

SHERENE H. RAZACK

# DARK THREATS & WHITE KNIGHTS

The  
Somalia Affair,  
Peacekeeping,  
and the New  
Imperialism



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On 4 March 1993 two Somalis were shot in the back by Canadian peacekeepers, one fatally. Barely two weeks later, sixteen-year-old Shidane Abukar Arone was tortured to death. Dozens of Canadian soldiers looked on or knew of the torture.

The first reports of what became known in Canada as the Somalia Affair challenged national claims to a special expertise in peacekeeping and to a society free of racism. Today, however, despite a national inquiry into the deployment of troops to Somalia, most Canadians are proud of their nation's role as peacekeeper to the world. Incidents of peacekeeping violence are attributed to a few bad apples, bad generals, and a rogue regiment.

In *Dark Threats and White Knights*, Sherene H. Razack explores the racism implicit in the Somalia Affair and what it has to do with modern peacekeeping. Drawing on the records of the military trials and public inquiry, Razack examines, first, the nature of the violence itself, and second, the ways in which peacekeeping violence is largely forgiven and ultimately forgotten. The matter of racism has all but disappeared from public memory and what remains is the myth of an innocent, morally superior middle-power nation obliged to discipline and sort out barbaric Third World nations. Modern peacekeeping, Razack concludes, maintains a colour line between a family of white nations constructed as civilized and a Third World constructed as a dark threat, a world in which violence is not only condoned but seen as necessary.

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*For my father  
Ishmile*

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# THE WHITE MAN'S BURDEN

Rudyard Kipling  
*McClure's Magazine* (February 1899)

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

Take up the White Man's burden –  
In patience to abide,  
To veil the threat of terror  
And check the show of pride;  
By open speech and simple,  
An hundred times made plain,  
To seek another's profit  
And work another's gain.

Take up the White Man's burden –  
The savage wars of peace –  
Fill full the mouth of Famine,  
And bid the sickness cease;  
And when your goal is nearest  
(The end for others sought)  
Watch sloth and heathen folly  
Bring all your hope to nought.

Take up the White Man's burden –  
No iron rule of kings,  
But toil of serf and sweeper –  
The tale of common things.  
The ports ye shall not enter,  
The roads ye shall not tread,  
Go, make them with your living  
And mark them with your dead.

Take up the White Man's burden,  
And reap his old reward –  
The blame of those ye better  
The hate of those ye guard –  
The cry of hosts ye humour  
(Ah, slowly!) toward the light: –  
'Why brought ye us from bondage,

Our loved Egyptian night?

Take up the White Man's burden –  
    Ye dare not stoop to less –  
Nor call too loud on Freedom  
    To cloak your weariness.  
By all ye will or whisper,  
    By all ye leave or do,  
The silent sullen peoples  
    Shall weigh your God and you.

Take up the White Man's burden!  
    Have done with childish days –  
The lightly-proffered laurel,  
    The easy ungrudged praise:  
Comes now, to search your manhood  
    Through all the thankless years,  
Cold, edged with dear-bought wisdom,  
    The judgment of your peers.

# **DARK THREATS AND WHITE KNIGHTS**

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New Imperialism



The photo appeared with the following article: Allan Thompson – *Toronto Star*, Sunday, 30 December 2001: B2 – ‘Battling to reclaim lost lives Sierra Leone’s slim hope of stability depends on its ability to rehabilitate its war-affected children.’ The caption read: ‘Small Comfort: Roméo Dallaire holds hands with two of the war-affected children he has come to Sierra Leone to help.’

# INTRODUCTION

## ‘Savage Wars of Peace’

The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line, – the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea.

W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903)<sup>1</sup>

I still think today as yesterday that the color line is a great problem of this century. But today I see more clearly than yesterday that back of the problem of race and color, lies a greater problem which both obscures and implements it: and that is the fact that so many civilized persons are willing to live in comfort even if the price of this is poverty, ignorance and disease of the majority of their fellowmen; that to maintain this privilege men have waged war until today war tends to become universal and continuous, and the excuse for this war continues largely to be color and race.

