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Good Intentions Aren't Enough: Intellectuals and Violence in Luis Goytisolo's *Mzungo*

Terri M. Carney

In the 1990s Luis Goytisolo explores the possibilities of popular fiction, adapting various genres (travel, mystery, erotic, historical) to accommodate his long-term project of unpacking Western Values. Indeed, Goytisolo's flirtation with the best-selling genre fiction constitutes a postmodern gesture of "complicitous critique."¹ For example, in *Escalera hacia el cielo* (1999) Goytisolo exploits the erotic genre to challenge the traditional paradigm of the dominant male gaze and the objectified female body and to offer instead expressions of mutuality.² In *Mzungo* (1996), Goytisolo engages the travel novel to undermine the culturally dominant position of the white European male who "discovers" an unknown culture/geography and explains it in terms of his own, which parades as universal. However, as opposed to the hopeful theme of mutuality we see in *Escalera hacia el cielo*, *Mzungo* offers a much darker vision of humanity and our potential for peaceful coexistence.

Mzungo mounts a self-conscious satire of the value of complicitous critique itself and the definition of agency it implies. In short, *Mzungo* raises questions about the validity of our postmodern notion that the best way to effect real change in a violent, dehumanizing world is to work against the injustice of a system from within the same system: to find "room for maneuver,"³ to be both inside and outside. The portrait of the intellectual in this allegorical novel leaves readers to wonder if the contemporary, liberal intellectual is dangerously disconnected from the social, political, and ecological problems that continue to ravage our world.

The value of complicitous critique itself is personified in the pantheon of liberal, well-educated, humanitarian protagonists, whose hopes for peace and justice in the world are satirically juxtaposed with their investment in the complex web of economic, political, and cultural interests of the West. The allegorical lesson suggests that an educated awareness of racism, xenophobia, and cultural differences, as reported by a liberal discourse of peace and tolerance, are simply not enough to end the violence between human beings.

Mzungo deals with a group of Europeans who travel to Africa on a cruise ship, which proves to be a microcosm of the machinations of post-colonial imperialism. The pampered European tourists are granted access to the exoticized African cultures from within the safety of their tourist bubble. In contrast with the white passengers, the ship's crew are dark-skinned "others," an issue

¹ See my study on his recent genre fiction: "Luis Goytisolo Beyond *Antagonía*: His Search for Agency in Democratic Spain." *Letras peninsulares*, 14.3, Winter 2001-02.

² See my study of this earlier novel published in *Romance Notes*, "Sex, the Body, and Human Subjectivity in Luis Goytisolo's Latest Novel *Escalera hacia el cielo*."

³ The title of Ross Chambers' book (*Room for Maneuver*) on the duplicitous dynamic of power and resistance.

Goytisolo foregrounds in the first page of his novel with the following conversation among white passengers:

—Se han dado cuenta de que la práctica totalidad de la tripulación es de color?

—Los oficiales superiores no.

[...]

—Más que de color podría decirse que son de colores: negros, chinos, mulatos, mestizos, indios, de todo.

[...]

—La verdad es que de los camareros no tengo ninguna queja. Son muy atentos. El único problema es que los confundo, todos me parecen iguales. (9)

The servile position of the people “de colores” parallels their lowly rank on a global economic hierarchy and renders them indistinguishable to those occupying the upper echelons, who look down at the masses from above.

Such cliché, xenophobic chatter typifies the communication between the white passengers, yet three of these characters consciously identify themselves as liberal intellectuals and strive to separate themselves ideologically from the others in their class, whom they disdainfully regard as unenlightened:

Tres profesiones, o mejor, tres modos de entender la vida que contrastaban incluso en las apariencias con el resto de los pasajeros, en su mayoría millonarios, jubilados ricos... seres de vida acomodada y ociosa que un buen día optan por dar la vuelta al mundo a fin de tener algo que contraer en el futuro, conscientes, al hacer recuento de su vida—el cole, la mili, la uni, la novia, el trabajo, la boda, los hijos, los nietos—de que nada de interés van a encontrar en el pasado. (13)

Armed with politically correct discourse that promotes equality, they decry the unjustly superior position of the Western world, all the while enjoying the benefits of their own membership in it.

