CREATIVITY AND CHAOS

War on the Front Lines

Carolyn Nordstrom

War is perhaps impossible; it continues nonetheless everywhere you look.

SYLVIE LOTRINGER (1987)

MUNAPEO

As I wandered up into the town of Munapeo1 from the dirt strip that served as a runway, I noticed the voids in the landscape of village life: the lack of houses and fields—razed, burned, or destroyed. The lack of social flow—well-worn paths empty of men returning from farm plots, women carrying water home, children running in endless games.

It was my first visit to Munapeo, but in the year I had just spent in Mozambique, I had seen a number of towns in similar straits. Munapeo had been held by the rebel group Renamo—responsible for the instigation of the war and the majority of terror-warfare practices and human rights abuses2—for some years. The Frelimo (government) forces had recently retaken the town. And the war was not far: gunshots and shouts from Renamo forces could be heard less than a kilometer away.

The sense of eerie abandonment gave way in the town center to an all too common scenario in war-torn Mozambique. Hundreds of people sat, slept, and worked in a clump of humanity, eschewing the few remaining bombed-out buildings in favor of makeshift tents. A limited supply of emergency foodstuffs, flown in on the cargo plane I had hopped a ride with, were being distributed to a surprisingly orderly line. The plane brought food but not cooking pots or fuel, and the ingenious tried to figure out ways to cook their grains in a town long since plundered for its goods and wood.

The battle-wise and violence-weary knew that food did not bring peace: a concentration of troops brought a concentration of (starving) civilians, which prompted the delivery of emergency resources, which then provoked renewed Renamo attacks seeking to loot the supplies. The war rolls over the town again.

Behind these scenes—the hungry and starving sprawled in the dust and the sun, the bombed-out buildings sporting military graffiti, the wild eyes and careless
ranting of someone who “has just seen too much war”—are a host of further tragic realities. Some stories I never got used to: I sat listening incredulously as a soldier explained to me a typical fact of life:

Renamo comes into town and some soldiers enter a hut and grab the woman and begin to rape her. Another soldier forces her husband to stand close by and look on. Usually these husbands do—they are so afraid for their families that they think they should stay and help in any way they can, and besides, Renamo has threatened them all with their lives if they do not do as they are told. Then we [Frelimo forces] come into town, and if we find out about such rapes, we round up these men. I mean, they must be collaborators (with Renamo), for what kind of man would sit and watch his wife being raped?

A mother comes up to me at this point and asks me to accompany her. She takes me to a shade tree where her son of about four years old is quietly sitting, and she draws back a dirty piece of cloth draped over one shoulder and falling to his lap. He has been shot in the groin, and the bullet is clearly still inside the child. Is there anything I can do? she wants to know. I look around at the town—no clinic, no medicines, no nurses, no running water. Even the indigenous healers cannot get outside of town to collect the herbs they need to treat. Other than passing out some antibiotics and some empty words of hope, there is nothing I can do. I sit down next to the child and realize he already knows.

These and a hundred other stories fill my head as I walk to the dirt airstrip to catch a ride out with a cargo plane that has come. But most of all, I think about the tragic fact that I can leave. The inhabitants of Munapeo cannot. In the contest for towns and the quest for security, both sides use the civilian population “strategically.” When the control of a town shifts hands from one set of troops to another, and when the ability of the troops to hold that area is questionable, civilians are often gathered together around a troop base. Theoretically, this is for security: “unprotected” civilians provide easy labor sources or targets for vindictive enemy troops convinced they are supporters of the “other side.” But, in fact, forced relocation provides troops with easily guarded populations who provided not only supplies and labor for the troops but also a buffer zone between the troops and the enemy. In case of an attack, it is the civilians who provide a wall of security. Because they were often forbidden to leave the immediate area, this meant that many were unable to attend their farms, and starvation often set in at an alarming rate. Entire communities were known to die off in this way.

It is less than a kilometer to the dirt runway, but no civilians are this far from the town center. I am reminded how close the war is for them when Renamo soldiers in the bush shoot at the plane as the pilot tries to land, something he is completely unaware of because he is landing to a roaring chorus of Aerosmith in his earphones. I think wryly back to the security clearance report I got before leaving for Munapeo:

“No problem, safe and secure for travel.”

When we touch down at the provincial capital, I glance to see if the two Russian twin turbine combat helicopters stationed there are in. One has “In God We Trust” painted on the side over a picture of an American dollar bill, and the other is emblazoned with the wings emblem from Paul McCartney’s first album with his band, Wings.

After more than a year in Mozambique, I was used to days such as this. The layers of conceptual havoc that surround the war had become, in a curious way, a fact of life—almost comfortable in an off-balanced manner. It was not always that way. When I first arrived, I was frequently assailed by what appeared to be sheer chaos. Uninitiated into reading between the lines, I could not figure out why security reports did not match security realities. I was philosophically stalled by listening to a man sympathize with a person for having to watch his wife being raped by enemy soldiers and then targeting him as an enemy for having let this occur. I had no framework with which to deal with a culturally constructed image of war (soldiers on a battlefield) that in reality turned out to be a four-year-old sitting silently under a tree knowing with an uncanny wisdom that he would probably die from a gunshot wound in his groin.

In this chapter I explore the three interrelated themes of chaos, nhấn (or what Feldman has said may effectively be called a crisis of reason), and creativity. Chaos abounds in war and in fact may be called one of its defining characteristics. It exists as both strategy and effect and permeates the entire war enterprise from perpetrators to victims. War, expanding on Elaine Scarry (1985), “unmakes” worlds, both real and conceptual. Both studying and writing about war call into question some of our enduring notions of reason. But what may be the most powerful aspect of studying war is not merely the deconstructive violence that attends to it but the creativity the people on the front lines employ to reconstruct their shattered worlds.

