

Developing a world view through a diversity of voices: A Reflection

By David Rinehart

The poems in this book give us the unique opportunity to explore the thoughts and imagination of people from a diversity of backgrounds and experiences. Some were born and raised in Ireland; some have come to live in Ireland from different countries including Nigeria, America, and Cyprus, while others currently live in other countries around the world. Many of the poets share a common sentiment of how tired, distressed and enraged they are by the vast array of social problems smattered across our globe. These voices resonated with me, reminding me of stories I heard in the United States, my home country. The global North and the global South share an unjust and lopsided history, yet *we*, those of us reading this book, those of us who are activists, those of us who are poets and writers and academics, *we* are coming together to demand justice, equality, and to save our planet.

I moved to Ireland in August of 2018. It was then, through the Maynooth University Ken Saro-Wiwa archive, that I learned the story of Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Ogoni 9 which shed light on egregious acts of violence and injustice in Nigeria. With a background in Latin American Studies, parts of this story felt familiar to me and drew me in. Now, working in Special Collections & Archives at Maynooth University Library, I'm in an incredibly privileged position to have a small part in this story, to contribute my very own words, experience, and knowledge. For this, I am very grateful.

The essays and poems in this book shed light on the many malignant ways in which capitalism and colonialism have wreaked havoc on our world. These forces destroy our planet, shape and sharpen racial tension and violence, widen the wealth gap, fuel sexism, encourage xenophobia and anti-immigration sentiment, and the list grows on. Some of the poems in the School Category in this collection describe a doomed earth where drilling for oil, the overproduction of plastic, and the politics that keep these dirty practices moving are destroying our planet, and subsequently their dreams. The anxiety these students feel, which is also evident in some of the poems in the adult category, is tangible and readers will be able to relate to this. It is but another consequence of global hypercapitalism and colonialism. These symptoms of capitalism are felt here as much as anywhere else. Take the Americas as an example.

In the Americas, the modern imperial force known as the United States of America has manipulated elections, staged coups, and allowed unimaginable violence to sweep the region so that foreign interests, namely American corporations, can stake their claims to land and benefit from cheap labour. These regimes smack down labour unions, tear apart labour laws, and take away the rich and fertile land from its own people. For example, in the 1950's, Jacobo Árbenz

became the second democratically elected president in the more than 100 years of Guatemala's independence. He ran on a platform of agrarian reform. Árbenz wanted to take the *unused* land owned by foreign corporations, namely the United Fruit Company, and give it back to the Guatemalan people. The United Fruit Company had majorly powerful stockholders in the US government, such as the Dulles Brothers, John and Allen, who were respectively the Secretary of State and Director of the CIA. The company was concerned about Árbenz ideas and his popularity. The CIA staged a successful coup d'état.¹ This has been followed by decades of violence, poverty, coups, and corrupt governing. One of the largest groups of immigrants undergoing a dangerous journey and seeking asylum in the United States are Guatemalans. The United States is doing everything it can to prevent entry and those who do get in, work hard long days for less than the minimum wage, which is already far less than a living wage. When I learned about the Ogoni people, which told a story of corporate greed and personal wealth at the cost of others' health, wellbeing, peace, and land use, it reminded me of the story of Guatemala and the United Fruit Company.

Whether it is Guatemala or Nigeria, or any other countries, the story is similar enough for us to recognise a global trend: a trend in which imperialism has transformed into global capitalism. We see the so-called "developed world" profiting from the labour and land of the so-called "under-developed" world. The global North reaping the benefits and raping the land of the global South. We see people fleeing their homes, not because they want to, but because they have no other choice. Liam O'Neill's poem, *Doctor Osman*, describes something I am sure many of us have felt at some moment:

At night, in Ireland, I settle down to watch a movie.
At night, in Sudan, more innocent people are being dragged
into 'ghost houses' to be injected with poisons.

The same powers taking advantage of these countries, are putting up borders and illegalizing and marginalizing the very people most affected by their actions.

