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**Desire in *Emergency Sex*:
The Human Rights Worker as Traumatized Witness**

Joshua Paul Dale

“Make a Left at the Amputee Camp”

Dancing and drinking, pool parties and marijuana cocktails, sex both desperate and thrilling; all happening in the midst of death, atrocity, torture, mass graves, and war zones. This is the world presented by *Emergency Sex and Other Desperate Measures: A True Story from Hell on Earth* as it alternates narrative episodes from the lives of three United Nations employees participating in peace keeping operations around the globe. While sensational “tell all” stories are anything but new, the book is unusual in the way it unabashedly connects the ego-boosting thrill of seeking out danger in exotic locales to the selfless satisfaction of enduring hardship to serve distressed populations.

Each author presents a different motivation for taking on this difficult work. Kenneth Cain is a newly graduated lawyer who, deeply affected by learning about the Holocaust in his youth, now wishes to export American style democracy and freedoms to stop future genocides. Former social worker Heidi Postlewait, also American, views these high ideals with amusement. “The personal is political” is her creed, as a desire for self-transformation drives her towards participation in events larger than herself. Finally, when Andrew Thomson, a medical doctor from New Zealand, discovers the Cambodian genocide, he feels something akin to a religious calling to serve others, a legacy of his missionary parents.

Although the motivations of its three authors are different, the three narrative strands in *Emergency Sex* tell essentially the same story. Cain, Postlewait and Thomson all embark on a journey of self-discovery when they take on human rights work, and the unforeseen consequences of completing this journey provide the narrative thrust of their book. All three authors undergo traumatic experiences that push them beyond their limits, as the book charts their initial optimism, followed by disillusionment, complete despair, and finally a coming to terms with their changed selves. *Emergency Sex* is thus intended to bear witness: not only to the mass atrocities and genocides that occasioned the UN missions on

which its authors served, but also to the three friends' own experiences as survivors of varying degrees of both physical and mental trauma.

The way that the authors present themselves as not only witnesses to, but also survivors of, trauma is crucial to my argument. All three authors share the underlying conviction that human beings are fundamentally the same. This is not surprising; for, as Anne Cubille points out in her recent book *Women Witnessing Terror: Testimony and the Cultural Politics of Human Rights*, this same humanist assumption informs the UN Declaration on Human Rights. Cubille's nuanced analysis shows that, by attempting to define an *a priori* subject of human rights in detail, the UN Declaration has the effect of erasing difference (28-41). She believes, as do I, that ethical relations can only be established when difference is acknowledged and maintained, rather than subsumed under a doctrine of sameness.

Since Cain, Postlewait and Thomson begin with this initial supposition, when their human rights work leads them to crisis situations and traumatic experiences, they assume a parity between themselves and the people—witnesses and survivors of atrocity and genocide, or the dead—on whose behalf they act. Thereafter, their narrative position changes: they begin to act and speak not just for the victims of atrocity, but *with* them. As I will show, this act of taking on the rhetorical position of what I term the “traumatized witness” not only triggers their disillusionment and despair (as well as enabling their new-found self-knowledge), it also makes their recovery dependent upon giving up human rights work.

In *Emergency Sex*, difference—and by this I mean radical alterity, that irreducible residue of otherness that haunts human relations—is disavowed: the authors act as if it doesn't exist so that they may identify with the people they are trying to help. The inevitable reappearance of alterity (the return of the repressed) then triggers the respective crises that destroy their faith in human rights work. I will argue that the authors' sensationalistic accounts of “emergency sex” have a crucial role to play in this process. But first, I want to take a brief look at the differences that *are* acknowledged in *Emergency Sex*. One that appears repeatedly is the gulf that opens up between the human rights worker and the rest of the population back home. “I wonder how I can ever date another regular civilian man,” muses Postlewait, “whose only stories are of petty crap at work and drunken weekends at the Jersey shore” (181, 82).

The elevated status of the veteran human rights field worker, whose existence is sanctified by atrocities witnessed and trauma survived, is a major theme expressed throughout *Emergency Sex*. In Postlewait's penultimate anecdote, she describes how

difficult it is for her and her former colleagues to make friends in New York, once they describe where they have been and what they have done. In a Manhattan bar, she compares the Wall Street gossip of expense accounts and salaries overheard at surrounding tables to that of her own companions.¹ When a friend on field assignment for the UN gives Thomson directions to her house in Sierra Leone, Cain overhears and repeats back part of the instructions to Postlewait: “Ken’s head jerks toward me. ‘Make a left at the amputee camp,’ he says, eyes wide, eyebrows up” (286). This passage highlights the differences in everyday life between human rights workers and Wall Street traders through a geography of atrocity, in which the most casual anecdote uttered by the former is capable of bringing ordinary conversation to a standstill and killing friendship in the bud. It also shows how Cain and Postlewait actively produce this difference, stressing and reinforcing it through their interactions.

