several generations worldwide with images of a wild, dangerous and unfathomable Africa asking to be colonised by Western reason and order. For many today, this continent comes out the same way, home to giant arachnids, moving sands and subservient people treating foreigners by *bwana*, the Swahili word for master. In part, this is due to Johnny Weissmuller, not exactly to the actor or the man – he, who was five times Olympic champion, but to the character, the Tarzan who became so difficult to distinguish from the actor himself. By embodying the ape man with a stylised yell, Weissmuller came to provide audiovisual depth to Rousseau's Noble Savage or Defoe's Robinson Crusoe. Commanding the jungle hoards with his authoritative yell, Tarzan/Weissmuller erects himself, from within the TV screens, as the *primus inter pares* of brutes and men but also as the master of the natural world, the epitome of the white man assuming, as manifest destiny, the commandment of other men and the control of nature. The story is much more complex than that, but it is also true that the paradoxical gaze, full of tensions, cast on the world by modern men and women finds in this story a rather fertile terrain. Walking up and down the thousand hills of Rwanda, there was no way I could ignore that the African continent embodies humanity's deepest fears, as much as it embodies humanity's longing for freedom and emancipation. It has become as much Conrad's heart of darkness, full of corpses and diseases, as Blixen's *afrikanske farm*, with its luxuriant savannas as far as the eye can see.

After four hours sailing through the deep green waters of lake Kivu, the raft gets closer to its final destination in Gisenyi. Life aboard gets more frenzied and chaotic as everyone confronts their own journey expectations and prepares to leave the raft. The movement and excitement open up some clearings among the mob. New human scenes form before my eyes and I can finally find a more comfortable position to hold on to the bow. There is this woman lying on the raft's floor by my side, who I could not see before, taking shoes out of a big bag while combing the hair of a young girl sitting next to her. There is this group of thirtysomething male friends standing up, more to the stern of the raft, drinking beer from green, elongated Primus bottles, cheering and hassling each other while drafting in the air vigorous movements with their arms. There is also this young guy with a bulky rucksack on his back, sitting tightly on the small deck covering

part of the bow and looking absentmindedly to the fuzzy horizon, towards the Congo. The moment I laid eyes on his silhouette I recalled the last time I had seen Seth, waiting for the bus to go back to the boarding school, at the end of Summer, on the muddy road close to L'Esperance. When the bus finally arrived, after a whole morning of waiting due to the heavy rains of the eve, we hardly had time to say goodbye. I then recalled when the bus got past the last curve, climbing up from the lake at the end of its tether, and stopped by the road like a grumpy, heavy pachyderm. The last I saw from Seth was him running to the rear door, handing a handful of banknotes to the collector and wimbling his way into the over-packed bus. He had just outrun his many competitors for a place inside, and as the clamour against the collector echoed stronger and stronger outside, I stayed there staring for a while at how Seth literally put his limbs back together, plunged into the mob and disappeared at the rear of the bus. With a deep, protracted complaint and clumsy movements, the bus left the Kagarama area towards Kigali while I walked back to L'Esperance. Lunch was long overdue.

The orphanage was home for Seth, for some eighteen years, and had also been mine in the past weeks. We met in the premises one night, in the beginning of August, by chance, during one of my endless, sleepless, restless deambulations through the garden. I was trying to cope with the malaria pill and had a hard time adjusting to the austerity of the Adventist daily routine. The long chats with Seth that ensued soon gave meaning to such sleepless nights and even to my stay. I had come to Rwanda to know more about the terrible circumstances of the 1994 genocide and that quest had started as soon as I set foot in Kigali. In my wanderings through the city I had passed by and visited the Kigali Genocide Memorial, the Hôtel des Mille Collines and the premises of the UNAMIR, the United Nations international force established in October 1993, by the Security Council, to implement the peace agreement between the Armed Forces of the mainly Hutu Government and the Tutsi-led Rwandese Patriotic Front (RPF). That night, I would watch on my laptop 'Hotel Rwanda' for the first time, the acclaimed film about the horrid events that took place in Kigali, in April 1994, and that led to the withdrawal of the UNAMIR peacekeeping forces, leaving behind thousands of Tutsis and moderate Hutus at the mercy of the Armed Forces and the militias.