CHAOS AND CAMUS’S ABSURDITY

A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But, on the other hand, in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity. (Camus 1955, 5)

In considering the many towns like Munapeo I observed during my year and a half of fieldwork in Mozambique, I found that understanding the war does not rest on the fact that the war begins to make any more sense as time goes on but that, as Mozambicans showed me, we begin to accept
the existence of senselessness. As a Mozambican explained to me, reminiscent of Camus:

Do you know why, when you meet a phantom on the road, you do not pass it by and look at it? Do you know what is so dangerously bewitching, so lethal, about looking? It is because if you turn around and look behind the phantom, you will discover him to be hollow. This war, it is a lot like that phantom.

For the vast majority of Mozambicans, war is about existing in a world suddenly divested of lights. It is about a type of violence that spills out across the country and into the daily lives of people to undermine the world as they know it. A violence that, in severing people from their traditions and their futures, severs them from their lives. It hits at the heart of perception and existence. And that is, of course, the goal of terror warfare: to cripple political will by attempting to cripple all will, all sense.

To understand the war in Mozambique is to multiply the small vignette of Munapeo a thousandfold. But to understand Munapeo is not to understand the war. For each person’s experience of the war is unique, and the characteristics of the war—the form the conflict takes—varies from village to village, district to province. I could as easily have begun this chapter with the story of the town I saw that was completely burned to the ground, all its inhabitants gone, no one knew where. No one knew where, because no one officially knew the town was destroyed. When I returned to the provincial capital and later to the country’s capital, I inquired about the fate of this town. No one had even heard it had been burned out. With a war that has affected one-half of the entire country’s population, it is hard to keep track of every casualty, including entire towns.

I could also have started this chapter with the story of any of the hundreds of thousands who have been maimed, displaced, or kidnapped. Stories such as the following are legion in Mozambique. These were the words of a person I spoke with the day after he emerged from the bush after having escaped from Renamo:

We were under Renamo control for several years. They came in and took everything, including us. We were forced to move around a lot, carrying heavy loads for Renamo here, being pushed there for no apparent reason. People died, people were killed, people were hurt, cut, assaulted, beaten ... there was no medicine, no doctors, no food to help them. My family is gone, all of them. Only I am here. But the violence and the killing is not necessarily the worst of it. Worst of all is the endless hunger, the forced marches, the homelessness ... day in and day out a meager, hurting existence that seems to stretch on forever.

The level of violence in this man’s story is considered “normal” in the war. True horror is reserved for stories that combine unbelievable brutality with sheer senselessness.

The formation of Renamo and the war helps to explain the inordinate amount of terror warfare that has characterized this war. Mozambique’s “internal” war was developed and guided externally. The war began when Frelimo (Frente de Libertação de Moçambique) came to power in Mozambique after the country achieved independence from Portugal in 1975. Proapartheid governments, first Rhodesia and then South Africa, formed and led the rebel group Renamo (Resistência Nacional Moçambicana) in an attempt to undermine the model and assistance that a successful black-majority Marxist-Leninist country offered to the resistance fighters of their countries. While pro-Renamo supporters and opportunists do exist within Mozambique, essentially the rebel soldiers functioned with little popular support. Because destabilization, not coherent political ideology, was the defining factor in Renamo’s formation, dirty war tactics—those using terror tactics in the targeting of civilian populations—predominate. The human rights violations have been recognized as being among the worst in the world.5

The extent of the violence in Mozambique can be captured in a few statistics. Over one million people, the vast majority noncombatants, have lost their lives to the war. Over two hundred thousand children have been orphaned by the war (some estimates are much higher). Adequate assistance is more hope than reality in a country where one-third of all schools and hospitals were closed or destroyed by Renamo and where a single orphanage operates. Nearly one-fourth of the entire population of 15 million people has been displaced from their homes by the war, and an additional one-fourth of the population has been directly affected by the war. In a country where 90 percent of the population lives in poverty and 60 percent in extreme poverty, the toll has been devastating.

These stories of war, individually and collectively, are distinctly Mozambican. It is their lives, their suffering, their courage, that is on the line. But the war itself is not uniquely Mozambican. In addition to the founding role played by Rhodesia and then South Africa, disaffected Portuguese former colonialists have played a critical role in Renamo’s war. As well, Renamo has been aided by numerous Western right-wing organizations and religious groups and assisted by Western military advisers, arms merchants, and mercenaries—placing the war, and its defining strategies, squarely in an international political, economic, and military network. The strategies used in Mozambique have been applied in scores of other wars.
around the globe, carried through the same international network by the same international cast in search of power and gain (Nordstrom 1994a, 1994b).

This international entanglement of alliances, antipathies, and mercenaries allows the transfer of fundamental strategic orientations and specific tactical practices from group to group across international and political boundaries. Transferred with these are the cultural belief systems: beliefs about what are deemed acceptable, and necessary, processes of war, violence, and control in the quest for power. These wars, which have taken place primarily in non-Western countries, have focused on the use of terror tactics and the targeting of civilians and social infrastructure. They carry the legacy of a cold war that has itself been given over to history.

To understand what is attacked in a dehumanizing war necessitates an understanding of what it is to be human. For Mozambicans, this includes, but is certainly not limited to, the following. Mozambicans are nurtured in the bosom of family, and this is grounded in the skills and behaviors that sustain life—in working, in cultivating, in harvesting, in consuming. As family members, they illuminate the nexus of a time/place continuum: the fecundity of the ancestors has been instilled in them and comes to fruition in the familiar landscapes of home, hearth, and the land they were born to. They thrive as part of a community, and a pattern of friendships, obligations, and shared goals gives tangible substance to their sense of world. Mythological space landscapes geographic space: ritual, ceremony, and belief bring the universal home. The eternal, the social, and the collective are made apparent through the individual and the particular. Cultural process brings “home” the nature of reality through the physical form of the participant’s everyday world. They sit in a gathering place in their community, just outside their homes, surrounded by their fields and animals and belongings, supported by their family and acquaintances, and they peer through ceremony’s door into the mysteries of the universe until they have made sense of it and it of them. Their community, mythic and physical, takes shape in relation to a landscape of cultivated and wild spaces, within a network of other communities that together follow patterns of exchange, of everything from people and goods to aggressions and innovations.

