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Tydskrif

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Introduction: Commemorating the 50th anniversary of East African literature as an academic discipline

Alex Nelungo Wanjala


In looking back over the historical period from the 1950s to the early 1980s, Chris Wanjala (“The Growth of a Literary Tradition in East Africa”) identifies the various approaches that had by then emerged in the East African region in regard to creative writing and the study of literature. In so doing, Wanjala examines how a literary tradition that is particular to the region was established. From Wanjala’s study, the first thing that becomes evident is that the approaches that were used in the early stages of developing a tradition in regard to the production and the study of East African literature were formulated within the English Departments of the University of East Africa, which was by then a brand-new formation to the region. The University of East Africa had been established in 1963 as a federation of colleges from the three countries that comprised East Africa after independence, namely, Uganda, Tanzania, and Kenya (Hyslop). The three constituent colleges that made up the federal unit of the University of East Africa had distinct histories, with Makerere College having the longest. Indeed, it was developed from Uganda Technical College, which was founded in 1922, and then transformed into Makerere University College in 1949, which would exist as an affiliate of the University of London. University College Nairobi, on the other hand, was developed from The Royal Technical College of East Africa, which was founded in 1951. This college was converted from a technical college into a university college in 1961, becoming the Royal College, Nairobi. Dar es Salaam was the youngest of the three, having been established in 1961 as a university college. With the establishment of the University of East Africa, by 1965 University College Nairobi had joined its sister unit in setting up an English Department, with a curriculum that was similar to that in use at Makerere. This, together with an increased student and staff mobility across the region, led to the birth of what we refer to today as East African literature.

Wanjala goes on to describe how the first of the three English Departments of East Africa that was established at Makerere University College created a platform that generated the foundation of writing and criticism in East African literature. He refers to it as the Makerere School of English. The approach to literature within this school was that of liberal humanism, and the “literary education of [students from this school] was based on the writings of the English tradition” (“Growth” 125). This was evidently due to the fact that the students were taught by expatriate lecturers from the metropole, and also because the curriculum at the time was based on an education that was somewhat similar to that being offered at the University of London at the time. It was thus steeped in the tradition of the Cambridge school of criticism whose leading lights were I. A. Richards and F. R. Leavis. The duo is known for engaging in the methodology of practical criticism of literary texts as a mode of teaching literary criticism. Although Leavis did not himself write essays on his cogent philosophical thought, he is known to be the most influential British critic of the 20th century through his work as a professor at Cambridge, his editing of the literary journal *Scrutiny* for twenty years, and especially for his numerous essays on English literature. Leavis displayed the influences of T. S. Eliot and Matthew Arnold in his thought and writing.

The text that Leavis is most famous for is *The Great Tradition* (1948) through which he establishes a literary canon of Western writers that he finds worthy of study. These writers are Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James, and Joseph Conrad who Leavis perceives as having written texts that could be seen as representative of a founding tradition in the past, and D. H. Lawrence who Leavis perceives as the only contemporary writer that is worthy to stand for a continuity with that past. It is evident, therefore, that Leavis’ critical ideology strives to suspend contemporary or modern culture and thought in an effort to preserve a tradition that he finds may have

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been lost due to the mechanisation of society (read Britain and America). He finds that the best way to battle against such a loss in regard to continuity is through literature and criticism, whereby the critic discovers and maintains standards.

This was the critical ideology that must have been carried over from Downing College of Cambridge to Makerere University College by the expatriate lecturers and was taught to budding scholars from East Africa such as James Ngugi (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o), Jonathan Kariara, David Rubadiri, Peter Nazareth, Pio and Elvania Zirimu, and Grant Kamenju, just to name a few, in their undergraduate studies as students in the Department of English. As the emerging East African elite, they were to be trained in a manner that would provide them with a sensibility towards art and culture that adhered to the Great Tradition. In this manner, their education would make them a preserve of the few in society who would have the ability to read and examine literary texts in a discriminatory manner. They would have been trained in the good use of English language and idiom and, through their reading of English literature, they would appreciate “the best that has been thought and said”, in the well-known words of Arnold. In perpetuating the English literary tradition through their reading and writing, they would battle against a potential loss in continuity that may arise in East African society due to the historical changes related to decolonisation within their immediate environment.

Wanjala, in agreement with an earlier assertion by Adrian Roscoe, goes on to pinpoint a second school that developed outside of the English Departments, but still influenced the development of a literary tradition in East Africa in the 1960s. He refers to it as the Song School in East Africa. It is the Song School that ushered in the idea of expressing nationalism through creative works. The students of this school came up with poems that were written in a manner that attempted to cultivate a certain sensibility and tolerance of local and regional cultures through language use. Their poems were a novelty at the time because they broadened the scope of written literature as it existed in the region at the time. They did so by incorporating traditional forms of oral literature within written texts. Early practitioners of the song school include its originator Okot p'Bitek who published *Song of Lawino* (1966); Okello Oculi, with *Orphan* (1968); and Joseph Buruga with *The Abandoned Hut* (1969). These poets “chose to capture East African pastoral life, in an image that was uniquely East African. They portray the peasant parlance and words of wisdom which writers in the Great Tradition could not grasp” (Wanjala 128). Through their poetry, they brought about a cultural renaissance that was a means to bridge an emergent East African urban culture with the traditional cultures that were still alive in the rural areas of East Africa. A similar, although not often mentioned trajectory, is evident in the first novel published by an African woman, which came from East Africa. This is Grace Ogot's *The Promised Land* (1966).

It is noteworthy that, prior to publishing his poetry, p'Bitek had already been involved in promoting local literature through organising and participating in performance arts, as is illustrated by Tim Allen: “[p'Bitek] was trained as a teacher in Mbarara in 1951–52. During these years, he was involved in a wide range of cultural activities, including singing and writing his first poems” (31). After his studies in Britain, p'Bitek continued in the same vein in Gulu and Kampala.

[I]n the mid-1960s, he initially worked in Gulu for the extramural department of Makerere University, where he helped create a festival where he performed as a singer and dancer [...] In 1966, he moved to Kampala, published the English version of *Song of Lawino*, and put on festivals incorporating traditional performances at the Uganda National Cultural Centre of which he became director” (Allen 37).

As Wanjala and Wanjala illustrate, David Cook had by then also established the Makerere Free Travelling Theatre, making the university college the home of theatre in the region. These actions had an impact further afield. In Nairobi, Es'kia Mphahlele (then Ezekiel Mphahlele) borrowed from the engagement in cultural activities at Makerere and the Uganda National Cultural centre to argue for the same in Nairobi (Mphahlele, “Drama in East Africa”). He had by that time established the Chemchemi Creative Centre, which he described as being geared towards the promotion of art, music, theatre, and creative writing among the African masses within the urban populace (Mphahlele, “Chemchemi Creative Centre, Nairobi”). Hilary Ng'weno documents how Mphahlele's approaches to dealing with locals in regard to production and performance led to his having frequent disagreements with them. As such, the centre went into a rapid decline shortly after being established and collapsed soon after, with Mphahlele moving on to the United States. Mphahlele's model of the establishment of a local theatre and arts centre still remains crucial, as it inspired the establishment of other institutions such as the Paa ya Paa gallery

that was run by Elimo Njau. The Free Travelling Theatre model that he advocated was eventually adopted by the University College Nairobi and led to the establishment of several other similar theatre groups around Kenya.

Meanwhile, back in the English Departments of the University, and especially at the University College Nairobi, events took place starting in 1968 that would revolutionise the study of literature in the region. These events involved the agitation for a deeper overhaul of the curriculum, rather than the cosmetic changes that were then being suggested by the acting chairman of the English Department. The events were led by a special lecturer who had undertaken his undergraduate studies at Makerere University College before proceeding to Leeds University for his postgraduate studies, known as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. They have already been very well documented (Ngũgĩ; Roscoe; Wanjala, "Growth"; Sicherman, "The Leeds-Makerere Connection and Ngugi's Intellectual Development", "Revolutionizing the Literature Curriculum at the University of East Africa"), and I therefore will not delve further into them. Suffice it to say that, by 1968, all East African countries had achieved their independence, but the African lecturers in the English Department by that time still constituted a minority, with Ngũgĩ being the only full-time staffer, and two others (Henry Anyumba and Taban lo Liyong) servicing the Department from the cultural wing of the Institute of Development Studies, where they were based. Having received their postgraduate education away from Makerere University (Cambridge for Anyumba and Ohio for Lo Liyong), they were wise to the fact that there was a great need for Africanisation, not only of the personnel teaching at the University, but also the manner in which literature was taught. They thus challenged the critical establishment that existed at the University of East Africa at the time through attacking the colonial curriculum promoted by the expatriates at the English Department of the University College Nairobi, going as far as calling for the abolition of the entire teaching unit and its replacement with a Department of Literature. They were eventually successful in this endeavour. Lo Liyong would have the last word on the issue:

This new syllabus, based on the relevance of subject matter to the human conditions obtaining in East Africa, and at the same time bearing in mind the boundary-lessness of the modern world, took three years to overthrow the ogres of Cambridge and Oxford. The coup was not swiftly accomplished, but we have now here the most revolutionary syllabus stressing the centrality of East Africa, and fanning outwards through Africa into other human experiences" (168).

It is evident therefore that the ideological battle to decolonise the literature curriculum at the University of East Africa was a battle against the Makerere school of English. When Lo Liyong talks of the ogres of Cambridge and Oxford, he is not referring to personalities, but a critical ideology that had been perpetuated during colonial times, continued during the period of decolonisation, and threatened to be furthered even during the post-colonial period. The revolution nipped such plans in the bud and led to a true liberation of the university curriculum in East Africa from its colonial origins. However, it should be noted that the shift was not conclusive, as not everybody was converted into a follower of the newly proposed ideological framework. Some of the African intellectuals that continued to teach at the University were already steeped in the tradition and continued to perpetuate it in their teaching and research, which has ensured that it persists to this date. Indeed, some African writers also preferred to continue operating within it. Carol Sicherman ("Revolutionizing") reports on how the poet Jonathan Kariara, an alumnus of Makerere who worked at the Oxford University Press, "declared he felt 'positively randy writing in the language of the colonizer'" (136). However, as it has been correctly observed, the actions by Ngũgĩ and his colleagues were directly responsible for the emergence of African literature as an academic discipline and therefore the University of Nairobi marked a first in the world with the establishment of the Department of Literature in 1970.

The implementation of a new curriculum at the Department of Literature could thus be equated to the inauguration of a new episteme in that the critical discourse that became dominant in East Africa ensured the survival and growth of African literature in thought and practice within the institutional framework of a university. This is evident through the fact that African orature became an important component of the course curriculum; texts were introduced into the course syllabus on the basis of representation rather than arbitrary criteria of "excellence", giving more freedom for exploration by East African writers; the study of texts from other regions of Africa was promoted; and finally, due to the ideological leanings of the time, there was an insistence on the evaluation of "commitment" in African writing, all the while maintaining a few of the elements in the study of literature from the previous curriculum.

This 'golden era' in which a new episteme had been established by what we could now refer to as the 'founding fathers' of the institution of East African literature involved the formulation of critical approaches to orature,

including a colloquium that was held in 1971 on Black Aesthetics (see Gurr and Zirimu); the publication of the pioneer text on East African literary criticism (see Wanjala, *Standpoints on African Literature*); a conference held at Nairobi School in 1974 that led to the establishment of collaborative activities between the Ministry of Education, The Department of Literature, University of Nairobi, and Secondary Schools in regard to curriculum changes in English at secondary school levels that would reflect the teaching of literature at the university level (see Gachukia and Akivaga); the participation of East Africans in FESTAC 77 (the second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture held in Lagos from 15 January 1977 to 12 February 1977); and other significant events that occurred both in Uganda and Tanzania, as is described by Sicherman (“Revolutionizing”). Notable publications at the time in the region that cultivated the production and criticism of African literature included “[i]ntellectual magazines like *East African Journal* and its sister special publication *Ghala, Transition, The Sunday Nation, The Sunday Post of Uganda, The Sunday News of Tanzania, The People of Kenya, Zambia’s Jewel of Africa* [which] consolidated the base for the study of African literature in East and Central African Universities” (Wanjala and Wanjala 256).

This era was, however, not to last as a result of push back from various political and economic forces facing African countries from the late 1970s such as increased pressure from imperial powers due to neo-colonialism, a rise in political dictatorship, and the attendant repressive tendencies of such political regimes. Such events led to the silencing of East African writers and literary critics, either through forcing them into exile, detaining them, denying them access to their livelihoods by preventing their works from reaching their target markets, or simply forcing them into conformity with the political establishment of the day by ensuring that they engaged in ‘safe’ practices in their writing and cultural activities. This led to a situation whereby there was a decline in home-grown production and appreciation of literary texts by the 1980s. As a result, what was being revealed as the dominant scholarly narrative in relation to East African literature was not what was purveyed through the respective universities located in East Africa, but rather what was produced by foreign (read Western)-based practitioners of East African literature.

The situation was not unique to East Africa, as is demonstrated by Biodun Jeyifo, who describes how gains made in the recently established academic field of African literature in terms of their desire to point out the “truth” to the masses through literary texts and a critical evaluation of the same, were arrested by a counterweight in regard to the study of African literature. This counterweight was the fact that foreign-based scholars as well as a few local scholars were more concerned with the technical evaluation of African literary texts in a “scientific” manner that over-specified the formal aspect of the text, at the expense of pointing out the “truth”, as desired in the original formulation of African literary studies. Jeyifo describes those with a desire for an over-specification of extra-literary aspect in the study of literature in the pursuit of truth as belonging to the “Nationalist” school of the study of African literature, and those seeking an over-specification of literary aspects as belonging to the “Africanist” school.