Eilish Fisher, in her work *Night Feedings*, exposes the monstrous, centuries old genocidal and racist practices implemented by the United States of dehumanizing 'others.' In this case, those dehumanized are migrants from the global South. These practices are so ugly that they go as far as to separate parents and children from each other, keeping children in cages, like animals. To give context to these practices: when the United States established what is referred to as the Prevention Through Deterrence policy back in 1994, namely putting up a physical border and increasing the amount of Border Patrol agents, it was acknowledged that it would

¹ Schlesinger, S., & Kinzer, S. (2005). *Bitter fruit: The story of the american coup in Guatemala*. Cambridge (Massachusetts): Harvard University, David Rockefeller center for Latin American Studies.

lead to migrant deaths at the hands of the cruel desert climate. They called these deaths unavoidable 'collateral damage.' Since 1998, over seven thousand migrants have died in the desert according to the U.S. Border Patrols own statistics². This does not include the thousands of migrants who have been declared missing. To add fuel to the fire, private prison corporations such as CoreCivic, inc. (formerly known as CCA), make billions of dollars a year for holding migrants in their euphemistically named 'detention centers.' They make 160 dollars per person per day, giving them incentive to overcrowd and to lobby for stricter border policies.³

Those of us who recognize this violence and oppression need to be heard: to remain silent is to be complicit. That is what I understand Ken Saro-Wiwa to mean by Silence is Treason, or the trope we hear throughout the global Black Lives Matters movement, Silence is Complicity. With that in mind, I would like to reflect on Ken Saro-Wiwa's words,

As we subscribe to the sub-normal and accept double standards, as we lie and cheat openly, as we protect injustice and oppression, we empty our classrooms, denigrate our hospitals, fill our stomachs with hunger and elect to make ourselves the slaves of those who ascribe to higher standards.⁴

Reading the entries to the Ken Saro-Wiwa Poetry Competition strengthened my sense of solidarity with oppressed people everywhere. . Some of the poets write about migration. Some reflect on homes and lands left behind, such as Lind Grant-Oyeye in *African Refugee*, or what their bodily experience is in this world, which we feel viscerally in Chiamaka Enyi-Amadi's *The Misrecognition of Bodies as Thorns*. Some of these poets, like me, have been raised and socialized by the global North and are waking from a hazy dream to see this western world for what it is, an ugly dragon hoarding gold and hurting those who come near.

These poems give us the most empathetic tool imaginable, to view the world through the eyes of others. You'll hear the beauty of humanity, people who enjoy entertainment, who struggle to raise their children, who love infinitely, who strive, who feel, who cry and laugh. We can smell, taste and feel what the poet smell, tastes and feels, like the smell of "Grandma smoking fish," in Philomena Obasi's poem *Smell of the Fish*. In just a few lines, we can be someone else, experience as someone else, understand someone else, and, from that, we become

² Southwest Border Deaths by Fiscal Year. (2019). Retrieved September 2, 2020, from https://web.archive.org/web/20190109174045/https://www.cbp.gov/sites/default/files/assets/documents/2017-Dec/BP_Southwest_Border_Sector_Deaths_FY1998_-_FY2017.pdf

³ Rinehart, D. C. (2018). *Walking the Fine Line: Legal Precarity Along the U.S. - Mexico Border* (Unpublished master's thesis). University of Florida.

⁴ Dickson, A. (2005, November 10). Against forgetting. Retrieved September 02, 2020, from <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/culturevultureblog/2005/nov/10/againstforgett>

a better more complete person. We get a taste of humanity and what it is as a whole. We nurture and grow our empathy. This should ignite a desire within us to keep reading, to keep learning, to keep listening. Poetry is a tool to look outward at the world and also to look inward, to understand others and the effect of our actions as a global community on others.

I cannot speak for those of you whom I consider myself an ally, what I can do, is tell you that I am here, and I am listening. I will follow your lead and learn from you only when and if you want to teach me. I will not pressure you or ask you, I will simply keep my eyes and ears open for those of you who are speaking and writing and painting and playing. I have learned so much from you and I have so much more to learn. The best lesson I have learned, as of yet, is that being anti-racist, an ally, a feminist, open minded and loving is a process that lasts our whole lives. It's a way of living, not an accomplishment.

These poems, the work of Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Ogoni 9 and the work of Maynooth University Library in keeping Ken Saro-Wiwa's work and words alive, has helped shape me and helped guide me on this journey. The voices in these poems and essays have helped me develop my understanding of the world I am fighting for. These words show us what the world is, what the world should and should not be and how we can work together to achieve justice and equality.