

ECHOES OF EMPIRE

HOW WESTERN MEDIA RECYCLE COLONIAL
MYTHS ABOUT AFRICA

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To ML, ICE and ADE
For more reasons than I can count...

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Every profession has its illusions.

Journalism perhaps more than most. From the outside, it appears to be a craft devoted to truth: reporters travelling across continents, observing events, collecting facts, and sending them back to the world. The image is reassuring. It suggests that the global story of our time is being told faithfully by those who witness it.

But stories are never neutral.

They are shaped by the people who tell them, by the institutions that publish them, and by the assumptions that lie quietly beneath both. What is seen, what is ignored, what is emphasized, and what is left unsaid—these choices slowly construct the narrative through which the world understands itself.

For more than a decade I lived inside that system. I reported from cities and conflict zones, attended press

briefings and diplomatic meetings, and watched the global news cycle turn with relentless speed. It was an extraordinary vantage point.

And yet, from very early on, I sensed that something about the way the world was being described did not entirely match the world I knew.

This book is an attempt to understand that gap.

WHERE IT STARTED

For most of my journalism career, between 1997 and 2008, I belonged to a small and curious tribe: foreign correspondents scattered across the world—Montreal, New York, Arusha, Kampala, Geneva. It was a peculiar universe, almost entirely dominated by Western journalists working for Western media. That I—a Black man from Cameroon—found myself inside that circle never ceased to surprise me. I was both participant and anomaly, an outsider who had somehow slipped into the room.

From that vantage point, I watched the machinery of global news operate from within. I learned its rhythms, its assumptions, its hierarchies. Yet I never quite felt that I fully belonged to it. That double position—inside the system yet slightly removed from it—gave me a perspective I only understood years later. It planted the quiet seed from which this book eventually grew.

The second source of this book lies deeper still, in my years as a student. In the mid-1990s I studied soci-

ology at the Universities of Douala and Yaoundé. More than a decade later, in the late 2000s, I returned to academia to study political science in Geneva. Along that intellectual journey I encountered a constellation of thinkers whose work transformed the way I saw the world: Achille Mbembe, Jean-Marc Ela, Mongo Béti, Jean Ziegler, Pierre Bourdieu, Serge Halimi, Noam Chomsky, Edward Said.

Reading them was not simply an academic exercise. It was a slow awakening. Through their work I began to understand how narratives shape politics and power; how the stories societies tell about people, nations, and continents often become the invisible structures that confine them. Words, I realized, are never neutral. They organize perception. They establish hierarchies. They define who is heard and who remains invisible. The ideas of these writers form the intellectual backbone of this book.

By a stroke of good fortune, I was able to meet several of them. Those encounters left marks that have never faded.

The late Jean-Marc Ela—the sociologist and theologian who devoted his life to amplifying the voices of Africa’s marginalized—gave me time and attention in ways that still humble me today. Mongo Béti, whom Nairobi’s *Daily Nation* once described as “possibly the greatest writer in African history,” frightened me at first. He possessed a fierce intellectual clarity and a refusal to compromise that could be intimidating. Yet twice he sat with me for hours, speaking with remark-

AUTHOR'S NOTE

able generosity. Those conversations felt less like interviews than private masterclasses—free, personal, and unforgettable.

Achille Mbembe, today perhaps the most influential living scholar of Africa, also agreed to meet me despite what I sensed was a deep weariness with journalists. I could understand his fatigue. Scholars spend years developing ideas only to see them compressed into headlines. Still, he gave me his time, and I remain grateful for it.

Then there is a story that still feels improbable to me.

When I was nineteen, a sociology student in Douala with more ambition than sense, I wrote letters to Pierre Bourdieu and Serge Halimi in Paris. At the time I had no reliable way to send them. So I entrusted the envelopes to the brother of a friend who happened to be returning to France after visiting Cameroon.

Against all odds, both letters reached their destinations. And even more improbably, both men replied.

Their responses arrived with books—works that were almost impossible to find in Cameroon at the time—and with words of encouragement so generous that I kept those letters for years. The ideas contained in those books—about journalism, power, and the narratives societies construct about themselves—run quietly through the pages of this book. I owe those two strangers more than I can properly express.

Anyone who has met their intellectual heroes knows how unsettling such encounters can be. There is

the nervousness beforehand, the strange gratitude afterward, and the lingering feeling that something important has happened even if you struggle to describe it. Those meetings remain with me still.

Much of this book was written more than fifteen years ago. As so often happens, life intervened. Careers change. Responsibilities accumulate. Personal projects are pushed aside by more immediate demands. I only completed the manuscript recently.

Yet the delay turned out to be revealing in an unexpected way. The trends, practices, and patterns I first observed years ago did not disappear. If anything, they have deepened. The arguments developed in these pages required almost no revision. Reality, unfortunately, did the updating for me.

The earliest drafts of these ideas took shape in 2007, at a moment when I was preparing to leave journalism and move into the world of international politics. A master's program in political science at the University of Geneva offered the time and intellectual space to develop them more rigorously.

Many people contributed to that journey—teachers, advisers, friends, and colleagues who challenged and encouraged my thinking. But above all I must thank Léa Sgier, who supervised my research with patience, intellectual rigor, and a generosity I did not always deserve.

A STORY YOU HAVE HEARD BEFORE

In 2005, the Kenyan writer Binyavanga Wainaina published a short, brilliant, and searingly funny essay in the literary magazine *Granta*. It was titled, “How to Write About Africa.”** It was not an instruction manual. It was an indictment, a Molotov cocktail thrown into the hushed, wood-paneled halls of Western publishing.

The piece took the form of a satirical guide for the aspiring Western author hoping to pen the next great African novel or a hard-hitting journalistic exposé that might grace the cover of a Sunday magazine.

“Always use the word ‘Africa’ or ‘Darkness’ or ‘Safari’ in your title,” he advised with the deadpan precision of a seasoned comic. “In your text, treat Africa

* How to Write About Africa, Binyavanga Wainaina, in *Granta* Magazine, xxx 2005

as if it were one country. It is hot and dusty with rolling grasslands and huge herds of animals and tall, thin people who are starving.”

He continued, methodically dissecting a century of literary and journalistic tropes with the skill of a surgeon. He laid out a checklist of mandatory characters and scenes: the naked warriors, the loyal, subservient servants, the half-naked, pot-bellied children with flies clustering on their faces. The landscape must be dominated by the baobab tree and the acacia. The animals must be imbued with more character and complexity than the people.

“Your African characters,” he wrote, his words sharpened to a fine point, “should be flat, simple people who eat things no one else would eat. They should have spears and short tempers. They have rhythm and music deep in their souls, but no capacity for logic or complex thought.” And above all, the story must end with the Western protagonist, having learned a profound lesson about themselves from their time in this primitive yet soulful land, gazing out at a magnificent sunset as a single tear rolls down their cheek.

The essay became a cultural phenomenon. It was so potent because it wasn't just satire; it was a painfully accurate diagnosis of a deep-seated pathology, a narrative sickness in the way the Western world has chosen to see and represent an entire continent.

Wainaina had held up a mirror, and the reflection was a grotesque caricature, instantly recognizable to anyone who had ever consumed a story about Africa.

This book begins where Wainaina's satire ends. It argues that what he so brilliantly diagnosed in the world of fiction is, if anything, even more pronounced and far more dangerous in the supposedly objective world of journalism.

For decades, the dominant Western narrative about Africa, particularly in its coverage of conflict, has followed a depressingly rigid and reductive script—a playbook written not by journalists, but by their colonial ancestors.

The global media has consistently treated African civil wars as if they belong to a different category from conflicts elsewhere on the planet. While wars in the Balkans or the Middle East are afforded nuance, their political, historical, and economic complexities painstakingly dissected by panels of experts, African conflicts are presented as “easy and definitive.”

The explanation is almost always the same, a tired, fatalistic refrain repeated from the Congo to Somalia, from Sierra Leone to South Sudan: they are rooted in “deep-seated hatred” and fought along ancient, inscrutable “ethnic and tribal lines.”

This is not a new phenomenon. It is a storytelling model with a long and distressingly consistent history. This book is an investigation into that model. It is an attempt to lift the hood on the narrative machine and expose the old, rusty gears that are still at work, churning out the same story, year after year.

To do this, we will journey into the heart of the deadliest conflict of our generation: the Second Congo

War, a war that, according to some estimates, killed more than five million people between 1998 and 2003, yet barely registered on the Western conscience.

By analyzing the coverage of this war in some of the world's most respected publications, particularly the British magazine *The Economist* and the French magazine *Le Point*, we will see Wainaina's satirical checklist brought to life with chilling accuracy.

We will discover how a complex, modern, international war was systematically framed as a **natural disaster**, an "eruption" of primeval forces beyond human control. We will see how its leaders and soldiers were portrayed through the **savage frame**, their political motives erased and replaced with the old tropes of irrationality and tribalism. We will witness the relentless application of the **savior frame**, in which every African attempt at peace was dismissed as futile, and Western intervention was presented as the only possible path to salvation. And we will uncover the most critical mechanism of all: the **systematic silencing** of the people at the heart of the story, turning a continent into a silent backdrop for a story the West tells about itself.

This is more than an academic exercise in media criticism.

The stories we tell about the world create the world we live in. They shape our empathy, guide foreign policy, and reinforce the economic and political hierarchies that define our age.

The story the West has told about the Congo is not

just inaccurate; it is an act of power, one with devastating real-world consequences. It is a story that has allowed millions of people to look away from serious human rights violations, abuses, and crimes, to misunderstand a continent, and to perpetuate the very inequalities that fuel the conflicts we claim to deplore.

Wainaina gave us the satire. This book is one piece of evidence. It is a journey into the ghost story that the West has been telling itself for centuries. And it is a call to, finally, wake up.

CHAPTER I

“THE CONGO ERUPTS”

In the mid-1990s, when the world looked at the war in Bosnia, it saw a story it could understand. The headlines that scrolled across television screens and the long-form articles that filled most respected magazines in western countries painted a picture of a tragedy that was, above all, a human one.

Readers and viewers learned the names of the cities under siege—Sarajevo, Srebrenica—and they became symbols of a world failing to live up to its promise of “never again.” They learned the names of the leaders—Slobodan Milošević, Radovan Karadžić—and their faces became masks of modern evil.

Journalists and analysts provided a vocabulary to make sense of the horror: “ethnic cleansing,” a chillingly bureaucratic term for a monstrous act; “ancient hatreds,” a convenient, if overly simplistic, narrative hook; “geopolitical chessboard,” a phrase that placed

the conflict within a recognizable framework of international power struggles.

The reporting, however horrifying, was fundamentally rational.

It was a story about history, about the collapse of a nation-state, about the cynical manipulations of political actors. It was a story about human choices.

But just a few years later, as the embers of the Bosnian war cooled, a new conflict ignited in the heart of Africa. It began in August 1998, and it would grow to consume the Democratic Republic of Congo and involve the armies of nine nations and dozens of armed groups. Before it was over, it would kill more people than any conflict since World War II. An estimated 5 million people would die, the vast majority from the war's knock-on effects: starvation and disease.

It was, by the numbers, the deadliest war of our generation.

And when one of the world's leading English-language newsmagazine, *The Economist*, turned its gaze to this monumental human catastrophe, it saw something else entirely. In its first major article on the war, on August 15, 1998, it declared that the Congo had **“erupted, again.”**

Let that word sink in. *Erupted*.

It wasn't a war that had *started* or *begun*. It hadn't been *declared* or *launched*. It had *erupted*. Like a dormant volcano suddenly spewing ash and lava. Like a plague festering under the skin of the earth.

The French newsmagazine *Le Point* reached for a

similar vocabulary, describing the war in November of that year as a **“descent into hell,”** a biblical, almost supernatural event. A few months later, it warned of a **“menace d’incendie généralisée”**—the threat of a generalized wildfire.

This was not a story about human choices. This was a story about nature.

Why would a war waged with guns and tanks, driven by strategic ambition and the lust for mineral wealth, be described with the vocabulary of geology and meteorology?

This question is more than a matter of semantics. The choice to frame a political war as a natural disaster is one of the most powerful and insidious tools in modern journalism. It is not an error but an echo—the faint but unmistakable sound of a colonial ghost that still haunts newsrooms from the United States to France, from Canada to the United Kingdom, from Belgium to Switzerland, quietly writing the script for how we understand the entire continent of Africa.

The missing actors, causes, and stakes

The story we are told about a crisis dictates how we respond to it. It shapes our empathy, our outrage, and our political will. A story that has villains and victims, causes and effects, invites us to pass judgment, to pick a side, to demand action.

A story about a hurricane or an earthquake invites a different response. We can feel pity, we can send aid, we can clean up the rubble. But we cannot stop the hurricane. We cannot reason with the earthquake. A

natural disaster has no motive. It has no politics. It just *is*.

This, in essence, is the story the West was told about the Congo War. It was a story of a phenomenon, not a plan.

Over the course of five years, in the articles published by *The Economist*, *Le Point*, The New York Times, or the BBC, Radio France Internationale or Deutsche Welle, and many western newspapers, radio and TV stations, as well as leading news websites, this “natural disaster” frame appears again and again, a steady drumbeat of depoliticized horror.

The war is a “bloody-go-round,” suggests *The Economist*, a phrase that conjures the image of a mindless, cyclical carnival ride, doomed to repeat itself without purpose. It is a “deluge of blood,” a biblical flood that washes over the land, unstoppable and absolute. It is a “treacherous mire,” a swamp that sucks in its victims. The conflict doesn’t just spread; it “consumes” the continent, like a disease or a fire. These are not the words one uses to describe a chess match. They are the words one uses to describe a plague.

This journalistic frame acts like the lens on a camera. It determines what is in focus and what is left blurry, what is magnified and what is cropped out of the picture entirely. By choosing the lens of a natural disaster, the reporting on the Congo War systematically blurred out three critical elements of the story: actors, causes, and stakes.

Imagine, for a moment, trying to understand World

War II without a clear picture of the Axis and Allied powers, without an analysis of the Treaty of Versailles and the rise of fascism, and without a sense of what was at stake for the future of the world. It would be impossible. The story would devolve into a meaningless catalogue of battles and death tolls. Yet this is precisely how the Congo War was presented.

The actors, when they were mentioned at all, were rendered as vague and interchangeable forces. Instead of nations with political goals, we were given “tribes” with “deep-rooted rivalries.” Instead of generals with strategies, we were given “warlords” scrambling for loot.

The president of the DR Congo at the time, Laurent-Désiré Kabila, was not portrayed as a political strategist navigating a complex regional power struggle, but as an incompetent and irrational “outsized village chief” who had “squandered” international goodwill. The reporting stripped him, his allies, and his enemies of political agency. They were not men making calculated decisions; they were figures swept up in the chaotic currents of a continental malady.

The causes of the war were similarly mystified. While the conflict was, in reality, a complex geopolitical struggle over regional dominance and vast mineral resources—involving intricate alliances between the governments of Rwanda, Uganda, Angola, Zimbabwe, and others—the reporting rarely delved into these specifics.

The “why” of the war was consistently subordi-

nated to the “what.” The articles provided a litany of horrors—massacres, displacement, humanitarian crises—but offered little in the way of coherent explanation. The reader was left with the impression that the violence was simply what happens in that part of the world. It was a self-perpetuating cycle, a feature of the landscape, as natural and as inevitable as the Congo River itself.

Finally, the stakes of the conflict were framed in the narrowest possible terms. The war was presented as a humanitarian tragedy, a terrible but ultimately regional affair. It was a crisis to be pitied, a wound to be bandaged by aid workers.