The adversarial relationship between the two schools led to a situation whereby the quest for decolonisation, which was the epistemic framework under which the Nationalists were steering the study of African literature, was “arrested” due to “structural, power relationships on an international, global scale” (40). This led to a situation that Jeyifo describes as “arrested decolonization” in which there emerged the “great paradox, surrounding the study of African literature [...]: historic de-colonization having initially enabled the curricular legitimation of African literary studies in African universities and schools, the equally historic arrest of de-colonization [...] swung the centre of gravity of African literary study away from Africa to Europe and America” (40). Writing in the early 1990s, Jeyifo points out a situation that has not changed even as we move into the second decade of the 21st century. This is illustrated in a discussion by Grace Musila in which she describes the unequal power relationships in knowledge production in regard to African literature between what she refers to as Africa-based academics and their ‘Northern’ collaborators: “A [...] process of homogenisation is implicit in the chronopolitics of the academy and its lexicon of ‘dated’ ideas, knowledge and scholarship. This aspiration to a uniformity of ideas, trends, theories, and even modes of framing our thinking is dangerous to the future of not only Africa-based scholarship, but to the global academy at large” (288). Jeyifo goes on to argue that the bifurcation within the critical establishment in the study of African literature could be cured if the two schools allowed for an integration of their approaches in a manner that retains the best elements from both schools and that also takes into account the historical and economic factors that have impacted upon the African continent. This should be undertaken in order to expand the agenda of the study of African literature away from merely gaining respectability for the discipline in Western countries, but instead addressing the marginalisation in the production and criticism of African literature within

the world system in contemporary times. Musila echoes the same sentiments with her appeal to avoid “intellectual inbreeding” (290) within the global academy in the discipline of African literature, indicating that there is still work to be done in the contemporary period in regard to addressing the concerns raised earlier by Jeyifo.

When I learned in 2014 that the editors of *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde* had decided to broaden their scope to include literature produced in the East African region, it was with these challenges in mind that I was very happy to honour the invitation by the then editor-in-chief Hein Willemse to serve on the editorial board of the journal as one of the editors responsible for the East African region. This was mainly because I saw *Tydskrif* as a good platform through which to give a voice to local practitioners of East African literature given its wide network and respectability as an established journal, and the fact that its editorial board comprises a good mix of scholars who are located both on the African continent and abroad. When invited in 2019 by the current editor Jacomien van Niekerk to propose a topic for a theme issue of the journal, I thought it would be worthwhile to mark the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the Department of Literature, University of Nairobi, as well as to commemorate 50 years since the date of the launch of three national universities in East Africa, namely Makerere University, University of Nairobi, and Dar es Salaam University, which were all started on 1 July 1970. The commemoration of these historic events which relate to the discipline of literature would be addressed through the topic “Critical perspectives on contemporary East African literature”.

Granted, the landscape of East African literature has changed over the past 50 years, with the region covered in the discipline not only limited to the three countries that formed the federation of University of East Africa, but now extending to cover other areas according to regional, economic, cultural, and social integration. In terms of regional integration, the area covers six countries, namely Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, South Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda. To these could be added countries with economic, geographic, social, and cultural ties with their neighbouring countries in the region such as Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti, Somalia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. The East African Coast and Islands in close proximity to it are also considered as part of East Africa, especially in regard to the study of Swahili culture and language.

The theme for the issue was framed with a view to answering some of the following questions:

- Is there an attendant formulation of the identity of the new “East African” that comes with the new political and economic arrangements? If so, how is it being expressed in literary texts?
- What are the new forms of texts in literature, and how are they being exploited by practitioners from the region?
- Is there a new aesthetic that could/should be used in terms of evaluating these new texts? How would such an aesthetic be developed?
- What are the theoretical perspectives that are suited to the analysis of the new literary texts emanating from the region?
- Do we have a literary equivalent in East Africa of what has been referred to as Nigeria’s third-generation writing?

The theme issue consists of two literary essays, one interview, and eleven research articles that address the above questions in one way or the other. Gichingiri Ndīgīrīgī’s essay sets the tone for the theme issue: he focuses on the famous Gĩkũyũ musician Joseph Kamarũ as an oral artist and demonstrates how his double-voiced political critique of the first two post-independence governments allowed him to escape detention or being “disappeared”. The introduction foregrounds the similarities in the message in Kamarũ’s lyrics and Ngũgĩ wa Thiongo’s creative works from the 1970s and 1980s, thus suggesting the benefits of a dialogic study of both the creative and expressive art that challenged the increasing dictatorship experienced in a specific period of Kenya’s history. In the bulk of Ndīgīrīgī’s essay he examines how, during a time of political oppression and censorship, Kamarũ used figurative language in his songs to “say the unsayable”.

Whereas Ndīgīrīgī gives us fresh critical perspectives on texts emanating from an earlier period of Kenya’s history, Sam Dennis Otieno follows through with an essay that explores new genres of literature in contemporary East African society which are purveyed through literary magazines and which experienced a renaissance in the earlier part of the new millennium with the appearance of *Kwani?* on the literary scene. Otieno demonstrates how, with the decline of the activities of *Kwani?* in the recent past, new outfits such as *Down River Road* have emerged and are using the form of the literary magazine to engage in the publication of new genres such as flash fiction and visual narratives that are becoming increasingly popular with younger readers in East Africa. The two essays

are followed by an interview by Tom Odhiambo with the Kenyan writer Rebeka Njau, a prolific Kenyan writer who is part of the earlier generation of East Africans that were educated at Makerere University. She was also a co-founder of the Paa ya Paa Art gallery and has been an important part of the Kenyan literary scene over the years. The interview highlights various aspects of her life and reveals her current literary projects.

The research articles in this theme issue cover various genres of literature ranging from the novel to drama, the short story, poetry, and the emergent literary genres that are to be found on digital media. In her article “Alienation and estrangement in Dinaw Mengestu’s *All our Names*” Ruth Openda signals the complicated task of defining the geographical extent of East African literature, as it focuses on the latest novel from a writer who identifies as Ethiopian-American, having been born in Ethiopia and moved to the United States at the age of two. The novel, whose narrative space covers Ethiopia, Uganda, and the American Midwest, may be seen to be a true reflection—albeit refracted in terms of time—of the author’s identity as an African immigrant to the United States. Openda provides an interesting examination of the narrative of immigration as is portrayed in the novel. In the article Openda explores how the answer to the question “who are you?” is indeterminate in a world where the immigrant is in a continuous quest to belong, and thus explores the complex notion of identity in the contemporary world. Openda exploits the interplay between the concepts of hybridity and cosmopolitanism as espoused by postcolonial critics to examine the notions of alienation and estrangement in the novel by Mengestu, whose three novels indicate that although the writer is foreign-based, he is a powerful presence in the landscape of East African literature.

The examination of new and forceful presences in contemporary East African literature is also evident in Annie Gagiano’s article “East African women writers’ ‘national epics’: A new force in creative fiction?”, in which she focuses on five African women writers whose individual works are critically acclaimed. They are *The Orchard of Lost Souls* by Nadifa Mohamed from Somalia, *Dust* by Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor from Kenya, *Kintu* by Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi from Uganda, *The Old Drift* by Namwali Serpell from Zambia, and *The Shadow King* by Maaza Mengiste from Ethiopia. The novelists under study cover a large swathe of East Africa, making the paper an excellent comparative study of contemporary novels by women writers from the region. The inclusion of the Zambian writer Namwali Serpell may raise a few eyebrows, but the writer has provided a convincing argument for doing so.

In her article, Gagiano focuses on the novels as contemporary national epics. In doing so, she distinguishes her idea of the epic form, as depicted in the novels that she studies, from those of Georg Lukács, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Jan Knappert. She argues that, by choosing crucial moments and periods of ‘national crisis’, the authors of the novels give their works of creative fiction something of the scope of the traditional epic genre, thus the appellation “ethno-national”. She demonstrates how, through their novels, the women writers address localised histories of various East-African “Ethno-nations” while at the same time giving a more prominent role to the contribution of women in the development of national consciousness through deepened historical awareness.

The study of the interplay between form and content in regard to contemporary authors as is depicted in Gagiano’s study in relation to the genre of the novel is carried over into the genre of drama in the article by Renata Jakubczuk and Witold Wołowski entitled “La République Démocratique du Congo: Dramaturgies de conflits (idées et formes)” (Democratic Republic of Congo: dramaturgies of conflict (ideas and forms)). In this article, Jakubczuk and Wołowski study seven plays written by six different Congolese playwrights, namely Pierre Mumbere Mujomba, Nlandu Mayamba Mbuya Thierry, Mumbul’Ikie Namupot Mas, David-Minor Ilunga, Célestin Kasongo, and Jonathan Kombe. This state-of-the-art survey of Congolese theatre reveals how contemporary dramaturgy in the Democratic Republic of Congo is based on all types of antagonisms and conflicts, such as culture conflict as depicted in *Misère*, political conflict in *Prisonniers d’Ekafela*, social conflict in *La dernière enveloppe*, religious conflict in *L’illusion*, and family conflict in *Einstennette* and *Tour de contrôle*. The authors go on to examine the aesthetic forms represented in these types of agonistic dramaturgy in a manner that reveals the intrinsic value of modern Congolese drama as part of African and World literature.

Ruth Wenske brings literary aesthetics into dialogue with educational theory in her article “Teacherly aesthetics: Literature and literacy in Binyavanga Wainaina’s works”. She traces the history of literature-related pedagogy in East Africa from the 1960s to the present moment, connecting it to Wainaina’s views on the subject through a close reading of his memoir *One Day I will Write About this Place*. With insights from Wainaina’s essays on teaching and education, Wenske examines how teacherliness, as an intrinsic connectedness of literature and education, is constructed as an aesthetic and poetic layer of *One Day*, arguing that Wainaina views teacher-centred

approaches as incomplete models for both pedagogy and literature in East Africa. The author further demonstrates how Wainaina's thinking on education was ahead of his time, as his teacherly ethos is mirrored in learner-centred reforms introduced in recent years across East Africa, for example, in Kenya's Ministry of Education's launch of a Competency Based Curriculum (CBC) as their new framework from 2017.

Makumbi's debut novel *Kintu* (2014) stands out as a contemporary East African novel, firstly because of how it came to be published. Makumbi was awarded the Kwani? Manuscript Project prize in 2013 by a panel of judges comprising writers and critics from Africa. Kwani Trust went on to publish the novel, which thereafter was published in the United States by Oneworld in 2018. Today, it is one of the most critically acclaimed contemporary East African novels, which goes to show that the judges were not wrong in their selection. The novel's popularity is also reflected in the number of authors that focus on it in this theme issue. Russell West-Pavlov, in his article "Proximate historiographies in Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi's *Kintu*", makes an important contribution to the theorisation of questions arising from readings of East African literature. Focusing on *Kintu* as historical fiction, West-Pavlov uses the critical notion of 'proximity' to demonstrate how Makumbi's novel performs history in a peculiar manner by revealing the existence of an overlap of various types of historiography within the framework of the narrative that incrementally builds into the shaping of a material reality. Whereas West-Pavlov focuses on historiography in *Kintu*, in his article "African literature, metonymic gaps, and *Gandasation* of metropolitan language in Jennifer Makumbi's *Kintu*", Emmanuel Adeniyi focuses on aspects of language in the novel. Adeniyi draws attention to the prominence of Ganda terms within the novel and how the novel employs metonymic gaps to expound the deployment of indigenous knowledge in the English language text, thus allowing room for the jostling of various cultures in a struggle for supremacy, a process he refers to as the "*Gandasation* of metropolitan language".

Another encouraging project with participants from East Africa that has resulted in a publication in the past decade is that of a workshop on short story writing hosted by Shadrack Chikoti in Malawi in 2015. The workshop was facilitated by three East Africans, namely, Billy Kahora from Kenya, Jackee Budesta Batunda, and Beatrice Lamwaka, both from Uganda. The Pan-African nature of the project is evident through the fact that participants were drawn from all over the continent. The final product of the workshop was an anthology of short stories set in a future Africa: *Imagine Africa 500* (2015) edited by Billy Kahora. Doseline Kiguru focuses on this anthology of short stories in her article "Speculative fiction and African urban futures: Writing food in Billy Kahora's edited collection *Imagine Africa 500*". In her article, Kiguru gives a critical overview of some selected short stories from the anthology, while at the same time using ecocritical approaches in the study of those texts in order to examine how the food imagery contained in the short stories reflects anxieties about the effects of development on the environment today, and how these anxieties are projected through that imaginary into the portrayal of future African cities in the genre of speculative fiction.

In a seminar on "Media and Construction of Identity in Africa" held in Nairobi in 2004, Karin Barber presented a convincing argument on how different forms of media have over the past 100 years or so played a role in revitalising popular traditions in African culture (Barber). Barber further indicates that new media forms have also created new forms of popular culture in Africa because African cultural practitioners have innovatively harnessed these new forms of technology in a manner that serves, not only in retaining the old genres of African literature and diffusing them more effectively, but also in a manner that brings out new conventions and new genres that are specific to African popular culture. The same is evident in East Africa, given that since the 1990s there has been a rapid democratisation in media thanks to changes in geo-politics which have seen a relative liberalisation of media in the region. Technological advances in the dissemination of information have also enabled the transformation of traditional popular media such as songs, folktales, and short oral forms through new platforms such as FM radio stations, television, short message services, mobile telephone applications, and social media. An important element that carries over from the traditional forms of popular media in Africa to the modern forms is that of the interactive nature of popular media. These new forms of media have also enabled the transformation of traditional forms of popular culture to forms that adapt to the use of technology in their transmission and can be disseminated to reach more people much faster. In a way, we are now talking about popular media being a means of mass communication.

Two authors tap into these important developments in regard to the production and dissemination of new forms of popular culture in East Africa using digital media in this theme issue. The first is Patrick Chesi Lumasia's article "Churchill Show: Transgressing language codes; upsetting stereotypes". In his article, Lumasia focuses on a popular Kenyan comedy show that is filmed before a live studio audience and broadcast on television sta-

tions and YouTube. Some of the more popular skits are shared through social media platforms like WhatsApp, thus boosting the popularity of the performer. Lumasia focuses on selected comedy sketches from the show in order to examine their literary features, and in so doing highlights how, through aesthetics of escapism, the texts re-narrate quotidian events and give a certain re-interpretation of the country's history trajectory that veers away from what is contained in the official narratives purveyed through the mainstream media. Lumasia seeks to point out how these texts display a political aesthetics clothed in a post-modern aesthetics that transgresses language codes and upsets socio-psychological stereotypes.