I don’t mean to belittle the achievements of human rights workers, or to deny that a well-deserved sense of accomplishment can distance them from their peers. However, the deployment of difference in *Emergency Sex* takes a more convoluted turn when it appears amongst the human rights workers themselves. For example, consider the three authors’ use of nicknames for each other. Throughout the book, Kenneth Cain is referred to as “Mr. Ken” and Heidi Postlewait as “Miss Heidi.” Cain explains that this custom originated during their first mission, in Cambodia in 1993:

We call each other Mr. and Miss as terms of respect and endearment. Not everybody earns it. It comes from the maids and the cooks and the drivers. They called me Mr. Cain, which sounds too formal. So I said don’t call me Mr. Cain, please call me Ken. They have their own sense of honor and duty, so they compromised and call me Mr. Ken. They did the same with Heidi and it caught on. Now when someone says ‘Heidi,’ I’m offended by the disrespect. It sounds naked. That’s Miss Heidi to you. (67)

Andrew Thompson is always called “Dr. Andrew,” which emphasizes not only the two other authors’ personal connection to him, but also their respect for him as a medical doctor who is the most experienced human rights worker among them.

¹ Just a few pages previously, Postlewait describes how five limousines transported the champagne drinking guests at her fortieth birthday party from an uptown Manhattan rooftop to a downtown club. The fact that she completely misses the irony between her own ostentation and that of the Wall Street bankers whom she despises testifies to the unbridgeable distance that she considers to lie between her aid worker friends and all uninitiated “civilians” (282-83).

Notwithstanding the colonialist implications of a list comprising: “the maids and the cooks and the drivers,” Cain’s point is that it is Cambodians, the people they are there to help, who originated this nomenclature. Yet the compromise between American informality and a prior French colonialist legacy that produced the neologism “Mr. Ken” was not necessarily a result of these Cambodian’s “own sense of honor and duty.” For example, if honorifics are generally employed by other Cambodians towards their foreign employers, these employees of “Mr. Ken” and “Miss Heidi” might well have felt that it was not in their best interest to drop all verbal marks of respect.³ So, though Cain is careful to ascribe motivations to his Cambodian employees other than the “respect and endearment” that underlie his use of them, he also does not hesitate to put words in their mouths, and tell us what these motivations are. I want to emphasize the narrative progression at work in this passage: cultural difference is established, briefly emphasized to demonstrate respect for it, then immediately dispelled when it is appropriated for the narrator’s own use.

Cain and Postlewait call each other Mr. and Miss as terms of respect and endearment. The origins of these terms as appellations preferred by their Cambodian employees are preserved by attaching these honorifics to first names rather than surnames (not to mention the fact that “Ms.” is much the preferred term for women in the United States). Only Cambodians and friends—those “in the know”—can use these terms: it’s a right that not everybody earns. Yet on the other hand, if someone says merely “Heidi,” Cain is offended: “That’s Miss Heidi to you.” In other words, it’s damned if you do and damned if you don’t, because Cain deploys these nicknames to establish and emphasize an “insider vs. outsider” dynamic at work among the human rights workers organizing the Cambodian elections.

At the parties for hundreds of guests held at the huge house where Cain and Postlewait live in Phnom Penh, ordinary guests are limited to the veranda, while friends of the housemates are picked out from the crowd and escorted to the roof, a party within the party. “It’s like a VIP room at a nightclub,” writes Cain. “You have to be invited up by someone from the house, so a select clique hangs out there to dance in private and pair off discreetly” (66). Though ostensibly they are all equals—they all came to help—the logic of

² For example, the desire to retain honorifics in addressing their employers might have reflected these Cambodians’ hope of landing other jobs in the English-speaking community after these temporary UN workers left for other postings. Even in this post-colonial world, not all expatriates living on a high salary in a developing country—and this includes many “informal” Americans—are happy with servants addressing them by their first names.

the clique is at work all the same, with borders actively policed. When differences are not apparent, they are artificially created.

I cite these trivial examples of bar stories, nicknames and exclusive rooftop parties to make a point: difference doesn't just go away when people are considered fundamentally the same. Instead, it proliferates. Differences start showing up everywhere, and thus the three authors' belief that it is an essential sameness that binds people together is under continual threat, not the least by their own simultaneous desires to see themselves as forever separate from those they left behind, and among the "in group" amongst their peers in the field, at the same time they want to find and maintain a connection to those they are there to aid.

The Call to Bear Witness

1. "Mr. Cain"

But from whence comes this desire to embark on human rights work? I'll start with Kenneth Cain, who finds his calling during a summer of field work in South Africa and Israel for his senior thesis at Harvard law school. In Tel Aviv during the first Gulf War, Cain is dared by his Israeli friend Tali to watch Iraqi Scud missiles fall from her veranda. Though the danger makes Cain hyper-aware of his body and surroundings, he has trouble imagining the reality of the missile strike: "That Scud hit and killed people. I keep repeating it all in my mind, to make it real" (16). When Tali goes downstairs to call a friend and get the news, Cain cannot summon the courage to join her, instead remaining in her sealed room in case of gas attack.