What was lost in this framing was any sense that the war had global implications—that the coltan being mined by warring factions in the eastern Congo was essential for the production of the cell phones and laptops in our pockets, or that the stability of Central Africa was a matter of international security. The story of the Congo was cordoned off, presented as another sad tale from a place apart, the “heart of darkness.”

Diverging playbooks, distinct reports

To truly grasp the significance of this journalistic script, we need to place it alongside the one used to cover the war in Bosnia just a few years earlier. The contrast is not just stark; it is revelatory. It exposes a deep-seated, likely unconscious, double standard in how the Western media reports on the world. It reveals two entirely different playbooks for telling the story of war.

The Bosnian Playbook: A Tragedy of History

When war broke out in the former Yugoslavia, the Western press deployed its full analytical arsenal. The story was framed as a complex, but ultimately comprehensible, tragedy of history and politics.

The Actors were clearly defined. They were nations and peoples with distinct identities and goals: Serbs, Croats, Bosniaks. Their leaders were not caricatured as irrational chieftains; they were profiled as calculating, modern political figures. Slobodan Milošević was the “Butcher of the Balkans,” a nationalist demagogue, but he was often portrayed as a rational actor pursuing a clear, if monstrous, political project: the creation of a “Greater Serbia.” The reporting was filled with quotes from leaders, diplomats, and generals on all sides. We heard their justifications, their threats, their political rhetoric. They were given agency.

The Causes were explained in detail. Journalists became amateur historians, tracing the roots of the conflict back through the centuries, to the Ottoman Empire, to World War II, to the death of Tito and the unraveling of the Yugoslav federation. The narrative was rich with political concepts: nationalism, irredentism, state collapse. While the phrase “ancient hatreds” was often used as a shorthand, it was always embedded within a larger story of modern political failure. The violence was never presented as mindless; it was presented as the brutal, but logical, outcome of a political ideology.

The Stakes were presented as universal. The war in Bosnia was not just a Balkan problem; it was a European problem, a Western problem, a human problem. The siege of Sarajevo was a test of the West's moral resolve. The genocide at Srebrenica was a stain on the conscience of the world. The reporting constantly invoked the legacy of the Holocaust and the promise of "never again." The stakes were nothing less than the credibility of NATO, the future of the European project, and the meaning of Western values in the post-Cold War era.

The Congo Playbook: A Catastrophe of Nature

When the press turned to the Congo, this entire analytical framework was discarded. A new playbook was opened, one with a much simpler, and much older, story to tell.

The Actors were vague and anonymized. As we have seen, the conflict was not a war between nations with competing interests, but a chaotic free-for-all between ill-defined "factions" and "tribes." The leaders were not political strategists, but incompetent despots. And most tellingly, their voices were almost entirely absent. Of the numerous articles published by *The Economist* in London and *Le Point* in Paris, there is a near-total lack of direct quotes from the primary belligerents. The Congolese, Rwandan, and Ugandan leaders and soldiers at the center of the conflict are almost never allowed to speak for themselves, to explain their motives, or to offer their version of events. The story is told *about* them, but never *by* them. The

journalist becomes the omniscient narrator, and the African becomes the silent subject.

The Causes were mystified. The historical and political complexity was smoothed over with the broad brush of incomprehensibility. Instead of detailed analyses of regional power dynamics or the economics of resource extraction, the reporting fell back on vague, catch-all phrases like “deep-rooted rivalries” and “tribal loyalties.” The war was presented as something that simply *is*, a chronic condition of the continent, rather than the result of specific, identifiable decisions made by specific people for specific reasons. The French magazine *Le Point* went so far as to quote a Congolese professor who explained the war in the starkest possible terms of fatalism: “We are pursued by destiny. It is a curse.” The magazine presented this not as one man’s opinion, but as a plausible explanation for the country’s plight.

The Stakes were presented as purely humanitarian. The Congo War was framed as a crisis of suffering, not a crisis of politics. The stories focused on the victims—the refugees, the starving, the sick—but disconnected their suffering from its political source. The war was a tragedy, yes, but it was Africa’s tragedy. It was not presented as a test of our values or a threat to our security. It was a distant disaster, a problem to be managed by the United Nations and Non-Governmental Organizations. The message was clear: this is not our story. This is not about us.

So what, you may ask?

At this stage, one question at least might come to mind: So what? Why does this difference in storytelling matter?

It matters because these journalistic frames are not just passive descriptions of reality; they are active forces that shape it. The way we talk about a problem determines how we think about it, and how we think about it determines what we do—or don't do—about it. The “natural disaster” frame has at least three profound real-world consequences.

First, **it encourages political inaction and a purely humanitarian response.** If a war is an incomprehensible eruption of chaos, then there is no political solution to be found. There is no point in diplomacy, in sanctions, in peace negotiations, because the actors are irrational and the causes are primordial. The only logical response is to send in the aid workers, to set up refugee camps, to distribute food and medicine. This is the logic of disaster relief. And while humanitarian aid is vital, it is not a substitute for political action. It treats the symptoms of the conflict, not the disease. It bandages the wounds without ever asking who is holding the knife. This frame, in effect, gives governments a free pass to ignore the political dimensions of the conflict and to avoid the difficult work of peacemaking.

Second, **it reinforces and validates the oldest and most damaging stereotypes about Africa.** The story of an irrational, chaotic, and timeless Africa is not a new one. It is the foundational story of the colonial era,

the grand narrative that was used to justify centuries of exploitation. When a modern journalist describes an African war as an “eruption” or a “descent into hell,” they are, consciously or not, tapping into this deep reservoir of prejudice. They are telling their readers that Africa is, as they always suspected, a place apart—a continent stuck in a primitive past, immune to the logic of modernity, and doomed to a cycle of self-destruction. This creates a profound sense of apathy and fatalism in the public. If the problems are eternal and incomprehensible, why should we invest our time, our resources, our moral energy in trying to solve them?

Third, and perhaps most importantly, **it robs the people at the center of the story of their humanity.** To be human is to have agency, to make choices, to act with purpose, to have a history and a future. The “natural disaster” frame denies all of this. It transforms millions of people from political actors into helpless victims, from citizens caught in a struggle for power and survival into a faceless mass of suffering. It is the ultimate act of “othering,” a journalistic practice that turns a nation of people into a landscape, and their history into a weather report.

WE HAVE SEEN THE EVIDENCE. Two wars, happening in the same decade, covered by the same respected media institutions, but told using two fundamentally different stories.

One is a story of history, politics, and human

agency. The other is a story of nature, chaos, and fate. One invites understanding and engagement. The other invites pity and resignation.

This brings us to the central question of this book: Why? Why does this happen? Why do intelligent, well-meaning journalists, working for our most esteemed publications, fall back on this simplistic and damaging script when they report on Africa? Is it laziness? Is it unconscious bias? Or is it something deeper?

Where did this script—this journalistic playbook for reporting on Africa—come from?

To find the answer, we cannot simply look at the practices of modern journalism. We have to dig deeper, into the archives of a much older and more powerful enterprise. We have to examine the language not just of reporters, but of explorers, missionaries, and administrators. We have to look at the language of empire; colonial empire.

CHAPTER 2

A COLONIAL PLAYBOOK

In 1877, the explorer Henry Morton Stanley, the man famous for finding Dr. Livingstone, completed a grueling, near-thousand-day journey across the width of the African continent. His expedition followed the Congo River from its interior headwaters to the Atlantic Ocean, a feat of endurance and brutality that cost the lives of hundreds of his porters and companions.

When he finally emerged from the dense, sweltering rainforest, his accounts, published in newspapers across Europe and America, did more than just fill in a blank space on the map. They filled the Western imagination with a new and powerful set of ideas about the land he had just traversed.

He described a continent not just unmapped, but unmoored from time itself.

“For centuries Africa has been the dark continent,”

he wrote. "It is the one continent that has never been explored, the one continent that has never been conquered. It is the one continent that has never been civilized."

His Congo was a place of primordial chaos, a world of "savage life" locked in an endless, unchanging present. It was a land, he implied, without a past and without a future—at least, not one it could create for itself. It was a place where history had not yet begun.

Stanley was not just an explorer; he was a storyteller. And the story he told—of a timeless, savage, and chaotic Africa in desperate need of European salvation—was not just a travelogue. It was the rough draft of a script, a foundational narrative that would be refined, expanded, and institutionalized over the next century. It became the official story that a continent (Europe) told itself to justify the subjugation of another (Africa). It was the instruction manual for the Scramble for Africa, the ideological software for the project of empire. It was, in short, a playbook.

This chapter is about that playbook. It is about the ghost in our global machine.

The journalistic frames we saw in the previous chapter—the war as a natural disaster, the irrational actors, the need for Western saviors—did not emerge from a vacuum in the 1990s. They were not invented in the newsrooms of London or Paris. They are the direct descendants of a set of ideas carefully constructed in the 19th century to make the colonial project not only profitable, but also morally righteous. To understand

why *The Economist* described the Congo War as an “eruption,” we must first understand why Henry Morton Stanley described the continent as “the dark continent.” The language is different, but the logic is the same. The ghost of Stanley’s story still haunts the machine of modern western journalism.

AN EMPIRE, especially one built on the far side of the world, cannot be sustained by force alone. It requires a story. It needs a powerful, internally consistent narrative that explains to the people back home why it is not only acceptable but *necessary* to rule over millions of people in a distant land. This story has to perform a delicate balancing act. It must portray the colonized people as simultaneously valuable enough to be possessed (for their labor and resources) and inferior enough to require domination. It must frame the act of conquest not as a violent seizure of land and liberty, but as a noble, selfless mission.

The colonial playbook, developed over decades by a chorus of explorers, missionaries, academics, and administrators, was this story. It was a remarkably effective piece of intellectual engineering, a grand unified theory of European superiority. And while it had many local variations, its core logic rested on three unshakable pillars.

Pillar 1: The Land Without Time (The Naturalization of Reality)

Pillar 2: The Savage Mind (The De-politicization of People)

Pillar 3: The White Man's Burden (The Moralization of Power)

These three pillars did not just justify colonialism. They created a complete and self-reinforcing worldview, a lens through which all information coming from the colonies was filtered and made sense of. It was a lens so powerful that it outlived the empires that

created it. It is the lens, as we shall see, that was placed on the camera when journalists went to cover the war in the Congo.

PILLAR I: THE LAND WITHOUT TIME

The first and most fundamental task of the colonial playbook was to remove Africa from the stream of human history. Before you can claim to be bringing progress to a place, you must first establish that it has none of its own. The continent was therefore portrayed not as a collection of societies with their own complex pasts, their own political evolutions, their own rises and falls of kingdoms and empires, but as a piece of primordial nature. It was geography, not history.

The German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, one of the most influential thinkers of the 19th century, gave this idea its most famous academic expression. In his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, he wrote that Africa was “the land of childhood, which lying beyond the day of self-conscious history, is enveloped in the dark mantle of Night.” For Hegel, history was a story of progress, of reason unfolding over time. And in his telling, Africa had no part in this story. It was, he concluded, “no historical part of the World; it has no movement or development to exhibit.”

This was not just an academic theory; it was a foundational assumption that permeated every aspect of the colonial project. It was reflected in the maps that labeled vast swaths of the interior as “unexplored,” as if

the millions of people who lived there did not exist until a white man arrived to draw a line around them. It was reflected in the museums in London, Paris, and Brussels, where African artifacts were displayed not in history wings alongside the relics of Greece and Rome, but in natural history collections, next to the skeletons of exotic animals and displays of strange geological formations.

This idea—of an Africa outside of history—was a powerful tool. If a place has no history of its own, then it is a blank slate upon which a new history can be written. The arrival of the European is not an interruption or a conquest; it is the *beginning* of history.

This frame also had a crucial corollary: if Africa is a realm of nature, not history, then events there do not have political causes; they have natural ones. Things don't *happen* for a reason; they just *occur*. A famine is not the result of agricultural policy or colonial land seizure; it is a feature of a harsh and unforgiving landscape. A political uprising is not a response to oppression; it is a sudden, inexplicable outburst of primal energy.

It is a very short leap from this 19th-century world-view to the 20th-century headlines we saw in the last chapter. When *The Economist* reports that the Congo has “erupted,” it is, wittingly or not, channeling Hegel. It is treating the war not as a political event unfolding in time, with a clear sequence of cause and effect, but as a geological event, a timeless feature of the African landscape. The magazine is implicitly telling its readers

that this is not a story about history. This is a story about nature.

The colonial administrator and writer Sir Harry Johnston, a key figure in the British colonization of Africa, provided a perfect example of this mindset in his 1899 book, *A History of the Colonization of Africa by Alien Races*. The very title is revealing. The history of Africa, in his telling, is the history of what outsiders have done to it. The internal dynamics of the continent are rendered invisible. He described pre-colonial Africa as a place of “unrelieved chaos,” a world where “the struggles of tribe with tribe, of chief with chief, were as purposeless as the battles of the wolves and bears.”

“As purposeless as the battles of the wolves and bears.” This is the very essence of the naturalization frame. The violence is not political; it is animalistic. It is not a means to an end; it is a state of being. It has no logic, no strategy, no goal. It is, like a storm or a flood, a natural disaster. This is the intellectual DNA that connects the colonial administrator of the 19th century to the foreign correspondent of the 20th. When a journalist frames an African war as a “deluge of blood” or a “treacherous mire,” they are reaching into the same playbook. They are framing the conflict as a feature of the landscape, not a product of human decisions. They are telling us that this is a land without time, a place where history has not yet begun.

PILLAR 2: THE SAVAGE MIND

Once the playbook had established Africa as a realm of nature, its next task was to define the people who lived there. If the land was timeless and chaotic, then the people must be too. The concept of the “savage” was the answer. It was the perfect intellectual tool for the job, a category that allowed the colonizer to portray the African as simultaneously human enough to be ruled and sub-human enough to be denied self-rule.

The colonial idea of the savage was not simply about brutality. It was a complex and internally consistent psychological profile. The savage, in the colonial imagination, was the inverse of the modern, rational, European man.

First, the savage was **irrational and emotional**. He was governed not by reason, but by instinct and superstition. His world was not one of cause and effect, but of magic and witchcraft. The French sociologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, in his influential 1910 book *How Natives Think*, argued that the “primitive mind” was “pre-logical.” It did not follow the same rules of reason as the European mind. This was a convenient theory. If a people are fundamentally irrational, then their political grievances cannot be taken seriously. Their demands are not the product of legitimate concerns, but of childish emotions or dark superstitions. Their resistance to colonial rule is not a political act; it is a temper tantrum.

This finds a direct echo in the reporting on the

Congo War. The leaders of the warring factions were rarely presented as strategic actors. They were, like Laurent-Désiré Kabila, portrayed as stubborn, incompetent, and driven by ego and paranoia. Their political motivations were ignored in favor of psychological caricature. The reporting consistently failed to explain the rational political and economic goals that were driving the conflict—the control of mineral wealth, the securing of national borders, the pursuit of regional hegemony. Instead, the violence was attributed to a vague and inexplicable **“upsurge in fighting,”** as if it were a matter of collective mood rather than military strategy.

Second, the savage was **tribal**. The concept of the “tribe” was one of the most powerful and enduring inventions of the colonial playbook. It took the complex and fluid social and political identities of Africa—kingdoms, clans, linguistic groups, city-states—and flattened them into a single, primitive category. The “tribe” was presented as the natural and eternal unit of African society. It was a bond of blood, not of choice. It was, in the colonial view, the African equivalent of a wolf pack—a primal, instinctual grouping that demanded absolute loyalty and fostered a permanent state of hostility towards all other groups.