The second article is Kimingichi Wabende's article "Imagining the Kenyan Canaan dream journey in cyber space" which continues along the same trajectory as that of Lumasia's in its focus on new literary genres that have emerged in the digital space. Wabende focuses on the interrogation of a 'Canaan' narrative that emerged during the electoral campaigns for Kenya's presidency in 2017. This narrative was initiated by the opposition candidate Raila Odinga who used biblical allusion in his speeches to fashion himself as a political 'Joshua' tasked with leading Kenya out of bondage and into the promised land. The 'Canaan' narrative thereafter grew a life of its own, with an online presence that involved exchanges either in support or in opposition to the opposition candidates' message by means of the various supports that exist on social media. Wabende uses the concept of online liveness in his analysis to examine how the digital exchanges arising from the 'Canaan' narrative represent a psychological desire by a Kenyan public for a journey towards freedom, and how the performance of this desire was enacted in cyber space.

Kiswahili literature, or Fasihi, is an important and integral part of East African literature, with texts published in Swahili forming a significant, if not substantial part, of the literary output from the region. Tanzania and Kenya are two countries in the region in which the language is predominantly used, and it is in these two countries that the output in regard to such texts is the highest. Mikhail Gromov indicates how changes to Kenya's language policy and publishing interests in the new millennium has led to its surpassing Tanzania which previously had the highest number of literary texts published in Kiswahili. In regard to the Swahili novel, Gromov indicates how the contemporary Swahili novel published in the 21st century could be placed within two broad categories. The first category consists of 'high breed' novels. These are experimental and neo-realist novels that are targeted towards a discerning readership that mostly comprises professionals in Swahili. The second category consists of novels that could be referred to as 'popular', for example the Swahili detective novel which targets the general public (40).

In his article "Metatextualities in the Kenyan Swahili novel: A case study reading of Kyalo Wamitila's *Dharau ya Ini*", Lutz Diegner showcases the experimental aspect of the contemporary 'high brow' Swahili novel by focusing on a novel by the prolific Kenyan writer which, as Diegner demonstrates, is written using innovative aspects in regard to its narration. Diegner subjects the novel to a close reading in order to reveal how Wamitila incorporates metanarration within his narrative structure in a manner that embeds several other genres of literature within the writing of this novel, thus inviting the novel not only to comment upon itself but also provide a re-evaluation of those other genres of Fasihi.

Alex Wanjala's "(East) African postcolonial ecocriticism: Revisiting Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Prisoner*" is the last research article featured in this theme issue. In the article, Wanjala revisits the renowned East African poet's text *Song of Lawino* on the 50th anniversary of its publication in order to re-examine the poem's contribution to the Song School of East Africa. Wanjala subjects the poem to a fresh reading using critical approaches arising from the intersection between postcolonial studies and ecocriticism. His evaluation involves an analysis of language use in the poem in regard to the depiction of imagery and metaphors related to the natural environment of East Africa. An interpretation of this imagery reveals a realistic depiction of the social and political situation of East African countries in the late 1960s and allows the reader to grasp the subtle message in the text.

In conclusion, the interview and essays contained within this theme issue on "Critical Perspectives on Contemporary East African Literature" provide readings and critical approaches that go a long way towards unfolding the peculiarities within the discipline of East African literature and how, as an institution, it has opened up and expanded according to changes within the postcolonial order in an increasingly globalised society. Produced in the midst of a raging global pandemic, the fact that this theme issue has seen the light of day is a testament to the patience and dedication of the authors. I would like to thank you all for submitting your articles and persevering through the long and arduous editorial process, even at a time when there were more pressing demands arising from the disruptions of a pandemic. I would also like to thank Hein Willemse for clearing the space that made this

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“The mouth that ate itself”: Reflections on Joseph Kamarū, oral artist extraordinaire Gĩchingiri Ndigĩrĩgĩ

Introduction

After a liberating sojourn in a pastoral Ilmorog, Munira, the central character in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s *Petals of Blood* returns to his home in Limuru, only to be demeaned by his rich father. During a compensatory bar-hopping night out on the town, he runs into Karega, an old acquaintance who has fallen on hard times. The narrator evokes the pathos in the moment thus:


I saw him. He was gesticulating with an empty bottle of Tusker in his hand. His drunken voice rose above the others. They were arguing about the merits of [Joseph] Kamaru and D. K. [Daniel Kamau]. He was shouting Kamaru sings about our past: he looks to our past, he wants to awaken us to the wisdom of our forefathers. What good is that to the chaos that is today? Another was arguing: his is the tinkling of a broken cymbal. But D. K. sings true—about us—the young—here and now—a generation lost in urban chaos. Another interrupted: we are not a lost generation [...] Don’t you go about abusing folk in a bar doing their thing. Gee—I gonna dance to Jim Reeves and Jim Brown and break a safe or two like some cowboys I saw in the Wild Bunch—Gee. (101)

The latter speaker is noteworthy for the slangy American words he uses to amplify his affectation, and the choice of American country and soul music preferences as opposed to the local Kenyan musicians who excite Karega and his first interlocutor. In this paper I focus on Kamarū’s music for three reasons. First, the archiving of our past that Karega celebrates in Kamarū’s music ran parallel to efforts by many of the first generation of East African writers, including Ngũgĩ, to answer Achebe’s challenge to African writers to show that their pasts had beauty, dignity, and a philosophy of great depth (“The Role of the Writer in a New Nation” 8). Second, the recognition of oral literature in East African academic settings since the 1960s foregrounds the role of the oral artist not only in preserving a seemingly fossilized past, but also responding more immediately to a changing environment like the D. K. in the second interlocutor’s comment. Above all else, Kamarū was an oral artist of exceptional skill. He is also the same artist who challenged Kanda Bongoman, the Paris-based Congolese king of *kwasa kwasa*, to a performance contest at City Stadium in 1990 and soon incorporated a more frenetic dance climax in his songs after the encounter, attesting to his adaptability to changing tastes. Reviewed in its entirety, Kamarū’s music reveals how he also responded to a generation lost in urban chaos in a way that creates an intertextual synergy between music and creative literature, and extends the meaning-making abilities of the literary text. Third, if East African creative writers retreated to safe havens during the reign of dictators in the 1970s and 80s, Kamarū appears to have filled the gap by composing and disseminating searing critiques of despotism couched in several creative oral performance tropes that I explore shortly. His songs fill some of the gaps in the creative literature.

There is a certain irony that almost immediately after making the comment celebrating Kamarū’s cultural retrieval, the drunken Karega—who is at that point a sad example of the lost youth of the second interlocutor’s comment—falls asleep as a song by D. K. about a young man who has failed the responsibility of taking care of his aging mother—like Karega himself—plays on the jukebox. He will eventually realize by the end of the novel that cultural awakening by itself is inconsequential if the material expropriation that accompanied the cultural loss is not addressed. After a lengthy flirtation with Afrocentrism, Karega undergoes a Fanonist turn and recognizes the folly of his earlier investment in glorious pasts: “all this knowledge [of such pasts in India, Syria, Iraq, Palestine] never once deterred the European merchant warlords. And China was saved, not by singers and poets telling

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of great past cultures, but by the creative struggle of the workers for a better day today” (*Petals of Blood* 301). As Fanon stated,

The native intellectual nevertheless sooner or later will realize that you do not show proof of your nation from its culture but that you substantiate its existence in the fight which the people wage against the forces of occupation. No colonial system draws its justification from the fact that the territories it dominates are culturally non-existent. You will never make colonialism blush for shame by spreading out our little known cultural treasures under its eyes. (223)

The same fight against the forces of occupation that we see in the retrospective narratives about Kenya’s war of liberation find their equivalents in Kamarū’s songs, particularly his two-volume cassette collection titled *Mau Mau Patriotic Songs*. If the creative artist retreated from confronting the East African dictator, the internal force of occupation in the 1970s and 80s, or donned the cloak of comedy in order to continue “telling the truth laughingly” as John Ruganda said of Francis Imbuga’s drama, both Ngũgĩ and Kamarū expressed almost the same level of outrage after the populist J. M. Kariuki’s murder in 1975 through fiction, essays, and song. In addition, Ngũgĩ’s theatrical satires of the period derived from and subsequently informed popular music. *Ngaahika Ndeenda* (I Will Marry When I Want) derived its title and one of its most relatable songs from D. K.’s song titled “Ngarua Ndeenda”. After Kamarū watched the theatrical performance at Kamĩĩthũ in 1977, he composed a song titled “Kĩũru” in which a Kioi-like character with a history of complicity with the colonizers becomes an exploitative large landowner after independence. If the questing Gatuĩria of Ngũgĩ’s *Devil on the Cross* searches for the voices and local instruments that will fill his oratorio on Kenyan history, the Ngũgĩ who vicariously searched for such an oratorio and ended up gathering his collections in *Maitu Njugĩra* travelled the same path that Kamarū trod in life and archived through music. The anglophilic cabinet minister and the neocolonial ruling elite satirized in *Matigari* are the same ones being reminded that political leadership derives its legitimacy from the people in Kamarū’s “Kenya ya Ngai”. While Ngũgĩ and other creative writers critiqued the Moi state from the safety of exile, Kamarū found a way to say the unsayable from within the Kenyan territorial space by mobilizing double-voiced Gĩkũyũ cultural treasures in praise of the ruling elites.

If the study of oral literature/folklore and mythology avails a rich cultural intertext that extends the meaning-making abilities of East African literary texts, might an investment in a dialogic study of creative and expressive arts be equally rewarding? If we refuse to be persuaded that literary criticism is such a fragile and insular discipline that it should not be contaminated by approaches steeped in interdisciplinarity or historicism or even high theory, we might find that literary studies may gain if we see literature as a “particular cultural practice related to other discourses [...] one signifying practice among others [...] in a complex intertextual phenomenon”, as Jonathan Culler suggests (46–7). I offer a sample study of Kamarū’s songs as an example of the way other arts illuminate the complex issues in late twentieth century Kenya.

Kamarū’s archive

When Joseph Kamarū passed away in 2018, it was like the closing down of the doors to a living cultural archive. Though he sang mostly in Gĩkũyũ, Kamarū was easily one of the most prominent Kenyan musicians from the 1960s into the 90s. The language of composition reminds us of some of the limitations of creative production in ethnic languages that faced musicians and creative writers alike. As Achebe remarked regarding his meeting with Shabaan Robert in 1960, he was aware that he was “in the presence of a great writer, but of the nature of his writing I had no idea” because he could not read Swahili (“The African Writer and the English Language” 431). Music may provoke a different affective response, but the beauty of Kamarū’s music derives from his masterful song writing that deploys powerful imagery, lexical economy and dexterity, and deep symbolism and metaphoric discourse that require an almost encyclopedic intertextual knowledge of the intricacies of Gĩkũyũ culture and language. That he was able to thread his narrative songs with this richness might tell us that we had a poet and storyteller whose skill is yet to be discovered.

With over 1000 compositions to his credit, Kamarū was a master of many song genres ranging from generic love songs, ballads, blues, waltz (the Gĩkũyũ *mwomboko* ‘borrows’ its dance step and the accordion from Scottish waltz), and country—admittedly inspired by “Jimmi Rodger”, elegy, wedding songs, circumcision songs, political songs, and gospel. If the earliest generation of modern African writers felt called upon to be the sensitive needles, the moral barometers of their communities à la Achebe, Mphahlele, etc. (Achebe, “The Novelist as a Teacher” 45), they were carrying into print a function and practice that had been the preserve of oral artists from the village sto-

ryteller to the more professional performers of epics. Like the traditional oral artist who preserved the communal lore and presented himself as a communal voice whose autonomous art could not be compromised, Kamarū left a lasting legacy as the conscience of the nation and that will be my focus for the rest of this paper, in which musical political commentary is central. In what follows, I locate Kamarū's critique within his larger *oeuvre* that is far too large to review. Following a suggestive free translation of his most remarkable individual songs, that locates them within their contexts, my focus shifts to the two significant phases of his political music making.

Kamarū wrote generic love songs like "Nūū Ūcio?" (Who was that?) and "Reke Nyambe Ngwītīkīrie" (You are Free [to go]) about love triangles. He also composed ballads like "Gathoni", the slender girl with a gap in the teeth and hair like that of a Boran woman, and "Tūgatigithanio nī Gīkuū" (Only Death will Separate Us) about two lovers from Nyeri and Kangema who refuse to let the fighting during the 1950s State of Emergency and the exceedingly cold season in August keep them from having a wedding, and stage such a magnificent one that it results in the birds chirruping a complaint that they had not been invited to the wedding feast. Others like "Wendo wa Chebe Chebe", the blues song about inconstant/toxic love that was akin to living in a perpetual remand cell, became paradoxically popular in dance halls of yesteryear. Kamarū's mobilization of affect and embodied expressions lent force to lyrics that were masterfully crafted, observing proper rhythm and meter, and melodic lines that do not just drop off the edge of a page or beat. One could also point to the elegy to J. M. Kariūki and the melancholic *Mau Mau Patriotic Songs* as lasting popular records of major moments in Kenyan history.¹ In addition, the popular pre-pandemic *Mūgithi* may have had its roots in such Kamarū songs as the wedding evening party favorite, "Nīnyuo Ndīrī Nyagachū" (Let us Toast the Newly-weds) that evoked a traditional beer (*mūratina*) toast celebrated in an escort dance-train formation that eventually became the centerpiece of *Mūgithi* nights. In the song, the joy surrounding the festivity is such that even the despised co-wife and her brood (*nyagachū*) cannot be denied a chance to join the toast. If ribaldry became the centerpiece of *Mūgithi* performance, it had its more innuendo-laden fore-runners in Kamarū's "Irua" (Circumcision [Song]), and "Kīndū kīa Maunā" (a song that would be liberally translated by sing-along drunks as "Mūnā's privates" by a devious phonemic pun on "kīndū/thing"). The reception of the song paved the way for a full-length cassette titled *Kikuyu Folk Songs: Adults Only*, in which Kamarū unleashed the seasonal license for ribaldry during the traditional Gīkūyū circumcision season onto the Kenyan nightclub scene of the mid-1980s. It remains a collector's item for multiple song genres like *mūthūngūci*, *mūthuū*, *mwomboko*, *mūmbūro*, and *nduumo*. At a time when folklore and folksong collection and preservation was only just beginning in earnest, Kamarū had already collected or composed a whole library that also includes two classics titled "Mītugo ya Gīkūyū" (Customs of the Gīkūyū) and "Mītī ya Gīkūyū" about Gīkūyū traditional trees and their functions.