I feel like a virgin deflowered and abandoned. Embarrassed, excited, disappointed, proud. I want more and I never want to do it again. I knew that this feeling existed—bombs fall, people die in war—it's horrifying but seems vaguely familiar. I'm sixteen and I'm having sex for the first time. Suddenly it's not a fantasy. Wait I'm not ready yet okay let's do it do I have to now yes I want to but not yet take your pants off. Tears and blood. (17)

The salacious details of human rights workers partying hard in war zones are undoubtedly a factor in the marketing of *Emergency Sex* (it is published by Miramax, and a television series is said to be in development). Yet the intermingling of tales of sex and death is more than just titillation for readers. It is integral to the book and to the authors' self-presentation. This is the first of many episodes in which the three authors relate tales linking sex and death. For Cain, this experience transforms his desire to be a part of

something larger than himself into an imperative to join the UN and engage in the ethical act of witnessing. Like the act of losing one's virginity, surviving the Scud's payload of mass death marks him permanently. Now he resolves to put not only his mind, but also his body into service as an agent of humanitarian change.

In his anecdote remembering the loss of his virginity, Cain's use of "I" in the penultimate sentence makes it unclear whom is speaking: Cain or his partner. This slippage is intended to carry over into the last sentence fragment. However, while the tears might or might not have been Cain's, we may presume that the blood was not. And just as Cain appropriates the blood that accompanied the deflowering of his female partner, he appropriates the mass death of war. When he does leave the sealed room and goes downstairs, Tali tells him that the Scud had landed in a field, hurting no one. Thus, Cain's attempt to elevate the experience of watching the missile fall into an experience of witnessing and surviving mass death is revealed as mere fantasy. But far from dispelling his fantasy, this anticlimax only leads him further into the desire to don the aura of the survivor himself.

When Cain leaves Israel and returns to law school at Harvard, he finds himself immediately subjected to dormitory theorizing about Middle Eastern war and politics. Cain soon discovers that his own recent experience on the ground doesn't matter to his hall-mates in the slightest: "The fact that I was just there offers no barrier to their compulsion to display certainty and omniscience" (22). As a witness to war, Cain easily finds the blind spot in his fellow law students' will to intellectual mastery. Yet Cain has his own compulsion: for him, certainty now stems from the embodied experience of the witness. He has not yet stood in this position himself (except in fantasy), but he has become aware of its power. There in his Harvard dorm, however, he is missing a crucial ingredient: something that would mark his presence among his over-intellectualizing peers with an undeniable stamp of authority.

Tears and blood appear again in Cain's narrative after he joins the UN mission in Cambodia. When Atsu, a Japanese election worker, is ambushed and killed in the north, Cain watches his housemate break down while relating the news. He writes:

This is the first time I've been close to a colleague's death. I get the chills looking at Suliman, watching a man cry. It's like that Scud landed again off in the distance. I'm in awe. He's had some derivative status bestowed on him that I can't name or describe but that everyone in the house feels. He's somehow earned respect and distance. (63)

Suliman did not actually witness Atsu's death, but he is *bearing witness* to it, by relaying his grief to his housemates along with the story. Cain is drawn to Suliman's new status as someone touched by trauma, sanctified by suffering. It is a curious type of envy, for the person in this position is incapable of enjoying the new status bestowed upon him or her. Though he does not yet realize it, any enjoyment Cain may take from this special status he so desires will depend upon his maintaining a distance from trauma while still characterizing himself as a survivor. As we shall see, the failure of this balancing act is built into the trajectory of all three narratives in *Emergency Sex*.

2. "Miss Heidi"

Heidi Postlewait presents herself as a foil to Cain and Thomson's idealism. When they become frustrated by the failures of various UN humanitarian missions, she calls them boys who need to stop crying and grow up. "No one cares except them that they had a plan to save the world and it didn't work," she declares (179). Though Postlewait's desire to be a part of something larger than herself is also followed by disillusionment, then world-weary acceptance, her motivation for undertaking the work is different. A realist, she prefers to concentrate on individuals rather than trying to aid whole populations. Her inability to imagine her own life in "the field" is precisely what draws her towards it. Arriving in Cambodia, she declares: "Before me is the opportunity to recreate myself" (30).

What causes Postlewait to embrace human rights work as a chance to recreate herself? Early in the book, she confesses to a perverse envy of people living in war zones, because for them: "Nothing else matters but to stay alive. And that's how I want to feel" (13). Simply put, Postlewait desires to be a survivor. This is not to say that Postlewait wishes to suffer trauma, but rather that she seeks the status of the survivor; which, like Cain, she presumes will propel her out of the mundane world and into a hallowed existence. And, although she does end up in a war zone when she serves in the UN mission to Somalia, for the most part her drive to cast herself as a survivor—a person for whom life is reduced to its most basic and most important elements—is expressed in quite a different context: namely, in sex. This is how Cain categorizes Postlewait's relationships with her lovers: "She pushes even the most unlikely relationship right to the edge; nothing else exists, it's life and death. It's like she's a performance artist and the performance is her relationships. And she is devoted to her art" (232). In other words, while Cain and Thomson see themselves as actors on the world stage through their participation in human rights work, Postlewait elevates her own relationships to the level of international significance, conflating intimacy and sex with

political action. Next, I consider how two of these relationships express what is at stake in Postlewait's drive to recreate herself.