One of these self-styled liberals is Henri, an ex-jesuit missionary who is now a director of a humanitarian aid organization. At one point in the story he tries to strangle his own wife, and he routinely employs derogatory stereotypes, yet his tolerant discourse remains constant: “Es la mala conciencia del blanco lo que hace que el pasaje siga viendo asechanzas donde no las hay. La crueldad con que el blanco ha tratado siempre a las demás razas es lo que inevitablemente la hace esperar el mismo trato” (10).

While Henri and the other hypocritical, self-appointed freethinkers cruise along the coast, readers are invited to follow the African adventures of three men who set foot on the continent: a Frenchman named Philippe, the Spaniard Felipe, and the Englishman Philip. Each of the “Phils” has an intercultural encounter that ends in tragedy, which has broader implications for the

possibility of peaceful coexistence among civilizations.⁴ In each case, the post-colonial tourist (modern-day colonialist) looks out over the authentic paradisiacal beauty of the foreign terrain from the comfortable perch of a hotel balcony or from the protected space of an automobile, exercising the Western will to power with their gaze (Moore-Gilbert on Edward Said, 54). All three long for an “authentic” encounter with the other culture and punctuate their daily movements in the foreign society with declarations of multicultural sensitivity and open-mindedness, yet such self-conscious, xenophilic gestures (or what Angelika Bammer calls “multicultural p.c.”) are mercilessly ironized throughout Goytisolo’s text.⁵ The fates of the three “Phils” echo the allegorical message of *Mzungu*: xenophilia and xenophobia traffic in the same violent dynamic of objectifying and therefore dehumanizing the other. My reading of the three “Phils” proposes that they are:

someone for whom the other is a source of curiosity and exoticized interest; an object of study. For a pluralist aesthete (even one imbued with multicultural p.c.) the other is not a subject with whom to engage in an attempt to understand what “difference” really means—what it has meant historically and what it feels like—but an object to be taken up in the self-serving quest for stimulation, entertainment, or new markets. The problem, as Spivak here and elsewhere insistently point out, lies, not in our intentions, but in the systemic violences of which we are a part and from w which we, willy-nilly, profit. (emphasis mine. Bammer, 47)

It would seem then, that “good intentions,” under the umbrella of xenophilia, are not a viable alternative to xenophobia.

Desperate to access behind the scenes of the photos they see in the travel brochures, each of the Phils pursues knowledge of the other culture (objectifying sense) to a dark, even violent end. This drive to know does not lead to mutual understanding, but rather to violence on both the interpersonal and intercultural levels. Felipe kills a native girl over a miscommunication about a pair of boots, Philippe becomes trapped on a remote island that is closed off for political reasons, and Philip is burned alive when his drive kills a village boy in a car accident.

Philippe the Frenchman works for a humanitarian aid association for the Third World, and on his trip to Africa he replays a somewhat formulaic discourse on multicultural appreciation over and over in his head:

⁴ For a related, brief treatment of this novel, see my earlier publication in *Letras peninsulares*, “Luis Goytisolo Beyond *Antagonía*: His Search for Agency in Democratic Spain” (495-96).

⁵ “Spivak sees the nostalgia for the ‘authentic’ Third World subject as deriving in part from the West, where many ‘radicals’ (like consumers who prize the genuine ‘ethnic’ product) prefer the subjects of their benevolent attention to be as ‘pure’ as possible.” (Bammer, 86) “Whether the object of ‘ethnocentric scorn’ in the imperial period, or of ‘hyperbolic admiration’ today, the sub-altern’s function (and subject-position) remains primarily constituted by the West.” (Bammer, 90).

