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Hemingway, Mau Mau and the End of (British) Empire

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Hemingway in Kansas City

Thirteenth International Hemingway Society Conference

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Hemingway's Early Years: War + Ink

Hemingway, Mau Mau and the End of (British) Empire

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(Paper delivered at the 13th International Hemingway Society Conference, June 13, 2008, Kansas City, MO. The paper is adapted from Guy Reynolds, *Apostles of Modernity: American Writers in the Age of Development* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008))

In this paper I want to work with some of the key global issues – modernization, decolonization, development – that preoccupied US intellectuals in the 1950s, as the country moved towards a hegemonic global position following the Second World War and, perhaps more importantly, the breaking-up of European empires. In Burdick and Lederer's *The Ugly American* (1958), Bellow's *Henderson the Rain King* (1959), and the sprawling manuscript that became *Under Kilimanjaro/True at First Light* we see fictional responses to decolonization: these authors constructed narratives that placed American protagonists in the terrain of the vanishing European. All these texts contain quite specific examples of development in action: episodes, vignettes and plots that follow the expatriate, the 'overseas American', as he brings ideas of pragmatic development to the post-European sites of Asia or Africa. For Lederer and Burdick, Bellow and Hemingway, the fiction of development is also a stage for presenting a particular figure, the robust and neo-Rooseveltian pragmatic American who will replace the settlers, colonial administrators and *fonctionnaires* of European empire.

We can see this new American globalism in books published in the late 50s and early 60s. *The Overseas Americans: A Report on Americans Abroad* was the title of a book published in 1960 by the Carnegie

Project. Carnegie had funded (from fall 1956, the date of Suez) a major Syracuse University project to examine the lives and experiences of Americans working abroad. From 1956 through to 1960 researchers compiled reports on what was patently felt to be a new turn in the relationship between America and the globe, as large numbers of U.S. citizens settled in territories that a generation before had barely registered on the national radar screen.¹ The authors – Harlan Cleveland, Gerard J. Mangone and John Clarke Adams – warned that ‘the American educational system has not yet mobilized its imagination and its resources to meet the urgent requirements that this unprecedented fact implies.’² Their work would then center on the ‘new’, that is relatively new to the American experience, countries of Asia and Africa where U.S. military, missionary and business presence was expanding.

Saul Bellow’s Henderson says at one point: ‘It was my turn now to move’: indeed, many of these 1950s texts focus on an American desire to seize the nation’s day and then ‘to move’ on the world stage. But the narrative structures of *The Ugly American*, *Henderson the Rain King* and Hemingway’s *Under Kilimanjaro* also suggest the complexities of inserting American protagonists into terrains still warm with European presence. Burdick and Lederer in *The Ugly American* opted for a highly-pragmatic, real-life series of suggestions for the overseas American; Bellow pursued an exuberantly picaresque plot whose energy embodies the desire to get into Africa, *to do things* (and ‘*I want*’ is one of Henderson’s plainspoken catch-phrases). *Under Kilimanjaro* presents another, more twisted narrative response to decolonization. In the summer of 1954 Hemingway began to write the vast, sprawling manuscript that would become the posthumous, abridged ‘Fictional Memoir’ *True at First Light* (1999) and then (in fuller transcription) *Under Kilimanjaro* (2005). For the first version, Hemingway’s son, Patrick, edited the 200,000 word manuscript to produce a text that used about 75% of the original. In editing he tried to ‘emphasize’ the love interest in the plot.³ Understandably, the son took the clearest route he could see into the thickets of his father’s work, and re-shaped the text as a binary romance where Hemingway moves between the relationships with his wife and a native African woman. Patrick Hemingway also

discussed the text as a post-colonial document, a fiction that grew out of a recognition that the white colonial presence in Africa was now at an end. 'Africa is the one continent where the European invasion of a technologically less advanced people utterly failed except in the very southern portion. And so it was very interesting for me to read this book in that light because I realized that my father understood when he was there in 1953–54, that there was no future for – for want of a better term – white people at least in equatorial Africa.'⁴