On vacation before taking up her post at the UN mission in Somalia in 1993, Postlewait travels to Mombasa, where she finds herself bored and alone at a beachside resort. Local residents are not allowed on the hotel's beach, but one day at the far boundary a young Kenyan man called James comes up and introduces himself. Postlewait and James begin a three day affair—first in his village, then in a cheap hotel—filled with sex, marijuana and Bob Marley. Postlewait figures out from the start what is going on: "As we walk, I notice other solitary white women, all fairly young and attractive, with their own Masai tribesmen. Great, now I've turned into one of those rich white chicks who pick up poor, attractive men in third world countries for sex" (97). As they part, Postlewait hands James two hundred dollars.

Though they stay in James's village and meet his friends, the time she spends with him is repetitive, like the same Bob Marley song they play over and over, and the sex they have again and again. Postlewait takes up with James to escape from a tourist identity she finds stifling, but she ends up falling into that very trap: she becomes a sex tourist, and knows it. Postlewait cannot shake the guilty feeling that she has used and discarded another human being, which marks this as an unethical encounter for her: a personal betrayal of her drive to make all of her relationships resonate politically; or, in other words, to make them push her further on the path of self-transformation. Her affair with James sent her backwards, not forwards, on this path, which makes this episode a useful benchmark against which to measure Postlewait's subsequent relationships.

In Mogadishu, Somalia, Postlewait lives and works in the Embassy Compound. One night after dinner, Postlewait and her friend Yusuf, a married Somali interpreter on whom she has a crush, are walking back to her room when the compound suddenly comes under sniper attack.

After a minute, or five—time loses all meaning—Yusuf and I get up and run around to the safe side of the building. And then the strangest thing happens. I want to rip my clothes off, rip Yusuf's clothes off, and just fuck him right there. I can feel this pounding inside me and I can't wait. It has to be right now, not in ten minutes, not five. Now. An emergency. Emergency sex. (139)

Then, immediately after they finish having sex: "As we pass a dark lumpy form in a doorway, Yusuf says matter-of-factly that it's a dead body. I make this whimpering noise and then I just start sobbing, tears and hiccups and big gulps and I can't stop." (139). This

episode, which gives title to the book, is the most pure evocation of Postlewait's desire to attain the position of the survivor, because her "emergency sex" involves a state in which life is reduced to its most basic elements. This passage also eliminates difference, because emergency sex assumes the same desire for everyone. Yet there is one item left unaccounted for; namely, the dead body in the doorway.

When the irresistible force of emergency sex meets the immovable object of the dead body, language flees, and tears flow. Then the narrative moves on. Postlewait never mentions the identity of the person who was killed (bear in mind that these events take place inside the Embassy Compound where she lives and works). Without a name, the "dark, lumpy form" of the body figures in the narrative as an object haunting the excitement of emergency sex: a residue of the mindless lust that preceded its discovery, an unavoidable manifestation of absolute alterity.

The following month, Postlewait stops by the US Army field hospital in Mogadishu and encounters a visibly upset doctor standing outside who tells Postlewait that when examining her latest patient, a pregnant Somali woman in labor, she realized that the woman had undergone extreme genital mutilation. She asks Postlewait to come and see for herself, and Postlewait agrees: "I don't want to but I want to. I'm ashamed for the patient, but I want to see for myself" (179). The doctor tells Postlewait to pretend she's part of the medical team, and promises to hold up the sheet so the patient won't see her reaction. Inside the ward, Postlewait writes:

By now the woman is used to being prodded and poked by the American doctors and, without a word, parts her legs for me . . . At first I think she's been burned, her vulva has that running-wax appearance of burned flesh. But then I see it and I understand. There is no vulva. There's nothing there, it's all been sliced off and sewn shut. The doctors now have to reopen her so she can give birth to her child.
(180)

Postlewait realizes that the doctor's invitation was an unethical attempt to find catharsis by passing her trauma on to another woman. But Postlewait herself now has inherited that trauma, and the matter is complicated by the fact that she has no connection to the Somali woman. Postlewait is a mere spectator in this situation, and now she must find her own catharsis, which she does with two attempts to elevate her spectator experience into one of bearing witness.

When Yusuf comes to her room at midnight that day, Postlewait has been waiting with trepidation to ask his opinion of the female genital mutilation practiced in Somalia.

“What if he defends it? What would that mean for us? I couldn’t go on with him if he reacted the wrong way” (182). When she brings up the topic, he tells her that all Somali women are mutilated. However, he also explains that he doesn’t support this practice. When Postlewait asks if his sisters have undergone the procedure, he answers that they have: “But in educated families, the women only lose a small part of their vulva and are not sewn shut” (182).

“As if losing a small part of your vulva is a minor concession,” Postlewait writes (182). But then, instead of addressing her concern about the effect this revelation will have on her feelings for Yusuf and the future of their relationship, Postlewait concludes the chapter by relating some gossip she had heard previously about a Somali woman who had married a Norwegian peacekeeper, only to leave him after her new husband had beaten her. In this way, Postlewait shunts the culturally specific abuse of genital mutilation onto a general association with domestic violence, a world-wide problem. Through this displacement, Postlewait disavows the unsettling sense of utter wrongness, of disturbing difference, that she felt when she saw the Somali woman’s infibulated vulva, and this disavowal is enabled through the deployment of sameness: namely, through the definition of women as universally at risk (albeit in different ways) from the traditionally patriarchal institutions of family and marriage.