This obsession with tribalism served a dual purpose. On the one hand, it provided a simple, all-purpose explanation for any conflict. A war was never about land, or resources, or political power; it was always a “tribal war,” fueled by **“ancient hatreds”** that

the European mind could never truly fathom. This was a wonderfully convenient narrative, as it absolved the colonial administration of any responsibility for creating or exacerbating the very tensions it claimed to be managing. On the other hand, the idea of a continent hopelessly divided into warring tribes positioned the colonial power as the only possible source of order. Only the neutral, rational European could stand above the fray and impose peace on the squabbling natives.

This, of course, is the exact logic we see in the reporting on the Congo. The war, which was in reality a complex international conflict, was frequently reduced to a story of **“tribal loyalties.”** The violence in the eastern Congo was not explained as a consequence of the Rwandan genocide and the subsequent struggle for control of the region, but as the bloody work of **“innumerable local militias”** slaughtering and pillaging for reasons that were left to the reader’s imagination. The playbook provided the default answer: it must be the tribes.

Finally, the savage was **inherently violent**. The colonial narrative portrayed pre-colonial Africa as a scene of constant, meaningless warfare. This was a crucial element of the story, as it framed the European arrival not as a conquest, but as a rescue mission. The colonial power was not there to impose its will, but to bring peace to a violent land.

Joseph Conrad’s 1902 novel *Heart of Darkness*, based on his own experiences in King Leopold’s Congo, is the most famous and enduring literary

expression of this idea. The Africa of his novel is a place of unspeakable horror, a world where the veneer of civilization is stripped away to reveal a primal, savage core. The book's central journey up the Congo River is a journey into a psychological abyss, a place where the European protagonist, Marlow, confronts the terrifying possibility that the "savage" is not just an external other, but a hidden part of himself.

The novel is a masterpiece of atmospheric dread, but it is also a perfect crystallization of the colonial mindset. The violence it depicts is detached from any political or historical context. It is presented as a feature of the jungle itself, a kind of moral malaria that infects all who enter.

It is no accident that *The Economist*, in its coverage of the Congo War, repeatedly and explicitly invoked Conrad's novel. In December 2000, it ran a major feature on the conflict under the headline **"In the heart of darkness."** Another article, in August 1998, was titled **"War in the heart of Africa."** The reference is not subtle. It is a deliberate and powerful piece of journalistic framing. It is a signal to the reader, a way of saying: "You know this story. You have read this book. This is that place." By invoking Conrad, the magazine was able to tap into a century of accumulated cultural baggage about the Congo as a place of incomprehensible, almost metaphysical, horror. It was a shortcut to a pre-packaged narrative, a way of explaining the war without having to explain it at all. It was the colonial

playbook, updated for the age of the 24-hour news cycle.

PILLAR 3: THE WHITE MAN'S BURDEN

The first two pillars of the playbook established the problem: a timeless, chaotic land inhabited by irrational, tribal, and violent savages. The third pillar provided the solution: the moral imperative of European intervention. This was the great alchemical trick of colonial discourse. It took an enterprise of economic exploitation and military domination and transmuted it into a noble, selfless act of charity. The British poet Rudyard Kipling gave this idea its most famous name in his 1899 poem, "The White Man's Burden." The poem urges the United States to take up the colonial project in the Philippines, and it frames the task as a thankless but necessary duty:

Take up the White Man's burden—
Send forth the best ye breed—
Go bind your sons to exile
To serve your captives' need;
To wait in heavy harness,
On fluttered folk and wild—
Your new-caught, sullen peoples,
Half-devil and half-child.

The language is breathtaking in its condescension. The colonized are "captives," but they are also in "need." They are "wild," "sullen," and, most damningly, "half-devil and half-child." The colonizer is not a

conqueror, but a long-suffering servant, a weary parent trying to manage an unruly child. The project of empire is not a quest for power and profit; it is a “burden.”

This was the moral capstone of the entire colonial edifice. It allowed the West to look at itself in the mirror and see not a predator, but a savior. Every colonial power had its own version of this story. For the British, it was the burden. For the French, it was the “mission civilisatrice,” the civilizing mission. For the Belgians in the Congo, it was a mission to end the Arab slave trade and bring Christianity and commerce to the benighted natives.

This narrative, of course, required a systematic erasure of the colonizer’s own violence. The brutal realities of the colonial project—the massacres, the forced labor, the concentration camps, the engineered famines—were either ignored, denied, or presented as regrettable but necessary steps on the road to progress. The story had to be kept pure. The West was the agent of order, of reason, of peace.

And so we arrive at the final, and perhaps most disturbing, parallel between the colonial playbook and the modern reporting on the Congo. Just as the colonial narrative positioned the European as the only possible source of order in a chaotic Africa, the journalistic narrative of the 1990s consistently framed Western intervention as the only viable solution to the conflict.

The articles in *The Economist* and *Le Point* are filled with a deep and abiding skepticism towards any African-led peace initiative. These efforts are portrayed

as inevitably doomed to fail, undermined by the very flaws that the playbook attributes to the African character: the incompetence of the leaders, the stubbornness of their rivalries, the intractability of their tribal hatreds.

In August 1998, *The Economist* considered the possibility of an African diplomatic mission to solve the crisis, only to immediately dismiss it: "Could this succeed? Alas, probably not, though it is worth trying." The reason? "This is a region with deep-rooted rivalries, its political rulers notoriously tricky and obdurate."

The language is pure colonial-era condescension. The Africans are "tricky" and "obdurate," like difficult children. Their problems are "deep-rooted," implying a kind of natural, unchangeable condition. The possibility that they might be capable of solving their own political problems is raised only to be shot down.

In contrast, the prospect of Western intervention is always treated with a different kind of gravity. It is presented as the last, best hope. The reporting is filled with appeals for the West to "do something."

In May 2003, as the violence in the Ituri region of the Congo reached a fever pitch, *The Economist* ran an article under the headline "Waiting to be rescued." The title says it all. The Congolese are cast as passive victims, waiting for an external savior. The article dismisses the ability of the UN's multinational peace-keeping force and the Congolese government to solve the problem, before turning to the only real possibility:

“On May 13th, France agreed in principle to send its soldiers to the rescue, after Mr Annan begged for a ‘coalition of the willing’ to sort out the mess.”

The narrative arc is identical to Kipling’s poem. The world is a mess. The natives are incapable of cleaning it up. The burden falls, once again, on the weary shoulders of the West.

THIS, then, is the playbook. A three-part story, refined over a century, that works like a perfectly calibrated machine for producing a particular kind of knowledge about Africa.

First, you remove the land from history and turn it into a timeless piece of nature. This allows you to frame any event, including a war, as a natural disaster.

Second, you remove the people from the realm of politics and turn them into irrational, tribal savages. This allows you to dismiss their motivations and portray their conflicts as meaningless chaos.

Third, you position yourself as the only agent of history and reason. This allows you to frame your own intervention not as an act of power, but as an act of moral necessity.

This playbook is the ghost in the machine of modern journalism. It is a set of inherited assumptions, a collection of narrative shortcuts, a deep structure of thought that continues to shape the way the West sees and tells the story of Africa.

It is the reason why a political war in Europe is a story of history, while a political war in Africa is a story of nature.

It is the reason why a European leader is a strategist, while an African leader is a village chief.

It is the reason why, in the pages of our most respected publications, the people of the Congo are still, in so many ways, waiting to be rescued.

The journalists who covered the Congo War did not set out to write colonial propaganda. They were, for the

most part, brave and dedicated professionals, trying to make sense of a complex and dangerous situation.

But they were working within a machine that was built for a different purpose. They were using a tool without fully understanding its history. They were telling a story without realizing that the script had been written for them, a hundred years before they were born.

Now that we have seen the playbook, now that we have understood its history and its logic, we can return to the scene of the crime. We can look again at the coverage of the Congo War, not just as a collection of articles, but as a case study in how this ghost in the machine operates in the 21st century. We can see, in detail, how the old playbook was dusted off and put to use, and what the consequences were for our understanding of the deadliest war of our time.

CHAPTER 3

FROM CONRAD TO THE ECONOMIST

There is a particular kind of story the West tells about itself. It is a story of progress, of reason, of the slow, messy, but ultimately forward march of history. When Western nations go to war, the reporting is framed within this story. Western conflicts, however brutal, are imbued with meaning. They are struggles for democracy, for freedom, for national interest, for a place in the historical record. Western leaders, even the ones most despised, are treated as rational actors, playing a high-stakes game of geopolitical chess. Their decisions are analyzed, their motives debated, their strategies deconstructed. The story is complex, often tragic, but it is always, fundamentally, a human story. It is a story about politics.

The Savage Frame is the inverse of this story. It is a narrative machine designed to take a conflict and strip it of all political meaning, to lift it out of the stream of

history and place it in the realm of mythology. It is a way of telling a story that makes it fundamentally inhuman. When Western journalists arrived to cover the war in the Congo, they brought this machine with them. They set it up on the banks of the Congo River and began to run the raw data of the conflict—the battles, the alliances, the political maneuvers—through its gears. And what came out the other side was not a story about politics. It was a story about savagery.

This chapter is a look inside that machine. We will examine its three main components, the interlocking gears that work together to produce a single, powerful narrative. We will see how the reporting in *The Economist* and *Le Point* systematically portrayed the war's leaders as irrational actors, how it used the idea of the "tribe" as an alibi for political violence, and, most powerfully, how it reached back a century to borrow the atmospheric dread of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* to create a Conradian echo that reverberated through its coverage.

This is not just a story about bad reporting. It is a story about the enduring power of a colonial ghost to shape our perception of reality, to turn a nation's tragedy into a spectacle of horror, and to convince us that what we are witnessing is not a war, but a nightmare.

THE IRRATIONAL ACTOR: A PORTRAIT OF THE VILLAGE CHIEF

Politics is, at its core, the pursuit of power. It is a rational, if often ruthless, business. To understand a conflict, you must first grant that the people involved are acting rationally, according to their own interests and their own understanding of the world.

You may find their goals monstrous, their methods barbaric, but you must begin from the assumption that there *is* a goal, that there *is* a method. This is the fundamental courtesy that Western journalism extends to Western leaders. It is a courtesy that was almost entirely withheld from the leaders of the Congo War.

The central figure in the early years of the war was the Congolese president, Laurent-Désiré Kabila. Kabila was a complex and, by many accounts, deeply flawed figure. He was a veteran revolutionary who had spent decades in the political wilderness before being plucked from obscurity by Rwanda and Uganda to lead the rebellion that overthrew the long-serving dictator Mobutu Sese Seko in 1997. A year later, when he tried to assert his independence from his former backers, they turned on him, launching the Second Congo War with the aim of removing him from power.

This is a classic political story: a story of shifting alliances, of a puppet cutting his strings, of a regional power struggle. It is a story that could have been told in the language of *realpolitik*.

But that is not the story that was told. Instead, in

the pages of *The Economist* and *Le Point*, Kabila was subjected to a relentless campaign of psychological caricature. He was framed not as a political actor, but as a walking embodiment of African incompetence and irrationality.

Consider the language used by *The Economist* in August 1998, just as the war was beginning. Kabila, the magazine declared, had “diminished into an authoritarian tribalist.” He was “stubborn and incompetent.” He had “squandered” international goodwill.

This was not a political analysis; it was a character assessment, and a damning one at that. The magazine did not analyze his political decisions—such as his attempt to build a national army independent of Rwandan control, or his efforts to renegotiate mining contracts to benefit the Congolese state—as rational, if risky, moves in a political chess game. Instead, it presented them as the products of a flawed personality.

This frame became the dominant narrative.

Two years later, in a feature piece, *The Economist* doubled down on this characterization. Kabila, it wrote, had “turned out to be little more than an outsize village chief, adept at staying in power, but with no vision and a deep distrust of competence.”

The phrase “outsize village chief” is a masterpiece of colonial condescension. It conjures the image of a primitive, small-minded man, hopelessly out of his depth in the modern world. It strips him of any claim to the status of a legitimate head of state. A president has

a vision, a strategy, a foreign policy. A village chief has superstitions and petty squabbles.

The French magazine *Le Point* painted a similar portrait. In a long article in November 1998, it described Kabila and his entourage as a **“curieux cocktail ou se mêlent inexpérience et incompetence, absence de sens politique et habileté diplomatique, démagogie et rouerie”** (a curious cocktail mixing inexperience and incompetence, an absence of political sense and diplomatic skill, demagoguery and cunning).

The description is a jumble of contradictions. He lacks political sense, but possesses diplomatic skill. He is inexperienced, but also cunning. The portrait is not of a coherent political actor, but of a chaotic and unpredictable personality. The message to the reader is clear: this is not a man you can reason with. This is not a government you can negotiate with. This is a force of nature, a problem to be managed.

This framing has a powerful effect. It makes the war seem like the inevitable result of African misrule. The conflict is not a geopolitical event; it is the natural outcome of putting a man like Kabila in charge. The blame is shifted from the complex web of international actors and economic interests that fueled the war, and placed squarely on the shoulders of a single, flawed African leader.

This is a classic move from the colonial playbook.

During the colonial era, African leaders who resisted European rule (from Cameroon's Ruben Um Nyobè, to Congo's Patrice Lumumba or South Africa's

Nelson Mandela) were routinely dismissed as irrational despots, as bloodthirsty tyrants, or at best Moscow's puppets, who were standing in the way of progress. Their political motivations were ignored, their resistance framed as a product of their savage nature.

The modern journalistic portrait of Kabila is a direct descendant of this tradition. It is a portrait designed not to explain, but to dismiss. It is a frame that makes political understanding impossible, and in doing so, makes the violence seem both inevitable and incomprehensible. It is the first gear in the machine of savagery.

THE TRIBAL ALIBI: A WAR WITHOUT A CAUSE

If the leaders are irrational, then the soldiers must be too. If the war is not being fought for coherent political goals, then what is it being fought for? The Savage Frame has a simple, one-word answer to this question: **tribes.**

In the lexicon of Western journalism, "tribalism" is the skeleton key that unlocks the mystery of African conflict. It is a convenient, all-purpose explanation for violence that relieves the reporter of the difficult task of investigating the actual, complex causes of a war. It is an alibi. It allows the journalist to say, in effect: "This is not a war about resources, or land, or political power. This is just what these people do. They are prisoners of their ancient hatreds, their primal loyalties. It

is a story as old as time, and there is nothing we can do about it.”

The Congo War was, in reality, a profoundly modern, international conflict. It was a war fought with sophisticated weaponry, funded by a global trade in minerals, and driven by the strategic calculations of nation-states. It was, as the scholar Gérard Prunier has called it, “Africa’s World War.” But in the reporting of *The Economist* and *Le Point*, this complex reality was consistently flattened into a simplistic narrative of tribal savagery.

The word “tribe” and its cognates appear again and again in the coverage, always as a substitute for political analysis. *The Economist* warns, in August 1998, that the war will lead to **“the spread of local armies rooted in tribal loyalties.”** This, it concludes, is **“hell.”** The magazine does not explain who these “tribes” are, what their political grievances might be, or how they fit into the larger international conflict. The word itself is treated as a self-contained explanation. It is a synonym for chaos.

This “tribal alibi” performs several crucial functions for the Savage Frame.

First, **it makes the conflict seem ancient and timeless.** By attributing the violence to “tribal loyalties,” the reporting lifts the war out of its specific historical context—the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide, the collapse of the Mobutu regime—and places it in a mythical, unchanging African past. It suggests that this is a conflict without a beginning, and

therefore, without an end. It is simply the latest flare-up of a permanent, natural condition. This reinforces the idea we saw in the last chapter: Africa as a land without history.