Under Kilimanjaro, the less shaped version that has recently emerged, has the inchoate feel of a book that demands the revision and narrative excision typically associated with Hemingway. Nonetheless, the narrative's posthumous publication should not obfuscate its significance. Its very range tracks a host of cultural and political motifs current in the 1950s. Hemingway's love of the hunt – particularly the safari – had serendipitously led him into one of the contested spaces of the decolonization era. This is eccentric late-Hemingway, but as with John Dos Passos's *Brazil on the Move* (1963), the final stages of a modernist career witnessed continued engagement with world politics. The text recapitulates many of Hemingway's classic motifs and stylistic tics, while addressing the new, decolonizing terrain of East Africa in the 1950s. Here are his typical discourses and subjects: a highly ritualistic, technical account of hunting; the sentimental and intermittently ironic language of marital love; the barely-fictionalized memoir of Hemingway's circle at a specific moment in time; and the tiresome bar-room humor. The manuscript is then specifically located in terms of time, place and political context. The place is Kenya, as it moves towards decolonization; effectively, after Indian independence and South Africa's Unilateral Declaration of Independence, the country would become the last major British colony in terms of status (unlike Nigeria, Kenya had a large white settler population). Hemingway's autobiographical first-person narrator moves amongst a late-colonial cast: the white hunters, colonial officials and 'boys' of the savannah. But this was also the moment of the Mau Mau 'emergency' (as it was known by the British), the complex struggle over land and white settler authority that pulled in the British government while pitting one tribe against

another. Hemingway for the most part sidesteps commentary on the insurgency or the colonial authority's brutal response.⁵ As Christopher Ondaatje (brother of the novelist, Michael Ondaatje) has recently pointed out, Hemingway's safari took place in the lands occupied by the Wakamba tribe which was largely uninvolved in Mau Mau, an organization built around the Kikuyu.⁶ Hemingway, as we shall see, had his own conceptions of indigenous identity, which usually revolved around a tribal authenticity untouched by the kinds of argument about land ownership or political enfranchisement that animated the insurgency. This seems to be a text more engaged with the legacy and mythology of white settler culture than a travel book alert to contemporary change within a late imperial order.

Contrast Hemingway's relative indifference to the significance of Mau Mau for other American commentators. Malcolm X invoked the insurgency for its resistance to white power. One biographer reports of Malcolm's speeches: "'We need a Mau Mau,'" he repeatedly asserted.⁸ On the other hand, Mau Mau could also stand for a certain 'savagism.' Mau Mau surfaced in Robert Ruark's popular 1955 novel, *Something of Value*, later made into a 1957 movie (starring Sidney Poitier and Rock Hudson), where the insurgency is turned into a parable for the Civil Rights era. Ruark, sometimes known as the 'poor man's Hemingway,' presented a brutal 'heart of darkness' model of Africa: 'To understand Africa you must understand a basic impulsive savagery that is greater than anything we "civilized" people have encountered in two centuries,' is one of the opening statements.⁷ Ruark himself played an important role in US segregationist politics. The historian Thomas Noer, in an account of 'the foreign policy of the the white resistance' in the 1960s, has noted that: 'Ruark's fiction was critical of the rapid shift to black rule, and he openly mocked the ability of Africans to govern themselves....Ruark became the white resistance's "expert on Africa," and his writings were staples of segregationist publications.'⁸

Living and working in Kenya, Hemingway was an American abroad amidst the British Empire's literal and textual spaces. Hemingway's text reads at times like a pastiche of a British late-imperial text, a