The words of a Mozambican woman friend of mine poignantly demonstrate the destruction that the war has brought to millions of her compatriots:

Ephu, Carolyn, this war. My youngest son came of age not too long ago, and I felt obliged to take him back to the land of my people to perform the ceremonies that would ensure that he grows into a strong and healthy member of our family. The journey was a heart-stopping one—as you know the roads are so unsafe, and we had to walk a majority of the way to avoid land mines and rogue soldiers. I was so frightened I would lose my son before he could even come of age properly. But when we arrived in my birth home, it was so very disappointing: I remember a house filled with the happy shouts of children, lush farmlands flowing out from its doors, vegetables to pick for food, and our animals dotting the hillsides. Always a fire with food cooking, always a story being told.

It is so useful to see it now. My mother is the only one there now: my father, as you know, was killed by Bandidos [Renamo], my grandparents just died of the war: not enough food, medicines, hope. My mother, she will never be the same after all the attacks she has lived through, after seeing her husband slaughtered. The horror of the violence is etched on her face and her soul. The house is dark, desolate and empty. The Bandidos have carried off everything they could in the innumerable times they have come through. The fields are destroyed, and my mother refuses to replant them, for every time she does, the Bandidos come and raid and then burn the fields. The animals are long gone, killed by the soldiers. The neighbors are few and far between, killed off, run off, starved off. No more laughter, no more stories, no more children. No more home. Even worse, when we arrived there, I found it was going to be really difficult to hold the ceremonies we wanted to for our son. The noise and music of the ceremonies attracts the Bandidos. They hear it and come to attack. We cannot even perform the ceremonies that make us human. We did a ceremony, yes, but a mere skeleton of that which tradition calls for. Skeleton, yes, that is a good word—we are living skeletons of the war.

With the onslaught of excessive violence, the boundaries defining family, community, and cosmos slip, grow indistinct, reconfigure in new and painful ways. And through the breached boundaries, the substance of each spills out across the landscapes of life in a way that is unstructured, highly charged, and immediate. Family has been shattered, not only by death and displacement but by the impossibility of resolvables: Is a missing relative alive? Can I protect those still with me? How do we live like a family when that which defines family life no longer exists? In its most fundamental sense, family is a historical continuum, and home the place where it unfolds. When these are disrupted, the grounding of self in time, place, and space is upended. Left to a here and now unmoored in time, people lose the guidance of tradition, the comfort of tomorrow. What then becomes of the person severed from time and place? Not the flesh and bones body but the intangible and subjective eeriness animating personal identity and bringing the self to life—that which, all told, makes humans human. The world, as many Mozambicans sadly said to me, is no longer human.6

When violence reaches this level of severity, identity itself suffers, as evinced in the words of a dislocado (dislocated: internal refugee) in southern Mozambique. As we talked, he stood, handmade hoe in hand, surveying the dry and barren fields where he and many other dislocados had
recently arrived to try and eke out food and a fragile home. I thought at
the time I had never seen a face so sculpted by resignation and determina-
tion at one and the same time.

We have arrived here from all over, scattered victims of Renamo violence. Everyone has
lost everything they had. Their homes were burned, their goods stolen, their crops de-
stroyed, their family members slaughtered. Even those that managed to flee often ran
different directions from the rest of their families, and today do not know if the rest are
alive or dead. Many have been through this cycle more than once, having fled to a
“safe area” only to be attacked again. Me, this is my third relocation. I do not know
where most of my family is. Maybe we will be attacked yet again—we hear Renamo
passing by here at night. It is difficult to find the will to plant crops and tend children
when it may all be taken from us tonight, and maybe we will not survive this time.
The worst of it is the way this attacks our spirits, our very selves. Everyone here thinks:
Before this I knew who I was. I farmed the land that my father farmed, and his ance-
tors before him, and this long line nurtured the living. I had my family that I fathered,
and I had my house that I built, and the goods that I had worked for. I knew who I
was because I had all this around me. But now I have nothing, I have lost what makes
me who I am. I am nothing here.

If people are defined by the world they inhabit, and the world is cultur-
ally constructed by the people who consider themselves a part of it, people
ultimately control the production of reality and their place in it. They pro-
duce themselves. But they are dependent on these productions (Tausigg
1993). Should one wish to destroy, to control, or to subjugate a people,
what more powerful “target” could be found than that of personhood and
reality? To destroy the world, encapsulated in the nexus of place and per-
son described above, is to destroy the self.

It is my opinion that self, identity, and the experience of the world are
mutually dependent for all people, as contemporary existential, phenomeno-
logical, and postmodernist theory are demonstrating. But this view has
long permeated African thought. Without trying to overgeneralize African
epistemology, I found many Mozambicans hold a similar view to the schol-

The African culture makes no sharp distinction between the ego and the
world. African culture makes the self the centre of the world. . . . The world
which is centered on the self is personal and alive. Self-experience is not sep-
arated from the experiencing self. The self vivifies or animates the world so
that the soul, spirit or mind of the self is also that of the world. . . . What
happens to the world happens to the self. Self disorder is a metaphysical con-
tagion [italics in original] affecting the whole world.