Second, **it obscures the economic drivers of the war.** The eastern Congo is one of the most mineral-rich places on earth, a treasure trove of gold, diamonds, tin, and coltan—a mineral essential for the production of mobile phones and other electronics. The control of these resources was a central, if not *the* central, driver of the conflict. The armies of Rwanda, Uganda, and Zimbabwe, along with a host of other armed groups, were deeply involved in the systematic looting of the Congo's wealth. This was not random pillaging; it was a highly organized, multi-billion-dollar enterprise.

But in the tribal frame, this economic dimension is rendered secondary, almost incidental. *The Economist*, in June 1999, describes the war as a **“localised scramble for loot, mainly gold and diamonds.”** The word “scramble” is telling. It suggests a chaotic, disorganized affair, a mad dash for treasure, rather than a systematic campaign of economic extraction. The reporting acknowledges the presence of resources, but it frames the struggle for them as a symptom of the chaos, not its cause. The primary motive is always assumed to be the primal, irrational urge of tribal conflict.

Third, **it makes the violence seem uniquely and inexplicably brutal.** The tribal frame comes with a set of built-in assumptions about the nature of the

violence. “Tribal war,” in the Western imagination, is not like other kinds of war. It is not fought by professional soldiers according to rules of engagement. It is a war of machetes and massacres, of unrestrained, orgiastic violence. It is, in a word, savage.

The reporting on the Congo is filled with lurid descriptions of the war’s brutality, but these descriptions are rarely connected to a political or military logic. The violence is presented as a spectacle of horror, an end in itself. In May 2003, *The Economist* describes the fighting in the town of Bunia as a **“tempest of tribal killing.”** The militias are a **“bewildering and constantly mutating horde.”** The language is atmospheric, almost gothic. It is designed to evoke a sense of horror and confusion in the reader, not to provide a clear understanding of the military situation.

This is the ultimate power of the tribal alibi. It takes a complex, modern, international war and transforms it into a simple, ancient, and incomprehensible blood-bath. It is a story that requires no expertise to understand, no knowledge of history, no grasp of economics. All you need to know is the one magic word: tribes. Once you have that, the rest of the story writes itself. It is a story of savage people in a savage land, locked in a savage cycle of violence. It is a story that is easy to tell, and easy to believe. And it is a story that is, in almost every important respect, a lie.

THE CONRADIAN ECHO: A JOURNEY INTO THE HEART OF DARKNESS

There is a ghost that haunts the Western imagination of the Congo. It is the ghost of a Polish-born novelist named Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski, better known as Joseph Conrad. In 1890, Conrad captained a steamboat up the Congo River, working for the brutal colonial regime of King Leopold II of Belgium. The experience scarred him, and a decade later, he distilled it into a short novel, *Heart of Darkness*. The book is a dark, brooding, and ambiguous masterpiece, a psychological journey into the moral abyss of colonialism and the darkness that, Conrad suggests, lurks within the human soul.

But over the past century, *Heart of Darkness* has become more than just a novel. It has become a cultural shorthand, a pre-packaged narrative for the Congo. It is a story of a journey up a river into a primeval jungle, a world of impenetrable mystery and unspeakable horrors, a place that is not just a geographical location, but a symbol of humanity's savage core. It is the ultimate expression of the Savage Frame.

And when the journalists of *The Economist* went to cover the Congo War at the end of the 20th century, they brought their copy of Conrad with them. The novel's influence on the magazine's coverage is not just implicit; it is explicit, deliberate, and pervasive. It is the final, and most powerful, gear in the machine.

The most blatant example comes in December

2000, when the magazine published a long, in-depth feature on the state of the war. The headline was not a political analysis or a summary of the military situation. It was a literary allusion: **“In the heart of darkness.”**

This is not a neutral headline. It is a powerful act of framing. It is a command to the reader. It says: “Forget everything you know about modern warfare. Forget politics, forget economics, forget strategy. We are not in that world anymore. We are in Conrad’s world. Prepare for a journey into a realm of primordial horror.”

The article itself delivers on this promise. It is a catalogue of chaos and despair. The war, it says, has created **“huge business opportunities which have obscured its primary, political, cause.”** This is a stunning admission. The magazine acknowledges that the war has a political cause, but it chooses to focus instead on the spectacle of corruption and greed. The country is a **“blank on the map,”** a phrase that erases the existence of its millions of inhabitants. The Congolese people are dismissed with a single, devastating quote from an anonymous Rwandan official: **“A hopeless people... All they want to do is drink and dance.”**

The Conradian echo reverberates throughout the magazine’s coverage. An earlier headline, from August 1998, reads **“War in the heart of Africa.”** The phrasing is a clear and deliberate echo of Conrad’s title. The message is the same: this is not just a war in a country; it is a war at the very core of a continent’s savage soul.

This literary frame does something that a purely political or military frame cannot. It aestheticizes the violence. It turns a human tragedy into a piece of gothic literature. The war is no longer a set of problems to be solved; it is a mystery to be contemplated, a source of existential dread. The journalist is no longer a reporter, but a Marlow figure, a weary traveler navigating a landscape of moral decay.

This frame is intellectually lazy, but it is also incredibly effective. It provides a ready-made narrative that is both familiar and thrilling to a Western audience. It taps into a century of accumulated cultural prejudice about the Congo. It allows the magazine to tell a story of profound horror without having to do the hard work of explaining its causes. The explanation is already there, embedded in the literary allusion. The cause is the darkness itself.

The Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe famously called *Heart of Darkness* “an offensive and deplorable book,” a book that “projects the image of Africa as ‘the other world,’ the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization.” He argued that the novel’s central purpose was to reduce Africa to a mere backdrop for the psychological disintegration of a white man. It is a book that, in his words, “presents Africa as a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity, into which the wandering European enters at his peril.”

This is precisely the function that the Conradian frame serves in the journalism of *The Economist*. It turns the Congo into a metaphysical battlefield. It erases the

humanity of the millions of people caught in the conflict. And it centers the story on the experience of the outsider, the Western observer, who enters this world at his peril and returns to tell a tale of the horror.

THE SAVAGE FRAME is a powerful and self-reinforcing system. The three gears work in perfect synchrony.

You begin with the **irrational actor**. The leaders are incompetent, emotional, and unpredictable. Their actions have no political logic. This creates a problem for the storyteller: if the leaders are not driving the conflict, what is?

The second gear provides the answer: the **tribal alibi**. The conflict is not driven by political goals, but by the ancient, primal hatreds of the tribes. This explains the violence, but it also makes it seem eternal and insoluble. This creates a new problem: if the conflict is a permanent, natural condition, what is the point of the story?

The third gear provides the solution: the **Conradian echo**. The story is not about finding a solution. It is about bearing witness to the horror. It is a literary journey into a heart of darkness. This gives the story its purpose and its emotional power. It transforms a political failure into a literary success.

This is the machine that took the deadliest war of our generation and turned it into a story of savage people in a savage land. It is a machine that runs on the fuel of old colonial myths. And it is a machine that is

still running today, in newsrooms around the world. It is a ghost that we have yet to exorcise. And until we do, the story of Africa will continue to be told not as a human story, but as a story from another world, a world of darkness, a world without a name.

CHAPTER 4

WHY AFRICA ALWAYS NEEDS RESCUING

There is a story, perhaps the oldest and most powerful story in the Western canon, that we never seem to tire of telling. It is the story of the rescuer. It is the knight slaying the dragon to save the princess, the superhero swooping down from the sky to save the city, the lone cowboy riding into a lawless town to restore order. We are captivated by this narrative. It speaks to our deepest ideals of strength, of justice, of moral clarity. It is a story that makes us feel good about ourselves.

When the West looks at Africa, this is the story it almost always chooses to tell. And it is a story in which the West invariably casts itself as the hero. Jacques Chirac, France's former President, liked to paint himself as Africa's advocate, its prime defender.

The first three acts of our colonial playbook have set the stage perfectly for this grand finale. The **Natural-**

ization Frame has established the setting: a chaotic, timeless land convulsed by forces beyond rational control. The **Savage Frame** has introduced the characters: irrational leaders and tribal hordes locked in a cycle of meaningless violence. The stage is dark, the actors are lost, and the plot is a tragedy without end. Now, the spotlight swings to the wings, and a new character steps forward. He is calm, he is rational, he is reluctant but resolute. He is the Westerner. And he has come to save the day.

This is the Savior Frame. It is the moral capstone of the entire narrative machine, the part of the story that transforms a legacy of exploitation into a tale of noble sacrifice. It is a frame that works by performing two simultaneous, contradictory operations. First, it must systematically dismantle and discredit any attempt by Africans to solve their own problems. It must portray them as helpless, as incompetent, as children incapable of managing their own affairs. Second, it must present Western intervention—whether diplomatic, economic, or military—as the only possible, rational, and effective solution. It must cast the former colonial master in the role of the indispensable rescuer.

This chapter is about how that story was told during the Congo War. It is about the journalistic alchemy that turned a complex international conflict, with a host of African-led peace initiatives, into a simple morality play about African failure and Western necessity. We will see how the reporting in *The Economist* and *Le Point* created a narrative in which every

African attempt at diplomacy was a prelude to failure, and every hint of Western involvement was a glimmer of hope. This is not just a story about media bias. It is a story about the persistence of a colonial fantasy, the fantasy of the White Man's Burden, a story that continues to shape our world in profound and damaging ways.

ACT I: THE DISMISSAL OF AFRICAN AGENCY

Throughout the five years of the Second Congo War, there was no shortage of African-led attempts to bring about peace. The conflict was a crisis for the entire continent, and leaders from South Africa, Zambia, Libya, and elsewhere invested immense diplomatic energy in trying to resolve it. Summits were held, ceasefires were negotiated, and complex power-sharing agreements were hammered out. From the Lusaka Ceasefire Agreement of 1999 to the Sun City Accords of 2002, African diplomats, leaders, and civil society groups were constantly at the negotiating table.

This was the real story of the peace process: a difficult, often frustrating, but deeply serious effort by Africans to manage a continental crisis. But this is not the story that was told to the Western public. In the pages of *The Economist* and *Le Point*, these African-led initiatives were treated with a consistent and corrosive skepticism. They were framed not as serious political efforts, but as a kind of political theater, a prelude to the inevitable, and necessary, arrival of the real peace-makers from the West.

The dismissal of African agency in the reporting operates on two levels: the caricature of the leaders and the caricature of the process.

First, the leaders themselves are portrayed as fundamentally untrustworthy and incompetent, their flaws presented as insurmountable obstacles to peace.

We saw in the last chapter how Laurent Kabila was framed as an irrational “village chief.” This characterization was extended to nearly every African leader involved in the peace process. They are, in the words of *The Economist* in August 1998, “**notoriously tricky and obdurate.**”

This is the language of a frustrated colonial administrator, not an objective journalist. “Tricky” implies a kind of low cunning, a slipperiness that is the opposite of serious statesmanship. “Obdurate” suggests a stubborn, almost childish refusal to see reason. The message is clear: these are not people you can make a deal with. They are not serious partners for peace.

The reporting is filled with this kind of condescending character assessment. The peace process is constantly being undermined by the arrogance of one leader, the greed of another, the paranoia of a third. The possibility that these leaders might be acting out of a rational calculation of their own national interests is rarely considered. Instead, their actions are attributed to personality flaws, which are in turn presented as representative of a continental political culture that is simply not up to the task of modern diplomacy.

This framing creates a powerful narrative expectation in the reader. If the people at the table are fundamentally unserious, then the process itself must be a charade. And so, the reporting on the peace process is a relentless story of failure. The headlines and opening paragraphs of articles about African-led negotiations

are almost always tinged with cynicism and foreshadowing of their collapse.

In July 1999, after the signing of the landmark Lusaka Ceasefire Agreement—a complex document that involved six national governments and two rebel groups—*The Economist* ran an article under the headline: **“The war is dead, long live the war.”** The headline is a masterpiece of weary cynicism. It tells the reader, before they have even read the first sentence, that this agreement is meaningless, that the peace is a fiction, and that the natural state of Africa—war—will inevitably reassert itself.

The article itself reinforces this sense of futility. The agreement, it says, **“looks suspiciously like a continuation of the war by other means.”** The tone is one of worldly wisdom, of a seasoned observer who is not fooled by the superficialities of a signed document. The possibility that the agreement might represent a genuine, if fragile, step towards peace is dismissed out of hand.

This pattern is repeated throughout the coverage. Every African-led summit is a talk shop, every agreement is a temporary truce, every ceasefire is a prelude to the next round of fighting. The reporting creates a self-fulfilling prophecy. By framing African diplomacy as inherently flawed and doomed to fail, it primes the reader to see every setback as proof of this fundamental truth, and to ignore any evidence of progress.

Perhaps the most telling example of this dismissive frame comes from *Le Point* in November 1998. The

magazine is covering a major Franco-African summit in Paris, where the Congo War is at the top of the agenda. The magazine praises the French for their role as “facilitator,” but its description of the African side of the equation is deeply revealing. The summit, it says, is one of those **“grands-messes franco-africaines”** (great Franco-African high masses). The term “grand-messe” is dripping with condescension. It suggests a ritualistic, almost religious gathering, a piece of political pageantry rather than a serious working summit. It implies that the African leaders have come to Paris not to negotiate as equals, but to participate in a ceremony presided over by their former colonial masters.

This is the Savior Frame in its most subtle and insidious form. It does not need to shout. It works through the quiet power of word choice, of tone, of narrative expectation. It creates a world in which African agency is a contradiction in terms, in which every African attempt to solve a problem is simply another demonstration of their inability to do so. It clears the stage of all local actors, leaving it empty and waiting for a hero.

ACT II: THE ARRIVAL OF THE RESCUER

Once the narrative has established the fundamental incompetence of the Africans, the stage is set for the arrival of the rescuer. In the reporting on the Congo War, the West is always waiting in the wings, a source of potential salvation that is held in reserve, its inter-

vention framed as the last, best hope for a desperate continent.

The contrast between the reporting on African diplomacy and the reporting on Western involvement is stark. While African-led initiatives are treated with cynicism, any hint of Western engagement is treated with a sense of gravity and hope. The West does not participate in “grand-messes.” It engages in serious diplomacy. Its leaders are not “tricky” and “obdurate.” They are concerned, responsible, and burdened by the weight of the world’s problems.

Consider the language used by *The Economist* in October 1998. After dismissing the peace efforts of regional organizations as “deeply divided,” the magazine notes a shift: **“The United States is a little less laid back.”** An American special representative is traveling to the region. The assistant secretary of state for Africa may soon join him. The tone is one of quiet approval. The adults have entered the room. The chaotic, emotional world of African politics is about to be subjected to the calm, rational influence of American power.

This narrative of Western necessity is built slowly, piece by piece, over the course of the war. It is often framed as a reluctant duty, a burden that the West would rather not have to bear, but which its moral conscience will not allow it to shirk. This is a direct echo of Kipling’s “White Man’s Burden,” the idea that ruling over others is not a privilege, but a thankless and heavy responsibility.

In June 2003, as the war was finally winding down, *The Economist* published a remarkable editorial that laid this logic bare. The article, titled **“Africa’s open wound,”** considers the argument for non-intervention. **“Some argue that the West should avoid embroilment altogether,”** it begins, acknowledging the weariness of Western powers. **“There are no western interests at stake, and Africa’s supply of strife seems endless... There is a limit to how many wars stretched western armies can stop.”**

This is the voice of the weary parent, the long-suffering rescuer. The West is “stretched.” Africa’s strife is “endless.” The framing suggests that the West is the world’s sole firefighter, rushing from one blaze to the next on a continent that is permanently on fire. But then comes the pivot, the turn to moral duty: **“But in humanitarian terms, Congo is the big one, with more victims than any since 1945. Stopping it should be an urgent priority.”**

The conclusion is presented as a reluctant but inescapable moral imperative. The West must act, not because of self-interest, but because of its humanitarian values. The Savior Frame is complete. The West is not an actor with its own complex history and economic interests in the Congo; it is a disinterested agent of pure morality.