Seth lost both his parents during the genocide that ensued and extended to the rest of the country, and L'Esperance was the only home and family left for him afterwards, as for many other children from the region who lived through that tragedy. Eventually, this would become the centre of my conversations with Seth, as well as with other guys who started feeling at ease to tell me the stories of their past and their late parents, or even take me on long walks through the nearby hills and show me what was left of their homes. Such was the case on that particular clouded afternoon, towards the end of my stay at L'Esperance, when Janvier approached me unexpectedly and asked, in his imprecise English, whether I would like to go with him for a stroll. 'It could be interesting for you', he added. Perceiving the ringing challenge coming from his words I instantly nodded and followed Janvier through the gates of the orphanage. After crossing the streets of the neighbouring town of Ngoma, we then started climbing the nearby hill through a steep and rocky path and soon found ourselves on top of the most verdant plateau, crossed by a charming little stream of water. In a neutral tone that showed no sign of emotional engagement, Janvier pointed at a grassy clearing in front of us and then claimed: 'This was my home; my parents used to live here.' The silence around us

was overwhelming – almost mournful – contrasting with the frenzy of people who just some minutes before walked up and down that hill. Some feet ahead, while crossing the little creek and jumping from stone to stone to the other side, Janvier added: ‘During the genocide, the corpses were thrown at this creek. It was packed with corpses and the water became red from the blood’.

Suddenly, a few stark and commanding words pronounced out loud in Kinyarwanda by the captain woke me up from the slumber of previous minutes, as the powerful sound of revolving waters and an abrupt movement of the engine reminded me the raft was approaching the port of destiny. The journey had ended and soon that piece of humanity would disembark in Gisenyi and then disband. From afar, unto the eyes of an obscure and blasé God, the procession of people and parcels that formed spontaneously, flowing outside to the firm land, would look like a trail of busy ants, carrying on their backs all sorts of bits and pieces stolen from His world at a rare moment of godly neglect. Once outside, light-headed and bemused not unlike the many boxes offloaded to the small yard by the port, I lost sight of most of the raft companions and felt left to my own devices in a weird way. I stood there, undecided for a moment, as if the journey’s numbness had affected me once again. On the left side, the imposing but shaky building of the brewery acted like an immediate deterrent to the mind. On the right side, a dirt road appeared that meandered up the hill, sluggishly, overlooking the lake as if showing me the way to take. Suddenly, awoken by the lively chatting of careless young boys, I could see a bunch of moto-taxis drivers right in front of me. I picked one with my look, walked through the yard towards his bike, clarified where I wanted him to take me and discussed the price of the ride. Sitting on the bike, on my way to the Catholic nunnery by the lake where I would stay for the next few days, I could feel the wind blowing on the big dishevelled helmet on my head, causing it to slip back and forth and falling in rhythm with the wobbly movement of the bike struggling on the bumpy road. Enjoying the ride, I tried to be one with the flow and looked in the direction of the lake, to the horizon, where the clouds were gathering and getting darker, and would soon turn into thunder and heavy rain. I then realised that would be the first night, after four weeks, I would not be sleeping in my tent at L’Esperance, and a vague sense of loss got hold of me. In the distance, the gates of the nunnery emerged from the protruding bush. Making a gentle and accommodating gesture while raising his right hand, the driver seemed to say I had just arrived to the new home.

**Please see HTML version for accompanying video content**

**Marcos Farias Ferreira** is Assistant Professor at the School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Lisbon. Having obtained Graduation, Master and PhD in International Relations at Aberystwyth University and the University of Lisbon, research interests include Visual Global Politics, Global Security and Development, Post-Soviet Politics, Collaborative Ethnographies. Docudramas and short films produced include “La Toma” (2011), “Revolución” (2014) and “Esperance” (2015).  
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8257-3336>