Kamarū's encyclopedic "Mītugo ya Gīkūyū" and "Mītī ya Gīkūyū" appear to be the culmination of an effort to preserve fast-disappearing traditions. Like the traditional oral artist who preserved the communal lore but also recognized the emerging cultural changes, Kamarū started singing songs critical of the rapid modernization in the 1960s. He also presented himself as a communal voice whose autonomous art could not be compromised, even as he spoke as the conscience of the nation, unafraid to address hot-button issues through song. On the preservation aspects, one recalls such songs as "Ndanuko cia Mītahato", an evocation of the loving care with which rural mothers would orally mash bananas (*mītahato*) in their mouths for feeding new-borns who could not handle solid food. When the same children were all grown up and living in the city, they looked down upon the simple lives their parents still led and refused to visit them. Parents of "modern" girls who forget the beauty and dignity of traditional marriage rituals and devalue bridewealth into an exploitative commercial transaction are reminded about them by Kamarū speaking as an emissary of tradition-bound young men in "Ndūmīriri cia Mīhūūni". In "Kībaata Kīa Matukū Maya" (Modern Dance) Kamarū laments the corruption of the age and gender-defined customs that regimented which group got to dance to which dance, and which pairing was taboo. The dance space (*Kībaata*) in the modern dispensation is the bar, where old men and young women, fathers and daughters, sons and mothers partake of modern drinks that remove all inhibitions, and dance the "twist" and rumba with predictable results.² The earliest noteworthy social critique that would earn Kamarū notoriety was a mid-1960s song titled "Ndari ya Mwarimū" (The Teacher's Darling Student) in which he critiqued the then pervasive predatory love affairs between male teachers and their female students. It was probably the first song to be denied airplay on KBC Radio, the national broadcaster, at the instigation of the national teachers' union. To his credit, Jomo Kenyatta reversed the ban, telling teachers to sue Kamarū in a court of law if they felt that aggrieved. Way before the awareness about the dangers posed by dead-beat dads and date/acquaintance rape gained currency, Kamarū released two songs in the 1960s about advantage-taking males. Deploying a female subject's words, "Na Ugatorooka" (You Dared Escape

[responsibility]) critiqued an urbanized man who misled an innocent rural girl with endearing words, but then escaped from his Nairobi base to Tanzania once he learnt that the pregnant girl was looking for him in the city. Implicit in this critique is the recognition that the traditional sanctions and fines that would have been imposed on such a man were no longer operative. “Tiga Kūhenia Igooti” (Stop Lying to the Court) lampoons men who take advantage of female friends and needy rural girls and defile them without accepting responsibility for the trauma by claiming that the intimacy was consensual when they face prosecution. Beyond romantic entanglements, Kamarū flagged the emerging class-based injustice through such songs as “Kihooto Kiigwo Mwanaya” in which the refrain is that the poor deserve equal justice with the rich. When Idi Amin threatened to annex Kenyan territorial space in the late 1970s, Kamarū warned him not to dare in “Nĩ Maitho Tunite” (Only Our Eyes are Averted). The attempted military coup in 1982 was memorialized in “Baraka za Kenya” (Kenya’s Blessings), one of the few songs Kamarū composed in Swahili to remind Kenyans of the ties that bind their imagined community.

If the political class celebrated when Kamarū sang in praise of Kenyatta as the ageing rooster that had not lost its vitality in the metonymic national homestead in “Aromaka” (Confound him), a decidedly anti-Odinga song of the late 1960s, he was the same artist who would later sing the caustic elegy “J. M. Kariuki Mwendwo Nĩ-irĩ” in which he called for those responsible for J. M.’s murder to be ritually stuffed into beehives and rolled down a hillside to their deaths, the traditional Gĩkũyũ punishment for miscreants.³ The Kamarū who sang “Safari ya Japan”—a praise song for Moi, Kenya’s second president, for including average Kenyans like Kamarū in his entourage to Japan—would also unleash “Kenya ya Ngai”, “Chunga Marima”, “Waica Kehiri”, etc. before abandoning the allusive and allegorical mode for the more trenchant political critiques in his ‘message’ sermon cassettes of the 1990s. Kamarū left a lasting legacy at the level of musical political commentary and that will be the focus of the rest of this essay. Some context is in order.

I interviewed Kamarū twice (1989 and 1993) in circumstances that illuminate his political courage. In 1989, the editor-in-chief of the soon-to-be defunct *Financial Review* asked me to do a profile on Kamarū. When I met him at his River Road studios, I fully disclosed that it was Peter Kareithi who wanted to do a profile on him, at a time when the weekly magazine was a thorn in the flesh of the Moi state. It was closed down within months of the interview and the profile was never published. In 1993, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o was planning to launch *Mũtiiri*, the Gĩkũyũ language journal through which he hoped to show that African languages are adequate vehicles for creative expression and critical thought. I was preparing to do my initial dissertation research on Kamĩrĩthũ when I contacted Ngũgĩ for some context on his role in the theater project. He expressed interest in a critical article on Kamarū’s music, if it was in Gĩkũyũ. I made an appointment with Kamarū and fully disclosed that it was the “dreaded” Ngũgĩ who wanted an article on him. He did not even flinch. However, the Kamarū I interviewed in 1993 was different from the one I had interviewed in 1989.

Saying the unsayable

In 1989, Kamarū still had faith that his richly allusive music could prick the political class into doing the right thing for the people who had elected them. His critique was broadly directed at the spineless politicians who supplicated themselves to foreign interests and the ones beholden to local tin gods. However, the message is couched in proverbial discourse directed at the initiated. In “Kenya ya Ngai” (Kenya, God’s [Gift]), for example, the 1983 “traitor” controversy is woven into a timeless message.⁴ The singer wonders whether the Kenya that was being auctioned to foreign interests is the same Kenya for which blood was shed in the liberation struggle, promising that if it owes any debts, he is ready to pay them, just as they paid for independence with much blood. Using war imagery, the singer warns that the nameless threat could not escape entrapment, and then switches to the language of commerce. The threat is an elected politician for whom people voted so that he would advance their interests. Instead, he has “wrapped Kenya in banana leaves” like tobacco bound for the village market, but the singer wonders where the politician will be able to sell it without God, its guardian, noticing. Further, those intent on auctioning the country are warned that it is not a marriageable woman on whose behalf they could request the traditional beer that initiated negotiations over bride wealth. If anybody had partaken of such a ritual drink, he had to be ritually purged before the singer pronounced the curse words that would make the beer harm the opportunist who consumed it outside ritual sanction. As the singer concludes, Kenya may have had a sore throat, but prayer might fix it, obviating the need to mortgage the soul of the nation and its people. He also includes a rider that all power is God-given, which makes the curious listener wonder whether even the power the president himself was deploying recognized the source of its legitimating moral authority. Richly allusive lan-

guage, no names mentioned, but the message resonated in the topical moment while also speaking to all patriots who are called to reject those who would rock the nation “like wind in a napier grass patch that has no owner”.

In “Chunga Marima” (Watch the Holes) the singer amplifies the oblique messaging regarding political opportunism. Singing that those who throw missiles meant for their enemies have no control over who escapes them and who does not, the singer warns an unnamed person to watch the holes in the figurative homestead. The message relies on an understanding of traditional *Gikūyū* homesteads and the wise sayings that concretized the idea of fate. The shared courtyard space between the man’s hut and his wife’s or wives’ had to be kept clean and free of obstacles, holes, or wetness. The communal lore held that there is no escaping a hole in the *nja* (the courtyard) or to avoid falling in that space if the ground was slippery. As the space that was crossed and crisscrossed repeatedly by almost all people in the homestead, if they were going to trip anywhere it would most likely happen there. The domestic space is used as a metonym and a metaphor of regional and national political space. Characteristically, the singer reveals that he will be speaking in code: he will not rip open the message he is carrying, he will “cut” it like sugarcane. The un-initiated will go for the younger top part of the cane, leaving the sweeter parts for others. He does so because danger still lurks around: women’s skirts cannot be compared to the feathers on a hen; what is given to the hen may not be enough for the rooster; one who crosses a river at a cursed watering point has to be careful; watch the holes; let us find a remedy for moles before they consume all our yams; let us hunt the traitor down before he escapes. On and on the singer goes before concluding: what is this disease that afflicts us, yet we know that it is not yaws? Can we find a good traditional healer to excise it before it spreads, now that the thorn used to pierce it and pus “never get a good night’s sleep”?

Every animal has a shelter, I am going home
but let me say that I come from Kangema, my cousin from Nyeri
If anybody needs me, he will find me there
but let him come in peace,

the singer says, before ushering in the final refrain:

Watch the holes; if you trip, you should not say that I did not warn you. (my translation)

The warning not to take war to the singer arises out of a common understanding that if one does not like the message, they should not fight the messenger. Could this message have been directed only to Mwai Kibaki, the “cousin from Nyeri”, to watch his back and the holes in his regional homestead and the traitors who may have dug them, or the moles that may have been eating his yams, or the enemies who were throwing missiles, not knowing who might be able to evade them? The video compact disc version of the song flashes images of Kibaki giving speeches in several places, but was there a regional political kingpin from Kisumu to Mombasa who could sleep peacefully during the paranoid 1980s and 1990s Nyayo era in which opportunism and political sycophancy had been perfected into a performance art?⁵ I could amplify this reading by parsing “Waica Kehiri” in which the singer lambasts the opportunists who had sold their souls for a derisive “*runyeni*”, a metonymic single leaf of a previously wild vegetable that was domesticated by the *Gikūyū*, even though there was no famine in the country, but that might be belaboring the point. However, it is worth noting that the seemingly masterful puppeteer’s antics are not being celebrated. In the end, the singer’s frustration as captured in the songs about this period was that politicians were pursuing power for their own ends—the electorate, ethics, and morals be damned! This frustration explains Kamarū’s turn to the sermon-like “message” mode of the 1990s, delivered as a talk given against the background of a flat drumbeat.

In an extended interview with Kamarū in July 1993 that I tape-recorded openly, I probed him on the role he played in the fluid political environment in Kenya in the run-up to the reintroduction of multi-party democracy in 1992. I was particularly curious about the fact that despite releasing a fairly caustic cassette titled *Mahoya ma Būrūri* (Prayers for the Nation) in the run-up to the Saba-Saba rally on 7 July 1990, he appeared not to have paid a heavy personal price. There were also no reports that copies of the cassette were mopped up by the coercive state apparatus like the equally critical *Thīna wa Muoroto* (Precarity in Muoroto) released around the same time by John Mugo Muoni. His honest discussion of the intrigues that kept him out of jail or detention, or being ‘disappeared’, speaks to his ability to use his music to speak truth to power by mobilizing double-voiced utterances. If irony functions through a wink to those in the know, Kamarū’s mobilization of three oral performance tropes, the self-description as “*kanya ka ūhorō*” (the gourd/container—really the bearer—of news), “*mwaria njarie*” (he who

only amplifies what is being discussed in whispers), and “*kanua werüre*” (the mouth that ate itself) invites some probing. He used variations of the three tropes in his critiques of the Kenyatta and Moi states in songs like “J. M. Kariuki Mwendwo Nĩ-irĩ”, “Musa wa Andu Airũ”, “Atongoria Nĩ Inyuĩ Itugi”, “Chunga Marima”, “Kenya ya Ngai”, “Waica Kehiri”, etc.

The mouth that ate itself

In the days leading up to the 7 July protest meeting slated for Kamukunji Grounds, several leading Kenyans who were championing political change were rounded up and either placed under house arrest, or in formal custody or detention without trial. Kamarũ’s band members were locked up at Central Police Station and when he went there to find out why they had been arrested, he, too, was arrested on 6 July 1990, but apparently, Moi wanted to interrogate him personally at State House. Kamarũ was delivered to the then president and given the opportunity to explain his “subversive” message in *Mahoya ma Bũrũri*. Kamarũ explained to the president that political opportunists had been feeding him with a misinterpretation of Kamarũ’s message, which was in Gĩkũyũ, a language the president did not speak. The bone of contention appears to have been the literal reading of the lines to the effect that Moi was going to “*gũikio irima ta Danieli*” (literarily be thrown into a hole/den like Daniel) which his informers suggested was code for the idea that the unpopular president would be killed and buried. Kamarũ apparently clarified that by invoking the figure of the biblical Daniel in his message, he had actually been signaling to the president that he would be tested during the period like the analogously named Daniel who was thrown in a den of lions that did not consume him because God was on his side. Kamarũ explained that, as a friend of the president, he had actually been praying for Moi. His explanation apparently moved Moi to tears and he immediately asked Kamarũ to translate the message in the cassette into Swahili so that more people would hear the message. Kamarũ went ahead to translate the message, but when he attempted to deliver the tapes to State House later, he found his access blocked. Apparently, the same opportunists had succeeded in convincing the indecisive president that their own interpretation of Kamarũ’s message was the authoritative one. Kamarũ played samples of the translated message for me during the interview, and what struck me was his ability to weave a message that was open to interpretation depending on the interpreter’s interests, even though he had moved away from the more richly metaphorical language of the 1970s and 80s.

