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A Review

Susan Akono, *WMD: The Weapons of My Disappointment*

Insch, Scotland: Lipstick Publishing, 2004
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This book-length extended essay from Susan Akono¹ marks a welcome intervention into the contemporary political crisis that was inaugurated by the attack on America's financial and military centres in September 2001 by Islamic fundamentalist terrorists, and the subsequent attacks on Afghanistan and above all Iraq by America and its coalition of subordinates. Akono speaks from a position that has had little profile in media debates on Bush's and Blair's terror war on terrorism. She speaks as a woman, as a mother, and as a black African born in Cameroon but now living with her white husband in Britain. The essay form typically does speak in personal and openly subjective (but not unreasoned) ways. It also typically mixes writing modes and Akono, who also writes fiction, does something of that here, populating the essay with "characters" such as her son and her grandfather, recounting memories and conversations in detail, and using parables and allegories to make her points. We learn early on that her grandfather, haunted by his own memories of colonial oppression, castigated her for her choice of partner. Coming from a country that had been, like all

of Africa, subjected to Western colonialism, Akono's trenchant critique of the contemporary imperialism strutting the world stage, is all the more powerful.

After a prologue in which she articulates her fears for the future to her young son, Akono begins with an open letter to Tony Blair. He is one of her biggest WMDs—for mass disappointment is a weapon when it spurs people on to think critically about the society in which they live. Like many, Akono had some hopes that Tony Blair would be a different sort of political leader, but those hopes were shattered by his “servile complicity”² with US imperialism and his rhetoric which is designed to conceal “the well-known link between terrorism and imperialism.”³ She sees Bush and Blair as the mirror opposites of the Islamic fundamentalists who are drawn from the wealthy elite ranks of their own societies and who, like Bush and Blair, care nothing for real improvement in the lives of ordinary people.

The fallibility of Blair, however, is of course not simply an individual failing. The second chapter discusses the hijacking of western democracy by the “excessive greed and dehumanisation of almighty business people.”⁴ Here her addressee shifts to the American people after she recounts her racist treatment and harassment by a US airline, after 9/11. Akono reminds her readers that the West generally, and America especially, in the pursuit of its foreign policy aims, has cultivated tyrants like Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein for a long time. This history of collaboration is rarely mentioned in the mainstream media and when it is acknowledged, it is implied that now “we” are bringing democracy to places like Iraq, this represents a break from previous policies. Actually Bush's favourite word is not democracy, which still retains some faint friction with western imperialism, but *freedom* because in his mouth, the word freedom refers to the *freedom of capital*. Thus in an era of multinational institutions and transnational corporations which have diminished the

independent room for manoeuvre of the nation-state, the West has discovered the virtue of “democracy” for its former colonies, at the very moment that its practice has become increasingly hollowed out and rendered impotent as a means for meaningful public discussion of choices and agendas. As Akono notes, Bush and co. “will only tolerate an American puppet, *never* a genuine democratic leader who will subordinate US interests to the welfare of his/her compatriots.”⁵ The skilful manipulation of public opinion continues today, after the Iraqi elections, with much talk of a US/UK “exit strategy,” when, in reality, Iraq will have American troops on its soil in permanent bases for many years to come.

Akono calls on the western public for a fundamental change of consciousness to secure their own protection. This change of consciousness would require breaking with their political leaders and transforming western foreign policy towards the developing world. In a neat subversion of western racism, she asks for the western public to break their own “tribal syndrome”⁶—those deeply rooted cultural reflexes that bond them to their rapacious and ruthless leaders; that bond them to an implicit sense of superiority, and that blind them to the utterly self-interested use of military force abroad. In her final chapter Akono writes of her disappointment that her righteous sympathy as a young girl for the Jews, after learning about the Holocaust, clashed with the subsequent historical narrative in which a Zionist state dispossessed the Palestinians and continues to oppress them today. Akono makes an important distinction between groups engaged in armed struggle for the genuine emancipation of oppressed groups, such as the PLO, and Al-Qaeda, who were formerly the creatures of American policy in the fight against communism. This is an important distinction and one that needs to be more thoroughly thought out by all progressives. But ultimately, the political responsibility for all those who live in the West, is not to

moralise about the tactics or aims of all those who are fighting against western imperialism today, but to put pressure on their respective governments to withdraw militarily from the developing world and the world's trouble spots (including the selling of arms) and to press for eradicating the injustice and poverty that ultimately feeds violence. Akono, who now straddles both "worlds," helps us in that task.

¹ Susan Akono's essay "An Unfinished Business" may be seen in *EnterText* 4.2.

² Susan Akono, *WMD—The Weapons of My Disappointment* (Insch, Scotland: Lipstick Publishing, 2004), 15.

³ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 100.