It would appear to be equally valid to conclude that world disorder is a
metaphysical contagion affecting the whole self. Yet if the world makes the

self, the self equally makes the world, and this is why terror warfare is ulti-
mate doomed to fail. As we will see in the section on creativity, people
have the creative wherewithal to re-create the worlds war has destroyed.

REASON

It is worth noting that the language peculiar to totalitarian doctrines is always an
academic and administrative language.

ALBERT CAMUS

Western epistemologies generally try to find “The Reason” (universal and
specific) for war—to fix it in time and understanding. If only we could just
bring to light the specific structural, mythological, interpersonal acts of
domination and resistances, war would make sense. But these are sweep-
ing analyses, ones that all too often leave out the individuals—living, suf-
ferring, dying—who are the war. Individuals do not make up a generic group of
“combatants,” “civilians,” and “casualties” but an endlessly complex set of
people and personalities, each of whom has a unique relationship to
the war and a unique story to tell.

Based on my field experiences at the front lines of wars, I hope to chal-
enge—to draw a line through—the epistemologies of Reason, with a capi-
tal R, as it applies to War. When war actually becomes a matter of life and
death, Reason is replaced with a cacophony of realities. One cannot peel
back the layers of the onion to find the core phenomenon; for, as we all
know, the onion, like reality, is composed only of layers.

I am reminded of a conversation I had with a young teenage soldier in
the bush of north-central Mozambique. I asked him why he was fighting,
and he looked at me and in all seriousness replied, “I forgot.” For this
person, the tattered clothing he was wearing, the gun he carried, the fear and
hunger he constantly felt, the “endless days and nights of living in the re-
 mote bush on the run without food, shelter, or comfort” were realities.
The “why” of it all was far less intelligible; unimportant even.

Behind the political ideologies, the military strategies, the international
arms and ally networks that support the war effort, and the commanders
that channel this down to the front lines, “I forgot” can exist, the core of
the phenomena.

The problems that surround reason do not pertain exclusively to war.
The whole notion of reason as it has been defined in Enlightenment phi-
losophy is in crisis. Epistemology can no longer conveniently be separated
from ontology, word from act and concept, subject from object, reality
from construction. This crisis extends to the heart of theory. For, ulti-
mately, we as theoreticians live our reason. We cannot step outside of it to
assess it in any final sense. We are, as Allen Feldman (1991) points out, inescapably implicated in our reasoning about reason. This is nowhere more evident than when we begin to try to “make sense” of the cacophonous flow of our field observations—to wrench word from experience.

Terror warfare, such as that defining Renamo’s in Mozambique, seeks to sever all relationships grounding personhood to enforce complete political acquiescence. But, too, our theories are all too often abstracted—and sever personhood from narrative and text. In Western epistemology, we have a legacy of thinking about violence as a concept, a phenomenon, a “thing.” We reify it, we “thingify” it, as Michael Taussig (1987) cautions, rather than recognize it as experiential and rendering it real. This approach stands in sharp contrast to the Mozambican’s view of violence—a view that sees violence as fluid, as something that people can both make and unmake.

A concern with the reasons of war comes dangerously close to a concern with making war reasonable—which, of course, is a goal of the Enlightenment process. Maybe this search for reason has allowed us to “explain war away”; concretized in theory, set in fact, distanced to a comfortable vantage point. I suggest that we are familiar with the fact that this search for the “reason” for war actually silences the reality of war.

In her study of torture, Scarry (1985) has noted that pain unmakes the world of the victim. Expanding on Scarry, I (1992a, 1992b) have suggested that war’s violence unmakes the world at large both for those who experience it and for those who witness it. Violence deconstructs reason. The question then arises, Does writing and reading about violence unmake the world? Is this why so many of our theories on violence are modernist, clear concrete categories distanced from the raw experiences they purport to explain?

Another paradox may lie at the core of this question about “writing” violence in theory. How can we write about the “unmaking” and “creating” of the world in a “made” world of academic prose? No matter how representative we try to be, theory and literature have a structure and an order that they impose in and of themselves, always once removed from experience, intolerant of chaos. As Jean Baudrillard (1987:133) succinctly points out, “Theory is simulation.”

Theories about violence will always struggle with these issues of representation. Violence is an unsettling topic. It raises piercing questions of human nature, social in/justice and cultural viability—and about our personal accountability and responsibility in the face of these. It challenges cherished notions of a just world and throws into stark relief the sheer daunting complexities of human and cultural reality. It utters the unutterable.

On entering the field, we enter the domain of lived experience. What is “safe” is a study in smoke and mirrors. Everyone has a story, complete with vested interests, and all the stories collide into contentious assemblages of partial truths, political fictions, personal foibles, military propaganda, and cultural lore. The louder the story, especially when it comes to violence and war, the less representative of the lived experience it is likely to be. In the midst of wars of propaganda and justification, the most silenced stories at war’s epicenters are generally the most authentic.

To understand a war is not the same thing as understanding a war in the town of X and among the people who populate it. In the same way that a body cannot be understood by a finger, a war cannot be understood by a single locale. It was the war in Mozambique, and the Mozambicans’ experience of it, that formed the core concern of my research. Because this research question demanded different field techniques than those normally associated with anthropological studies set in a specific locale, I followed an approach I call the “ethnography of a warzone” (Nordstrom 1994b). Here, the theme of war, rather than a specific locality, situates the study. Process and people supplant place as an ethnographic “site.” My reticence to situate this study in a given locale extends to the urban centers and the institutions of power brokers (the “site” of traditional political science research)—the places where war is formally defined, debated, and directed. These sites add to the study, they do not define it.