Following Mikhail Bakhtin, it is now accepted that any utterance is dialogic, and a speaker does not have a monopoly on meaning. As Bakhtin argues, “[...] language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker’s intentions; it is populated—overpopulated—with the intentions of others” (294). To what extent, then, was Kamarũ a neutral conveyor of messages that were not overpopulated with his own intentions, even as he blamed his accusers of overpopulating his message with their own intentions? In his translated message, he consistently reverts to the Gĩkũyũ mode of call-and-response performance in which he frames himself merely as a soloist calling on his chorus to respond to the message from “*mwaria njarie*” (he who only repeats what was already being discussed, ostensibly in whispers). He repeatedly wondered why he, “*kanua werüre*” (literarily the mouth that ate itself, but meaning the mouth that talked too much), was being persecuted. Understanding the contradictoriness of the two tropes illuminates how Kamarũ created a slippery slope on which any interpreter was bound to slip. Can one really say only what is already being discussed, perhaps saying the unsayable, yet be “the mouth that ate itself”, saying more than the rational mind would find safe? Was Kamarũ only a neutral conveyor of messages—“*kanya ka ũhoro*”—as he also repeatedly labeled himself?

It is important to briefly delve into Gĩkũyũ gnosis to understand Kamarũ further. Popular wisdom held that those who are enlightened about pertinent matters do not require messages containing overt texts (*ciunagwo rũkomo, kĩmenyi akamenya ikiunwo, mũũgĩ ndarĩ mũheere wa ũhoro*, etc.), but they also held that “*ndĩthũire mũnyoni ta mũnyanĩrĩrĩ*” (I do not hate the one who sees my faults; I hate the one who broadcasts them), or its variation—*ndĩthũire mũmĩoni ta mũmĩanĩrĩrĩ* (an antelope does not mind the one who sees it, it hates the one who mobilizes the hunters). In the interview, Kamarũ consistently lamented that people had refused to listen to his nuanced political critiques in the political songs mentioned earlier, forcing his turn to the ‘message’ cassettes like *Mahoya ma Bũrũri*, *Message to the Youth*, and *Kũroga*, a call to curse and banish contaminants. Listening to the translated *Mahoya* in his River Road office, I could not help noticing that at one point he compared himself to Moses, he who led the Israelites across the desert and at some point, reportedly threw down the tablet with the Ten Commandments in

frustration. Upon further review of my interview tape (Gĩchingiri and Kamarũ), I find these words in the refrain really striking:

*Fuata nyayo za Mwenyezi Mungu
Kenya yangu, nakupenda mama yangu, sitakuacha
Kenya yangu, baba yangu, sitakuacha*

Follow God's footsteps
My Kenya, I love you my mother[land], I will never abandon you
My Kenya, my father[land], I will never abandon you

In the message Kamarũ devolved leadership to all parents who had teenage children whose morals they were called to guide to save the country that he found messed up. He also voiced his frustration that people were lying to Moi that they were following in his footsteps. If this was the same “prayer” that Kamarũ summarized for Moi, it is no wonder that he might have become the mouth that ate itself by over-explaining his otherwise coded messages. But, more fundamentally, Kamarũ had punctured the president’s cloak as the benevolent father of the nation who presided over the ruling party that was celebrated as “*baba na mama*” (father and mother) of infantilized Kenyans. However, if Moi expected the people to uphold a God-given moral code and act in His image, could they conceivably follow God’s “*nyayo*” (footsteps) at the same time that they were expected to follow the mortal Moi’s slogan of “*fuata nyayo*” (follow [my] footsteps)? If Kamarũ’s call to the people was to recognize themselves as the glue that held the nation together while the leaders were only pillars in an echo of an earlier song from the late 1970s (“*Atongoria nĩ ĩnyuĩ ĩtugi*”), or if all parents were really the leaders, how was this call for the recognition of their popular sovereignty to be reconciled with Moi’s investment in the image of the all-powerful sovereign? If he saw the agitation for pluralism as the equivalent of the Gĩkũyũ “*ituĩka*”, or generational succession from one ruling group to the next, was he just a neutral messenger—the message-carrying gourd—or “*kanua werũire*”, the mouth that got its owner into trouble by explaining more than the rational head wanted? Was it any wonder that some political opportunists that will remain nameless were able to flatten Kamarũ’s message into one meaning consumable by a president who saw himself as having a monopoly over the construction of national meaning and its interpretation? If the earlier musical political commentary was too figurative and allusive to get through to listeners, were the message tapes too overt in meaning? Was it any wonder, then, that Kamarũ was blocked from seeing Moi to deliver the translated *Mahoya* tape? Had the president been toying with him all along as Kamarũ speculated during our interview? There was one more complication to this narrative.

In the run-up to the first multi-party elections in December 1992, Moi dispatched emissaries to Kamarũ inviting him to support the ruling party, KANU, publicly. He even invited Kamarũ to perform at the national celebration of Kenyatta Day on 20 October. Kamarũ accepted the invitation, but he used his televised address to tell Moi to his face that the people did not want him. Kamarũ would only comment euphemistically that he was subjected to “heat” for his comment. According to him, he was only telling Moi what his sycophants could not, or would not. Very tellingly, Kamarũ was not arrested, jailed, detained, or “disappeared”. Could it be that his mask, “*mwaria njarie*” (the one who speaks aloud what others can only whisper) protected him after all? But even as he deployed this mask, he had to be aware of the contrarian Gĩkũyũ saying “*ndĩthũire mũnyoni ta mũnyanĩrĩri*” (I do not hate the one who sees my faults, I hate the one who broadcasts them), a saying that he mobilized in “J. M. Kariuki Mwendwo Ni-iri”, the song that critiqued Kenyatta’s regime after its reported involvement in Kariuki’s murder in 1975. By dancing around in slippery masks signifying that he was only a messenger, a loose tongue, and only a parrot, Kamarũ was consistently able to say the unsayable and stay out of jail, detention, and avoid being “disappeared” or bought and paid for. It is a testament to his skill with words that, having said the unsayable, or gotten his mouth to “eat” itself, Kamarũ could point to politicians and lament that they had overpopulated his messages with their own intentions, thus refocusing attention on the dialogic message itself.

Conclusion

In closing, I loop back to the suggestions in the introductory section, particularly Culler’s idea that literature is only one signifying practice among others in a “complex intertextual phenomenon” that valorizes interdisciplinary approaches to literature. Kamarũ captured the burning issues of the day in song, and his collection is useful in illuminating the context for studying the alternatives to self-censorship in the literature of the period. Having

teased out the possible synergies between Kamarū's music and Ngũgĩ's writing as an example, and recognizing the place of traditional songs and popular music more generally in Ngũgĩ's writing, I close with three suggestive questions. First, how many other traditional or popular artists' work might be useful companion pieces to the study of creative works from the period? Two, if his language of composition limited Kamarū's audience, is it possible to effectuate Ngũgĩ's suggestion that translation might bridge the gulf between languages, so that one day there might be a collection of Kamarū's translated songs, from the traditional—with a guide for the dance choreography—to the romantic and the political? Achebe's hope that his people would one day recognize that there was nothing shameful in their weather, that the palm tree is a fit subject for poetry, invites some more context for the third question. Kamarū's evocation of the universal sublime in "Tūgatigithanio nĩ Gĩkuũ", for example, mobilizes a "fresh" appeal to sensory experience, fear, joy, and wonder. The couple journeys through a war zone in the bitterly-cold August—when birds freeze to death in their nests—and partake in the preparation for the feast for which "the grinding stone was having a conversation with millet near the granary, and the birds were chirruping complaints that only they had not been invited to the feast". The people celebrate the bridegroom's courage by mythologizing him as a giant who could throw a machete nine miles away. So here is the third question: following musician Bob Dylan's recent award of the Nobel Prize for Literature in recognition for the artistry in his songs, would incorporating Kamarū's songs and those of the countless artists who sang a version of Gidi Gidi Maji Maji's "Unbwogable" in intertextual/interdisciplinary conversations about our age be too high a prize/price? Kamarū's songs reward a more sustained close textual analysis than the one undertaken in this exploratory discussion.⁶

Notes

1. A former political detainee during Kenya's liberation struggle of the 1950s, Kariūki became a threat to the Kenyatta state in the early 1970s for his popular nationalism and critique of the emerging inequities in the independent state. He was brutally murdered in March 1975.
2. One may recall the scene in Ngũgĩ's *Petals of Blood* referenced earlier, in which the bar patrons ironically dance to the song about abandoned rural parents and resume "their hip-gyrations, all facing the juke-box, almost as if they were fornicating with a woman hidden in the music box". Just before recognizing the drunken Karega, Munira had just had a fantasy about making love to Wanja in public on the floor of the bar (101).
3. A doyen of the anti-colonial struggle especially in the legislative arena, Oginga Odinga was Kenya's first vice president up to 1966 when he left the government to form the official opposition party KPU after falling out with Kenyatta over the independent state's policies.
4. A then-powerful cabinet minister was rumored to have procured foreign help to help him seize the reins of state power from the serving president whom he had helped acquire power in 1978 specifically because the minister thought Moi would be a pushover. A well-cultivated campaign was mounted all over the country forcing the Anglophilic minister to step down.
5. Almost all of Kamarū's music is available on YouTube or on the website www.josephkamaru.com. Kibaki was Moi's vice President between 1978–88. Almost immediately after the fall of the Anglophilic cabinet minister who had been angling to cut Kibaki down to size, Kibaki was himself subjected to Machiavellian palace intrigues that progressively undermined his influence around the country, and even in his regional Nyeri base.
6. A scholarly collection of essays on East African music that would be of interest in advancing the kind of conversations I am suggesting is Njogu and Mapeau's *Songs and Politics in Eastern Africa* (2007).

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Down River Road in contemporary Kenyan popular fiction

Sam Dennis Otieno

The understanding of the contemporary Kenyan society in popular fiction during the post-Moi years was largely made possible by the *Kwani?* literary journals. The influence of *Kwani?* on the Kenyan literary terrain has, however, been marred by a decline in its literary activities as has been recorded by Carey Baraka in the *Johannesburg Review of Books*. This notwithstanding, literary activities within Kenya still continue to thrive as is evident in the founding of a new literary magazine called *Down River Road* (DRR) which also seems to follow the path set out by its predecessor, *Kwani?* in not conforming to artistic and generic boundaries.


In the “About” section on the DRR website, the editors explain that the magazine identifies as an “[...] online and print journal that publishes fiction, nonfiction, poetry and ideas” and is interested in “[...] the margins, in the shifting centres and the new spaces that exist in what we’ve come to call the alternative”. The identity of DRR also embodies its philosophy which seeks to imagine the world “here, in the right now, in the ongoing, in this perpetual machine we call enlightenment [...]”: a philosophy that seeks to creatively represent the world in the present time. This ‘here’ and the ‘right now’ of the DRR philosophy is reflected in its publications which represent human conditions in the contemporary Kenyan society. For DRR, the evolution of society demands new ways of chronicling it and the cultures within while still maintaining a fidelity to artistic demands. These new ways of chronicling the contemporary Kenyan society are embodied in the publications by DRR in terms of their concerns and even linguistic choices. So far, DRR has published two issues: “Place” in 2019 and “Ritual” in 2020, a reading of which elucidates both the identity and the philosophy of the literary magazine.

In “Place”, narratives of being in the contemporary Kenyan society are explored. This is made possible by the curation of stories and poems that interrogate the theme of place and how characters strive to make meaning of their existence in various places, be they physical or psychological. In its engagement with the subject of place, the stories in this literary magazine also examine the fluidity of identity as a means of survival in the contemporary urban and rural Kenyan societies. The magazine further adopts new ways of storytelling such as the flash fiction genre through which the stories explore the human condition in the contemporary society. “Ritual” contains stories and poems that examine the rituals governing human existence. The subjects addressed range from understandings of grief to reflections on memory and even rituals of everyday life. The rituals of everyday life are represented in a depiction of the daily hustles and bustles of life in the city and stories that depict issues on body consciousness among the youth. “Ritual” also abides by the magazine’s philosophy of imagining the ‘ongoing’ in the here and now through visual narratives, which are increasingly becoming a preferred way of storytelling in contemporary societies. The visual narratives in “Ritual” include works of photography and colour paintings which visually represent the rituals of the human condition in urban and rural settings.

The inclusion of the genre of flash fiction and visual narratives in the DRR literary magazines contributes to a newness in ways of storytelling in contemporary societies. These ways of storytelling still stand in the margins of literary criticism and warrant a critical reception as society evolves and new ways of chronicling it emerge. The language and structures in the stories and poems contained in these magazines are actual reflections of breaching artistic and genre-specific boundaries. Nevertheless, the magazines do not ignore literary merits in their pursuit of a literary revolution in contemporary Kenyan society. Even within the margins and the shifting centres, the contents of the DRR literary magazines still embody literary standards of creativity and intellectual rigour that can actually contribute not just to the vibrancy of the Kenyan literary scene but also to meaningful knowledge production on contemporary Kenyan literature.

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As *DRR* continues to blaze its trail in contemporary Kenyan popular literature, other literary magazines such as *Enkare Review* and *Jalada Africa* continue to contribute to literary imaginations of the contemporary society, although from the margins. Both magazines utilise a model similar to that of *DRR*—a model that seeks to curate narratives of the contemporary society without being beholden to the demands of artistic and generic boundaries. Whereas *DRR* exists both online and in print, *Jalada Africa* and *Enkare Review* largely represent the contemporary society from the digital space. The use of the digital space as a means of literary production and artistic expression is also gaining traction as a new way of perceiving the world through literature. This is seen in critical inquiries by scholars of digital humanities who are interested in the ways through which the digital world has influenced ways in which researchers interact with the world. The vibrancy of the Kenyan literary space is thus kept by these journals which continue to push the boundaries of literary production in Kenya, albeit from the margins.