The month after Postlewait is called by the doctor to see the Somali woman, an American co-worker, Matt, is killed. His death becomes one of the main factors behind Postlewait and Cain’s disillusionment with the UN, due to what the two of them see as an institutional attempt to cover up the security lapses that lead to his demise. Her grief and frustration over Matt’s death leads Postlewait to her second attempt to turn her unethical examination of the Somali hospital patient into an ethical act of bearing witness. When the Board of Inquiry that convenes to investigate Matt’s death refuses to hear Postlewait’s testimony (she had commuted to work in the same convoy before deciding it was too dangerous), she writes:

I could say the hell with it, I was smart enough to get myself off that convoy, I made it alive. I could say I learned my lesson . . . I could let them shut me up, let them mutilate me and sew my vagina closed. Leave Somalia and never be heard from again. (191)

Instead of leaving, Postlewait begins to complain openly about UN security lapses to all who will listen, and this comprises her second attempt to transform her unethical position as a passive spectator to the Somali woman’s genital mutilation to an ethical and active

position of witnessing. She does this through a rather startling metaphorical connection of the vagina and the mouth, organs of sex and speech, that bears further examination.

In the Embassy Compound in Mogadishu, Postlewait is one of a handful of women surrounded by twenty thousand men in uniform (133). Eating dinner, she writes: "I often look up from my plate to find that every soldier in the mess hall has taken a seat facing me. You start to feel like you're nothing but an enormous animated vagina perched atop two legs" (139). The sniper attack that prompts Postlewait's episode of emergency sex directly follows this description of herself as a passive object for the soldier's viewing pleasure. In this way, even though emergency sex appears as an imperative to act that is out of her control, it functions as a way for Postlewait to recover agency and power over her body. Yet when Postlewait looks at the Somali woman's vagina, these positions are reversed. Suddenly, Postlewait is the spectator, obsessively staring at a woman who, like she was in the cafeteria, is reduced to being nothing more than a vagina. Her final attempt to rectify the inequality of this situation involves an identification not with the Somali woman as an individual, or genital mutilation in particular, but rather with the position of all women struggling against a patriarchal system that seeks to make women mute and powerless by reducing them to a single point of difference written on the body.

Faced with the trauma of the grotesque sight of a Somali woman's mutilated genitals, Postlewait first interrogates the culture that insists upon this treatment of women by asking Yusuf about it. When his response fails to satisfy her, she first dispels the troubling difference by relating an anecdote that universalizes the abuse of women, and later attempts a metaphorical displacement of sex and speech that finds her taking on the trauma as her own. Note that in both cases, Postlewait acts in a way that enables her own desire to continue without interruption. Her relationship with Yusuf, which brings her closer to Somali society in a way that offers the opportunity for self-transformation, and her idea of herself as a powerful, outspoken woman at odds with patriarchal power structures, both emerge intact—indeed, strengthened—from her encounter with the Somali woman. In the process, the anonymous Somali woman takes on the same status as the nameless dead body that caused Postlewait to break into tears after the emergency sex: a forgotten remainder of the encounter with absolute difference.

3. "Dr. Andrew"

While still in medical school in New Zealand, Andrew Thomson meets a Cambodian doctor, Vray, who had escaped from the murderous regime of the Khmer Rouge. Listening

to his story of survival leads Thomson to an obsession with genocide. He reads compulsively about the Cambodian genocide, and his attempt to comprehend it leads him to conduct thought experiments to try to imagine the degree of carnage wrought by the Khmer Rouge: for example, during lectures, he tries to imagine nearly two thirds of the audience dead. But his best efforts are to no avail: "The more I learn," Thomson writes, "the less I'm able to grasp the enormity of what they did. The why keeps slipping through my mind like mercury" (20).

After a fruitless visit to his minister, he and Vray attend the premier of *The Killing Fields*, which tells the story of journalist Dith Pran's escape from Cambodia. Thomson writes: "When Pran staggers across fields of corpses and through the last minefield to look down on the huge Red Cross hospital tent in the Thai refugee camp below, I have to leave the theater. Out by the concession stand . . . I don't imagine or really even decide, I just know that one day I'll be a Red Cross doctor in a tent somewhere in Cambodia" (20). Thomson's epiphany reveals a decision made unconsciously, i.e. a choice made without realizing it, which appears in his mind already formed. Thus, he leaves the theater at the exact moment he places himself into the picture: or rather, he leaves in order to not see himself absent from the screen, because in his unconscious, he already *is* there.

Unlike Cain, Thomson does not find his calling for human rights work through willing himself into an identification with the victims of war or the survivors of trauma. He faced one initial choice: to listen to Vray's story, or turn the conversation to other matters. Once he decides to hear, he finds himself unable to understand, identify with, or imagine the Cambodian genocide, and it is this lack that propels him towards working for the Red Cross to save lives in that country. He closely identifies with the survivors, however, eventually building a house in Phnom Penh that he shares with a Cambodian family (41, 42). To the extent that Thomson engages in human rights work because of his inability to understand genocide, he maintains alterity in a way that the other two authors of *Emergency Sex* do not. His eventual crisis of faith occurs due to a shift away from this initial status of recognizing universal equality while maintaining difference in human relations.