Waugh novel for instance. The mock-British drinking slang and comic figures such as the old soak, G.C. ('Gin Crazed') feature prominently. Surrounded by the accoutrements of the settlers, the booze, rifles and ironic social rituals, the narrator almost begins to 'pass' as an American white settler, an imperialized (at least in a cultural sense) Midwesterner. Intersections between *Under Kilimanjaro* and the writing of Empire are at moments starkly immediate; Patrick Hemingway refers to his father's wide reading in the literature of late-colonialism, including books by Olive Schreiner, Isaak Dinesen, Doris Lessing and D.H. Lawrence.⁹ But if the American traveler, the overseas American, enters into the zone of European colonialism, he might run the risk of becoming European. There is a subliminal anxiety about identity running through this American text from the period of decolonization – an anxiety about being seen as European or, specifically, British. It is all too easy to become generically 'Western', to lose what is uniquely or exceptionally 'American', or even to become identified with the failures and decline of European empires. If America is assuming the mantle of the hegemonic Western power, then that assumption and its very distinctive cultural idiosyncrasies might be bleached out into a dangerously generic Occidental identity. American identity might even start to lose its vaunted exceptionalism when projected outside the United States. In *The Ugly American* Burdick and Lederer focused these problems in military-diplomatic terms, and deployed French culture as a defining measure to distinguish Americans from the Old World. For Hemingway, as for a figure such as Peter Matthiessen, the American traveler-writer is shadowed by the seductive narratives of heroic British exploration. Matthiessen, in *The Cloud Forest* (1961), looked wistfully back to the days of the imperial explorers, and could even see his own journeys as acts of obsolescent antiquarianism. Textual and contextual information also confirms Hemingway's deep immersion in British colonialism; the narrative results of that immersion were conflicted plotlines and an awkward series of characterizations and self-characterizations: Hemingway became an honorary member of an African tribe in Kenya, but he also became, he claims, an honorary British colonial official during his safari.

In traveling through East Africa Hemingway moved into a literal and written space, and inserted his own writing into the field of imperial textuality. Kenya was an intensely written place, the center of a broader East African world recounted in travel books and fictions by Evelyn Waugh and Wilfred Thesiger. Hemingway's text is shadowed by this work. A colonial police officer says to him at one point that, "'we're the last of the Empire builders. In a way we're like Rhodes and Dr. Livingstone.'" Hemingway's response: "'In a way," I said'."¹¹ From this context, it's hard not to imagine a meld of laconic humor and irony underpinning these words. Empire's literary legacy emerges a few pages later. Hemingway consciously invokes the late-imperial literary context: 'The old pukka sahib ones have been often described and caricatured' (169-70). One way to read *Under Kilimanjaro* is as an American text written back to the British Empire, a novel where the U.S. traveler directly inserts himself into a quintessential imperial terrain.¹²

But the cultural impress of Europe on the globe posed another worry – that of homosexuality. In a classic maneuver Hemingway demarcates and divides his tribes according to a code of loyalty and authenticity; and these tribal demarcations are also sexual. The Masai are portrayed as 'coddled', idolized by 'the homosexuals'; but Hemingway venerated the Wakamba who 'were completely loyal to the British':

The Masai had been coddled, preserved, treated with a fear that they should never have inspired and been adored by all the homosexuals who ever had worked for the Empire in Kenya or Tanganyika because the men were so beautiful. The men were very beautiful, extremely rich, were professional warriors who, now for a long time, would never fight. They had always been drug addicts and now they were becoming alcoholics. (130)

The Masai fight, Hemingway adds, under 'a mass hysteria which cannot come off except under the influence of drugs' (130). One senses an author keen to fend off associations between romantic primitivism and homosexuality – an association explored, for instance, in Alan Hollinghurst's gay revisiting of Empire in *The Swimming Pool Library*

(1988).¹³ When the dominant East African narrative of exploration and tribal knowledge is British, and when that narrative can appear so overtly camp, where does that leave the heterosexual American writer? Hemingway's dismissal of the Masai could hardly be more brutal, and the reader registers (as in *A Moveable Feast*) the unpleasant sound of old scores being settled. He produces what is, ironically enough, a rather British solution to the problem of being associated with imperial gay exoticism: he divides the indigenous tribes into the good and the bad (in this case, the straight and the queer), and through such division establishes a tribal hierarchy. Some tribes are more deserving of approbation than others.

