

Airport Theatre, African Villain

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Airport security officials in America are taking extraordinary interest in passengers' crotches. The authorities assure us that the latest nefarious tactic of the fanatical acolytes of bearded men in the borderlands between Afghanistan and Pakistan is to hide explosives in the crotch area and to blow themselves and their fellow passengers out of the sky. No stone is being left unturned to prevent such atrocities. The Transportation Security Administration (TSA), with a very American faith in the power of technology, has deployed a new machine called an Advanced Imaging Technology (AIT) unit. Its X-rays pierce the shell of your clothes, exposing your naked body to the security personnel operating the unit, and thus presumably preventing you from smuggling anything harmful on board. You might, of course, have the explosives or drugs inside you but that little problem is not the topic of this essay and will have to wait for an American machine that looks all the way into your large intestine.

It was months after learning of the existence of this machine that I came to suspect that it could only have been designed by a man who, like me, read lots of superhero comics in the 1970s and 1980s. If you did, then you might recall that most of them had advertisements for USD1 X-ray glasses, toward the back pages: 'See through fingers, see through skin, see yolk of egg, see lead in pencil ... yours to see always, when you wear Slimline X-ray Specs.'

The genius who invented the AIT unit is putting its predecessor – designed to expose metallic objects of a certain size – out of commission. This new machine and its flesh-baring capabilities is the darling of the new best practice for American security officials, whose foremost intention is to let us to know that they will do anything to keep their skies safe.

A combination of factors has helped bring this new technology to the fore. The first being Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, the young Nigerian, who boarded a flight to Detroit on Christmas Day in 2009 and unsuccessfully tried to detonate explosives hidden in his underwear. Barely a month earlier, there had been reports of the arrest of an unidentified Somali man in possession of powdered chemicals, liquid and a syringe as he was attempting to board a plane in Mogadishu for a flight to Dubai, via the northern city of Hargeisa and Djibouti. You might also recall Richard Reid, the attempted shoe-bomber and of course the box-cutter hijackers of 11 September 2001. It is doubtful that the AIT unit would have done a better job than the older machines at stopping most of these attackers.

What is not in doubt is that planes are irresistible magnets for men with a cause and that security officials who want to keep their jobs must be seen to be trying to thwart such murderous plots. Hijacking a plane, blowing it up or flying it into a skyscraper, guarantees instant publicity in the competitive world of insurgency-against-Western-power. Abdulmutallab made headlines

at precisely the moment that this new body-baring technology was being marketed for wider use and the Obama administration was looking to stimulate a shattered domestic economy. The result was the purchase of many of the new scanners with funds from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. Unfortunately for the US President's underlings, this touch of Obamaesque technocratic ambition is being looked at askance by Americans, who are well aware of their right to privacy and thus are less than comfortable with the idea of their love handles and man breasts being ogled by TSA employees. Their fears are not unfounded. Last year, an airport screener was arrested for assaulting a co-worker who, having seen a shot of him on the AIT unit, asked him, 'What size are you?' His line of defense was that the inquiry as to his penile proportions amounted to 'psychological torture'.

With any African who has ever applied for a visa to a Western country, the poor man's suffering would immediately strike a chord. Indeed, Africans who travel to Europe and North America have long been subjected to invasions of privacy and dignity that are harsher than anything the AIT unit and its giggling operators can dish out. The AIT unit might appear as little more than a form of theatre to the currently offended Western punditocracy – a lame attempt by the government to assure the public that it is safe, and not a real countermeasure to the determined terrorist. But that this form of theatre extends beyond airport security for the average African is barely acknowledged.

The best way to understand this system is to follow an African through it as he labours under seemingly automatic suspicion of being a criminal element; of carrying drugs up his anus; of malintent to fleece the social welfare system; and/or of contributing to the further soiling of a pure Western culture with his odd religions and smelly foods. For the African, the security theatre has no façade, whether it is practiced in an embassy or on the streets of any Western city. He is the first to suffer the indignities that are inherent in the oppressive and suppressive practices of the West.

If you are an African who wants to leave his country for another, you start by asking yourself whether or not you need to apply for a visa. In case the journey is to a neighboring country or to China for instance, this is a relatively easy procedure. But such is not the case if the intended journey is to the West. The visa requirements to any part of Europe or North America are laid out in exacting legalese. Reading this list, you receive the first intimation that getting to the West is a going to be a battle between your will to go and a rich and powerful government's determination to keep you out. Success is conditional on palavering with a variety of *mzungu* bureaucrats before travelling to their country – in other words negotiating a geography of power that demands constant shifts and emphasis in communicating your identity.

Western visa application forms commonly demand a written invitation from an individual or institution, proof of sufficient funds to make the trip and sustain yourself financially during your stay and proof that you have the incentive to return home after the visit. The great difficulty of fulfilling these requirements confirms just how correct your cousin's letters from Paris are about pots of gold and easy French girls waiting for you on the Champs-Élysées. After all, why would anyone work so hard to keep something that was not exceedingly pleasant from you?