When Thomson undertakes UN missions in Haiti, Rwanda and Bosnia, he works with the dead instead of the living. He collects information on victims of atrocity in Haitian morgues, and disinters bodies in mass graves for forensic analysis in Rwanda and Bosnia. It is then that his ability to maintain difference begins to disintegrate. In the next section, I demonstrate that Thompson's underlying humanist conviction of the essential similarity

between human beings is the factor that finally implodes his ideals and causes him to join Cain and Postlewait in bitter disillusionment.

Death and (Emergency) Sex

1. "Mr. Cain"

In Somalia, after his co-worker, Matt, has been killed, Cain lies in bed night after night waiting for the joint UN/US compound to be attacked. He confesses that his altruistic sentiments are no protection against a will to commit violence: "The problem is that no matter how good your intentions, eventually you want to kill someone yourself. I lie in bed at night and listen to the exchange of automatic weapons. So much for the ceasefire" (193). We might assume that this transformation is the final stage of Cain's crisis of faith in human rights intervention. But Cain's narrative actually moves in quite a different direction. He continues:

Deep sleep. Body at rest. Gunfire erupts outside the window. The moment the ears process the sound and the brain recognizes it, the body panics. You go from total rest to total panic in a fraction of a second. But you don't even realize you're awake yet. It's not clear who or where you are. You only know that your entire body is bursting with energy and fear. (193)

The trauma he recounts involves a complete, if momentary, loss of identity. Cain is reduced to utter helplessness, a mere collection of physical panic responses: "Heart races, stomach churns, palms sweat" (193). In reaction, he finds himself trying to avoid this trauma by anticipating it.

This is where we would expect the desire to kill to appear in Cain's account, in the form of a revenge fantasy in which he imagines picking up a gun and transforming his real-life helplessness into Rambo-like armed retribution. But this fantasy never appears. Instead, we find the following:

And then you start to wait for it at night. You start to want to hear it. You don't want to sleep. You want them to fight. And you're disappointed when it subsides. It's like . . . when you're having sex and the moment comes when you lose your inhibition, stop posing, and you both let loose, claw at each other, howl at the moon. Miss Heidi calls it emergency sex. It must have something to do with remembering you're an animal. So that's what I'm thinking: just kill each other, you animals. And I'm jealous. (193, 194)

Citing Postlewait's concept of emergency sex, Cain offers an example of how human beings can be reduced to animals. In the penultimate sentence, it's the people outside the compound with guns who are the animals. The immediate juxtaposition of these two examples of animality would seem to link Cain's panicked reaction to the gunfire to his fantasy of killing those causing his pain: in other words, he seems to be saying that it is natural for emergencies, either sexual or violent, to provoke animal-like responses in everyone. A closer reading of the passage, however, reveals that more than fantasy is at work.

Cain uses the second person to indicate himself at the beginning of this passage, and he continues to include himself in the example of emergency sex. However, the last sentence reverts to the first person tense to describe Cain's wish that those outside, to whom he refers in the third person, would keep killing each other. Therefore, in spite of what he says earlier, Cain's desire is not to rush out himself and start shooting; rather, his wish is that the killing going on outside will continue. But notice that the forces outside are no longer differentiated. Through the conceit of emergency sex, Cain reduces both US soldiers and Somali fighters to a common animality that eliminates the differences between them. I'm not saying that Cain's ability to distinguish between friend and foe has evaporated. He certainly does not wish for the death of American soldiers. But how else can we account for his declaration: "just kill each other, you animals," except as a satisfaction taken from the pure act of killing? Why else would he be jealous?

The satisfaction Cain feels in imagining the killing happening outside is a mental response to a bodily trauma, in which Cain tries to avoid the traumatic panic reaction of suddenly waking up to the sound of gunfire by anticipating it. But this anticipation has its own pitfalls. It gives rise to a satisfaction that feeds on itself and cares for nothing but itself. While the experience of trauma destroys Cain's subjectivity—his identity, his ability to constitute himself as himself, vanishes in the moments of panic—this anticipatory satisfaction offers a different subjectivity, one which always demands more violence, more killing. While the jealousy that Cain feels might include a Rambo-like revenge fantasy, what it reveals at a deeper level is not, strictly speaking, a fantasy at all; rather, it is a drive to put oneself into an ever-closer orbit around the object of one's satisfaction. Though being outside, closer to the source of the danger and the violence, would definitely *not* increase his enjoyment, Cain's drive satisfaction is blind to this fact; thus, he feels jealous.

Though Cain continues with human rights work, only burning out completely when he joins the UN peacekeeping mission in Liberia, this moment in Somalia crystallizes the

conflict between his ideals—that is, his fantasy of bringing the light of American-style democracy and freedoms to the world, which depends on the denial of difference—and the drive satisfaction that employs absolute alterity to hold Cain in thrall to violence and death. In the end, he is unable to reconcile the failure of the former with the undeniable success of the latter, because the balance between apprehending difference while holding himself far enough away so that it does not overwhelm him is a completely static one. There is no way to take action in this mesmerized state.