This narrative requires a staggering act of historical amnesia. It requires us to forget that Belgium, one of the Western nations now being called upon to rescue the Congo, was responsible for a colonial regime that

killed millions of Congolese. It requires us to forget that the United States and France were the key international backers of the brutal and kleptocratic Mobutu regime for over thirty years, a regime whose collapse was the direct precursor to the war. It requires us to forget that Western corporations were, and are, deeply enmeshed in the trade of conflict minerals that fueled the fighting.

The Savior Frame wipes this slate clean. In the story it tells, the West has no history in the Congo. It arrives on the scene as a neutral, benevolent outsider, its hands clean, its motives pure.

The ultimate expression of this frame comes in moments of acute crisis, when the language of rescue becomes most explicit. In May 2003, during the horrific massacres in the Ituri region, *The Economist* ran an article with the headline: **“Waiting to be rescued.”**

The headline is a perfect encapsulation of the entire colonial narrative. The Congolese are cast as passive, helpless victims, their agency completely erased. They are not fighting, they are not resisting, they are not organizing. They are simply waiting. And who are they waiting for? The article leaves no doubt. It dismisses the UN peacekeepers as “cowering” and the Congolese government as useless. Then it turns to the only real hope: **“France agreed in principle to send its soldiers to the rescue, after Mr Annan begged for a ‘coalition of the willing’ to sort out the mess.”**

The story is a fairy tale. The people are trapped in the dragon’s lair. The local knights are useless. And so a call goes out, across the sea, to the one hero who can

save them. The language is not one of politics; it is one of mythology. It is the story of Perseus and Andromeda, of St. George and the Dragon. It is a story that makes us feel good about ourselves. And it is a story that has almost nothing to do with the complex reality of the Congo War.

ACT III: THE LOGIC OF THE BURDEN

Why is this story so powerful? Why does it persist, even in the face of overwhelming evidence that it is a distortion of reality? The Savior Frame is not just a journalistic habit. It is a deep structure of thought, a way of organizing the world that is fundamental to the West's sense of its own identity. It is a story that we need to believe.

At its core, the Savior Frame is a mechanism for managing the profound moral and psychological discomfort of the post-colonial world. The history of the relationship between the West and Africa is a history of profound violence and exploitation. This is an uncomfortable truth. The Savior Frame provides a way to rewrite this history, to transform a story of guilt into a story of redemption.

It works like this: If Africans are eternally in need of rescuing, then the West is eternally in the position of the rescuer. This reframes the entire historical relationship. The colonial project was not an act of conquest; it was the first, flawed attempt at rescue. The post-colonial relationship is not one of neo-colonial economic domination; it is a continuing mission of aid and development. The intervention in a conflict is not a geopolitical power play; it is a humanitarian mission.

The Savior Frame creates a perpetual present, a world in which the debts of the past are never called in, because the crises of today are always so urgent. It allows the West to maintain its position of dominance,

not as a right of conquest, but as a moral burden. We are not in charge because we are powerful; we are in charge because we are good. We are not interfering; we are helping.

This is a deeply seductive narrative. It allows the Western reader to consume stories of African suffering without feeling implicated, without having to confront the uncomfortable truth that their own prosperity is historically linked to that suffering. The story is not about us, the perpetrators; it is about us, the saviors.

This narrative also has profound real-world consequences. It shapes foreign policy, turning it away from long-term political solutions and towards short-term, high-visibility humanitarian interventions. It is easier, and more politically rewarding, to send in the troops to “rescue” a population than it is to engage in the difficult, patient work of supporting local institutions and African-led peace processes.

It shapes public opinion, creating a sense of both compassion and condescension. We are encouraged to feel pity for the victims of African conflicts, but we are also taught to see them as fundamentally incapable of solving their own problems. This creates a cycle of dependency, in which African nations are perpetually cast as wards of the international community, their sovereignty always provisional, always subject to revocation by the great powers who have appointed themselves the guardians of global order.

And finally, it silences the very people it claims to be helping. The Savior Frame is, by its very nature, a

monologue. It is a story the West tells to itself, about itself. The object of the rescue—the African—is a passive figure in this drama. They are the damsel in distress, the grateful recipient of aid, the silent victim. They are rarely, if ever, given a speaking part. They are not asked what kind of help they want, or whether they want it at all. The script has already been written. The roles have already been cast.

The great tragedy of the Savior Frame is that it is a story that is almost impossible to escape. For an African leader to reject Western intervention is to be cast as an obstacle to peace, as an irrational actor who is willing to sacrifice his own people for the sake of pride. For an African intellectual to criticize the narrative is to be accused of being ungrateful, of biting the hand that feeds. The frame is a prison, and it traps both the rescuer and the rescued in a cycle of dependency and condescension that is a direct echo of the colonial relationship.

In the end, the story of the Congo War, as told by the Western press, was not really a story about the Congo at all. It was a story about the West. It was a story that reaffirmed the West's sense of its own moral superiority, its own rationality, its own indispensable role in the world. It was a story that took the immeasurable suffering of millions of people and turned it into a backdrop for a comforting tale of Western heroism. It was the oldest story in the book. And it is a story that we must, finally, learn to stop telling.

CHAPTER 5

WHO GETS TO TELL THE STORY?

Power, in its rawest form, is the ability to control another person's body—to command their labor, to restrict their movement, to end their life. This is the power of the soldier, the slave master, the dictator. But there is another kind of power, one more subtle and perhaps more durable. It is the power to control another person's story. It is the power to define their reality, to interpret their motives, to speak on their behalf. It is the power to render them silent.

This is the ultimate power of the journalist.

The reporter, the editor, the news anchor—they are the gatekeepers of the global narrative. They decide which stories are told and which are ignored, which voices are amplified and which are muted. In an ideal world, this power would be wielded as a sacred trust, a

tool for giving voice to the voiceless and holding the powerful to account.

But in the real world, and especially in the reporting that flows from the West to the rest of the world, this power is often used to reinforce the very hierarchies it claims to challenge.

Nowhere is this truer than in the coverage of Africa.

We have seen how the colonial playbook provided a script for reporting on the Congo War, a script that framed the conflict as a natural disaster, its actors as savages, and the West as the only possible savior. But all of these frames are held in place by a single, foundational act of journalistic malpractice: the systematic silencing of African voices.

This chapter is about that silence. It is about the most critical and damning finding from our analysis of the articles published by some of the most dominant media institutions in the West: the near-total absence of the people at the heart of the story.

In a war that involved nine nations, dozens of armed groups, and millions of people, the voices of the primary actors—the Congolese, Rwandan, and Ugandan leaders, soldiers, and strategists—are almost entirely missing from the record. Their story is told, but they are not allowed to tell it.

This is not a minor oversight. It is the central mechanism through which the entire colonial narrative is sustained. It is the act that makes all the other distortions possible.

By controlling the microphone, the Western jour-

nalist is able to construct a reality that is uncontested by the people who are actually living it.

This chapter is an anatomy of that control. We will explore how the journalist assumes the role of the omniscient narrator, how the few African voices that are included are used as ventriloquist's dummies to support a pre-written script, and how the only true authority is granted to the outsider. This is the story of how a continent was turned into a silent backdrop for a story the West tells about itself. It is the story of who gets to speak, and who, in the end, gets to be human.

THE JOURNALIST AS OMNISCIENT NARRATOR: SPEAKING FOR THE MUTE

In classic 19th-century literature, the omniscient narrator is a god-like figure. He stands above the story, seeing into the minds of all the characters, interpreting their motives, explaining their actions, and passing judgment on their souls. He is the ultimate authority. The characters exist only through his telling.

When Western journalists cover Africa, they often adopt this same narrative posture. They do not see their role as a conduit for other people's voices, but as the primary source of truth. They are not just reporting the facts; they are interpreting the very soul of a continent. And they do so with a confidence that is breathtaking.

In the coverage of the Congo War, the journalist is everywhere. His analysis, his opinions, his judgments,

form the very fabric of the story. But the people he is writing about are nowhere to be heard. We are told, in great detail, what Laurent Kabila is thinking, what the Rwandan government wants, what the Ugandan army is planning. But we are almost never told this by Kabila, or by the Rwandans, or by the Ugandans themselves.

Consider the portrait of Laurent Kabila that we examined in Chapter 3.

He is, according to *The Economist*, an “outsize village chief” with “no vision and a deep distrust of competence.” This is a strong and specific claim about a man’s character and intellect. In most journalistic contexts, a claim like this would need to be supported by evidence, preferably in the form of direct quotes from the man himself, or from those close to him, that reveal his worldview.

But in the articles we analyzed, Kabila is quoted directly only once. In a portrait published after his assassination in 2001, *The Economist* includes a single, cryptic quote: “My long years of struggle were like spreading fertilizer on a field... But now it is time to harvest.”

This is not a quote that illuminates his political strategy or his vision for the Congo. It is a piece of revolutionary poetry, used to add a bit of local color to his obituary.

For the entire duration of the war, a man at the center of a geopolitical maelstrom, a man who gave countless interviews and speeches, is rendered almost completely mute in the pages of the Western press.

His voice is replaced by the journalist's. The reporter becomes a mind reader, a political psychoanalyst. He tells us that Kabila is "stubborn and incompetent," that he has "diminished into an authoritarian tribalist," that he is "mentally stuck in the cold war of the early 1960s, imagining global plots against Congo."

These are not reported facts; they are judgments. They are the pronouncements of an omniscient narrator who has decided that the character in his story is not worthy of a speaking part.

The same is true for the other main actors in the conflict. The Rwandan and Ugandan governments, the two key foreign powers that launched the war, are also largely silent. Their official justifications for the invasion—that they were acting to secure their borders from the remnants of the Hutu génocidaires who had taken refuge in the Congo—are mentioned, but they are almost always framed as a pretext, a cover for their real, more primitive motives of greed and expansionism.

We are rarely given the opportunity to hear a Rwandan or Ugandan official make their case in their own words. The journalist summarizes their position for us, and in doing so, he frames it, interprets it, and ultimately, dismisses it.

In a rare exception, in June 2000, *The Economist* quotes the Rwandan president, Paul Kagame, talking about his disillusionment with his Ugandan counterpart. But the quote is not about the war in the Congo; it is about an internal squabble between the two allies.

It is a piece of political gossip, not a statement of policy.

This practice of silencing has a profound effect on the reader. It creates a world in which Africans do not have coherent political thoughts. They do not have strategies. They do not have ideologies.

They have, instead, psychological states: they are greedy, they are paranoid, they are stubborn. Their actions are not the product of political calculation; they are the symptoms of a flawed character.

This is a deeply dehumanizing narrative. It reduces an entire cast of political actors to a collection of stereotypes. It takes a war that was fought for clear, if brutal, political and economic reasons, and turns it into a drama of personalities.

And in this drama, the only truly rational, all-knowing character is the one telling the story: the Western journalist. He is the one who can see the big picture, the one who understands the true motives of the players, the one who can pass judgment from on high. He is the omniscient narrator, and the continent he is describing is his silent, tragic, and ultimately incomprehensible subject.

THE VENTRILOQUIST'S DUMMY: CURATED AFRICAN VOICES

Of course, it is not entirely true that there are *no* African voices in the coverage. There are some. But they are included so rarely, and in such a specific and calculated

way, that they often do more to reinforce the colonial frame than to challenge it.

The few Africans who are allowed to speak are not treated as independent sources of information or analysis. They are used as props. They are ventriloquist's dummies, their mouths opened by the journalist to speak the lines that the journalist has already written for them.

In our analysis, we can identify two main types of curated African voices that are used to support the pre-existing narrative.

The first is the **Voice of Despair**. This is typically an anonymous, ordinary Congolese person—a taxi driver, a market woman, a student—who is quoted expressing a sense of hopelessness and fatalism. This voice is used to confirm the narrative of the Congo as a land of unending, incomprehensible suffering.

A perfect example comes from *Le Point* in November 1998. In an article titled “Congo Kinshasa: la descente aux enfers” (The Descent into Hell), the magazine is building a case for the country’s utter collapse. To drive the point home, it quotes an **“éminent professeur de l’université de Kinshasa”** (an eminent professor from the University of Kinshasa). This is a man whose status is designed to give him credibility. And what does this eminent professor have to say? **“Nous sommes poursuivis par le destin. C’est une malédiction.”** (We are pursued by destiny. It is a curse.)

This is a remarkable quote. It is the perfect soundbite for the Savage Frame. It confirms everything the

Western reader is being primed to believe: that the war has no rational cause, that it is a supernatural event, a feature of a cursed and fatalistic land. The professor is not quoted offering a political analysis, or a historical perspective, or a strategic assessment. He is quoted offering a piece of metaphysical dread.

The journalist is not using this professor as a source; he is using him as a symbol. The professor becomes the voice of the continent itself, a voice that confesses its own irrationality, its own helplessness. The ventriloquist—the French journalist—has found the perfect dummy to speak the lines that his script requires.

The second type of curated voice is the **Voice of Validation**. This is usually an African who is quoted confirming the wisdom or necessity of Western involvement. This voice is used to support the Savior Frame, to create the impression that the West's intervention is not only necessary, but welcomed.

In the same 1998 article in *Le Point* about the Franco-African summit, the magazine is keen to portray the French as effective, if reluctant, peacemakers. To support this narrative, it quotes an anonymous **“responsable français”** (a French official) who speaks of the danger of the war. But the real work of validation is done through the overall framing of the event as a success for French diplomacy, a moment where the wise old powers of Europe were able to bring a measure of order to the squabbling Africans.

A more subtle example comes from *The Economist* in

February 2000. An article about popular sentiment in the eastern Congolese city of Bukavu quotes a local cleric explaining the population's reluctant support for Laurent Kabila: "We may have reservations about Kabila, but he is the voice of national unity at the moment and that is what counts." The quote is then immediately followed by a reference to the Catholic archbishop, who has called for a campaign of peaceful resistance against the "occupation and domination" of the Rwandan-backed rebels.

On the surface, this looks like balanced reporting. But look closer. The voices quoted are not political or military leaders. They are religious figures, moral authorities. They are not talking about strategy; they are talking about unity and resistance. And their voices are being used to frame the conflict in a way that is convenient for the Western narrative.

The story is not about the complex political choices facing the people of Bukavu; it is a simple morality play about national unity versus foreign occupation. And in this play, the implicit question is always: who will come and rescue these good, moral people from their terrible predicament? The answer, as we saw in the last chapter, is always the West.

This is the art of journalistic ventriloquism. You find a voice that seems authentic, you carefully select a quote that fits your pre-existing narrative, and you place it in your story as proof that you are not just imposing your own view on the situation.

You are simply reporting what the locals them-

selves are saying. But it is a deeply dishonest practice. It is the illusion of inclusion, a performance of listening that is, in reality, just another form of monologue. The dummies are speaking, but the voice is always the same.

THE AUTHORITY OF THE OUTSIDER: WHO GETS TO BE AN EXPERT?

If the voices of the African actors are silenced, and the voices of ordinary Africans are curated to fit a pre-written script, then who is left to provide the authoritative analysis? Who is the expert in this story? The answer, in the world of Western journalism, is almost always another Westerner.