For Hemingway, the journey into Africa was on one level a journey into that American 'technique' seen in *The Ugly American*. Hemingway deploys the familiar ritualistic and technical accounts of how to hunt big game, for instance. But we also see how Hemingway, again in parallel to Burdick and Lederer, had to cope with the lingering European presence in so many parts of the world. And what does Hemingway do with the imaginative outreach of British imperialism? He invokes, resists, mocks, pastiches and pays homage to the British Empire; but he refuses, as it were, to refuse it. Hemingway's text, with its gallery of colonial types and its aristocratic joshing, encompasses the rhetorical presence and impress of the British upon East Africa. Hemingway creates a chaotic and inconsistent narrative response to that larger historical shift, the entry of the American into a terrain from which the European exits while living a rhetorical footprint. This now seems a telling fictional embodiment of what happens at a historical turning-point, when empires fall, when one hegemonic force gives way to another, even though the former remains present in terms of narrative line and rhetorical impress.

Under Kilimanjaro pulls in a multitude of directions, as Hemingway's 'fictional memoir' re-imagines the culture and politics of decolonizing Africa. One narrative strand focuses on post-Lawrentian tribalism. Hemingway seems to have wanted to create a form of invented tribal religion – an invented tradition for the strangely hybrid world he finds himself in, an American amongst the white hunters and native

gun bearers of the waning British Empire. Out of the remnants and shards of various cultures, Hemingway quixotically promises to invent his own tribal tradition (89). Whether this desire constitutes a considered response to cultural de-traditionalization or merely amounts to intellectual scavenging is a question forcefully raised by these texts.

Hemingway's self-fashioning is complexly related to his encounters with non-American cultures and his pursuit of an authenticity that can – rather paradoxically, perhaps – also absorb and synthesize cultural otherness. Hemingway is the most recognizably 'branded' of U.S. writers in his general image of a self-reliant, outdoorsy American masculinity. But his writing, especially when the writing veers towards overtly autobiographical meditations, usually alights upon an ability to pass himself off as a member of a different culture. In a sense, however, the two sides of Hemingway – if we momentarily separate them in this way – are part of the same persona. For Hemingway, personality or character is founded on ideals of technique and adaptability; by learning a particular hunting tactic, or how to fish or to box, one achieves a certain mastery of self and environment. *Under Kilimanjaro* pushes this adaptation as far as it can go. Even late in his career, Hemingway continues to tug at the fabric of his self-created identity. Charo, his wife's gun bearer, who first featured in *Green Hills of Africa*, 'had wished to convert me to Islam some twenty years before and I had gone all through Ramadan with him observing the fast' (32). Typically, the accession to Islamic belief (and what a prospect that would be: Hemingway as an American-Moslem author!) comes not through a leap of faith but through the ritual and self-discipline of fasting. In his flight from the Masai, Hemingway alights on East African Moslems as repositories of integrity and authenticity. Stripped of doctrinal or devotional features, these figures stand for an archetypal image of loyalty. Charo is manly and ritualistic in his actions, and sufficiently Other to establish exoticism. But his presence is assimilated in ways that Islamic presence could not be accommodated in other American internationalist texts of this time (I'm thinking of Paul Bowles's North African tales, or Richard Wright's account of the Bandung conference in 1955, *The Color Curtain*). Charo lacks, in Hemingway's representation, that

edge of religious-ideological difference that the Western observer perceives as threatening. Charo occupies the space in Hemingway's fiction where we find a disciplined male alterity which is culturally-distinct but also admirable and also, quite possibly, attainable; it is the place where Hemingway places bullfighters, fishermen and African hunters. Even though Charo wanted to convert Hemingway to Islam, Hemingway's own flirtation with Islam emerges out of his own ability to re-shape such cultural difference in the light of lifelong fascinations with stylized masculinity.

By the close of the 1950s there were around 1.5 million Americans temporarily living and working abroad, including 800,000 GIs and 100,000 members of what has been called a 'Third Force,' of missionaries, businessmen, students and teachers. Hemingway, like Dos Passos, was a modernist who had experience one wave of expatriatism at the start of his career, but was now an 'overseas American' at a time of a radically re-shaped world system. It is within this context that we might construct a reading of Hemingway as a U.S. globalist in the age of European decolonization.