Beyond critical inquiry into the place of *DRR* within scholarship on digital humanities, these literary magazines are also potential sites for postmodernist readings of contemporary Kenyan popular fiction. The presence of visual narratives in these magazines, as new forms of texts in literature, invite ekphrastic interpretations to the texts as espoused by Ronja Bodola and Guido Isekenmeir in *Literary Visualities* (2017). Ekphrastic interpretations will subject visual to the verbal and, in doing so, broaden the boundaries of literary interpretation in the evaluation of these new/unorthodox genres of literature that are quickly gaining ground in Kenyan literary production.

While I have largely focused on *DRR* as the newest literary establishment in Kenya in this essay, the presence of *Jalada Africa* and *Enkare Review* continue to shape our understanding of contemporary Kenyan popular literature. In their early stages, the *DRR* literary magazines offer literary critics of East African literature fresh perspectives of interrogating emergent forms of literature from Kenya and their place within regional literature as well as African and global literature in the 21st century.

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Remembering the past and reflecting on Kenya's present

Rebeka Njau & Tom Odhiambo

Rebeka Njau was born in colonial Kenya and went to school at a time when girls were unlikely to be encouraged to seek formal education. But coming from a Christian family, she was encouraged to study and managed to be admitted to Makerere University College, from where she graduated, and came back to teach at her alma mater, Alliance Girls High School. She would later found Nairobi Girls School in 1964 from where she retired as a teacher in 1968. Njau would then be involved in the arts scene together with her now ex-husband Elimo Njau at Paa Ya Paa Gallery in Nairobi. Later she would work with the National Council of Churches of Kenya, where she was the editor of the council's magazine *Target*. Rebeka lives in 'semiretirement'—as she continues to keep herself busy with writing—on the outskirts of Nairobi. Tom Odhiambo had this interview with her at her home soon after the release of her memoirs, *Mirrors of My Life*, which was published in July 2019.

TO: Tell me a little bit about your early life: your impressions of life growing up as a young girl in a context of this European modernity and colonialism and a vibrant Kikuyu culture and community.

RN: I grew up, of course, in a village near Fort Smith (Kiambu County today). That's where we had the first Europeans come. It was very near our village and then there was also an Asian shop there. [...] I remember those days. There we were: there were white men on the other side, about one kilometre away from ourselves. It was exciting to have a shop at that time, owned by Asians. We would walk to the shop and see those white men. There was one white man who was called Hallow. I don't know if that was his proper name. He was a doctor, and he was helping our people with all kinds of things. The *mzungu* was killed by Mau Mau and one of the people who killed him was a relative—when I talk about relatives, you know how people were living in a village together.

TO: Yes.

RN: Later on, I could not forget that man. Although he had done a bad thing, killing, there was a side of him that was really good. I have talked about it in the book (*Mirrors of My Life*) a little bit—how he helped me to get into a crowded bus when I was going home from hospital—from Kenyatta Hospital—and I had to walk about three miles from Kenyatta Hospital to where the university [of Nairobi] is because that's where we could board the buses. It was interesting for us, especially in our home, because we were surrounded by people [that] we would call primitive. They circumcised their girls. In our home my parents were Christians. It's like we lived in two countries because we were separated by traditions. We had nothing to do with one another.

TO: So, how did you relate? How did your family relate with the immediate community?


RN: Well, my parents did not look down upon them [neighbours], although my mother was an evangelist. Of course, she would tell them that what they were doing, such as the Mau Mau activities, were bad. But there was no quarrelling about it in our village. I remember that we were not stopped from going to visit our grandmother or our uncles. We had a good time there. But then you know that circumcision was a must and some of our relatives were circumcised and they didn't care. They would go all around the villages taunting us and then they [also]

Rebeka Njau is one of the earliest Kenyan women writers, writing mainly in English. Her published works include the novels *Ripples in the Pool* and *The Sacred Seed*; a play, *The Scar*; and a number of 'folktales' published in different anthologies.

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knew my mother was having classes [for] teaching young girls how bad circumcision was for women. But we didn't care. She was such a brave woman and [the] Mau Mau wanted to kill her. They changed [eventually]—I don't know why. They came to kill her but then on second thought, just before they neared our home, they went back. And of course, we lived a very strict life. My parents were very strict. We were not supposed to mix with people who did not go to school and who were dressing in traditional clothes and behaved in a traditional manner. But we were lucky, especially myself, because my maternal grandfather lived about fifteen miles away. We would go and learn a lot of things from our grandfather, stay there, sleep on a hard wood bed in his room. I remember that we [also] slept [on] goatskin.

TO: *And what was your first impression when you went to school?*

RN: In fact, I liked school. It was a new thing, and we were given slates to write on. It was exciting. One wanted to learn. Where we lived [was] on a highland. We were surrounded by people who were not sending their children to school, but we were not alone. There were other families whose parents were evangelists, or they believed in God, and we made friends among them because we were not supposed to make friends with all these other girls who did not go to school and accepted circumcision. So, we lived separate lives. I remember how we used to be abused by boys. If they knew you were not circumcised, you had a hard time. All these [sic] was great experience for me and I was able to write especially about the circumcision because of what I had seen and the treatment we got and how mum was able to sit down with girls and teach them [...] that early [in] life.

TO: *So, [...] when you leave Alliance and you go to Makerere and you meet all these new people from completely different communities, how did you feel?*

RN: [...] [G]oing to Makerere, of course we found people we had not met before, but you know in our home, the way we were brought up, we were able to mix with people from different countries through my brother. I had a brother called John. John had gone to Makerere earlier and had made friends. There was one man—in fact, I have written about it—from Zambia, I can't remember, or Zimbabwe, who came to live in our house. Dr. Kiano (Gikonyo Kiano was the first African Kenyan to earn a PhD and became a Minister in independent Kenya's first Cabinet) also came to my home through my brother John who made friends with people of different nationalities, different tribes. In fact, he got his wife from Western Uganda. We were really taught how to socialise with people of the same beliefs. What they, my parents, did not want us to do was to keep company with the others because of the influence we would get—bad influence.

TO: *So you found it easy to fit into Makerere?*

RN: I found it easy [...] because I had already been there with my mother to visit my brother John who had set up a shop in Kakira in Jinja.

TO: Yes.

RN: And even at Alliance Girls we had invited two girls from Uganda to come and stay and learn from us. I don't know how they did it. When I went to Makerere one of the girls became my friend. In fact, she was very interested in *Ripples in the Pool* when it came out, and because she had a position in the Ministry of Education, she wrote letters [to concerned officials] saying they should try to get *Ripples in the Pool* in their schools. I also remember this girl from Zambia. She became a very good friend of mine. It was not strange as far as I was concerned.

TO: *But your generation as a whole, what vision of Kenya did you have as we were getting away from colonialism into independence?*

RN: Well, of course we all wanted independence to come because I remember whenever we went to shop [along] Moi avenue—it was then Government Road—and there were Asians all over the place. I remember one day going to buy something inside the shop of an Asian. They would not let us get in. They said, "Just go away." We were feeling bitter because we were treated very badly. When we went to town we used to go and buy second-hand books because we are great readers in my family. We would go to those Asian bookshops [and] they were very unfriendly at that time. We looked forward to better times because we knew, although we had gained some knowledge, we still wanted our country to be ours. Remember there were booklets written in Gikuyu. You know we used to read those books and they made us feel proud about our land and we wanted to occupy it later without any hindrance from all these Europeans and Asians. I felt strongly that we needed independence and we were

looking forward to having everything good, rich, no more poverty. But then we found after independence things went slowly. People continued to be poor, but we remained patient.

TO: *What about women professionals? When you came back from Makerere to teach at Alliance, what did you as women pioneer professionals talk about? You've talked about friends—Kiano, Matiba—what did you see yourselves as?*

RN: We knew we had to struggle. Also, as women, we did not consider ourselves privileged at all. What we didn't have at that time is this feeling that you belong to this or that tribe. I did not know tribalism because at Alliance we mixed. And I have told you even from Uganda, the girls came to stay with us, and we found out how different they were. Somehow, we envied them. They knew how to dress; they were well-groomed. We were still very new to these modern things; of course, you look forward to that kind of thing.

TO: *So, what do you think Kenyans have not done correctly since independence?*

RN: Well, there are people who have worked very hard to bring themselves up but this idea that we must be rich quickly—even young people now don't want to start at the bottom there and grow up—is wrong. When you grow up with something you have struggled for, and you know it's your thing, you'll not waste money. Now, you know what makes me sad is the fear that these young people today [have]. They don't know where they are, they are wobbling here and there. They have no solid ground on which to stand because even those ones who are supposed to set the example are too busy working and they have no time to think of things that matter. [...] [W]hat do you believe in? I am not talking about Christianity or whatever because when you look at the people who have gone before us—who had a traditional set up, who had never gone to school—they had a great deal to teach about life.

TO: *So, you think adults today, the old are not teaching the young?*

RN: No, because [...] I don't think they were taught or, if they were taught, they ignored. They preferred to get things quickly. Money, quickly. They leave their children—like us ladies, we have a baby, even before it is six months you've already left it with the *ayahs*. In the traditional setup, children were taught by grownups, grandmothers, and grandfathers. Talk about sharing, talk about it is wrong to steal even one shilling from somebody. That was evil in certain customs like the Kikuyu, I know. So now where do you think all this nonsense has come from? This stealing without feeling anything. I can't explain.

TO: *What do you think we can do to address the problem?*

RN: We have to slow down about looking for riches. Money is good because without money sometimes you can't even help other people. I see young people here, neighbours carrying stones. They are working so hard, and I wish I had more money to give them, and I tell them when you get this money do not drink. I am not going to employ anyone who is drinking because people drink in a way that they do not know why they drink. Drinking just to make them maybe forget themselves and where they are going. No vision. They stay just like that. I feel very sad. You see all those schoolgirls getting pregnant and then they have a baby, their life, real life, is more or less sometimes cut short by men who are in offices who [are] driving big cars. What is that?

TO: *Some time back you worked with the church. Do you think the church can help these?*

RN: Now that we are talking about the church, I worked with the church for fifteen years. I remember when I came to settle here, there were preachers around and they'd put on their music very, very loud so that we can hear them. And one day I was seated here writing and there was a church here that had started, and they would put the loudspeaker facing here.

TO: *Facing you?*

RN: Yeah. And when I went out and looked at the congregation, there were only four people in that *kachurch*. Do you know what I did? I took the speaker and turned it to face them. So, later they came here—a man and his wife—to talk to me. To tell me that am I not afraid of going to hell because what I did, God does not like. And you know what I told them? In the end of times when it comes and we are being shown where to go, there'll be a big wide road and a tiny one. The big wide road, maybe it will be pointed out to me where all those people who have

been helping people, who have been living well, good ones, would be directed to. And you, pastor and your wife, you'll be surprised because you'll be led to a road that leads to Jahannam, everlasting fire.

I preached to them. I told them even in the olden times, our grandfathers, our fathers, they went to pray under the tree. Either Mugumo or whatever, and there they were quiet. They knew it was a holy place they were in. Here in your church, you go in people are shouting, laughing, talking, you do not even respect the house of God. I wanted them to learn about the old people of the past. They believed in god, whoever they thought was god, *na wanampa heshima* (and they respected him). These ones here, you hear them shouting to the highest, they are not really interested in you; they want to be heard outside so that more and more people can go to their church. So, I feel sad about the church because it should be at the forefront of the struggle against suffering. We should not have so many young people drinking, being immoral. So, what have we gained from them (present day preachers)? The missionaries, at least they came and gave us an education. At least that was something. But today, what is education giving us? I sometimes wonder. I think people should rethink and learn and teach the young, first of all, to think of the person you are next to as a neighbour, whether you know them or not. And you do not let them go to hell without helping. We must help one another. You know that's what we lack.

TO: *Helping one another?*

RN: Helping one another and thinking about you as a human being. Maybe because we want money so quickly, there is nothing else occupying people's minds. How can I get some more? Money is good, but to be obsessed with it that you can't even give somebody something is wrong.

TO: *What about writing? What does writing mean to you?*

RN: To me writing means a lot. I can't do without writing.

TO: *Why?*

RN: Because there is nothing else I can do. That's what I have done for many years. Do you know I have a lot of things I have written but not published? I have this book of sixteen women—in this book [*Mirrors of My Life*] I have listed some of them. I have short stories, almost done. I have not organised [them]. I have to go through them. At night I don't forget to put a piece of paper and a pen near my bed because something can come into my mind, and I have to wake up and write it down because if I don't, I'll forget. There is no day, if I'm here, I'm not writing at my desk. [...] [I]t is like people who drink—they can't do without a drink. It's the same thing with me. Something I've seen I put it down, like this. Now what have I to do? I don't have many years to live, to put all together.

TO: *So, what's your philosophy of life? How have you managed life? You've lived your life up to this age, there is a philosophy of life you have.*

RN: Well, I'm very positive. I'm not negative at all. Even with the government I have hope that this place can be better, and it will be because there will be people who can bring it to where it should be. If I see somebody saying "don't", I don't want to talk to you. If you have negative feelings, negative response to people who need your help, then don't come to me. And I don't hate people. I can disagree with you, but I do not hate you. And if you've done something wrong to me, of course I will tell you right away. But I'm not going to hate you. The only thing is that I keep away from you if what you are telling me is negative. I've had also failures. We are human beings, we make mistakes. Sometimes you can take the wrong lane and go the wrong way but soon, if you listen to yourself, you find you are on the wrong path and you get back to where you should be. I think [it's] because I have had so many experiences living with different types of people from different tribes. And you know in our home we were encouraged. You see my brother John married from Western Uganda. My brother Job, who died two years ago, married that side. And John's children [sic], Wanjiru, she got married to a doctor—[he is] Luo [and] they live in Kisumu—and my sister Muthoni also married. You know all of us we were lucky because my father was working in Nairobi as a telephone operator and he would meet people, *wahindi* [Indian people], *wazungu* [white people], and they were really good to us. They taught us a lot of things. They taught us not to be greedy. You know, [as] children you'll see somebody dressed in a nice dress, [and] you beg for it. We couldn't do that. We were not supposed to do that—covet things. Be satisfied with what you have.