Cain concludes his portion of *Emergency Sex* by claiming the right to bear witness as a privilege bestowed by his status as a traumatized survivor. “I won the right, I am the owner of that privilege,” he writes (291). In so doing, he chooses to ignore the drive satisfaction that placed him in a helpless, passive orbit around the alterity of death, and instead focus on the good that he managed to do as a human rights worker. However, in order to accomplish this retreat into the realms of desire and fantasy, Cain ends up defining the act of bearing witness as a right and a privilege, instead of as an obligation or an imperative. Meaning, he decides, is his to make: “There are many competing versions of this story—U.S., UN, NATO, EU. But we were there and capital letters always lie and our version has no meaning if no one renders it” (291). This position, in which reality is completely self-referential, makes no allowance for difference, and thus leaves no room for ethics.

2. “Miss Heidi”

Postlewait’s experience of sex tourism with James in Kenya, as well as her affair with Yusuf in Somalia, reveal her desire to “go native:” that is, to immerse herself so thoroughly in the life of the Other that her own identity is transformed. The fact that her lovers are themselves from cultures under considerable stress adds to her desire to attain the status of survivor herself. We see this most clearly in her relationship with Marc, the Haitian man with whom she spends three years in Port-au-Prince, since he himself has survived the rampages of the *macoutes* (anti-Aristide paramilitary death squads). But Postlewait’s admiration of—and identification with—Marc goes beyond his personal experience as a survivor:

When I look at Marc, I want his ancestors to be my own. I want the blood in my veins to be that of the rebelling slaves of Haiti of two hundred years ago, victors in a war for freedom. Marc . . . has an obligation here to his people. I want to have this

obligation too. I want them to be my people . . . I already decided Haiti will be my home. I belong here (228).

Later, after Postlewait quits the UN to open a small business with Marc, she finds confirmation of her transformation when a passing group of schoolgirls, after whispering among themselves, suddenly call her a "*Gremelle*." She writes: "The word hits me with such force, I step backward onto the dog's foot. A *gremelle*! They think I'm a *gremelle*! I want to kiss them. I've somehow graduated from a *blanc*, a foreigner, an outsider, to a *gremelle*, a mixed-race Haitian" (242). In the schoolgirls' mistake, Postlewait finds confirmation of her deepest wish: that the very blood in her veins would change to reflect her new, yet deeply felt, identity as an insider, a native Haitian.

It's obvious that Postlewait's fantasy is impossible to attain, and at some level she must realize this. The crucial point to my analysis is that she acts as if it is not impossible. Cain identifies in Postlewait a drive to perform her relationships as art, and now we have come to the essence of that drive: at the heart of Postlewait's desire to recreate herself is a compulsion to live out the impossible fantasy of becoming the Other. This process is dependent upon a fetishistic disavowal of difference: Postlewait knows that she is not a mixed-blood Haitian with island ancestors, but by holding this knowledge at bay, and acting as if she does not know it, she is able to live as though a magical transformation into her heart's desire is possible.

Postlewait's crisis of faith occurs when she comes face to face with an undeniable alterity: death. When Marc is killed in an accident, his history, blood, and obligations pass beyond Postlewait's reach forever, and she returns to New York. There, she struggles to come to terms with her lover's death, finally concluding:

With Marc's death I both lost and gained my life in one tragic stroke. The pure beauty of death is as impossible to describe as . . . the moment of orgasm. You can't know it until it's touched you, moved inside you, awakened every nerve in your body and made you feel with complete clarity things you never thought bearable. (294)

Postlewait has passed over: not into death, but into the realm of the survivor. She holds Marc's death in her mind as the placeholder of this new status, which cannot be known or understood by anyone who hasn't been through the experience themselves.

Postlewait characterizes her painful recovery from her lover's death as the attainment of her long dreamt self-renewal. This could only occur with a death: and here I refer not to Marc's tragic demise, but rather to the death of the impossible fantasy of

becoming the Other that underwrote Postlewait's desire to recreate herself. Once the possibility of realizing this fetishistic fantasy is definitively closed off, the self-recreation appears suddenly, *already accomplished*. Thus Postlewait concludes her narrative: "The long night over, life starts anew" (295). Here is her self-transformation, complete.

The mindless imperative of emergency sex, haunted by the dead body she and Yusuf see afterwards that causes Postlewait to break into uncontrollable sobs, involved an addictive loss of self that operates according to the same logic of drive satisfaction as Cain's disturbing attachment to the sound of gunfire. The two authors' attempts to reconcile the utter disparity between their initial motivations for taking on human rights work and the disturbing satisfaction produced by their encounters with alterity find both Cain and Postlewait trapped in a self-absorbed state with no exit. They consider themselves elevated by what they have suffered and survived, yet they are left with no means of connection to other human beings except through the presumption that trauma, like emergency sex, affects all equally: a position that, by assuming universality while failing to preserve difference, fails the test of ethics I articulated at the beginning of this article.

3. "Dr. Andrew"

Andrew Thomson, excavating mass graves in Rwanda to obtain evidence for war crimes trials, spends day after day dislodging body parts as he exhumes the dead for forensic evidence to convict their killers. He reports that he has become obsessive in this task, sometimes spending hours disinterring one body that is buried under several others, trying to make sure he gets all of the pieces of the same one.