Many people give up at an early stage, but there are hardier types who, after weighing the costs, decide that the only visa they need is a bus ticket across the Sahara and cash to pay a smuggler for the dangerous leaky boat trip across the Mediterranean. Other innovative souls monitor global headlines on the present state of rape, dismemberment, discrimination and murder in their country. After careful calculation, on the advice of the cousin in Paris who is au fait with which stories of atrocities are currently resonating with the refugee processing office, a story is concocted and a long trek made to a neighboring country's United Nations refugee office to demand asylum.

The better-off embark on a mission to subvert their countries' laws and regulations. They bribe bank officials for fake income statements showing balances with many zeros; costly certificates boasting of brilliant academic achievements are pried from school and ministry of education officials; and immigration officials get *backsheesh* for a speedily processed passport with the appropriate date of birth. These documents are kept in a large brown envelope that slowly, torturously becomes thicker in direct proportion to your shrinking wallet.

Long before you get to the West, you have become, strictly speaking, a criminal. Perversely, this is the very reason Western countries give for making the visa application so difficult. Underlying all the forms and procedures is a single question: Why are *you*, out of the teeming, desperate millions who want nothing but to live abroad, *the one who deserves* the opportunity to travel to that glittering city on a hill?

Your visit to the embassy commonly begins at the break of dawn. A queue of men and women, like you holding brown envelopes and dressed in their Sunday best, stands outside the high walls. Cameras swivel to gaze at you. The guards at the gate are neater and more efficient than you have ever seen men in uniform. You teeter between heady excitement and stomach-churning nervousness and worry about the debts you have incurred to get the chance to stand there in the cold.

The thoroughness of the security check depends on the country you are trying to get to. The American embassy appears terribly threatened for such a powerful country. Its walls and gates are ready to withstand a three-year siege by the hordes from hell. The Swiss on the other hand, who live under the profitable illusion that they have no enemies, are as inviting as a bank branch. Leaving behind the local security guards, you enter the West for the first time. It is steely quiet, with lawns so manicured that they must have used sophisticated lasers to cut the grass. And clean, so very clean. You might not know it then, but that is the moment that the West begins to fuck with your mind.

A young white person interviews you – possibly the first white person you have ever had a conversation with. She already looks irritated by your pleading eyes and sweaty face. You slide the contents of the brown envelope under the glass and shift from foot to foot. Like a man marrying a powerful politician's daughter, you have a hollow, lightheaded feeling. You try to remember answers to the questions you have been told to prepare for. And when she asks those very questions, it is as if this is the first time you have ever heard them. They fly out of her mouth like angry bees: 'Why do you want to go to Paris?; How will you afford it?; When will you come back?; Why should I believe you?; Do you have relatives in Paris?; Are

they working?; What is your real name?; This degree you say you have, what is the subject about?’ She does this a hundred times a day so you feel she might be looking into your future in *her* Paris, a place you are determined to never leave until you have the money you did all this lying for.

True story. I was applying for my first visa at the American embassy one afternoon in the late 1980s, when a famous Kenyan musician and television host walked into the waiting room – his hair in a curly kit, dressed all in white, and replete with, I kid you not, a white Michael Jackson glove. But walking is not the right way to describe his gait. He was doing the ‘bop’ we used to see black Americans doing on television. A cool expression and a high step with the feet thrown forward, shoulders still and held slightly back, one hand in the pocket and the other one dangling casually. The whole room sat up straighter, visa question strategies forgotten for the moment. The rest of us, squares all, were in ties and blazers or below-the-knee ribbony dresses. This new arrival was the coolest thing that Kenya had produced that decade, and I for one had no doubt that here was a man who was ensured 100 per cent success in his application for a visa.

His name was called over the loudspeaker and he ‘bopped’ over to the application window. I couldn’t hear everything he said, but there was no mistaking the *ngwee-ngwee* American accent he was throwing skillfully at the woman behind the glass, repeating over and over that he had a concert to throw somewhere in America. Her questions were equally difficult to make out but their impact was clear. His cool pose soon crumbled and our star’s accent began to sound a bit rural. Eventually he ran out of angles and turned to walk quickly out of the room, bop forgotten.

Back to *the* story. You get your visa and are headed to the airport, at last, to America. You really are leaving. The boarding gates have exotic names like Bangkok, Frankfurt, Paris and Addis Ababa. The shops bear goods you have never seen before and the prices can only be an April Fools’ Day joke. You are X-rayed one final time before walking toward the entrance of the plane. This journey down the padded passageway becomes a banal detail once you’ve flown a few times. But the first time you walk that gangway, it is mindblowing – never have you walked through a steel tube to anywhere. Just a few metres and you have already walked across continents. The cabin attendant, white (especially if the airline is European or American) with equally gleaming teeth, takes your boarding pass and with a practiced nudge to the shoulder pushes you down the correct aisle. Experienced passengers are already seated, opening their newspapers and taking off their shoes. You, on the other hand, have never read numbers with such ferocious attention as you do now, looking for your seat.