TO: *So, that's the thing to really teach society today? People to be contented?*

RN: Contented and also don't be a slave. What I want to say is this: stealing to us was very bad, for instance, even when you were given food. Mother gave you food and you said, "*Aah, hii siwezi kushiba*" (This food isn't enough). You know what she did? She would make you overeat so that you learn your lesson. You know, when I was living in Railways Quarters I used to go to a butchery in Parklands and buy meat there. [...] [E]ven when I changed my residence, I would still go to that shop in Pangani. So, one day I went to the butchery and whilst I was waiting to be served there was somebody next to me. I don't know if it was the person in front of me who saw a fifty-shilling note down on the floor. He picked [up] the note and asked me if I had dropped the money. I said no. I looked in my purse and there was no fifty shillings. But who else? The attendant insisted that the fifty shillings was mine. I said okay. But on the way [home], I was thinking all the time: this is not my fifty. Do you know I had to take the money back! All the way. Those people were surprised. They said, "You don't want this money?" I said, "This money is not mine". I remembered what my mother taught us. Not to take things that are not ours. And even the Kikuyu believed that stealing was an evil thing. So, I don't know where all these people have learnt to steal from.

TO: *Well, thank you very much, but that's how the society is today.*



Alienation and estrangement in Dinaw Mengestu's *All Our Names* Ruth Kwamboka Openda

Alienation and estrangement in Dinaw Mengestu's *All Our Names*

In this article I explore issues of negotiating cultural identity in new geopolitical spaces as presented in Dinaw Mengestu's *All Our Names*. I examine the portrayal of a liminal character living in Uganda and America and how the author narrates his daily experiences of negotiating identity in order to underscore the power of hierarchies of ethnicity, class, race, and nationalistic discourses at play in determining who belongs and who does not. I analyse the ways in which names are used as narrative strategy to show that identity is never singular or fixed but plural and continuous. I explore how, through Isaac's un-naming, naming, and renaming, Mengestu contests the fixity of names and identity by indicating naming as a processual act and how a person's identity is layered and thus cannot be fully contained within a single marker. Drawing upon the concepts of hybridity, third space, and cosmopolitanism, I demonstrate how subject position and cultural identity are not fixed into definite categorical distinctions but are fluid concepts. Mengestu does not only raise possibilities of belonging beyond the confines of a nation or community, but also presents a cosmopolitan world where negotiation and belonging is difficult because of power differences, racism, marginalisation, and discrimination. **Keywords:** cultural identity, cosmopolitanism, hybridity, alienation, racism.

Introduction

In this article, I am motivated by debates surrounding identity and diaspora in different academic disciplines. Theorists like Homi K. Bhabha, Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, and Kwame Appiah, to name but a few, have explored new ways of interrogating diasporic identities because discourses of nationalism or race as modes of belonging placed individuals in fixity of roots and origins. In *Beginning Postcolonialism*, McLeod rightly observes that:


nationalist discourses attempt to construct "deep, horizontal comradeship" by setting "norms and limits" for the nation's people [such that] although migrants [...] pass through the political borders of nations [...] gaining entrance to the new place, such "norms and limits" can be used to exclude the migrants from being accommodated inside the imaginative borders of the nation [...] migrants can be deemed not to belong there and [...] from thinking of the new land as their home. (212)

These discourses of nationalism, race, or ethnicity are no longer suitable as models of identity and belonging in the present time because of the increase in migration of people across nations which has remarkably altered the way individuals think of their identity in the new places.

Hall states that an essentialist concept of identity is "constructed on the back of recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group, or with an ideal, and with the natural closure of solidarity and allegiance established on this foundation" (16). As Culler indicates, this notion of identity is fixed and constant throughout an individual's life and that it is something given by birth (115). Hall argues against this essentialist view of identity as fixed, proposing that identity involves constant change and is never static. Identity is influenced by structures of power, race, and ethnicity and is "more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion" (17). Difference plays a role in fluidity of identity.

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Bhabha discusses the concept of hybridity in *The Location of Culture* (1994). Hybrid identity is a process that emerges in the liminal space where two cultures integrate. He goes on to state that it is necessary:

[...] [t]o think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These 'in-between' spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself. (1–2)

Bhabha explains the process of cultural negotiation where two opposing cultures clash and articulate their differences. The in-between space is where the new cultural identity that is hybrid is created. This hybridity of cultural identities is not a product of assimilation of two cultures but of something new. This notion presents cultural identity as in a process, not something fixed. It keeps changing and is not limited to a geopolitical community.

Bhabha further states “for me the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the ‘Third Space,’ which enables other positions to emerge” (“The Third Space” 211). The third space allows for new possibilities to emerge and questions the established fixed categories of culture and identity. Bhabha argues that the liminal space “opens up possibilities of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (4) and, in so doing, “instead of exclusion and rejection, the new space, thus, has the capacity and tendency to include and accept” (Chakraborty 149).

In this article I draw attention to the fluid nature of cultural identity. I am interested in exploring the ways in which the characters in the novel define and (re)construct their cultural identities as they try to fit into the socio-culture of the host community but remain on the periphery. Such characters face discrimination and marginalisation as they are not accommodated within the imaginative borders of the nation. Their in-between state of being affords them a chance to reinvent their identity, therefore achieving a plural and hybrid identity.

In examining the notions of identity and belonging in the contemporary world “cosmopolitanism has re-emerged as a way of understanding the implications of social, cultural and political transformations and contacts that transcend territorial boundaries” (Voronkova 1). Vertovec and Cohen state that cosmopolitanism can refer to:

a vision of global democracy and world citizenship; [...] it points to possibilities for shaping new transnational frameworks for making links between social movements. [...] [It is] a non-communitarian, post-identity politics of overlapping interests and heterogeneous or hybrid publics [which] challenge conventional notions of belonging, identity and citizenship; [...] and descriptively [cosmopolitanism] address[es] certain socio-cultural processes or individual behaviours, values or dispositions manifesting a capacity to engage cultural multiplicity. (1)

Cosmopolitanism is thus premised on a sense of belonging that transcends national borders, anti-essentialist notions of identity, and calls for willingness to engage with the other by stepping outside the definitive modes of belonging and identification. It recognises possibility of multiple identities and “emphasizes cultural hybridity to challenge the relevance of national cultures and arbitrariness of distinction between us (co-nationals) and them (foreigners)” (Boucher, Aubert and Guérard de Latour 23). Cosmopolitan identity is constantly in a state of becoming rather than being.

This idea of cosmopolitanism has been criticized because, as Bhabha argues, it “configures the planet as a concentric world of national societies extending to global villages. It is a cosmopolitanism of relative prosperity and privilege founded on ideas of progress that are complicit with neo-liberal forms of governance” (*Location of Culture* xiv). Pollock *et al.* argue that:

cosmopolitanism of the contemporary times does not spring from the capitalized “virtues” of Rationality, Universality, and Progress, nor is it embodied in the myth of the nation writ large in the figure of the citizen of the world; as cosmopolitans today are victims of modernity, failed by capitalism’s upward mobility, and bereft of those comforts and customs of national belonging. (582)

Such arguments have emphasised the need to reconsider the celebratory notion of cosmopolitanism in relation to minority groups because of its “overtone of urbanity and sophistication” (Ashcroft 13) and free movement because it does not consider power hierarchies in the global world. As Ashcroft further argues, “people who must move across borders, flee the nation either as economic or political refugees, or as subjects oppressed in some way by the state power. Such people are undecidedly unfree” (13). Bhabha coined the term “vernacular cosmopolitan-

ism” to address the problem of too eager claims of world citizenship associated with cosmopolitanism. He states “the notion of borderless cosmopolitan community seems inadequate in relation to the millions of refugees and migrants fleeing violence and poverty propo[sing] a cosmopolitan community envisaged in *marginality*” (Werbner 497, emphasis in original). Vernacular cosmopolitanism recognises the minorities’ daily experiences in the new spaces they move to and the inequalities that come with their mobilities.

Drawing upon the concepts of hybridity, third space, and cosmopolitanism, I demonstrate that subject position and cultural identity are not definite categorical distinctions but are fluid concepts. I urge for what Gerard Delanty calls critical cosmopolitanism regarding “multiple ways of existing in the social world based on the principle of openness created out of the encounter of the local and the global which considers the minority with their struggles in the global world” (“The Cosmopolitan Imagination” 27). Vernacular and critical cosmopolitanisms contest the experiences of discrimination and marginalisation that minorities go through as they are not accommodated within the imaginative borders of the nation.

No place to belong

All Our Names captures the experiences of Isaac (D—) and his friend Isaac in Uganda, and later his relationship with Helen in America. Isaac’s search for identity and a place to belong starts as a young boy in his home in Ethiopia where he always felt like an outsider; always dreaming of leaving home, a dream he later fulfils when he leaves for Uganda. The narrator was estranged from his own family because he felt burdened by the traditions and the customs his community believed in. He imagines that in Uganda he would belong and make it a place to call home. However, he finds himself always on the margins, isolated as a foreigner and poor boy from a small village in Ethiopia. Isolation and alienation mark his life in Uganda.

Mengestu employs a split narrative technique in the novel by using two narrators—Isaac whose real name we come to find out is “D—” and Helen. Through a manipulation of focalisation by using these two characters, he brings about plurality of perspectives in the novel. The chapters titled Isaac contain Isaac’s narrative of his experiences in Uganda while the alternating ones titled Helen narrate Helen’s perspective whereby we get to learn of Isaac’s life in America and the romantic relationship between the two—Helen and Isaac. The use of two narrators, as Robyn McCallum argues, is one way of “representing a plurality of voices, consciousness and discourses in the narrative, of structuring a narrative as a dialogue between different cultural and ideological positions” (63). Mengestu’s use of two narrators—of different genders, in different cultural spaces—in alternating chapters presents different perspectives on questions of identity and belonging in these two cultural spaces—Uganda and America.

In this article, I use the terms “alienation” and “estrangement” to refer to the immigrants’ experiences of isolation as outsiders and racialised others in the host societies. Immigrant here refers to the characters who are displaced from their homelands for political, economic, and social reasons. Derek Hook states that “the concept of alienation emphasises a sense of eruption—estrangement—in the relationship between the individual and the things, objects and people around him or her” (95). Jan Hadja offers a similar definition of alienation as “an individual feeling of uneasiness or discomfort which reflects his exclusion or self-exclusion from social and cultural participation; an expression of non-belonging or non-sharing, an uneasy awareness or perception of unwelcome contrast with others” (756–7). These definitions capture Isaac’s experiences of always being on the margins, excluded and unwelcome as a foreigner in Uganda and as racialised other in America.

In the novel, Isaac is portrayed as a permanent outsider as evidenced in his experiences back home, in Uganda, and in America. He feels alienated as much in his home as in Uganda. His sense of not belonging is underscored by the name “Bird” his father gave him as a child, because he thought his son “lived high in the sky, far above everyone else” (*All Our Names* 179). The nickname alludes to the narrator’s “wandering—[his] statelessness as a state of being” (Sacks). It symbolises the freedom associated with not belonging to a particular place. The narrator is just like a bird that migrates from place to place, temporarily stopping in its journey but never settling. He has never felt a sense of belonging to any place. Even back home he felt like an outsider always dreaming of leaving. This is later evidenced in the novel by Helen who discloses that Isaac told her once he had accepted the idea that “there was no place in the world where he felt fully at ease but [he] didn’t know it was permanent” (*Names* 99).

The narrator seeks to reconfigure his own identity away from his family and culture because at home he always felt estranged from his family, culture, and what the community believed in. “When I lived with my parents I used to take long walks by myself even when I was very young and was forbidden from doing so. I couldn’t help

it. I was restless. I always felt out of place” (99). The narrator’s estrangement in his home reconfigures the idea of home as a place where one belongs as Georgiou posits. According to her, a home is the “symbolic and real place that becomes a synonym to familiarity, intimacy, security and identity against the unknown, the distant and the large” (85). Contrary to the notion of home, the narrator feels like a “prisoner” (*Names* 177) while at home, due to a sense of separation from all the traditions and customs that the community upholds. He stresses the sense of estrangement growing up in his village—dreaming about leaving and making plans to do so secretly.

When an opportunity to leave home comes, the narrator knows where to go. By the time he arrived in Kampala, Uganda he had given up all his names. His namelessness affords the narrator a chance to reinvent himself. Isaac’s dissonant self-narration discloses the guileless belief he had of making Kampala his home. “From the beginning, it was harder for Isaac than for me to be in the capital. This had never been and, I understood later, would never be my home, regardless of what I imagined” (5). He confesses how naïve he was in commit[ing] [him]self to thinking of [Kampala] only as “the capital [...] thinking as long as it was nameless, it had no allegiances. Like [him] it belonged to no one, and anyone could claim it” (4). The lack of a name and attachment to anyone makes the capital a place where anyone can belong, bringing out the cosmopolitan ideals of “openness, social justice, the universality of rights and principal of hospitality” (Delanty, “A cosmopolitan approach to the explanation of social change” 338). It is a place that respects cultural differences and is willing to engage with the other. Isaac thought he had a right to claim the capital as his home, but he later realises this will never be the case because of the power hierarchies of class and nationalist discourses at play in cosmopolitan mobilities that determine who belongs and who does not. In the capital the narrator finds himself always on the margins, isolated as a foreigner and poor boy from a small village in Ethiopia.

The narrating self uses interior monologue to comment on his feelings as an experiencing self. He states: “Isaac was gifted at making you feel special” (*Names* 8), revealing how important Isaac was to him as a friend. Mieke Bal describes interior monologue as “an artificial mode of narration in first person with character-bound narrator that seeks to eliminate reference to the first-person voice in favour of a silent ‘pure’ first person focalizer” (30). The ‘you’ here is used for self-address. Here the narrator discloses that, although he is powerless around his friend Isaac with his “conspiratorial language” such as “we should talk in private or let’s talk someplace else” (*Names* 8) and with his eagerness to please him, causing him to quickly nod in agreement with whatever he says, this makes him feel special. His dependence on his friend Isaac grows with time to the point where the narrator feels safe and can only sleep better on campus with Isaac around.