I selected Zambezia Province, in north-central Mozambique, as my home base for the majority of my stay in the country as it was the province most seriously affected by the war, and one that offered rich cultural diversity. But in the year and a half I worked in Mozambique, I traveled not only throughout the province but also through six of Mozambique’s ten provinces. In each location, I followed the ebb and flow of the war from urban centers to rural outposts, visiting locations on the peripheries of the war, locales that had recently been attacked, and villages and towns that had changed hands from the government to the rebel forces a number of times. Roads were heavily land mined and subject to frequent attacks and seldom, if ever, traveled outside of sporadic military convoys confined to a few main transitways. Like virtually everyone else who did not have the skills to walk across provinces, I depended on air travel. Unlike many, my major mode of travel was cargo planes taking emergency supplies to war-devastated areas lucky enough to have a flat dirt runway relatively free of
mines. In what I found to be one of the war’s many ironies, my ethnography, like emergency supplies and government officials, was confined to locations where a landing strip and a security clearance could be eked out. I dubbed this “runway anthropology.”

The nature of this ethnography thus reflects in many ways the nature of the reality of many Mozambican lives: conflict, starvation, deprivation, and the demands of work, family, and health have produced an extremely fluid population. As I noted before, nearly one-third of the population has experienced some form of dislocation. These Mozambicans can no longer, at present, ground their “selves”—their lives, their livelihoods, their dreams—in a single place. In responding to an external threat, they carry reworked notions of home, family, community, and survival with them. Repositioning has come to define a major sociocultural current.

In each place I visited, I made a concerted effort to collect the stories of average people, many of whom found themselves on the front lines of a war they neither started nor supported. Eschewing the popular notion that battlefields are comprised of male adult soldiers—especially since the vast majority of casualties in Mozambique were noncombatants—I turned my attention to both sexes and all ages, equally. Given the circumstances of the war, I worked in areas where the rebels were in close proximity, but I never elected to work in rebel-occupied areas.

The logistics of conducting an ethnographic study in a warzone are not as complicated as the fact that we begin to care about the world we have entered. We can sympathize with the trauma of a person looking over the charred landscapes that used to be called home; feel the gut-wrenching horror they feel wondering if the rest of their family made it to safety or not. We can understand the overwhelming grief of people who had to leave a family member where she or he fell, unburied, as they fled an attack, knowing they have condemned a loved one to roam the earth as a sorrowful rogue spirit with no resting place.

Everyone grapples with violence in his or her own way. What is traumatic, difficult, hopeful is in all likelihood different for every person in the field. It is impossible to escape the impact of the sheer violence: I will carry with me images of violence for the rest of my life which are variously poignant and unsettling, absurd and tragic. Some resonate with examples in the general literature and media on warfare, and these constitute the acceptable, and in many ways privileged, discourses on violence. The mainlined and the dead—victims of political torture, heroes and martyrs of causes, innocent victims of repression—fill this category.

Yet it is not the raw violence per se that most captures the essence of war for me. Curiously, the images that have done so for me seldom appear in formal discussions of warfare. To give one example: one of the things that struck me the first time I saw the massacre of innocent civilians was that, in the physical trauma of death, many of the dead men’s pants had fallen down. This example may appear frivolous to people who have not witnessed such scenes. But to those living daily with the specter of large-scale political violence, death scenes of familials—not only butchered but exposed—present a powerful statement on death, (in)discantry, and the nature of human existence.

It is misleading, however, to focus exclusively on the physicality of bodies as the repository of violence. When I am among people who have not been near the brute force of war, I am often asked, “What was it like? Did you see many dead bodies?” The question rankles. Even if I were to answer the question, which I never do, it would not be the ruined bodies themselves I have seen that summarizes the agonizing truths of war for me but the stories behind the bodies. In considering the question of what war is like, I might, for example, think of the color pink and the trails it has left on the landscape of war in my mind. Two stories, related only by color, help to explain this.

Early in my years of studying war, I was visiting a village I did not know. Well, several hours travel from my in-field home. I was sleeping in the house of a relative of a friend. I had never met. Quite early in the morning, I was roused unexpectedly from bed and asked to get dressed. No explanation, no food or coffee. There was something people wanted me to see. A group of men were waiting outside the door, most of whom I did not know, and we set off on foot through the fields and finally into the forest. We walked for quite a while it seemed. Finally we came into a small clearing, and in front of us a dead man hung from a tree—suspended on a pink bedsheets. The man in charge turned to me in concern and said, “We need to find out if this is murder or suicide.” Had this man chosen to escape insurmountable personal troubles, impossible war demands? Or had the war found him? Had someone killed him?

I am never sure why I am included in or excluded from certain things in my field. I had no idea why I was brought to witness this poor man hanging forlornly in the early morning sun. Did people think because of my interest in traditional medicine I was a medical specialist? Did they want someone to witness the inescapable violence people had to live with, someone who could carry the story back to the urban centers? I never did find out. They asked me to help examine the body to try to determine if the man had been murdered or not, and I did. But mostly I remember watching that body swing on the pink bedsheets in the slight breeze as I wondered about war, tragedy, absurdity, and the insurmountable.

The second story begins in the same time period. I had a friend in the community in which I lived who eased the tragedies of war for me. He was a fun and life-affirming man who loved ceremonies, parties, a good joke, and his fellow human beings. I could always talk to him about the war, and
he listened with a sympathetic ear. He hated the conflict tearing at his country.

