

TRAM 83

by Fiston Mwanza Mujilla

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Reviewed by: Olatoun Williams

The afflictions of the Democratic Republic of Congo are a tragic mimicry of Imperial Europe's 'Scramble for Africa' perpetrated 'formally' in 1881 and played out unrelentingly in the Congo in its various colonial incarnations - as the Congo Free State 1885- 1908 and as the Belgian Congo 1908 - 1960. Independence, hard won, was so soon thwarted. Congo's leadership, already weakened by a lack of skills with which to steer the ship of state, chose to abandon agriculture in favour of easy riches derived from minerals excavated and traded in complicity with foreign bodies at the expense of the people. The fragile foundations of the country were shaken further by inter-tribal wars fueled by coltan profits and by the harassment of the Congolese people and mass scale looting that followed military invasions in the 1st and 2nd Congo Wars carried out by a wide variety of foreign governments. Rwanda, Zimbabwe, Angola and Namibia are only a few of the countries fighting to the death on battlefields inevitably located around resource rich areas of the Congo. What resulted was an inevitable and gradual conflation of roles: the prey, the people of the Congo, became the predators. Today, the Congolese people represent an estimated 12.5 million of those digging frantically and often illegally for a projected \$24 trillion of untapped mineral resources: diamonds, cobalt, gold, coltan, copper, and yes, oil.



Flag of Democratic Republic of Congo

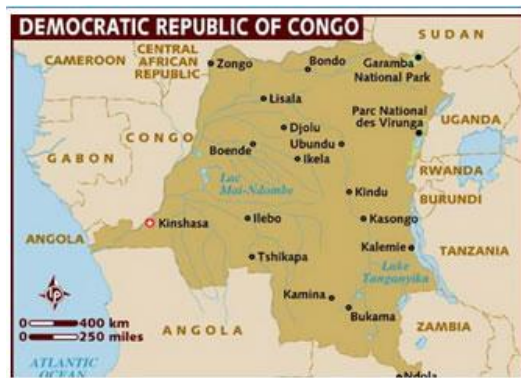
Tram 83 is Fiston Mwanza Mujilla's depiction of this modern 'predator's ball': a dazzling stage tale and mad-house rendering of the DRC at melt- down. "In the beginning, was the stone...." A metaphor for the novel's 'City-State' - an allegory of modern Congo, Tram 83 is also a physical space, a 'restaurant and hooker bar' where much of the novel's action takes place. The varied and colorful actors represent the

wide range of demographic groups that make up the Congo. Structured like a register of the polyrhythms and improvisations of jazz, the novel's hectic activity is tied together with the kind of syncopations found in dance music. It is a brilliant evocation of the music, amplified human voices and the amoral, freewheeling chaos that characterize the sprawling, post- modern African bar.



*Fiston Mwanza Mujila, Congolese author
Winner of prestigious,
Pan-African Etisalat Prize for Literature 2015*

A review by the *Nouvel Observateur* credits Mujila for inventing ‘locomotive literature’ perhaps in response to the very physical feeling of movement conveyed by his language structures which swing from prose, to poetry to play script and back again in a disorder. Mujila repeats in the numbering of the Rules of life of the dystopic City-



State. Language registers fuse, chug along, pick up speed and lunge forward, torpedoing down the rail tracks of his story. Ensuring that the sound of railways and trains and repeat mentions of ‘box car’, ‘tram’ will create in the ears of the reader the feel and sound of trains on endless roundtrips to the mines where diggers who have been warned, will excavate the death of illusions and more deadliness than saleable stones.

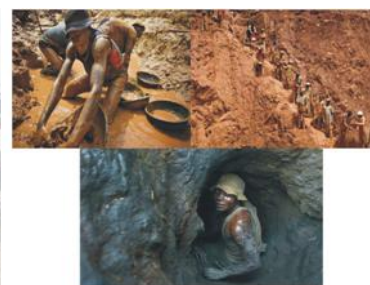
Le Monde talks of ‘touches of Hieronymus Bosch’ in Mujila’s apocalyptic novel. At first I disagreed: apart from bible chapters and verses reeled off by Tram’s hero, Lucien, to ward off every form of danger and desperado, I saw no Hieronymus Bosch. Then I looked beyond Lucien's bible listings -just a fragment of the canvas - to the whole story, and found in the whole, the biblical allegory with strong echoes of Bosch, which *Le Monde* speaks of. What Mujila has done incredibly well, is to speak and sing a vision of the judgement of the Congo.