W.E.B. Du Bois, Preface to new edition of *The Souls of Black Folk* (1953)<sup>2</sup>

Our security will require transforming the military you will lead – a military that must be ready to strike at a moment’s notice in any dark corner of the world.

President George W. Bush, Speech to West Point graduates, 2003<sup>3</sup>

The hands of Canada’s most well-known general clasp the hands of two Black children in war-ravaged Sierra Leone. Almost destroyed from his encounter with the ‘devil’ in Rwanda, General Roméo Dallaire, known for his efforts to stop the genocide in that country, has returned to Africa. He has come to work with children traumatized by war. They have something in common: each has seen great brutality and suffered trauma as a result. The general wants to come to terms with his past, not only with post-traumatic stress but with the ‘ghosts of Rwanda,’ the 800,000 people he felt he couldn’t save; they were massacred while a skeletal UN peacekeeping force looked helplessly on.<sup>4</sup> This is the story of peacekeeping we want to remember: our mission in the First World to save Africans, our helplessness and vulnerability in the face of so much horror, and our bravery in continuing nonetheless to help. For us, peacekeeping is Rudyard Kipling’s white man’s burden, barely transformed from its nineteenth-century origins in colonialism, when it provided moral sanction for waging ‘savage wars of peace,’ wars to ‘fill the mouth of famine’ and ‘bid the sickness cease.’ The nineteenth-century poet exhorted white men – Americans on the eve of an imperial war in the Philippines – to take up the thankless burden of meeting the needs of their

‘new-caught sullen peoples, / Half devil and half child.’<sup>5</sup>

For a brief moment in national history, modern peacekeeping revealed its sordid colonial origins. In Canada, two incidents stand out amidst the half dozen or more officially acknowledged ones and scores of uncounted others. On 4 March 1993, two Somalis were shot in the back by Canadian soldiers, one fatally. Barely two weeks later, on 16 March, a Somali prisoner, sixteen-year-old Shidane Abukar Arone, was tortured to death by soldiers of the Canadian Airborne Regiment. Dozens of men looked on or knew of the torture. Gruesome photographs of the 16 March event survive; photographs of the bloodied and battered head of a Black man, a baton holding his head in place for the camera as his torturer posed grinning beside him. For a while the photos confirmed that what had gone on during the Canadian peacekeeping mission in Somalia in 1993 could not be easily separated from racism, or indeed from colonialism. Soldiers had acted more like conquerors than humanitarians, and their actions underscored the meaning of Black bodies both here and there, historically and in the present.

As time went on, the racial dimensions of the peacekeeping encounter became even more evident. On 15 January 1995, *CBC Newsworld* announced that it had obtained a videotape of Canadian Airborne Regiment soldiers serving in Somalia. Filmed as a holiday video, the tape showed soldiers uttering a number of racist remarks as they sat around drinking beer under the hot sun. Corporal Matt MacKay, a self-confessed neo-Nazi who said he had quit the white supremacist movement two years earlier, gleefully reported, ‘We haven’t killed enough n— yet.’ Private David Brocklebank (later court-martialled for his role in the murder of Shidane Arone) announced to the camera that the Somalia operation is called ‘Operation “Snatch Nig-Nog.”’ In the background, Private Kyle Brown (also later charged with the torture and murder of Shidane Arone) was silent. Another soldier explained that a stick is used for cracking the heads of Somalis, while another commented that the Somalis were not starving and that ‘they never work, they’re lazy, they’re slobs, and they stink.’<sup>6</sup> No sooner had the public digested the first videotape than another emerged depicting violent and racist hazing rituals of another unit of the Airborne Regiment during a party in Canada. In this videotape, we see a Black soldier being smeared with faeces spelling out the words ‘I love the KKK,’ then tied to a tree and sprinkled with white flour. He is later made to crawl on all fours and to suffer a simulated sodomizing.<sup>7</sup>