The next time I visited the country, I looked forward to reuniting with my friend. The war continued, and deprivation and terror had touched everyone’s lives. When I reached my friend’s house, I was surprised to see an assault rifle leaning in the entryway, a revolver on the living room table. I settled into a chair to catch up on the news. An armed man materialized in the shadows of the porch and had a hurried whispered conversation with my host. I looked quizzically at my friend when he returned, and he sighed and handed me a photo album. The album itself was the kind you could find at any department store: the cover depicted the common scene of a young couple walking hand in hand in some romantic locale at sunset—all colored in bright pinks and images of serenity. Inside, however, were pages of photographs of maimed, mutilated, and murdered youths from the area. My friend shrugged his shoulders and explained the war had reached an intolerable level, something had to be done to save the country. He had decided to join the “security forces” to combat the “terrorists.” The pictures were of his work, the “solutions” he and those he worked with employed. The victims, mostly youths, looked to me to have died alone and unarmored: in a search for information; as a warning delivered in a message of terror; in a fearful and retributive rage, anything but as soldiers on a battlefield. I have never gotten over the shock of this. How could I be friends with a man capable of such torture? How could I have been friends with such a man? My friendship with this person is over. I have not kept in touch with him. But the impossible quandary of the situation stays with me: it represents the harsh realities of war that many live with on a day-to-day basis. And it is not so much the gruesome pictures of bodies that distresses me; it is the hopeless incongruity of their being in that photo album with the serene pink cover.

These are not the only scenes that define the heart of war for me, nor the only colors, sights, smells, tragedies, and fears I have experienced through other’s experiences of war. Each one gives a depth and a complexity to violent conflict that goes well beyond the shallow depictions of war that are offered in the traditional texts and media sound bites that “describe” war.

CREATIVITY

[The world is] created out of human experience.

Renamo, with its tactics of severing the noses, lips, and ears of civilians, seems to reclaim the original sense of the absurd: “The absurd, from the Latin, _absurdus_, is literally the deaf, the voiceless, and hence the irrational” (Ruf 1991:95)

But if war, especially terror warfare, strives to destroy meaning and sense, people strive to create it. This, ultimately, is why dirty war is doomed to fail. No matter how brute the force applied to subjugate a people, local-level behaviors arise to subvert the hold violence exerts on a population. This, of course, is a highly contested process. The situation at the local level is complex and contradictory. There are people working within the political, military, and economic spheres who seek to benefit from the fractures caused by war. Others work equally hard to solve the inequalities, injustices, and abuses caused by war and those who exploit violence for their own gain. It is the latter that interests me here.

Traditional Western approaches to violent conflict do not often recognize the creative strategies people on the front lines employ to survive the war. I was little prepared for the way in which people tried to reconfigure the destructive violence that marked their lives and to rebuild worlds so wrenchingly taken away from them by violence. It was only when I was in the middle of Mozambique (both literally and in terms of my research) that I began to appreciate the creativity of the average people caught in the traumatic contingencies of warfare. While this creativity does not extend to all people and all parts of the war, I am always encouraged by how much exists in day-to-day life. To give an idea of the range and richness of these world-building actions, I will give three different examples that can be introduced as the creating of symbols (the three monkeys), of society (the transport of fish), and of culture (the work of healers).

The first example involves three little carved wooden monkeys. When I first went to the country in 1988, the war economy was such that few market goods of any kind were available. I was always interested in the fact that one of the things you could find with regularity was a set of three little carved monkeys: see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil. For me, this was especially telling considering the regularity with which one heard stories of Renamo severing the ears and lips of civilians to silence resistance and control political will. One day I was sitting on the curb talking with a street vendor acquaintance of mine with whom I frequently sat and discussed the war (it had taken his legs, his family, and his home) and better days. During a lull in the conversation, with a sly twinkle in his eye, he pulled out a set of three monkeys to show me. The first monkey had one hand over his mouth and the other over one eye, but the second eye peered out wide open and both ears were uncovered and listening. The second monkey had one hand over one eye and the other hand over one ear; this time the mouth was uncovered and twisted into a grimace or a cry, but still one eye was watching and one ear was listening. The last monkey sat with a
cynical grin on its face: eyes, ears, and mouth open and cognizant. This monkey sat with its hands covering its groin. The symbolism is not lost on Mozambicans: the numbers of women who have been raped in the war are legion, and a significant number of men have been emasculated both physically and figuratively.

I have returned to Mozambique twice since my first trip and have traveled from the plush offices of power brokers to the crumbling embers of villages in the far reaches of the country. And in the places where force became violence, the subversive message of the monkeys—that we will cover our ears when you cut off our lips and still look with one eye; that we will watch, listen, and speak, but we will “cover our tails” in doing so—was reflected time and again, in village after village after town. The first part of the message conveys resistance; the second laces it with wry humor. The two together have given many a hope and a will to survive a very dirty war.

The three monkeys stand as popular symbologies (dialogues based on symbolic representations) that speak both to the war and through the war: statements constructed by the victims themselves to convey the complex way violence is lived, learned, subverted, and survived. Symbologies abound during war. “Violent concentrated action,” writes Antonin Artaud (1974: 62), “is like lyricism; it calls forth supernatural imagery, a bloodshed of images.” To speak directly about the war is to court danger. So songs, myths, parables, jokes, and stories circulate—each a palimpsest of meaning wherein “mythical” villains, heroes, murderers, and traitors implicate contemporary actors in the war drama. Everyone in the know “knows” what is being conveyed about whom: who to trust, fear, avoid. For those not in the know (one hopes, those who have the power to kill), these are “simply stories.” The “reason” Mozambicans apply in such situations extends well beyond that ascribed by Enlightenment philosophies focusing on discursive consciousness. It is a form of creative reasoning that combines symbolic, emotional, representational, discursive, and existential realities. Generally speaking, the split between epistemology, ontology, and life is an artificial one for Mozambicans.