Aquello era el Africa real, no un lugar de catástrofes al que había que acudir como una boy scout que participa en un simulacro de emergencia. Tenía que desprenderse de toda clase de prejuicios y aprensiones impropios, cuando no ridículos, por solapados que fueran. Y, por encima de cualquier otra consideración, debía esforzarse en aprender las sutilezas y finuras de una cultura tal vez ni mejor ni peor que la suya, de una cultura sencillamente diferente. (42)

Philippe is delighted at the opportunity to see the local sights as a passenger in a car driven by a real local: “Por eso detestaba el turismo de los ricos, que viajan sin enterarse de nada...nunca me quedaría en un hotel de lujo” (51). Eagerly wanting to apprehend the essence of the alien culture, Philippe remembers reading about an African custom, “collarín,” and asks his interpreter, Lyn, about it:

Una costumbre que se practica en otros países del continente. En Africa del sur, en Nigeria. Al que atropella a alguien, le encajan una vieja cubierta de goma, le rocían de gasolina y le prenden fuego [...] En Europa todo el mundo lo sabe. Se ha hablando en los periódicos, se han publicado fotos, yo mismo las he visto.

Lyn responds, “ ¡Pero eso es horrible!” assuring him that she has never heard of such a thing. Moments later, in an ironic twist, a young village boy runs out in front of her car and is killed on impact. Lyn jumps out of the car and screams, pointing to Philippe: “¡Aquí! ¡Asesino!” (55). Several sweaty men pull the dumbfounded Frenchman out of the car, dislocate his arms and ankles, hang him up, throw gas on him and burn him to a crisp. In the meantime Lyn hitches a ride back to town with a passing friend, unshaken and seemingly unaffected by the barbaric scene. Though armed with knowledge of the culture and a desire to experience its “authenticity,” Philippe still finds himself poorly equipped for a mutually productive intercultural encounter. His voracious curiosity about local customs gains him first-hand knowledge that produces his death. Indeed, Phil’s obsession with the barbaric custom “collarín” has not exempted him from its real violence, which leaves us to wonder about the value of cultural studies and to question our hierarchies that privilege academic knowledge over experience.

When we first encounter Felipe the Spaniard it seems as though he has managed to surpass the commodified tourist experience and “go native” among an aboriginal African tribe, but soon he joins his onomastic counterpart Philippe in the punishing logic of Goytisolo’s allegory. This section of the novel opens with Felipe talking with a tribal king and admiring his weapons and poison darts. However, as the focalizing apparatus pans out we are suddenly aware that this tribe is nothing more than a stop on the tourist trail, replete with ice cream vendors and a taxi stand. We are introduced to a vision of Africa as a complex hybrid of influences and traditions, and Felipe (and the reader) is denied access to a pure untouched Africa he imagines and desires.⁶

⁶ See Smith (304-5) on the desire for an untouched landscape as affirmation of the observer’s “true” self.

El jefe de la tribu, el rey,...iba cubierto únicamente por una larga falda a cuadros y sonreía casi amorosamente mientras accedían el pequeño porche. El mayor, en cambio, llevaba pantalones cortos y una camisa desteñida...La casa era igual a las restantes del poblado, dispersas todas ellas entre pequeños cultivos y papayos. Las había construido el gobierno en sustitución de sus antiguas cabañas. (133)

Faded T-shirts and standardized housing recall teenage rebels and suburban life in the West, and such cultural interference short circuits Felipe's self-affirming, self-reflexive gaze at the other, which is now blurred with haunting images of the self. At the end of his visit with the tribe, Felipe buys himself a cervatana and returns to his lodge, where he overhears fellow guests discussing the bothersome beggars littering the streets and the airport: "Estropean la magia de llegar a un paraíso como éste, sin televisión y sin fax" (136). The omnipresence of the beggars and the tribesman clad in Gap-like American clothes speak to the intercultural influences through permeable borders. These conditions defy idealized visions of otherness and attest to the messy negotiations that constitute cultural interactions, interactions not of discovery/dominance but rather of mutual exchange (including resistance) across economic, political, and cultural borders. While these conditions are not necessarily "cooperative," they are surely jointly significant.