Still later, trophy photos surfaced of soldiers posing with bound and hooded Somali youth, some of whom appeared to have been beaten. In the photo that appears on the cover of this book, young children sit tied and hooded; they are made to wear signs around their necks with the word ‘thief’ in Somali and forced to sit in the hot sun in plain view of everyone. This photo, perhaps even more than the ones of a tortured Arone, seemed to leave no room for doubt that something had gone terribly wrong in Somalia, something more widespread than a single incident of brutality. The soldier apparently standing guard over the children is Captain Mark Sargent, then the military chaplain. Captain Sargent has never spoken publicly about his role, but the military ombudsman for whom he now works as an investigator, and others, have claimed that he was merely trying to ensure that the children were not further harmed.<sup>8</sup> Others maintain that the chaplain had simply indulged in the common practice of having



trophy photos taken whenever there were detainees. As military police investigations revealed, several soldiers had posed for such photos, some sending them home as souvenirs. A copy had even been posted on the refrigerator door in the unit's tent in Belet Huen. It is clear, too, that the soldiers' superiors knew about the practice of the humiliation of children, and also about the taking of trophy photos. Colonel Serge Labbé maintained that when he first witnessed the humiliation of children, he ordered that it be stopped, an order Lieutenant Colonel Carol Mathieu jotted down in his field-message book. If this was indeed the order given, it was not obeyed. In late January 1993, when the photo of the five children and the chaplain was taken, several soldiers recorded the event either by taking trophy photos themselves or writing about it in letters home. Once the killing of Arone came to the media's attention, however, trophy photos were ordered to be destroyed. As General Ernest Beno wrote to Colonel Labbé in April 1993, if the Canadian public ever saw such photos, they would be disturbed.<sup>9</sup>

It is not clear just how routine was the event depicted in the photo. Some soldiers have claimed that they were initially disturbed by the routine practice of the 'bagging and tagging' of detainees.<sup>10</sup> As ex-Captain Michel Rainville (who was himself implicated in the 4 March killing) explained to the media, he shared his misgivings with his superiors and was reassured that the humiliation of the children was the only acceptable way to deter petty thievery.<sup>11</sup> Another soldier, breaching military rules, made the photo available to a national inquiry on the events in Somalia and planned to testify about what he felt was a contravention of the Geneva Convention. (For his actions, Corporal Michel Purnelle was disciplined and charged by the military with a series of infractions, among them leaving his post to appear before the commission of inquiry).<sup>12</sup> The soldier who took the photo, Captain Jeff DeLallo, maintained that the signs around the children's neck were the idea of the Somali interpreter and were 'for their own good.' When he was interviewed by military police in July 1994, Captain DeLallo felt himself to be the target of a government witch-hunt, presumably prompted by the furor over the torture and murder of Shidane Arone.<sup>13</sup>

What should we feel about six- to eight-year-old children being tied up, humiliated, and left to sit in the scorching sun for two hours? It may well be, as one journalist suggested, that Canadian peacekeepers were merely taking the advice of the local population in tying up the children and seeking to deter thievery through humiliation, although this explanation begs the question of whether we would have taken such advice if the children had been our own.<sup>14</sup> Seen alongside the 4 March and 16 March incidents, the videotapes, other incidents that would later come to light in a national inquiry, and subsequent military efforts to cover up what happened, the actions of peacekeepers seem far less benign than a cultural misunderstanding.

The first reports of what became known in Canada as the 'Somalia Affair' briefly highlighted for Canadians the connection between racism, peacekeeping, and the violent events we now know to be an aspect of most if not all peacekeeping ventures. The connection shook our sensibilities to the core, challenging as it did national claims to a special expertise in peacekeeping, and more importantly, to a history without racism. The flare died, however, as quickly as it was born. Today, despite a national inquiry into the deployment of troops to Somalia, what most Canadians are likely to associate with peacekeeping is the nation's glorious role as peacekeeper to the world,

and its traumatized heroes such as Roméo Dallaire. Few would now recognize the name of Shidane Arone and many would be outraged at the juxtaposition of the word peacekeeping with racial violence. At most, some would concede that what happened in Somalia was horrible, but they would put it down to a few ‘bad apples,’ bad generals, and a ‘rogue regiment,’ the latter now happily disbanded.