This annoys my team, because they have to heave off other bodies just so I can extract mine, but I can't face the same body two days in a row. In the end the body usually comes free with a pop and I collapse backward onto other corpses, hugging mine as it lands on top of me. Everyone laughs because we've all done it. (236)

It is a huge leap from treating Cambodian patients in a Red Cross tent to digging up the dead of the Rwandan genocide, yet Thomson has kept his focus on individual human beings. Often, he finds himself compelled to find every single bone of one body before he finishes for the day, because he cannot face the thought of leaving part of someone behind; in a sense, the dead are his new patients.

Just as he used to try to imagine the Cambodian genocide, Thomson compulsively attempts to put himself in the place of the Rwandan victims as he tries again and again to picture how they died (235). In Cambodia, making this effort helped him identify with the

survivors. In Rwanda, surrounded by the dead, collecting instead of curing, it takes an ominous turn.

At a party in Kigali, Thomson meets a woman named Suzanne who works in the refugee camps. A few weeks later, she invites him to her house for dinner. After a candlelit supper and dancing in the quiet house, they go to bed, have sex, and fall asleep. Thomson writes:

The next morning she asks why I kept tugging on her arm during the night. I tell her that I'm not sure . . . then the dream comes back; I'm not in Suzanne's bed; I'm lying in a grave but can't get comfortable on top of the bodies; I curse them as I move limbs and skulls out of the way. I mistook her for a corpse. (239)

Postlewait and Cain's emergency sex involves the disavowal of difference: a brush with death reduces people to the single-minded, animal-like imperative of insatiable sexual desire. Emergency sex happens when death is cheated, but death takes its revenge, appearing as an ineradicable residue of this encounter. Similarly, when Thomson tries to use sex to avoid death; that is, to forget the dead and come back to humanity, he ends up returning to the dead in his sleep, as one of them.

Thomson went to Cambodia because, having learned of the genocide there, he felt compelled to help the survivors. Now he is dealing directly with the dead of another genocide, and the knowledge that UN intervention could have prevented it preys on his mind. Standing in the church tower above the massacre site, Thomson has a fantasy of he and Cain killing the killers from that very spot. "Even though Uncle Sam wouldn't and God couldn't and the UN just didn't, Ken and I might have stopped this," he writes. "I know that's ridiculous—he's a lawyer and I'm a doctor—but the more time I spend thinking about it, the harder it is to escape the feeling that it's partly our fault . . . All of us are guilty" (244). While Cain is able to continue this sort of revenge fantasy through the conceit of emergency sex, Thomson dispels it immediately as guilt arises to take its place. This is interesting, because guilt had no place in Thomson's initial obsession with the Cambodian genocide, the source of his calling undertake to human rights work. It only comes later, after he increasingly begins to identify with the dead.

Recognition of this feeling of guilt leads Thomson to an overwhelming urge to throw himself off the church tower and join the cadavers below as one of them: "*Thud*. Just one more body for the pathologists to cut up. I'm shaking and sweating as I climb down the rungs to the safety and strange comfort of the corpses below" (244). Thomson's job of exhuming the dead is done in the effort to speak on their behalf, but he fights against an

increasing sense of identification that tempts him towards becoming one of the dead himself. The bodies offer “strange comfort” because as long as he continues his work, he can keep the drive to become one of them at bay: “I glove up and plunge back into the grave, where there’s hard labor to be done, not the body and blood of Christ for my sins but ten more cadavers. It’s salvation through exhumation, a new creed” (244).

Here, the true character of Thomson’s guilt is revealed: it is survivor guilt. He cannot shake the conviction that he speaks for the dead as one of them, which bleeds the life from him and offers, in the end, no chance of salvation:

Somewhere along the line, I lost sight of treating people and became obsessed with my own grandiose ideals of service. But there is no redemption in this. I’ve worked myself into the ground only to end up doing the very thing my parents begged me to avoid. I’ve ended up serving myself. (254)

Like Postlewait and Cain, Thomson discovers something about himself as a result of his human rights work; but unlike his fellow authors, he realizes the nature of the trap he has constructed, as well as his inability to escape from it. After he seriously contemplates suicide again, he ends his narrative with plans to go back to Cambodia, where he will build and share a house with a Cambodian family, perhaps open a small clinic: a return, in other words, to exactly what he was doing before he joined the United Nations and lost his way.

Conclusion

The three intertwined narratives of *Emergency Sex* characterize the human rights worker as following a natural curve that begins with idealism and optimism, passes through disillusionment and despair, and ends with hard-won self-knowledge. I’ve pointed out how, in presenting their stories in this way, all three authors fall into a trap of their own devising, each one of which involves the inability to maintain difference when constructing a universal subject of human rights. Cain finds himself taking refuge in a dark satisfaction with violence and death when he cannot give up his view of a world ready for American-style democracy and freedoms. Postlewait succeeds in recreating herself only when death intervenes to bring her fantasy of becoming the Other to an abrupt halt. Finally, Thomson, called to human rights work through an initial failure to imagine the horror of genocide, finds that the improvement of this faculty leads him into a closed circuit around death that he identifies as ultimately selfish. All three authors deny difference in others only to find alterity reappearing in themselves, mediated by sex and by death. Attaining the coveted

status of traumatized witness puts them in thrall to drive satisfaction in a way that makes ethical witnessing first problematic, then impossible.

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