In the coverage of the Congo War, the primary sources of rational analysis, of credible information, of expert opinion, are consistently Western diplomats, Western aid workers, Western academics, and, of course, the Western journalists themselves. It is a closed circle of expertise, a conversation that the West has with itself, about Africa.

When *The Economist* wants to explain the military situation, it does not quote a Congolese or Rwandan general. It quotes a “senior UN representative” or “western diplomats and analysts.” When *Le Point* wants to assess the political dynamics, it does not quote a Congolese political scientist or a historian from the region. It quotes a “diplomat” in Kinshasa or a “responsable français” in Paris.

This practice creates a clear intellectual hierarchy. The African is the source of the raw data of suffering: the anonymous victim, the witness to the massacre, the voice of despair. They are the objects of the story. The Westerner, on the other hand, is the source of knowledge, of analysis, of meaning. They are the subjects of the story, the ones who can make sense of the chaos.

This is a direct and unbroken continuation of the colonial project. The colonial enterprise was, at its heart, a project of knowledge. The West did not just conquer Africa; it studied it, classified it, mapped it, and wrote its history.

The colonial administrator, the anthropologist, the missionary—they were the experts. The African was the informant, the specimen, the object of study. The idea that an African might be an expert on their own reality, that they might possess a form of knowledge that was inaccessible to the outsider, was a contradiction in terms.

The modern journalistic practice of relying exclusively on Western experts perpetuates this intellectual hierarchy. It creates a world in which Africa is a problem to be diagnosed and solved by the West. It reinforces the idea that Africa does not produce knowledge; it only produces crises.

This has a devastating effect on our understanding of the world.

It means that we are only ever getting one side of the story. We are seeing the conflict through the eyes of the diplomat, whose perspective is shaped by the inter-

ests of his own government. We are seeing it through the eyes of the aid worker, whose perspective is rightly focused on the immediate humanitarian crisis, but who may not have a deep understanding of the political history. We are seeing it through the eyes of the journalist, whose perspective is shaped by the narrative conventions of his own profession and the cultural biases of his own society.

What we are not seeing is the conflict through the eyes of the people who have spent their entire lives navigating its complexities. We are not hearing from the Congolese historian who can trace the roots of the conflict back to the Belgian colonial policy of divide and rule. We are not hearing from the Rwandan strategist who can explain the security dilemma that drove his country to invade. We are not hearing from the Ugandan economist who can detail the intricate web of corporate and military interests that are profiting from the war.

These voices exist. There is a vast and vibrant intellectual and political life on the African continent. There are universities, think tanks, newspapers, and television stations. There are experts who have dedicated their lives to understanding the politics of their own region. But in the world of mainstream Western journalism, they might as well not exist. They are outside the frame. They are not part of the story.

The story, in the end, is a conversation between a Western journalist and his Western sources, for a Western audience. It is a story that is hermetically

sealed from the reality it claims to be describing. And it is a story that, because of its monopoly on the global narrative, becomes the official truth.

THE PRICE OF SILENCE

The systematic silencing of a continent is not a victimless crime. It has real, tangible, and devastating consequences.

First, **it makes a true understanding of the conflict impossible.** When you only hear one side of the story, you are not getting a story at all; you are getting propaganda. The silencing of African voices means that our understanding of the Congo War is permanently impoverished. We are left with the simplistic, distorted, and deeply misleading narratives of the colonial playbook. We are left with a story of savage tribes and helpless victims, a story that has no room for the complex realities of politics, economics, and history. And when we do not understand a problem, we are incapable of contributing to its solution.

Second, **it leads to flawed and paternalistic policy.** The governments in Washington, London, and Paris do not make their decisions in a vacuum. They are influenced by the information and the narratives that are provided to them by the media. When the media tells them that a conflict is an incomprehensible tribal bloodbath, and that the only solution is Western intervention, it creates a powerful pressure to act on that narrative. This leads to policies that are often discon-

nected from the reality on the ground, policies that ignore local complexities and dismiss African-led solutions. It leads to the kind of top-down, paternalistic interventions that we saw in the last chapter, interventions that often do more harm than good, and that reinforce the very cycle of dependency they claim to be breaking.

Third, and most profoundly, **it is an act of dehumanization**. To deny someone their voice is to deny them their agency, their complexity, their full humanity. It is to turn them from a subject into an object, from a person into a problem. The story of the Congo War, as told by the Western press, is a story in which the humanity of the Congolese people is systematically erased. They are not the authors of their own destiny; they are the passive victims of a cursed land. They are not the subjects of their own history; they are the objects of our pity.

This is the ultimate function of the Silent Continent frame. It is the final and most crucial act in the colonial playbook. It is the act that allows the West to maintain its position of moral and intellectual superiority. It is the act that allows us to look at the immense tragedy of the Congo and see not a reflection of a shared and troubled history, but a confirmation of our own enlightened and benevolent place in the world.

The power to tell the story is the power to shape the world. For over a century, the West has held a near-monopoly on the power to tell the story of Africa. The result has been a narrative that is not only false, but

deeply damaging. It is a narrative that has trapped both the teller and the subject in a prison of old myths and destructive fantasies. The first step towards breaking free from that prison is to recognize that it exists. The next step is to do something that the journalists in our story so rarely did: to stop talking, and to start, finally, to listen.

CHAPTER 6

THE REAL-WORLD CONSEQUENCES

In the spring of 2003, as the Second Congo War entered its final, sputtering phase, a French-led military force, backed by a United Nations mandate, descended into the town of Bunia in the Congo's northeastern Ituri province. They called it Operation Artemis. On paper, their mission was a noble one: to stabilize a region that had been torn apart by horrific violence between ethnic militias and to protect civilians from further massacres. To the television cameras and the newspaper reporters who covered their deployment, they were the very picture of the modern rescuer: professional, well-equipped, and morally resolute. They were the answer to the question posed by a headline in *The Economist* just a few weeks earlier: "Waiting to be rescued."

But on the ground, a different story was unfolding. The French soldiers, for all their professionalism, were

entering a political labyrinth they barely understood. Their intervention, celebrated in the West as a decisive humanitarian act, was seen by many in the region as just another move in a complex geopolitical chess game, a move that tilted the balance of power in favor of some local factions and against others. The very act of “rescue” was, in itself, a political act, one with unforeseen and often tragic consequences. The militias did not simply lay down their arms; they melted back into the forest, adapted their strategies, and waited. The violence, though temporarily suppressed in the town center, continued to fester in the surrounding hills. The rescue, it turned in, was not a conclusion. It was just another chapter in a story whose beginning and end were nowhere in sight.

This is the moment where the story we tell about the world collides with the world itself. It is the moment where the neat, compelling narrative of the news report dissolves into the messy, contradictory reality of human affairs. The stories we have been examining in this book—the stories of an “erupted” continent, of “savage” tribes, of a people “waiting to be rescued”—are not just words on a page. They are architectural blueprints. They design the world we inhabit. They shape the limits of our empathy, they guide the hands of our policymakers, and they build the very structures of the global economy. They have real, tangible, and often devastating consequences.

This chapter is about those consequences. It is an answer to the most important question of all: So what?

Why does it matter that a journalist in London chose to use the word “eruption” instead of “invasion,” or that an editor in Paris decided to frame a political leader as a “village chief”? It matters because these choices are not made in a vacuum. They are keystrokes in a global operating system, pieces of code that help to run the world. And the code we have been examining is riddled with bugs, with ghosts from a colonial past that cause the system to malfunction in predictable and catastrophic ways. We will trace the path of these narrative bugs as they travel from the newsroom to the corridors of power, from the living rooms of the West to the villages of the Congo. We will see how they build the very architecture of our global indifference, how they design the flawed and paternalistic policies of our governments, and how they provide the moral scaffolding for a system of global economic inequality that is, in the end, the engine of the very conflicts they claim to be describing.

THE ARCHITECTURE OF APATHY: HOW TO WATCH A GENOCIDE AND FEEL NOTHING

The first and most immediate consequence of the colonial playbook is the creation of a profound and durable public apathy. Apathy is not a natural state. It is a manufactured one. It is the product of a story that tells us that a problem is insoluble, that its victims are incomprehensible, and that its causes are beyond our

control. The Naturalization Frame and the Savage Frame are, together, a perfectly calibrated machine for producing this state of mind.

Consider the psychological difference between two stories. In the first story, a city is destroyed by a rival army as part of a calculated campaign of ethnic cleansing. The act is driven by a clear political ideology, led by identifiable villains, and aimed at a specific, achievable goal. This story—the story of Srebrenica—is a call to action. It provokes outrage, it demands justice, it forces us to ask ourselves what we are going to do about it. It is a political problem.

In the second story, a country “erupts” into a “deluge of blood.” The violence is a “tempest of tribal killing,” a “bloody-go-round” with no beginning and no end. The leaders are irrational, the motives are obscure, and the suffering is presented as a permanent feature of the landscape. This story—the story of the Congo—is a call to resignation. It does not provoke outrage; it provokes a weary sigh. It does not demand justice; it elicits a vague and fleeting sense of pity. It does not ask us what we are going to do about it; it tells us that there is nothing to be done. It is not a political problem; it is a natural disaster.

This is the difference between watching a documentary about a preventable industrial accident and watching a nature documentary about a tsunami. The first makes us angry and demands that we change the system. The second makes us sad and reminds us of the awesome and arbitrary power of nature. The reporting

on the Congo consistently framed the war as a tsunami.

The result was a historic disconnect between the scale of the tragedy and the scale of the public response in the West. The Congo War was, by a wide margin, the deadliest conflict on earth during the years it was fought. The estimated 5.4 million excess deaths—a number that is almost impossible to comprehend—is roughly equivalent to the entire population of Denmark or Scotland. It is a number that dwarfs the death tolls of the more highly publicized conflicts in Bosnia, Kosovo, and even the Rwandan genocide. And yet, during those years, the Congo War barely registered on the consciousness of the Western public. There were no mass demonstrations in London or New York, no celebrity-led campaigns demanding action, no sustained, front-page media attention. The greatest humanitarian crisis of our generation unfolded in a state of near-invisibility.

This was not an accident. It was the direct result of the stories we were told. The journalistic frames were the anesthetic that allowed us to witness a catastrophe of this magnitude without feeling the full pain. They gave us permission to look away. They built, brick by brick, an architecture of apathy.

This apathy is not just a moral failure; it is a political one. In a democracy, public opinion matters. It is the currency of political will. When the public is apathetic about a crisis, governments are free to ignore it. They are under no pressure to expend diplomatic

capital, to risk the lives of their soldiers, or to challenge the powerful corporate interests that may be profiting from the conflict. The media's failure to tell a coherent, political story about the Congo was a direct cause of the West's political failure to act decisively to end it.

The "CNN effect" is a term that was coined in the 1990s to describe the power of 24-hour news coverage to put pressure on governments to intervene in humanitarian crises. The images of starving children in Somalia or shelled civilians in Sarajevo, it was argued, could force the hand of even the most reluctant president. But the Congo War reveals the existence of a "CNN effect in reverse." When the coverage is not sustained, when it is framed as incomprehensible, when it reinforces the idea that the problem is insoluble, it can actually have the opposite effect. It can create a sense of fatigue and fatalism, providing political leaders with the cover they need to do nothing.

The stories in *The Economist* and *Le Point* were not just reporting on the world's indifference; they were actively producing it. They were telling their influential readers—the very people who shape policy and public opinion—that the Congo was a lost cause, a place beyond the reach of reason and politics. And in doing so, they helped to make that prophecy come true.

THE POLICY OF PITY: THE MISGUIDED LOGIC OF THE RESCUE

When a government does decide to act, the story it has been told by the media will profoundly shape the nature of its action. A policy is, in essence, a story that a government tells itself about a problem. If the story is wrong, the policy will be wrong. The colonial playbook, and especially the Savior Frame, provided Western policymakers with a story about the Congo that was not just wrong, but dangerously so. It was a story that led directly to a policy of pity—a set of responses that were paternalistic, short-sighted, and ultimately, ineffective.

The Savior Frame, as we have seen, works by systematically delegitimizing African agency and positioning the West as the only credible actor. When policymakers in Washington, Paris, and London read that African leaders are “tricky and obdurate,” that their peace processes are a “charade,” and that the people of the Congo are “waiting to be rescued,” it provides them with a clear, if flawed, policy directive.

The first consequence of this directive is a **preference for top-down, Western-led interventions over the support of local, African-led solutions**. If you believe that the locals are incompetent, you will naturally conclude that you need to take charge. This leads to a situation like Operation Artemis in Bunia, where a European military force is sent in to impose order,

bypassing the complex and difficult work of supporting the ongoing, African-led peace process.

This kind of intervention may look good on television, and it may provide a temporary solution to an immediate crisis. But it is a political sugar high. It does nothing to address the underlying political drivers of the conflict. It often undermines the very local institutions—the governments, the armies, the civil society groups—that are essential for long-term peace. It reinforces a cycle of dependency, in which African nations are taught that their problems will only be solved when the international cavalry arrives. It is, in short, a policy that is designed to fail in the long run, because it is based on a story that fundamentally misunderstands the nature of the problem.

The second, and perhaps more pervasive, consequence of the Savior Frame is the **prioritization of humanitarian aid over political action**. When a war is framed as a natural disaster, the logical response is disaster relief. You send in the UN agencies and the international NGOs to distribute food, to set up refugee camps, to provide medical care. This work is, of course, absolutely vital. It saves lives. But it is not a substitute for a political strategy.

Humanitarian aid treats the symptoms of the conflict. It does not, and cannot, cure the disease. The disease of the Congo War was political: it was a struggle for power, for resources, for security. The cure had to be political as well. It had to involve a negotiated settlement between the warring parties, a plan for

disarmament, a strategy for building a functioning state, and a system for managing the country's vast mineral wealth.

But the stories told by the Western press actively discouraged this kind of political engagement. By framing the conflict as an incomprehensible bloodbath, they made the hard work of politics seem futile. It is much easier, and much less politically risky, to write a check to the World Food Programme than it is to appoint a high-level special envoy to mediate a peace deal, or to impose sanctions on the corporations that are fueling the war.

The policy of pity is a policy of the lowest common denominator. It allows Western governments to look like they are "doing something" about the crisis, without ever having to make the difficult political choices that would be necessary to actually solve it. It is a policy that is perfectly aligned with the architecture of apathy we examined in the last section. It is a way of managing our collective conscience, of salving our pity, without ever having to engage with the messy, difficult, and deeply political reality of the war. It is a policy that is designed to make us feel better, but it is not a policy that is designed to make peace.

THE ECONOMICS OF OTHERING: THE MORAL SMOKESCREEN FOR A GLOBAL CRIME

The final, and most profound, consequence of the colonial playbook is the way it provides a moral and intellectual smokescreen for a system of global economic exploitation. This is where all the frames we have been examining—the Naturalization Frame, the Savage Frame, the Savior Frame, and the Silencing of Voices—come together to perform their most important and most destructive work. They create a world in which the theft of a continent's wealth can be made to look like business as usual.

The Congo is not a poor country. It is, in terms of natural resources, one of the richest countries on earth. Its soil contains a staggering wealth of cobalt, copper, diamonds, gold, and coltan—the metallic ore that is a vital component in the capacitors that run our mobile phones, our laptops, our gaming consoles. The global demand for these resources is insatiable. And for the past century, the story of the Congo has been the story of the violent and systematic extraction of this wealth by outside powers.

The Second Congo War was, in many ways, the culmination of this story. It was a resource war. The armies of Rwanda, Uganda, and Zimbabwe, along with a host of other militias, did not just fight over territory; they fought for control of the mines. A 2002 United Nations report on the illegal exploitation of

natural resources in the Congo detailed a vast and sophisticated network of plunder, a system in which high-ranking military officials, international corporations, and arms dealers worked together to strip the country of its wealth. The war was not just a byproduct of chaos; the chaos was, in many cases, a deliberate business strategy, a means of creating the lawless environment in which the looting could continue unimpeded.