Felipe's glossy tourist experience eventually takes on a very dark tenor. On his sightseeing trip to Agua Honda, Felipe misplaces his "cervatana" and spends the afternoon on the phone trying to locate the treasured souvenir. With no luck, he decides he will cross the small island on foot, and leaves the hotel armed with an anorak, boots, and a camera. When he leaves the hotel, two small native girls approach him and ask him for his boots: "Para mi padre" she says. Felipe brushes them off, annoyed, and continues on. While in the forest he is hit on the back of the neck and blacks out, only to awaken with the sensation of someone tugging on his boots. When he opens his eyes he sees the little girl:

Se sentó de golpe y sujetó a la niña por el cuello. La niña chilló un pájaro. Felipe se incorporó, levantándola también. La niña apenas pesaba, pero se agitaba como un manojo de nervios, intentando solarse, patalear, gorgotear. Le aplicó un brusco movimiento de torsión al cráneo y los nervios se aflojaron. Envolvió el pequeño cuerpo en el anorak: doblado, podía llevarlo perfectamente bajo un solo brazo, como si fuera un fardo de ropa [...] Entreabrió el anorak y lanzó su contenido contra una pared rocosa. Volvió sobre sus pasos sin mirar atrás. Llovía de nuevo. (157)

Later that day, on the airplane headed home, he thinks to himself: "Bien. En cualquier caso no podían probar nada. A otra cosa. La cervatana" (163). After murdering the girl

and dumping her limp body in Agua Honda, Felipe's thoughts return to the cervatana—to his lost souvenir/trophy of his African adventure. In our post-colonial tourist model of cultural imperialism, the souvenir stands as a reified symbol of the objectified, conquered other. Although Felipe is confident that the crime cannot be traced back to him, (and he might be right) the allegory renders a different verdict. He has effected irreversible change in the lives of many people—we read about the devastated family's reaction—in a violent interpersonal and intercultural encounter. It is significant that he must leave Africa without his prized souvenir; his African experience exceeds the neatness of a keepsake purchase that would tidily position him as “owner” of a travel experience.

Our third Phil is the Englishman, Philip, and like the other two Phils he is denied any innocent exterior position from the host culture and indeed is literally engulfed by Africa. If the Frenchman desired to know more about a barbaric custom and found his answer at the price of his own death, the Englishman follows a comparable course in paradox and irony: his desire to know a particular region in Africa is satisfied when he becomes a political prisoner of said region when it shuts down all connections with the outside world indefinitely.

Philip's desire to return to Río Frondoso is nostalgic—his military parents were stationed there when he was a young boy and his memories of the place are those of lush green landscapes and the warmth of family, images imbued with a pastoral quality that eschews the political, social, and cultural significance of American military presence in Africa.⁷ If Phil's return carries with it a residue of Western military intervention, in the allusion to his military parents, his subsequent entrapment in the host culture results directly from contemporary forms of Western cultural imposition on the myriad of African realities. Ironically, Philip ends up trapped in Río Frondoso because the regional leader cannot meet the stringent demands of an international ecological organization, which is led by the United States. This organization would require the local government to shut down their aluminum mine, their sole source of income. The leader criticized Philip's culture: “Se diría que para ustedes un árbol vale más que una persona” (100). But he goes on to reassure Philip: “Tarde o temprano se van a reanudar los vuelos. Y, no se preocupe, no vamos a dejar que la selva se coma nuestro aeropuerto.” The airport engulfed by the jungle and disconnected from the outside world is a sardonic fulfillment of Philip's wish to return to an idealized, unchanged Africa he remembered. The allegory seems to warn: Watch out for what you wish for because it might reconfigure your life of privilege in ways you didn't imagine.

Clearly the stories of the three Phils and their African quests invite an allegorical reading of Western man, who continues the colonial project through more insidious methods, here disguised as xenophilia, where the Western I seeks reflection in an idealized vision

that denies the historical past of Western colonialism and oppositional responses that create multifaceted and ever-changing hybrid cultures. The totalizing (albeit well-intentioned) gaze is denied any neat packaging of these cultural webs: “Xenophilia is a step outside that process, an act of imaginative projection into the culture of an other rather than the mutually challenging process of intra- and intercultural engagement.” (Bammer, 50)

The figure of the enlightened, multicultural p.c. tourist embodies a pervasive ignorance of the complex web of interchanges that connect us to other world societies and bring us face to face with our responsibility in the real material conditions, however unappealing, that shape their everyday realities. The drive to exoticize, to imagine an authentic Africa, is violence couched in innocence. We are denied the pleasure of witnessing a pristine other that would affirm our identity: we are confronted with our cultural accountability in creating the conditions that pollute our dream of the uncharted cultural, geographical space.

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