By the time the announcements are finished warning you not to smoke, to keep your seat upright, your table folded, your luggage out of the aisle, to switch off your mobile phone and to fasten your seat-belt, you are in a highly disciplined state. The safety instructions warn you that you are about to die. The one about putting on your oxygen mask before your child’s might be accurate as far as emergency procedures go, but it feels deeply alien to any survival code you have ever considered. But you listen carefully. Wanting to know precisely where the parachutes are, how to deploy the inflatable emergency chute and how to bend forward, head cupped between your arms to brace for impact.

These drills are in reality about only two things: reassurance and control. Reassurance because the idea that you will survive in a tube of steel falling out of the sky by putting your forearms against your ears is laughable; equally, that you will be able to breathe in oxygen when the masks fall from the ceiling, the siren goes off and you are alternating between screaming and hyperventilating with terror. Nowadays, they have abandoned the parachute pretense, but that

certainly was good for a laugh. As for the emergency chute, I cannot imagine the people seated near the emergency exits waiting to help some fat stranger from the back rows bail out before they escape with flames licking at their heels.

Here is the simple fact: plane accidents are rare but if they happen, you are a goner. But this is the last thing that airlines want you to dwell on. The other aim of these onboard instructions is control. The pilots and cabin crew want you to do precisely what you are told. Their many restrictions are there to ensure that, for the course of the flight, you are a hypnotised, needy creature who knows only to open your mouth to shovel in food and drink. It is highly likely that the world's worst dictators learnt their techniques as young men flying in economy class. This process of control begins at the embassy and continues at the airport, during your flight and indeed follows you through much of your immigrant existence.

So finally you land. In Paris' Charles De Gaulle airport, the police meet flights from Africa at the door. The cabin attendant might be smiling goodbye at you but the black-clad policeman has never in his life smiled at an African disembarking from an airplane. At Dulles airport in Washington DC, they sometimes ask passengers from Accra or Addis Ababa to get out of the plane and line up facing the wall of the passageway to the terminal. Then they walk a big German Shepherd dog along the row and it sniffs at you, so close that sometimes its nose touches the back of your thighs or your buttocks. You are neither told what they are looking for, nor are you asked whether you are willing to be searched. It is terrifying, especially for people who have grown up in countries in which dogs are kept as guards against criminals and are trained to attack. It is particularly unpleasant if you have been kind enough to carry in your hand luggage the smoked fish that your cousins begged for. The dog pauses above your bag long enough for you to suspect yourself of smuggling in cocaine by the kilo.

You follow the rest of the passengers to the immigration desks that are the final hurdle in your long journey. Here is where the complaints of Americans about the AIT unit are made to look like child's play. You stand in a long snaking line with other non-Americans, clutching your passport and entry forms. All the white people in the queue who are travelling to visit Disneyland or to cut deals on Wall Street look relaxed and bored. The Africans are visibly tense and keep glancing at their papers. There are men with guns walking around, fingers close to the trigger and benches holding Africans who have been detained for failing to deliver a correct response to an immigration officer's questions. These vary from relatively simple queries about where you are headed, to others that strike you as a bad joke.

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I was once asked by one such official what my real name was. I stuttered in surprise and this of course resulted in me being sent to the bench in record time. I was soon directed to a waiting room, not unlike the old visa application room at the American embassy in Nairobi. I was called into an office and a policeman – at least that is what I assumed he was – again asked for my real name. I repeated it. He asked why I was lying and whether I knew how harsh the consequences were. I had faced mean cops in Nairobi before and knew that there are only two ways out of such a situation: to beg for forgiveness, whether you are in the right or not, or to throw down a bribe. Not knowing the American language to get to the latter, I chose instead to grovel. Using a wheedling, submissive tone, I explained I was who I said I was, and that I was very sorry if I was in any way inconveniencing him.

The tactic drove the initially mildly irritated man to become a volcanic beast, intent on jailing me and beating the lies out of me. He only let me go after shouting the same question at me again and again, until I think his shift ended and he let me go to avoid the hassle of working overtime to complete the paperwork. An acquaintance of mine was not as fortunate. She flew

from Accra to New York's JFK airport and was ushered into a similar room. A small group of immigration officials demanded she strip naked with one of them searching her orifices while the others looked on and made jokes about her appearance.

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This airport show is not divorced from the world. The men who want to hijack and blow up planes also seek to be centre stage to perpetrate a horror that will transmit terror into far-away living rooms. Young Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab wanted in on this production, unlike the vast majority of Africans who endure strip searches and dog's noses and suspicious glances as they make their way daily through airports around the world. Western security agencies know perfectly well that the countermeasures they have at airports and on planes are mostly for show.

But if the goal of our young Nigerian terrorist and his comrades was to intrude on perception, then the AIT unit is similarly meant to control the terms on which we perceive the state and our relationship to it. Where Abdulmutallab wanted to rupture the atmosphere of control by committing mass murder, the AIT unit official seeks to regulate the potentially unruly elements that might unseat him and his masters. With the advent of the AIT, Westerners in increasing numbers will find themselves subject to the indignities of airport theatrics – sniffed, stripped, exposed, laughed at and limited.