Racism has all but disappeared from public memory of the Somalia Affair, despite its early dramatic appearances in the photographs and films. ‘Spectacle,’ Toni Morrison writes, ‘is the best means by which an official story is formed and is a superior mechanism for guaranteeing its longevity. Spectacle offers signs, symbols and images that are more pervasive and persuasive than print which can smoothly parody thought.’<sup>15</sup> The official story that emerged from the spectacle of the Somalia Affair – a spectacle that began with photos of the violent death of a Black man in custody and Black children bound and humiliated – was that of a gentle, peacekeeping nation betrayed by a few unscrupulous men. Violence transformed into gold.

This book explores what racism had to do with the Somalia Affair, what it has to do with modern peacekeeping, and how it disappears in the law and in national memory. These three themes are pursued through an examination of the voluminous records of military trials and the public inquiry into the deployment of Canadian troops to Somalia. They are also pursued in the texts of popular culture where both national and international mythologies about peacekeeping in the post-cold war era can be tracked. I follow two racial stories. One is the story of the violence itself and what would drive men from the North to commit such atrocities against people of the South. This is a story about race and the masculinities that make the nation white. The second story, and in many respects the more significant one, concerns the ways in which peacekeeping violence is largely forgiven and ultimately forgotten, both erased and de-raced, when the story of the violence travels from the South to the North and enters legal arenas such as military trials and a national inquiry. Race disappears from public memory through a variety of tricks, and incidents of racial violence become transformed into something else, something we can live with. In place of racial epithets, humiliated children, and tortured, beaten, and executed bodies, a new story emerges about the heroism of the peacekeepers of Northern countries and the traumas *they* have had to endure as they go about the business of assisting Third World nations into modernity.

Why tell these two stories now? First, the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon and the resulting ‘war against terrorism’ have made us all aware, if we were not before, of the racial underpinnings of the New World Order. In this book, recalling W.E.B. Du Bois’s famous observation, I refer to these underpinnings as the colour line. Embedded deep within the conceptual foundations of the Bush administration’s notion of a life-and-death struggle against the ‘axis of evil’ is a thoroughly racial logic. Disciplining, instructing, and keeping in line Third World peoples who irrationally hate and wish to destroy their saviours (as Kipling’s poem predicted) derives from the idea that Northern peoples inhabit civilized lands while the South, in Chinua Achebe’s words, ‘is a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity into which the wandering European enters at his peril.’<sup>16</sup> On such battlefields, violence occurs with impunity and is often legally authorized. As it

was in Somalia in 1991, colour-line thinking was certainly in evidence in the American invasions of both Afghanistan in 2002 and Iraq in 2003, invasions justified on the ground that it was necessary to drop thousands of bombs on Afghans and Iraqis in order to save them from the excesses of their own society. For Kipling as for President George W. Bush, a savage war of peace 'To veil the threat of terror / And check the show of pride' is the West's burden to bear. Oil, the free market, and the historical support the United States has given to the Taliban and to Saddam Hussein, among other despotic regimes, all disappear under 'smart' bombs. Once the smoke clears, peacekeepers walk in.

Second, the legal transformation of peacekeeping violence into a story of Northern goodness and heroism tells us a great deal about *how* violence directed against bodies of colour becomes normalized as a necessary part of the civilizing process. National and international mythologies of heroic white people obliged to make the world safe for democracy and needing to employ violence to do so flood our airwaves. Saluting Noam Chomsky for having unmasked 'the ugly, manipulative, ruthless universe that exists behind that beautiful, sunny word "freedom,"' Arundhati Roy underlines this key feature of the New World Order: great crimes against humanity are committed in the name of justice and righteousness.<sup>17</sup> Law has an important role to play in this process, for it is in the courtroom and at hearings that a public truth is proclaimed about who we are as a people and as a nation. The explanatory frameworks utilized in the legal context reveal how racial hierarchies are organized through knowledge production. We see, for example, how the notion that Somalis possessed different values from ourselves enabled the court to understand that violence in such a setting was both normal and necessary. Such assumptions, racist in their origin and impact, enable us to know ourselves as superior. Examining legal narratives for the ways in which they organize how we come to know ourselves is a valuable undertaking if we are to dismantle those deeply internalized myths about our civilizing mission.