In African culture . . . experience does not address itself to reason alone, imagination alone, feeling and intuition alone, but to the totality of a person’s faculty. The truth of this experience is lived and felt, not merely thought of. (Ruch and Anyanwa 1984:86–87)

There are many other ways people work to subvert terror and destruction and to reconstruct a purposeful social universe. In Mozambique, these are not just part of the war response; they are critical to survival. The second example I cite here became apparent to me when I was in an inland town that had recently been attacked a number of times. Crops and ani-

mals decimated and goods stolen, the markets had little to offer. I was therefore taken aback to find for sale some fish that had seen better days. This is particularly noteworthy, for it entailed several men walking with baskets of ocean fish on their heads for seven days from the coast through several language and ethnic communities and a number of dangerous war zones. This is a trip no formal trader would brave: the dangers were too great and the profit negligible. So why make such a trip? The men’s answers to me—“Because that’s how life goes on”—did not make a lot of sense at first. But as I listened to them talk, I realized that through their journey they performed an invaluable function. They carried messages for families and friends separated by the fighting; conveyed details on troop deployments and dangers; and transmitted critical economic, crop, trade, and political news, not to mention gossip and irreverent stories, between communities severed from one another by the war. They linked different ethnic and language groups in a statement that the war was not about local rivalries and could not be, if they were to survive. They forged trade and social networks through the disordered landscapes of violence. And by walking for seven days with baskets of fish on their heads through lethal front lines, they simply defied the war in a way that everyone they passed could enjoy and draw strength from. They were, literally, constructing social order out of chaos.

These traders created outgoing linkages in the country. In a complementary process, people also work to create a valid community and a stable social universe wherever they find themselves. Curandeiros9 are a locus of creativity in solving the problems of war. Encoded in their traditions are ide(a)ls that mitigate the harmful effects of abusive power, violence, and warfare. While African medicine has long assisted in warfare (Lan 1985; Ranger 1982, 1985), in Mozambique it has largely condemned Renano’s ruthlessness. I spoke with well over a hundred curandeiros throughout the country, and most had developed “treatments” aimed at protecting civilians and ameliorating the violence unleashed on society.

In refugee camps, in informal dislocation centers, in burned-out villages trying to rebuild, I found curandeiros performing treatments to take the war out of the community, the violence out of the people, and the instability and terror out of the culture. As one curandeiro explained,

People have just seen too much war, too much violence—they have gotten the war in them. We treat this, we have to. If we don’t take the war out of the people, it will just continue on and on, just Renano, past the end of the war, into the communities, into the families, to ruin us.

Scholars such as Pierre Bourdieu (1977) and Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff (1991) brought to academic attention what the curandeiros have
long known, that hegemonic ideals and cultures of violence can be dangerously, and unwittingly, reproduced throughout a society and can even undermine resistance and resolution.

Hundreds of conversations I had with Mozambicans reflected their preoccupation with defusing the culture of violence the war had wrought. It is a violence, they stress, that can last far beyond formal military cease-fires. People constantly reminded themselves and others about the insidious nature of violence, which allows it to reproduce itself and to destroy worlds and lives in the process. It is as if, fearful of the tendency toward habitus—toward what Bourdieu (1977:191) calls “unrecognizable, socially recognized violence”—Mozambicans have set into motion a cultural dynamic that continually challenges the entrenchment of a culture of violence. The following quote is from my field notes. I was sitting with several older women in a village that had seen a great deal of the war. The bombed-out and uninhabited husks of buildings stood outlined behind us in the afternoon sun, behind the sea of small thatch and mud huts that had sprung up to house the many people displaced by the war. We were sitting on the ground chewing on the stalk of a weed (I was chewing on the weed because the women had handed it to me; the women did so out of a habit they had developed to appease their appetites when food was scarce). We were talking about the war’s impact on people’s lives.

When people come back to our community after having been kidnapped and spending time with the Bandido [Renamo], or arrive here after their community has been destroyed by the war, there are a lot of things they need. They require food and clothing, they need a place to live, they need medical attention. But one of the most important things they need is calm—to have the violence taken out of them. We ask that everyone who arrives here be taken to a curandeiro for treatment. The importance of the curandeiro lies not only in his or her ability to treat the diseases and physical ravages of war but in the ability to take the violence out of a person and to reintegrate them back into a healthy lifestyle. You see, people who have been exposed to the war, well, some of this violence can affect them, stick with them, like a rash on the soul. They carry this violence with them back to their communities and their homes and their lives, and they begin to act in ways they have never acted before. They bring the war back home with them—they become more confused, more violent, more dangerous, and so on does the whole community. We need to protect against this. The curandeiro makes consultations and patiently talks to the person, he gives medicinal treatments, he performs ceremonies, he works with the whole family, he includes the community. He cuts the person off from any holds the war has on him or her, he scrapes off the violence from their spirit, he makes them forget what they have seen and felt and experienced in the war, he makes them alive again, alive and part of the community. He does this with Bandido [Renamo] soldiers too. If someone finds a soldier wandering alone, we take him and bring him to the curandeiro. Most people do not really want to fight. These soldiers have done terrible things, but many of them were kidnapped and forced to fight. They dream of their home and family and macambas [farms], of being far away from any war. The curandeiro takes the war out of them, he undoes their war education. He reminds them how to be a part of their family, to work their macambas, to get along, to be a part of the community. He cures the violence that others have taught.

In the midst of war, the treatments the curandeiros provide are not set prescriptions faithfully reproduced. They are creative acts in the true sense of the word. Worlds are destroyed in war; they must be re-created. Not just worlds of home, family, community, and economy but worlds of definition, both personal and cultural. As people look out over a ruined landscape that was once home—now shorn of life and livelihood, humanity and hope—they cannot simply “reconstruct society as it was before.” For in the violence and upheaval, it cannot be, may never be, the same as it was before.