This is the real story of the Congo War. It is a story about the intersection of global capitalism, modern warfare, and the long shadow of colonial history. But this is not the story that was told. The journalistic frames we have been examining worked together to create a powerful alibi, a narrative that obscured this economic reality and replaced it with a more comforting, and more racist, myth.

The Savage Frame was the key to this alibi. By portraying the conflict as a “tribal war” fueled by “ancient hatreds,” the reporting disconnected the violence from its economic engine. The looting of the mines was presented as a symptom of the savagery, a chaotic free-for-all that was the natural byproduct of the breakdown of law and order. It was a “scramble for loot,” as *The Economist* put it, not a systematic, corporate-military enterprise.

This narrative inversion is crucial. It flips cause and effect. It tells us that the country’s wealth is being stolen because the people are savage and chaotic. It hides the much more disturbing truth: that the people

are being forced to live in a state of chaos and savagery, in part, so that their wealth can be stolen more easily.

The silencing of African voices was essential to maintaining this fiction. If the journalists had quoted the Congolese economists who had studied the conflict minerals trade, or the local activists who were trying to expose the complicity of international corporations, the simplistic narrative of tribal savagery would have collapsed. The story would have become much more complicated, and much more uncomfortable. It would have become a story not just about them, but about us.

It would have become a story about the phone in our pocket.

The colonial playbook, in the end, is a powerful tool for what we might call moral and economic laundering. It takes the blood-drenched resources of the Congo and washes them clean. It runs them through a narrative machine that strips them of their history of violence and exploitation, and allows them to enter the global marketplace as clean, neutral commodities. It allows us, the consumers at the end of this long and brutal supply chain, to use our products without having to confront the human cost of their production.

This is the ultimate real-world consequence of the stories we tell. They are not just stories. They are a vital component of the global economic system. They are the ideological software that allows a system of profound inequality and exploitation to function, not just efficiently, but with a clean conscience. The Savage Frame is not just a journalistic trope; it is a business model.

And it is a model that has been, for the people of the Congo, a catastrophe.

THE VERDICT OF HISTORY

Stories are not innocent. They are the tools we use to make sense of the world, and in doing so, to make the world. The story that the Western media told about the Congo War was a powerful one. It was a story of chaos, of savagery, of helplessness, of the noble burden of the West. It was a story that was deeply familiar, deeply comforting, and deeply false.

And it was a story that had consequences. It built an architecture of apathy that allowed the world to look away from the deadliest conflict of our time. It designed a policy of pity that treated the symptoms of the war while ignoring its causes, reinforcing a cycle of dependency and paternalism. And it provided a moral smokescreen for a global economic crime, laundering the proceeds of a resource war and allowing the system of exploitation to continue, uninterrupted.

These are not abstract consequences. They are measured in human lives. They are measured in the 5.4 million people who died while the world was telling itself a convenient story. They are measured in the generations of Congolese who will continue to live with the legacy of a war that was not only fought with guns and machetes, but with words and with narratives.

The colonial playbook is not a relic of the past. It is a living, breathing force in our world. It is a ghost in the

machine of our global consciousness. And it is a ghost that has real blood on its hands. The verdict of history will not be kind to the storytellers who, when faced with a tragedy of this magnitude, chose to reach for the oldest and most destructive myths in their arsenal. The question that remains for us is whether we are willing, finally, to write a new story.

CHAPTER 7

BREAKING THE FRAME

For six chapters, we have been inside a ghost story. We have explored the dark corridors of a narrative machine built a century ago, a machine designed to produce a particular kind of story about Africa—a story of chaos, of savagery, of helplessness. We have seen how this machine, this colonial playbook, whirled to life during the Congo War, humming in the background of some of the West's most respected newsrooms, its gears turning the raw material of human tragedy into a familiar and deeply distorted fable. We have traced the real-world consequences of this story, from the architecture of public apathy to the flawed and paternalistic policies that have left a legacy of failure.

It is a bleak picture. And if this were the end of the story, it would be a profoundly pessimistic one. It would leave us with a sense of paralysis, a feeling that

we are all just cogs in a machine, prisoners of a history we cannot escape. But that is not the end of the story. Because a machine, once you understand how it works, can be broken. A ghost, once you see it, loses much of its power. A frame, once it is made visible, can be shattered.

This final chapter is not an epilogue of despair. It is a handbook for a different kind of future. It is a chapter about agency—not just the agency of the people on the African continent who are telling their own stories, but our agency, as readers, as consumers of news, as citizens of a connected world. The colonial playbook is not an immutable law of nature. It is a set of bad habits, a collection of lazy narrative shortcuts, a failure of imagination. And habits can be broken, shortcuts can be avoided, and imaginations can be expanded.

Breaking the frame is not a simple task. It requires a conscious and sustained effort from all sides of the news equation. It requires a new kind of media literacy from us, the audience. It requires a new kind of courage and creativity from journalists and the institutions they work for. And it requires, above all, a fundamental shift in power—a passing of the microphone to the people who have been silenced for too long. This is not a chapter about tearing down; it is a chapter about building up. It is about how we, together, can exorcise the ghost from the machine and begin, finally, to tell a truer story about our world.

PART I: THE READER'S TOOLKIT: HOW TO SPOT A GHOST

The colonial playbook thrives in the dark. It operates on the level of unconscious assumption, of the taken-for-granted. Its power lies in its invisibility. The first and most crucial step in breaking the frame, therefore, is to make it visible. It is to develop a new kind of critical awareness, a sort of narrative x-ray vision that allows us to see the skeleton of the story beneath the skin of the words.

What follows is a reader's toolkit, a set of diagnostic questions you can apply to any news story you read about Africa, or indeed, about any conflict in the non-Western world. Think of these as the tell-tale signs of a haunting, the creaks in the floorboards that let you know a ghost is in the room.

1. The Agency Gap: Who Does Things in This Story?

The single most powerful indicator of the colonial playbook is what we might call the "agency gap." Agency is the capacity to act, to make decisions, to be the cause of events rather than just the object of them. In a well-reported story, agency is distributed among the various actors. But in a story haunted by the ghost of empire, agency is almost exclusively reserved for Westerners.

So, the first question to ask yourself is: **Who gets to be the subject of the verbs in this story?**

Read a news report and mentally underline the

active verbs: “negotiates,” “decides,” “strategizes,” “builds,” “demands,” “leads.” Now, look at who is attached to those verbs. Are they Western diplomats, UN officials, NGO workers, and foreign governments? And are the African actors attached to a different set of verbs: “suffer,” “flee,” “die,” “wait,” “receive aid”?

This is the agency gap in action. It’s a subtle but powerful grammatical trick that divides the world into two kinds of people: those who act, and those who are acted upon. When you read that “the UN has warned of a possible genocide” while “tens of thousands are fleeing into the hills,” you are seeing this gap. The UN is the active agent, the one who warns, who analyzes, who frames the situation. The Congolese are the passive objects, a faceless mass defined only by their suffering.

A better story, a truer story, would distribute the agency. It would tell us not just that people are fleeing, but *why* they are fleeing. Are they making a strategic decision to escape an advancing army? Are they following a community leader? What are their plans? It would tell us not just that the UN is warning of a genocide, but that Congolese human rights activists have been warning of it for months, that local leaders are trying to negotiate a truce, that community elders are organizing self-defense militias. It would, in short, treat the people on the ground as rational actors, as the subjects of their own lives, not just the objects of our pity.

2. The Expert Problem: Whose Knowledge Counts?

As we saw in the last chapter, the colonial playbook creates a clear intellectual hierarchy. Westerners are the source of analysis and meaning; Africans are the source of raw, emotional testimony. The second question to ask yourself, then, is: **Who is quoted as an expert in this story?**

Scan the article for the voices of authority. Who are the people brought in to explain the “big picture”? Are they “Western diplomats,” “analysts in London,” “UN officials,” or professors at European and American universities? And are the only Africans quoted anonymous, one-dimensional figures—the “Voice of Despair” or the “grateful aid recipient”?

If the answer is yes, you are in the presence of the ghost. This is the intellectual equivalent of the agency gap. It is a system that launders knowledge, taking the lived experience and deep understanding of local experts and treating it as less valid, less objective, than the perspective of an outsider in a suit.

A story that has broken the frame will look different. It will be filled with the voices of Congolese political scientists, Rwandan military analysts, Ugandan economists, and local journalists. It will treat them not as sources of local color, but as genuine experts whose knowledge is essential to understanding the story. It will recognize that a professor at the University of Kinshasa might, just possibly, know more about the politics of the Congo than a think-tank analyst in

Washington D.C. It will, in short, decolonize its Rolodex.

3. The Context Deficit: Does This Story Have a Past?

The colonial playbook loves a story that seems to come from nowhere. As we've seen, the Naturalization Frame and the Savage Frame both work by stripping a conflict of its history, by presenting it as a timeless, eternal cycle of violence. The third question to ask, therefore, is: **Does this story have a history, or does it just have a dateline?**

Look at how the story is introduced. Does it begin with the latest atrocity, the most recent battle, the newest refugee crisis? Or does it take the time to provide the essential historical context that would allow the reader to understand *why* these events are happening?

A story suffering from a context deficit will be filled with what we might call “zombie concepts”—ideas that are presented without any explanation of their origin. The conflict between the Hema and the Lendu in the Ituri region, for example, is almost always described as an “ancient tribal hatred.” A story that breaks the frame would explain that this hatred is not, in fact, ancient at all. It would tell the reader that the Belgian colonial administration systematically favored the Hema, giving them access to education and power, and that this policy of divide and rule laid the groundwork for the conflicts of today. It would explain that the post-colonial state continued these patterns of

marginalization, and that the recent war provided an opportunity for regional powers and local warlords to arm these groups and exploit these historical grievances for their own political and economic gain.

That is a more complicated story. It takes more time to tell. But it is the true story. A story without a past is a myth. And the news from Africa is full of myths. The context deficit is a red flag that tells you that you are reading a piece of mythology, not a piece of journalism.

4. The Conrad Test: Is This a Story About Politics or a Story About a Nightmare?

The final and most atmospheric test is what we might call the Conrad Test. As we saw in Chapter 3, the ghost of Joseph Conrad haunts the Western imagination of the Congo. His novel provided a powerful and enduring script for framing the region as a place of metaphysical horror, a symbol of the darkness within the human soul. The fourth question to ask is: **Is this story trying to explain a political situation, or is it trying to give me a spooky feeling?**

Pay attention to the adjectives and metaphors. Is the war a “descent into hell,” a “quagmire,” a “vortex of chaos”? Are the militias a “mutating horde”? Is the landscape itself portrayed as a malevolent actor, a “vast, roadless forest” that seems to swallow people whole?

This is the language of gothic horror, not of political reporting. It is a language designed to evoke an emotional response—fear, dread, a sense of overwhelming confusion—rather than an intellectual one.

It is a language that aestheticizes violence, turning a real human tragedy into a thrilling and terrifying spectacle.

A story that breaks the frame will resist this temptation. It will be precise. It will be clinical. It will describe the violence, but it will do so in a way that is connected to a clear political and military logic. It will tell you not just that a massacre happened, but who ordered it, and why. It will focus not on the atmosphere of the jungle, but on the strategy of the generals. It will, in short, treat the war as a war, not as a nightmare.

These four tools—the Agency Gap, the Expert Problem, the Context Deficit, and the Conrad Test—are not a foolproof system. But they are a start. They are a way of training ourselves to see the invisible architecture of the stories we consume. They are a way of turning ourselves from passive consumers of news into active, critical readers. They are the first step in breaking the frame.

PART II: GLIMMERS OF LIGHT: THE JOURNALISM OF THE POSSIBLE

It is easy to criticize. It is much harder to build. And if this book were only a critique of what has gone wrong, it would be a profoundly unsatisfying one. But the good news is that the colonial playbook is not the only way to tell a story. There are journalists and news organizations around the world who are actively working to break the frame, to tell a different kind of story about

Africa—a story that is more complex, more nuanced, and more true.

These glimmers of light are not always easy to find. They often exist on the margins of the mainstream media, in independent publications, in documentary films, in the work of local journalists who are telling the stories of their own communities. But they exist. And by examining what they do differently, we can begin to see a blueprint for a better kind of journalism.

One of the most powerful examples of frame-breaking journalism in recent years has been the work of the Congolese filmmaker and journalist, **Milo Rau**. His 2017 film, *The Congo Tribunal*, is a radical act of narrative defiance. The film does not try to tell the story of the Congo War itself. Instead, it stages a symbolic public tribunal in the eastern Congo, bringing together victims, perpetrators, government officials, and international experts to testify about the causes and consequences of the war.

The film breaks the frame in several crucial ways. First, **it passes the microphone**. The primary speakers in the film are not Western journalists or diplomats; they are the Congolese themselves. We hear from a former child soldier, a mother whose family was massacred, a government minister, a local warlord. They are given the time and the space to tell their stories in their own words, in all their complexity and contradiction. The film shatters the illusion of the Silent Continent.

Second, **it relentlessly politicizes the conflict**.

The tribunal does not accept the easy narrative of tribal savagery. Instead, it follows the money. It traces the lines of connection between the violence on the ground and the boardrooms of multinational corporations in Europe and North America. It puts the global trade in conflict minerals on trial. It refuses to let the international community off the hook. It insists that this is not just an African tragedy; it is a global crime.

Finally, **it embraces complexity**. The film does not offer easy answers or simple villains. The perpetrators are often also victims. The lines between good and evil are blurred. The film does not try to resolve these contradictions; it presents them as the very essence of the conflict. It trusts the audience to be able to hold multiple, competing truths in their minds at the same time. It treats the viewer not as a consumer of spectacle, but as a member of a jury, tasked with the difficult work of listening, of weighing evidence, of trying to understand.

Another powerful example can be found in the work of the Kenyan writer and journalist, **Patrick Gathara**. In his columns for Al Jazeera and other publications, Gathara has made a career out of deconstructing the colonial gaze of the Western media. He is a master of spotting the ghost in the machine. In his analysis of the coverage of the 2013 Westgate Mall attack in Nairobi, for example, he pointed out how the international media consistently centered the story on the handful of Western victims, while treating the Kenyan victims as a faceless backdrop.

Gathara's work is a model of what we might call **"meta-journalism."** He does not just report the story; he reports on how the story is being reported. He makes the frame itself the subject of his investigation. This is a vital and necessary task. It is a form of journalistic self-correction, a way of holding the media to account for its own biases and blind spots.

A third example comes from the world of collaborative, data-driven journalism. Projects like the **Pulitzer Center's Congo River Basin Rainforest Journalism Fund** are pioneering a new model of reporting. Instead of sending a lone Western correspondent on a short trip to a crisis zone, they fund and support teams of local and international journalists to work together on long-term, in-depth investigations.

This model breaks the frame by its very structure. It challenges the hierarchy of knowledge that places the Western journalist at the top. It fosters a genuine collaboration between insiders and outsiders. And it allows for the kind of deep, patient, and context-rich reporting that is impossible to do on a tight deadline. The stories that emerge from these collaborations are often about the slow, complex issues that are the real drivers of conflict: land rights, climate change, government corruption, the legacy of colonial borders. They are not the sensational stories of the Savage Frame, but they are the stories that matter.