This book examines the eviction of Third World peoples from the realm of common humanity through a detailed look at one such legal encounter: the military trials and national inquiry into the deployment of Canadian troops to Somalia. Employing a case study such as the Somalia Affair to say something about the larger global story of racism and modern peacekeeping has an important advantage. The case-study approach provides an opportunity to examine up close how individuals perform national and international mythologies. Through a study of these performances we can move beyond the myths and the stories that nations and regions tell about their origins and history. We can begin to understand who people think they are and how this informs what they do. When Canadian peacekeepers went to Somalia, who did they think they were and what did they think they were doing in the hot desert of Belet Huen? By the same token, when a nation announces itself as peacekeeper to the world, and when its national subjects derive from this and related mythologies a sense of self, history, and place, what material structures and practices sustain these beliefs and are, in turn, sustained by them? And what racial hierarchies underpin and are supported by such apparently innocent beliefs? The hold that mythologies have should not be underestimated. They have the power to make a nation replace tortured and dead bodies with traumatized soldiers. Mythologies help the nation to forget its bloody past

and present. By showing in a context-specific way both how a racially specific national and international subject is performed, produced, and sustained and how such performances keep the global order in place, I hope most of all to reveal that subject's fictive and destructive core and to suggest another, more ethical way of imagining ourselves and of living in the world.

Du Bois, writing fifty years after his prophetic declaration that the colour line would remain the problem of the twentieth century, noted that behind the colour line was the fact that so many people were willing to live with its effects. Du Bois's insight that we are somehow able to live with the pernicious effects of the colour line suggests that it is imperative to understand how our daily participation in a colour-lined world is secured. In this study of peacekeeping violence, what is revealed is that we come to know ourselves in intimate ways *through* the colour line. A Canadian today knows herself or himself as someone who comes from the nicest place on earth, as someone from a peacekeeping nation, and as a modest, self-deprecating individual who is able to gently teach Third World Others about civility. So deep is this sense of self that it becomes inconceivable to imagine that Third World Others have any sort of personhood. Race, as Anthony Farley has written, drawing on Frantz Fanon and others, is a form of bodily pleasure and 'legal expressions of the colorline are, similarly, sensations that people have both in and about their bodies. The master and his slave may both come to see and feel themselves through the law that defines, commands, and is their expression of their situation.'<sup>18</sup> To unmake the colour line is to unmake ourselves. It is to give up race pleasure.

The colour line and the race pleasure on which it depends have a long history. As Kipling describes in his poem, 'savage wars of peace' were exactly how nineteenth-century colonial projects were characterized. When New World Order mythologies refer to the obligation of the First World, and the United States in particular, to teach the Third World about democracy, the underlying logic is the same as nineteenth-century colonialism and imperialism's notion of a civilizing mission. As Edward Said has often pointed out, imperialism is not just about accumulation but about the *idea* of empire. What distinguishes imperialist projects of the nineteenth century and of today from earlier empires is the idea that certain territories beseech and require domination. Empire is a structure of feeling, a deeply held belief in the need to and the right to dominate others *for their own good*, others who are expected to be grateful. The imperial past lives on in contemporary American proclamations of 'we are number one, we are bound to lead, we stand for freedom and order, and so on.'<sup>19</sup> Individuals come to define themselves within these scripts, believing deeply in 'the illusion of benevolence'<sup>20</sup> and requiring, as before, grateful natives.

In the chapters that follow, I show how modern peacekeeping is constructed as a colour line with civilized white nations standing on one side and uncivilized Third World nations standing on the other. In [chapter 1](#), this line is revealed in the peacekeeper as a figure who is entrusted with the task of sorting out the tribalisms and the warlords that have mysteriously sprung up in regions of the world where great evil dwells. Confronted with such savagery, peacekeepers can 'lose it,' either by descending into violence themselves or descending into madness. The traumatized peacekeeper, an important Canadian icon, is a man who bears witness to the savagery