A girl dressed for a Friday night in DRC



The Democratic Republic of Congo today



The brutish diggers displayed through bodies stiffened with radioactivity

As a performance, think an African Rocky Horror Show and the dark side of fairy tales we were told about only after our childhoods had safely passed. A scene involving a thoroughly corrupt police chief bubbling with bonhomie and a passion for

classical music, recalls Alice in Wonderland and the ghoulish side Lewis Carroll hints at in the Cheshire Cat's permanent grin and croquet playing card kings and queens shouting 'Off with her head!'.

Tram 83 boasts a stone-made economy where dogs, cats, rats are delicious, served with fried onions, and child miners and child prostitutes enjoy an asking price only a fraction less than coltan. In this world the people's moral compass is the resourcefulness needed to survive in a world where financial systems are non-existent, the government is self-serving and without agriculture, there is barely anything to eat. In this world a mirror is held up to the kind of treachery that etched so-called fairy story, Hansel and Gretel, forever in our memories.



The precious stone and coltan

Mujila's novel is an elegy to the living dead, a funeral song. How to describe the story's quality? A memorable scene takes place outside the Polygon of Hope in the dead of night. It is a moonlit frame which I see in black and white with flashes of metallic colour as in a film noir. Lucien is trapped. Behind him, the deadly mines; in front of him, a wall of huge, yellow-eyed 'chuckling dogs', on leashes, ready to leap. The dog's owners are diggers armed to the teeth with machetes and pick-axes, implacable in their intent. Like this scene, activity throughout Tram 83 appears suspended in time, calling to mind the haunting images of 'Hotel California', The Eagles' hymn to the undead.



A review by Le Nouvel Observateur credits Mujila with the invention of 'locomotive literature'

Lucien is an old university friend of Requiem, Tram's anti-hero. Time has separated them and their philosophies and life paths have radically diverged. The novel begins at the Northern Station with their reunion. It is quickly revealed that while Lucien has persevered in high-mindedness and hopes for a career as a playwright, Requiem has cast off all intellectual pretensions together with his Marxist leanings, choosing instead to face-off with the economic realities of his country. He always wins. Hated and admired throughout the City-State, he is fabled for the success of his financial escapades and for each victory, earns a codename such as: 'Man and his Destiny', 'Fancy Footwork', 'The Authorized Signatory' and 'Black Market.'

Interactions between the penniless, principled Lucien and the rich, renegade Requiem, play out like an expanded Socratic dialogue with the polyphonic voices of

the bar serving not so much as background noise but as backing vocals, and chorus to Requiem’s worldview. This world view is diametrically opposed to Lucien’s vision which is given an airing at Tram 83 - an unlikely platform for what turns out to be an hilarious book-reading hosted by Swiss publisher, Ferdinand Malingeau. Author Lucien is booed off the stage, beaten up and thrown out by the bar’s patrons in a symbolic and angry rejection of values perceived pretty much like garbage, in what, in Mujila’s own words to me, is “the joyous apocalypse which is the Congo”.

With his heart of darkness and the blood of all the world’s peoples flowing in his veins, Requiem is the libation offered by his creator, Fiston Mwanza Mujila, to the gods of globalization who in their frenzied, unremitting plunder of the Congo’s stones, callously spill the blood of the Congolese people. Named after the Catholic Mass for the dead, Vampire Town is the perfectly titled neighborhood Requiem has made his home.



LEOPOLD II OF BELGIUM



CHAINED CONGOLESE SLAVES ON A BELGIAN RUBBER PLANTATION

In the Congo Free State of 1885 - 1908, King Leopold II meted out a cruelty to the Congolese people

Lucien's alter ego, he is an African Requiem: Post-modern, thoroughly urban - without a green leaf of hope. Fantastically resourceful, 1001 aliases, he is all things to all situations; the man with the plan, the master scammer, victor, fallen angel, the Negus – the god of the Congo. A chilling representation of the DRC today, Fiston Mwanza Mujila’s debut novel, Tram 83, is ground-breaking literary art, distinguished by its dark splendour, amplified volume and its circus of crazed and abused people.



Reviewer, Olatoun Gabi-Williams