These examples—the filmmaker who passes the microphone, the columnist who deconstructs the frame, the collaborative project that redefines the very

process of reporting—are not isolated incidents. They are part of a growing movement, a global effort to decolonize the news. They show us that a different kind of journalism is possible. They provide a blueprint for a future in which the story of Africa is told not as a myth, but as a human story, in all its complexity, its tragedy, and its hope.

PART III: THE NEW PLAYBOOK: A CALL FOR A JOURNALISM OF HUMILITY

Breaking the frame is not just a matter of individual choice. It is not enough for us, as readers, to become more critical, or for a few heroic journalists to produce better work. The colonial playbook is not just a set of bad ideas; it is a system. It is embedded in the very structure of the global media industry: in the way newsrooms are staffed, in the way budgets are allocated, in the way success is measured. To truly exorcise the ghost, we need to change the machine itself.

What would a decolonized journalism look like? What would be the rules of a new playbook, a playbook designed not to reinforce old hierarchies, but to build a more just and accurate understanding of our world? It would be a journalism founded on a single, radical principle: **humility**.

It would be a journalism that begins from the humble admission that the view from London, Paris, Brussels, or New York is not the view from everywhere. It would be a journalism that approaches the world not

with the arrogance of the expert, but with the curiosity of the student. It would be a journalism that understands that its primary role is not to speak, but to listen.

From this principle of humility, a new playbook would emerge, with at least three core rules.

Rule #1: Hire the World.

A newsroom that is overwhelmingly white and Western will, inevitably, produce a view of the world that is white and Western. The single most important structural change that media organizations can make is to hire journalists who reflect the diversity of the world they are covering. This does not just mean hiring more journalists of color in Western newsrooms. It means fundamentally shifting the center of gravity of the news industry. It means investing in and empowering local journalists and news organizations across the African continent. It means treating a journalist from Nairobi or Kinshasa not as a “fixer” or a “stringer,” but as a full and equal colleague. It means recognizing that the most important stories about Africa will be told by Africans, and that the role of the Western media is to amplify and support those stories, not to supplant them.

Rule #2: Report the System, Not Just the Symptom.

The colonial playbook loves a crisis. It is a journalism of the spectacular, of the explosion, of the massacre. A decolonized journalism would be less interested in the symptom and more interested in the system. It would understand that a war is not an event

that comes from nowhere; it is the product of a long and complex history, of a set of political and economic structures. This means investing in a different kind of reporting. It means less time spent chasing the latest battle and more time spent investigating the arms deals that make the battle possible. It means less focus on the spectacle of the refugee camp and more focus on the global supply chains that are driving the displacement. It means, in short, treating a conflict not as a moment of chaos, but as the logical outcome of a system. This is harder work. It is less glamorous. It does not produce easy headlines. But it is the only way to tell the true story.

Rule #3: Embrace Complexity, Reject the Simple Story.

The colonial playbook is a machine for producing simple stories. It turns a complex world into a binary one: good versus evil, civilized versus savage, rescuer versus victim. A decolonized journalism would have the courage to be complicated. It would reject the easy narrative in favor of the messy truth. It would understand that in most conflicts, there are no pure heroes and no simple villains. It would trust its audience to be able to handle ambiguity and contradiction. It would see its role not as providing easy answers, but as asking hard questions. It would, in the words of the Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, reject the danger of a single story.

This is not a utopian vision. It is a practical and achievable one. The tools, the models, and the people

to build this new kind of journalism already exist. What is missing is the will. What is missing is a recognition from the leaders of our great media institutions that the old playbook is broken, that its stories are not just inaccurate, but actively harmful, and that the moral and journalistic imperative of our time is to find a new way to tell the story of our shared and complex world.

The ghost that haunts our newsrooms is old and powerful. It has been whispering its stories in our ears for a very long time. But it is not invincible. The light of a new story, a truer story, a more human story, is beginning to dawn. And it is our job, as readers, as journalists, as citizens, to help that light to spread, to chase the old ghosts away, and to build a world where every continent, and every person, is finally allowed to tell their own story, in their own voice.

THE STORY THAT IS WAITING

We began this journey in search of a ghost. Not a specter of rattling chains and moaning halls, but a ghost far more real and far more dangerous: the ghost of empire, a phantom that haunts the very machine built in the West to tell us the story of Africa.

We have tracked its movements through the pages of some of the West's most respected newspapers and magazines. We have watched it whisper its old, familiar script into the ears of modern journalists. We have seen it at work, taking the raw, human tragedy of the Congo War and expertly re-shaping it into a story we have all read before.

It is a story that turns a political war into a natural disaster, a conflict that “erupts” like a volcano from a cursed earth. It is a story that populates this cursed land with savage characters—irrational chieftains and

tribal hordes—whose violence is as mindless and as inevitable as the changing of the seasons.

It is a story that sets a dark and terrifying stage, only to swing a spotlight onto the one character who can bring order to the chaos: the reluctant, but ultimately necessary, Western savior.

And it is a story that achieves all of this through one foundational act of narrative violence: it silences the very people it claims to be about, turning a continent of 1.4 billion people into a silent, passive backdrop for a drama the West performs for itself.

We have laid the evidence bare. We have deconstructed the playbook. But the question that remains, the question that haunts us now, is not what this ghost *is*, but what it *does*. Why does this story matter?

It matters because the narrative frames we have examined are not just journalistic curiosities; they are a narrative anesthetic. They are the drug that allows us to witness the preventable deaths of 5 million people and feel not a burning rage, but a dull, distant pity.

A story about a political failure, a corporate crime, or a geopolitical power struggle demands a response. It demands accountability. It demands action. But a story about a “descent into hell” in the “heart of darkness” demands only our sorrow and our resignation. It is a story that gives the West but also the rest of the world, and their leaders, permission to do nothing. The ghost in the machine is not just a storyteller; it is an accomplice.

This has never been an indictment of individual

journalists, many of whom risk their lives to bear witness. It is an indictment of the machine itself, of the inherited, unexamined, and deeply colonial architecture of thought that continues to shape a worldview. It is a machine that runs on the fuel of ignorance, biases, and a deeply human desire for simple, comforting stories in a complex and troubling world.

But the machine is breaking down.

The ghost, once seen, can no longer haunt us in the same way. All across the world, and especially across the African continent, a new generation of storytellers is rising. They are the ghost hunters. They are the frame breakers.

The brilliant, searing satire of Binyavanga Wainaina, whose voice we heard at the beginning of this journey, was not a lone cry in the wilderness. It was the opening salvo of a revolution.

This revolution is being waged by filmmakers like Milo Rau, who put the global economy on trial in the middle of the Congo. It is being waged by journalists like Patrick Gathara, who turn their critical gaze back on the Western media itself. It is being waged in the newsrooms of Nairobi, Lagos, and Johannesburg, in the podcasts, blogs, and documentaries of a generation that is no longer willing to have its story told for them.

The work of breaking the frame, however, does not belong to them alone. It belongs to us. We, the readers and consumers of news, are the ultimate arbiters of the stories that get told. We have the power to demand better. We now have the toolkit to see the ghost for

ourselves: to spot the agency gap, to question the expert problem, to recognize the context deficit, to resist the cheap thrill of the Conradian nightmare.

To read the news this way is not a cynical act; it is a hopeful one. It is an act of engaged and active citizenship. It is a refusal to be anesthetized. It is a demand to be told the true, complex, and human story.

This is not, in the end, just a story about the Congo, or even about Africa. The colonial playbook is the West's default setting for telling the story of any place it deems "other."

The same narrative machines that turn a Congolese war into a natural disaster are at work in the way we talk about poverty in Latin America, about religious conflict in the Middle East, about the struggles of Indigenous communities in our own backyards. The story of the savage who needs saving is the bedrock myth of the modern world. And it is a myth that has done, and continues to do, immeasurable harm. Over four decades ago, Edward Said examined the process by which the West had 'Orientalized' the Orient. By Orientalism Said referred to the collection of stereotypes, distortions, myths, and fantasies which the West has imposed in order to dominate it.

The ultimate act of breaking the frame, then, is a simple one. It is the act of humility. It is the recognition that the West's way of seeing the world is not the only way of seeing it. It is the understanding that the most important stories are often the ones not heard yet, and the most important voices are the ones that have been

systematically silenced. The ultimate act of decolonization is not a grand political gesture. It is the simple, radical act of passing the microphone.

There is another story about the Congo, another story about Africa, and our world, waiting to be told. It is a story of immense resilience, of breathtaking creativity, of complex politics, of ordinary people navigating extraordinary circumstances. It is a story that is not simple, not comforting, not easy to digest. It is a human story. And it is a story that will, if we let it, change the way we see the world.

The story is waiting. All we have to do is listen.

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3 october 1998 Congo. The cost of Kabila
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23 september 2000 In Congo, war gets serious
9 december 2000 In the heart of darkness
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- 29 août 1998 Congo la situation dégénère
- 5 septembre 1998 Pourquoi la paix se fait attendre
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- 28 novembre 1998 Congo Kinshasa : la descente aux enfers
- 28 novembre 1998 France – Afrique : le marigot congolais
- 20 mars 1999 Profil : l'homme de pierre de Kabila
- 20 août 1999 Congo, une guerre entre alliés
- 09 mars 2001 La guerre des diamants
- 16 juin 2001 Rwanda – Ouganda : le bain de sang de Kisangani
- 02 août 2002 Congo Rwanda » : un fragile accord de paix

CHRONOLOGY

July 1998

Congolese President Laurent Désiré Kabila dismisses interim chief of staff of the armed forces. Congolese armies, Rwandan General James Kabarebe, in office since taking power in 1997. This act marked the beginning of open conflict between the Congolese president and his Rwandan allies. The Rwandan general and 800 Rwandan soldiers are expelled from the DR Congo.

August 1998

A rebellion by ex-military personnel and Banyamulenges kicked off the second war. On August 1 and 2, mutinies broke out simultaneously in several cities across the country, including the capital, Kinshasa. An attack on the presidential palace failed. On August 4, Rwandan and Ugandan troops seized three airliners

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and established an airlift between eastern and western Congo. Within two weeks, two thousand Rwandan soldiers reached cities outside the capital, Kinshasa. The aim was to launch a lightning war in and around Kinshasa to overthrow the Congolese government as quickly as possible. On August 6, a Congolese rebel leader, Arthur Zahidi Ngoma, officially announced that the goal of this war was for the Congolese to overthrow President Kabila.

On August 16, a Congolese rebel movement is formed: the Congolese Rally for Democracy (RCD), which later split into several factions. At the same time, most cities in eastern Congo are held by Congolese rebels and their Rwandan and Ugandan allies. The capital, Kinshasa, was without electricity, as the rebels had seized the Inga hydroelectric dam that supplied the city.

On August 18, Zimbabwe announces its military support for the Congolese president, followed by Angola and Namibia a few days later. Troops from the three countries helped the Congolese army to push back the rebels on the western fronts, particularly around and in the capital, Kinshasa. Defeated in the West, the rebels and their allies seized Kivu and Ituri, two provinces in eastern Congo. From then on, the front line was between the western Congo, which was in the hands of the government, and the eastern part, which was in the hands of rebel groups. This division would persist until the end of the conflict.

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November 1998

The Movement for the Liberation of Congo (MLC) was born and quickly became one of the country's most prominent rebel movements. It was supported by Uganda. Its rival, the Congolese Rally for Democracy (RCD), was increasingly supported by Rwanda.

April 1999

Sirte Agreement (Libya) on the withdrawal of foreign troops present in the Congo. Only the troops from Chad would leave the DRC as a result.

July 1999

Signing of the Lusaka (Zambia) ceasefire agreement between the six regular armies in conflict

in Congo (Rwanda, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Angola, Namibia and DR Congo) and three main Congolese rebel groups. For the most part, the Lusaka agreement will not be implemented.

May-June 2000

Violent fighting in the city of Kisangani between the Rwandan and Ugandan armies. Two Previous, less serious clashes had already taken place between the two armies. Until now allies, they are opposed over the exploitation of gold mines, particularly in this region of the Congo.

January 2001

President Kabila is assassinated by members of his

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guard. His son, Major General Joseph Kabila, succeeds his father. He speaks of "liberalizing the diamond and foreign exchange markets" and "promulgating a new mining and investment code."

February 2001

A conference relaunches the peace process. Congo accepts the arrival of UN peacekeepers. On February 21, the UN Security Council passes Resolution 1291, authorizing the deployment of 5,537 peacekeepers to the Congo. The peacekeepers arrive in March.

February 2002

The opening of a peace dialogue under the auspices of South Africa. It resulted in the Pretoria Peace Accords in December 2002. It will not be respected.

October 2002

A UN report highlights the link between multinational corporations and armed groups. According to the report, the primary goal of the conflicting parties—including the government—is the appropriation of natural resources, including gold, diamonds, coltan, and timber. The UN has identified 85 companies that have violated international law. To date, no sanctions have been imposed.

April 2003

New peace agreements signed in South Africa, in Sun City. They will be respected.

CHRONOLOGY

July 2003

In accordance with the Sun City peace accords, the transitional government including all Congolese parties to the conflict are formed. This officially ends the Second Congo War.

Sources: Olivier Lanotte (2003). Democratic Republic of Congo: Wars Without Borders. Co-published by GRIP and Editions Complexe. Brussels. ; and Gérard Prunier (2009). From Genocide to Continental War. Hurst and Company. London.

DETAILED OUTLINE

Chapter 1: The Congo Erupts This chapter opens with the central paradox: why was the Second Congo War, a profoundly political event, consistently described in the language of natural disasters? It contrasts this coverage with that of the Bosnian War to starkly illustrate the different “scripts” used for European and African conflicts. This chapter reveals the hidden frame and poses the central question: where did this script come from?

Chapter 2: A Colonial Playbook Here, we take a step back in time to show that the frames used to cover the Congo War weren't new. We'll explore the original colonial discourse—the language used by administrators, missionaries, and explorers in the 19th and 20th centuries to describe Africa as a chaotic, timeless, and savage land in need of European stewardship. This

chapter establishes the historical "playbook" that modern journalists unconsciously inherit.

Chapter 3: From Conrad to The Economist This chapter dives deep into the case study, using powerful examples from dozens of articles. It will show how reporters recycled tropes of “savagery” and “chaos,” frequently and explicitly referencing *Heart of Darkness* to frame the Congo as a place of primordial horror. We’ll see how this narrative strips the conflict of all political logic, making it seem incomprehensible to a Western reader.

Chapter 4: Why Africa Always Needs Rescuing We shift focus from the problem to the proposed solution. This chapter exposes how the news coverage systematically delegitimized African-led peace efforts, portraying them as doomed to fail due to local incompetence. In their place, the narrative consistently presents Western intervention as the only rational, credible path forward, casting former colonial powers in the role of reluctant but necessary saviors.

Chapter 5: Who Gets to Tell the Story? This chapter tackles the crucial issue of voice. Who gets quoted in these stories? We’ll show the near-total absence of African actors—the leaders, soldiers, and strategists at the heart of the conflict. The narrative is monopolized by the journalist’s own analysis, supported only by

anonymous sources or Western officials, effectively rendering an entire continent voiceless in its own story.

Chapter 6: The Real-World Consequences This chapter answers the "So What?" question directly. It connects the dots between biased media frames and real-world outcomes: flawed foreign policy, misdirected humanitarian aid, public apathy, and the reinforcement of the very global inequalities that fuel such conflicts. This chapter makes it clear that these aren't just words; they have weight and consequences.

Chapter 7: Breaking the Frame The book concludes on a forward-looking note. Now that we can see the frame, what can we do? This chapter will empower the reader by providing tools for media literacy, highlighting examples of better, more nuanced journalism, and arguing for a new kind of reporting—one that finally passes the microphone and lets people tell their own stories.

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