In the face of the monkey’s creation of symbologies, the fish vendor’s forging of social order, and the curandeiro’s production of culture, I find the theories on the cultural construction of reality relevant but inadequate. They start from the basis of an operating culture that imparts knowledge through interpersonal interaction. What happens when very little is operating and what has operated is of little immediate use? What shards of cultural relevance do the vendors and healers have to build on? Worlds cannot simply be created; they must be created anew. How do the poetics and practices of the people in these three examples interweave in the creation of cultures of survival and resistance?

The dilemma is clear: between the world as it was, the world as it should be, and the now of a world destroyed lies an abyss, a discontinuity, a need to define the one by the other, and the impossibility of doing so. The solution, Mozambicans taught me, lies, in part, with the imagination. I have come to think that this is a trait people have specifically nurtured to counteract destructive violence. When people look out over a land that should resonate with meaning and life, but that now stares blankly back with incomprehensible images of barren fields, broken communities, tortured bodies, and shattered realities, they are left with the choice of accepting a deadened world or creating a livable one. It is the imagination—creativity—that bridges the abyss, if not to reconstruct the past, to make the present livable.

Scarry (1985:163) has argued that pain unmakes the world and imagining makes it. Together “pain and imagining are the ‘framing events’ within whose boundaries all other perceptual, somatic, and emotional events occur; thus, between the two extremes can be mapped the whole
terrain of the human psyche." She invokes Sartre in exploring the idea that absence provokes an imagining of a special sort.

Sartre, for example, draws conclusions from the fact that his imagined Pierre is so impoverished by comparison with his real friend Pierre, that his imagined Annie has none of the vibrancy, spontaneity, and limitless depth of presence of the real Annie. But, of course, had he compared his imagined friends not to his real friends when present but to his wholly absent friends, his conclusions would have been supplemented by other, very different conclusions. That is, the imagined Pierre is shadowy, dry, and barely present compared to the real Pierre, but is much more vibrantly present than the absent Pierre. (Ibid)

In like fashion, it is the destruction of the world that prompts such vivid powers of imagining in victims of war and violence.

But unlike Scarry's view, some Mozambicans are able to imagine their real friend, their real home, their real society and culture as vibrantly as the "real thing." We can afford to leave underdeveloped our ability to imagine our real friend Pierre in a reasonably stable world. But when Pierre is dead, disappeared, or maimed, and when the world that held him is so hopelessly destroyed that left unattended it can only ring a death toll for the society affected, people must create, and to do so, they must first imagine what it is they are going to create. For Pierre will never be the same, and the world is still at war.

For Scarry (1992), imagining is grounded in perceptual mimesis. For the Mozambicans, contemplating their ruined villages and contentious political imbroglios, there is little to mime—and imagining becomes an act of pure creativity.

Not all Mozambicans have such developed powers of creative imagining. Not unusually, the creative members of the culture—Healers, visionaries, performers—have developed these skills to a fine art. Their talents lie not only with their abilities to imagine but also with their abilities to convey these images to others so that they, too, may share in the reconstruction of their symbolic and social universes. I have visited a number of communities that had been recently decimated by the war. One of the most powerful experiences I had at these times was sitting with people amid the fragments of what was once their home and community and listening, watching, the imagining—the creation of identity, home, and resistance afresh. I choose the word watching as well as listening purposefully: as the Mozambicans talk about what has happened and what will happen, and as they discuss this in the context of human nature and the meaning of life, I found I could not only understand but "see" the world they were creating. Apparently so did the others present. New identities of suffering and resistance were forged, home was reinvented, the world was relanscaped with significance, people survived.

1. Munapeo is a fictitious name and, in fact, is the name of an illness whose primary symptoms are that one "hunts all over—everything feels bad."

2. Gerson's (1988) interviews with Mozambican refugees who have fled the war recorded that 90% of the severe human rights abuses in the war were attributed to Renamo.

3. All of the conversations with Mozambicans in this article were conducted in Portuguese, Mozambique's national language. The translations are my own.

4. At first glance, it might appear strange to apply a concept like "the absurd" that was formulated as an alienated response to Western techno-industrial society to a bush war in Africa. The application holds for three reasons. First, contemporary dirty war is a product of modern state institutional society. Second, I resist the tendency to differentiate postmodern technological society from non-Western nonindustrialized, and by implication, (pre)modern, society. Mozambicans have long been embroiled in a transnational political economy: centuries ago no remote bush village was safe from the incursions of merchants, slavers, colonists, and profiteers. Many Africans I know can speak eloquently on the ramifications of living in a postmodern reality and did so well before Western intellectuals gave the perspective a word. Finally, the absurd applies to the experience of human existence, something we all share. The term "absurd" was honed by philosophers and writers who had been affected by wars they themselves had lived through and whose primary focus was on the lived experience of self as it confronts violence and senselessness. An irony of violence, one that gives it an existentially absurd quality, is that it exists as an experiential negation of existence.

I concur with Hanna (1969:191) in his use of the term absurdity:

In declaring my own understanding of the term "absurd," I want to insist that it not be taken as some exclusive philosophical concept which stands sovereignly aloof from certain obviously similar terms in the existentialists' vocabulary. With only slight qualifications in each case, I would be quite content to use Nietzsche's "pathos of distance," Sartre's "nausea," Camus' "revolt," Heidegger's "dread," and even the journalistically popular word "meaninglessness" as just as useful as the word "absurd." This extends equally to Kierkegaard's "despair."


6. To existential philosophers, angst of this realization provides the pivot where death, negation, and the slippages of reality can confront being and existence. This process, initiated only by individual choice, is viewed by the theorists as the font for creative change and redefinition—for the realization of being and self. In painful comparison, death, negation, and slippages of reality are not luring possibilities on a cognitive horizon but brutally inseparable facts in the center of Mozambican life. They inhabit being and existence. Far from the self-actualizing function the philosophers impart to the reunion of being/ negation, their unbridled penetrations are fundamentally destructive.
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