Notes

- 1 Christina Klein has summarized the American expatriate population at the end of the 1950s. 'By the close of the decade, the 1.5 million Americans temporarily living and working around the world included 800,000 GIs and their families, 50,000 civilian government workers, and 100,000 members of what the *Saturday Review* called a "voluntary Third Force" of missionaries, students, businessmen, and teachers.' *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945–1961* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 105–6.
- 2 Harlan Cleveland, Gerard J. Mangone and John Clarke Adams, *The Overseas Americans: A Report on Americans Abroad* (1960. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), vii.
- 3 'An Evening with Patrick Hemingway,' *The Hemingway Review* 19 (1999), 'True at First Light Special Section,' 10–11. He noted: 'The manuscript itself, if it had been published exactly as it is, would have been difficult to follow, because Ernest Hemingway had not reached the stage with this man-

uscript where he did the ordinary housekeeping chores that a writer has to do with material he has drafted for the first time' (9–10).

- 4 'An Evening with Patrick Hemingway,' 11.
- 5 The historical excavation of Mau Mau has been a long time in the making, and only recently have we had investigations that help to contextualize Hemingway's encounters with the British Empire in its latter East African days. See Caroline Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya* (New York: Henry Holt, 2005) and David Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged: The Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005). On the evidence collated in these important revisionist accounts of decolonization, Hemingway's realization – as reported by his son – that white rule had ultimately failed in Africa, failed to grasp the bitterness and repression that such failure eventually produced. Anderson, pp.77–118, 'Parasites in Paradise: Race, Violence and Mau Mau,' analyzes the white settler culture that Hemingway knew.
- 6 Christopher Ondaatje, *Hemingway in Africa: the Last Safari* (Woodstock NY: Overlook Press, 2004), 174. Ondaatje later writes about the text's 'strange blend of fact and fantasy, the true and the false, in this interesting but flawed book about Africa' (192).
- 7 Bruce Perry, *Malcolm: The Life of a Man who Changed Black America* (New York: Station Hill, 1991), 280.
- 8 Robert Ruark, *Something of Value* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1955), no page given.
- 9 Thomas Noer, 'Segregationists and the World: The Foreign Policy of the White Resistance' in Brenda Gayle Plummer, ed., *Window on Freedom: Race, Civil Rights, and Foreign Affairs, 1945–1988* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 141–162, 143.
- 10 'An Evening with Patrick Hemingway,' 14.
- 11 Ernest Hemingway, *Under Kilimanjaro*, ed. Robert W. Lewis and Robert E. Fleming (Kent OH: Kent State University Press, 2005), 143. Future references appear in the main body of the text.
- 12 Intriguingly, there is a significant difference at this point ('pukka sahib ones') between *Under Kilimanjaro* and the earlier version, edited by Ernest's son, Patrick Hemingway. *True at First Light* reads: 'The old Pukka Sahibs have been often described and caricatured. But no one has dealt much with these new types except Waugh a little bit at the end of *Black Mischief* and Orwell completely in *Burmese Days*.' *True at First Light*, ed. Patrick Hemingway (New York: Scribner, 1999), 139. Perhaps Patrick made a slight emendation to underscore his father's knowledge of British imperial texts? The later (fuller) version has a significant mistake in

the same passage, when Ernest Hemingway writes that 'no one has dealt much with these since *Nineteen Eighty-four*' (170) – an egregious misreading of Orwell! Perhaps a proper knowledge of the 'Pukka Sahibs' had become a matter of family honor for the son?

- 13 Mark Spilka, Hemingway's *Quarrel with Androgyny* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990). 'Hemingway derives opposing yet overlapping strands of feeling about manhood from Victorian protofeminist and imperial fictions. Of course, he also derives them from his upbringing in a peculiarly British and androgynous home, where such fictions were amply shelved' (6).