The narrator discloses that his friendship with Isaac was built on the understanding that “both were liars and frauds” (7), pretending to be students at the university so as to belong. Isaac, just like the narrator, arrives in the capital thinking he can easily find his place. Unlike the narrator who is from Ethiopia, Isaac is more rooted in Uganda, but because he is a poor boy from the village he is marginalised too. Isaac’s alienation is due to the society’s social structure, where the difference between the privileged and non-privileged classes isolates the latter, heightening their sense of not belonging. The narrator reveals how they become friends through their common alienation in the capital. We became “friends the way two stray dogs find themselves linked by treading the same path every day in search of food and companionship” (6).

Days later they meet on campus trying their best to belong by “standing near but never too close to a group of students” (7). From the moment their eyes meet they see some familiarity in each other which the narrator describes as “only two men meeting unexpectedly in the middle of a desert after having travelled for so long that they’ve begun to believe the world was uninhabited would know what we felt like” (7). In the slums they didn’t recognise each other but here on campus they are everything to each other. The description evidently demonstrates the isolated lives the narrator and his friend Isaac have in Kampala. Because of their poverty, they only manage to stay as poor squatters in marginalised slums away from the city. Seeing some familiarity in their alienation, the two become friends.

Their friendship blossoms over the games they play together at the university. They come up with a game of identifying two camps of students—the real revolutionaries and the campus frauds. They categorise members of the two camps simply by looking at the shoes the students are wearing. The real revolutionaries are those “who fought to be here” and wear “dusty shoes that had been repaired so many times till there was hardly anything left of the sole” (25) while the campus frauds are the boys who arrive in “chauffeured cars” (24). At the start of their game, the narrator does not care about the difference between the two camps because he is of the opinion that a third camp exists—outsiders like him who watch safely from the margins. He later realises the importance

of learning to see the difference between the two camps because he had imagined “in the university were better rules” (25) of equality and inclusion. It does not take long to see the students as “part of the same campus body but fractured into dozens of discrete parts that loosely connected but rarely touched” (25). The narrator’s observation indicates that the politics of belonging is not spared, even within the university community. The students who showed signs of wealth had privileges that “lifted their heads and focused their eyes” (25), something that could not be said of the likes of Isaac and the narrator who try their best to be part of the student body, but remain marginalised.

Using this game, Mengestu presents the social divisions in the city, depicting the disparity between the rich and the poor through the image of shoes. The foreigners, like the narrator, and the poor, like his friend Isaac, lack a sense of belonging in Uganda because the country only recognises those who have economic strength that can give them access to power and entitlement. This also illustrates the unfulfillment of the promise of Kampala as a city one can claim as home for ordinary individuals such as the narrator and Isaac.

Other than his friendship with Isaac, the narrator’s life in Uganda is marked by absolute isolation. No one notices him, either at the university or the slum where he lives. A few months after meeting Isaac and for the first time since coming to the Kampala, the narrator feels that it is a place where he finally belongs. This does not last long because he finds himself all alone once again after Isaac’s disappearance. In the weeks that follow, the narrator’s loneliness intensifies as he offers:

Before Isaac, I had always been content to cast myself as an outsider, because only by such measures, I thought, *could you break from the grips of the family and tribe around which you were supposed to order your life*. I had ventured far away from home to live up to that idea without understanding that, inevitably, something had to be paid for it. Every day following Isaac’s absence, I was reminded that without him I made no impact on no one. I was seen, and perhaps occasionally heard strictly by strangers, and always in passing. I was a much poorer man for this than I had ever thought. (46, emphasis added)

This narration, which sees his past decisions in retrospect, highlights a change in perception about the value of family and community. The narrator looks back at his naïve self and his decision to leave home, and now fully understands his loss, which at the time he could not grasp. The use of second person focalisation (italicised) allows the narrator to distance and evaluate his actions as an experiencing self. The narrator conveys his pain of loss and alienation in Kampala. The narrator’s need to belong and feel a connection with the society is underscored in one instance when a boy he mistook for Isaac waves at him. The narrator is so elated that someone had actually noticed him that he stands there for more than one minute waving back at that boy.

At the height of the revolutionary violence in the capital, Isaac gives a nameless man some money to take the narrator to “someplace safe” (211). The narrator’s presence in that village is “not totally welcome” but because Isaac had paid for his safety and for his stay there, his presence is just “tolerated” (219). The anonymity and quietness the narrator enjoys in the village initially, quickly wears off and every time the children shout his name, Daniel, it is a reminder of his “privileged perch” (219). The curious gazes from other villagers and the excitement from children shouting hello at him every day remind him of his status as an outsider in the village and sometimes, as the narrator offers, “I could hear the imaginary perch I lived on break” (220). The privileged perch he enjoys in the village makes him understand why his father called him a “bird” (219) who “lived high in the sky, far above everyone else” (179).

The image of the bird symbolises the detachment of the narrator from the host community. The narrator enjoys watching the villagers go about their daily activities but can’t be part of it. This perch emphasises his sense of not belonging there but being temporarily accepted, underscoring the experiences of immigrants in host communities as never fully recognised as part of the new places they move to. The bird image also indicates the narrator’s freedom and his quest for a place where he would belong. As a boy back in the village, the narrator always wanted to leave because he felt like he did not belong there. After arriving in Uganda, he thinks he can make the capital his home but that does not happen because he is not accepted. Just like the bird that flies from one branch to the next, the narrator is in a continued search for a place to belong. With no fixed place to belong, the narrator’s identity is not fixed but fluid, continually in a process of adapting to new places. These shifts present him the opportunity to reinvent his identity, therefore achieving plural and hybrid identity.

Isaac’s selfless act of giving the narrator his student visa enables the narrator to travel to America under his name, Isaac Mabira, consequently escaping the war in Uganda. Isaac’s act reflects Kwame Gyekye’s argument that “humanity, not our particular ‘ethnic’ background, should constitute our fundamental identity” (103) because

“it is the individual, worthy of dignity and respect, not the ethnic group, who ought to be considered” (103). In the novel *Mengestu* underscores that “friendship can be the basis of a deeper and more inclusive democracy as it is a relationship that goes beyond the proximity of familial, ethnic, or national relations” (Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship* vii). This is exemplified by the friendship between the narrator and Isaac. Despite their differences, the narrator being Ethiopian and the friend Isaac being Ugandan, their friendship is cemented on their experiences as marginalised individuals in Kampala.

To present Isaac’s experiences in America, Mengestu uses Helen’s perspective which is important in the novel as it presents the view of an individual from within the centre, not on the margins like Isaac. From her perspective, Isaac displays more maturity, and is a person who feels that he does not belong to this new place and is thus ready to live as quietly as possible. Helen’s narrative is significant in telling of Isaac’s life in America and how her encounter with Isaac makes her realise the extent of the racial discrimination in her town which, as she confesses, she only noticed in extreme forms.

In the novel, Mengestu uses Isaac’s interracial love affair with Helen to reveal the limits of cosmopolitan ideals of openness to otherness in America, where race is the power that differentiates and classifies individuals, deciding who belongs or does not belong. In the town of Laurel, race influences social relationships by fixing individuals in definite groups, thus denying people the chance of moving past these boundaries of race and engaging with the other. The town’s racist attitudes are captured in Helen’s description: “we were exactly what geography had made us middle of the road, never bitterly segregated, but with lines dividing black from white all over the town, whether in neighborhoods, churches, schools, or parks. We lived semi-peacefully apart” (33).

Because of the racial prejudice in the town, Isaac’s relationship with Helen unfolds exclusively in his apartment. Back in Uganda, Isaac had a fantasy of finding a foreign wife—probably a doctor, with blonde hair and blue eyes—who would fall in love with him despite their racial and class differences. He imagined them having a kind of love that frees an individual from the broken world. Here in Laurel, Isaac gets to understand that this kind of love is not a possibility outside his apartment. Their relationship is “an isolated reality that begin[s] and end[s] on the other side of his apartment” (21). They are also aware of “how easily the tiny world [they were] slowly building could vanish” (21) if the outside world found out about their affair. I read Helen’s sexual desire towards Isaac as a “mode of opening [her]self to the strangeness of the other [Isaac]; a risky movement of giving up [her] identity and entering the strange territory of the other [thus] creating possibilities for dialogue” (Pucherova 932). Despite the racism in Laurel, Helen risks it all to be in a relationship with Isaac.

Helen’s longing to have a relationship with Isaac, like other normal couples, and to have a chance to “go to the movies, dinner, invite friends over on the weekend, and have beach vacations” (*Names* 32) makes her single-handedly challenge the racism in Laurel. To start her small revolt, she invites Isaac out for lunch at Ben’s diner. She describes the diner as “never officially segregated” although only whites eat there (35). Isaac and Helen walk into Ben’s diner together and immediately “the whole diner fell silent as all eyes turned towards them” (36). In the midst of the stares which confirm that Isaac has transgressed the fixed racial boundaries by stepping into Ben’s diner, the waitress takes their order.

The waiter comes back after a while to ask them if they would like their food as takeaway because Isaac’s presence is not welcome. Isaac, realising what is going on, insists they will eat in the restaurant. The waitress brings Isaac’s order first, “served on a stack of thin paper plates barely large enough to hold the food [with] a plastic fork and knife wrapped in a palm-sized napkin” (38). Later, Helen’s order is delivered, served on “standard cream-colored plates used for everyone other than Isaac” (38). Isaac is treated as an inferior being not worth the same treatment as Helen, simply because of his skin colour. Mengestu contests such racial prejudices, arguing against forms of identity grounded in race that are used to justify forms of oppression and exclusion of some individuals based on their skin colour. The stares that Helen and Isaac receive at Ben’s diner are the same hostile glares they receive when they stop for lunch at a restaurant off the highway on their journey to Chicago. The waitress who serves them addresses both as “dear” and “honey” (225), an enacted affection to hide the obvious racism surrounding them.

Henry’s advice to Isaac for how to live in America highlights the normalisation of racism in Laurel. “[Henry] told me not to stare at white people, to say ‘sir’ if I was stopped by the police, and to live as quietly as possible” (177). Isaac takes Henry’s advice by trying to avoid unnecessary attention to himself, especially when with Helen. This is seen when Helen and Isaac take a drive to a motel far away from town. As they drive into the motel’s parking lot, Helen does not display any fear of them being seen together, but Isaac “insist[s] on sliding to the bottom of

the seat because even though [the people] don't know [Helen], they still might not like what they see" (150). His actions display his understanding of the racism in America and reactions to his identity as a black man in such a society.

Due to the racial discrimination that Isaac has to confront in America, his life in Laurel is steeped in loneliness. The only people Isaac can talk to are Helen and Henry. Isaac depends on Helen for almost everything, and on one occasion he calls her at work to ask her to leave the phone on the desk so that he can hear other people talking. Isaac's request exemplifies his isolation in Laurel. Helen reveals that Isaac "didn't know how to fill his days. He had books [...] that he read obsessively because he didn't know what to do with all those empty long hours" (22). Helen pities Isaac "for having nothing that was truly his" (22). Isaac has no place he belongs to or can call home. Helen observes that "being occasionally called 'boy' or 'nigger' didn't compare to having no one who knew him before [coming to America], who could remind him, simply by being there, that he was someone else entirely" (22). Helen's statements underline Isaac's estrangement and alienation. Estranged from his family and alienated in the new places he finds himself, Isaac is a permanent outsider and he acknowledges that there is no place in the world where he could feel at home. Isaac is in a liminal state; he is in a constant negotiation between a past that is lost and a present that is not definite. This gives him a plural and hybrid identity that challenges conventional notions of identity and belonging. Mengestu uses Isaac, who is always on the margins because of his difference, to counter celebratory cosmopolitanism and highlight power hierarchies at play in society that control mobilities across borders.

Names as sites for negotiation of identity

In the novel, Mengestu, through the character of Isaac, tackles the question of naming, unname, and renaming and how it connects to identity as a fluid concept. Isaac's search for identity is constructed around his flight from his own names and his past in a need to reinvent himself across borders. Growing up in his village, Isaac professes his desire to leave home because he always felt like a stranger. Even before leaving home, Isaac had given himself different names—though he does not disclose them—in addition to the others he gets in the course of the narrative. In *All Our Names*, names are used as a narrative device to illustrate that identity is not singular or fixed but plural and continuous.

According to Janet, a name "personifies the individual and is also a symbol of uniqueness of the individual" (711). This makes the name "a rigid designator that can attribute identity and impute properties to an object or an individual" (Kripke 48). Naming, as Ganapathy-Dore states, "follows birth, a christening that endows an individual with an identity and inserts the individual in a clan or religious or national community" (17). This is the case with Isaac as he narrates "when I was born, I had thirteen names. Each name was from a different generation, beginning with my father and going back from him. I was the first one in our village to have thirteen names. Our family was considered blessed to have such a history" (*Names* 177). This statement underlines the importance of names in Isaac's community and family. For them, names reflect the culture, history, and memory of the community and group consciousness. For the community, naming, as Derek Alderman argues, is "a powerful vehicle for promoting identification with the past and locating oneself within the network of memory" (195). Isaac did not share in the pride of having all these names as he confesses: "I knew from a very young age, though, that I would never want that. I felt as if I had been born into a prison" (*Names* 177–8).

In his quest to free himself from this prison, he decides to drop his names as he crosses the border from Kenya to Uganda: "I shed those names just as our bus crossed the border into Uganda" (3). Isaac's action reaffirms Derrida's argument that "we are not our names or titles; the named may break free from their received names" (*On the Name* 12–3). Derrida's statement indicates that names are not fixed entities. This is also emphasised by Bodenhorn and Vom Bruck's argument that "naming, name dropping and name changing demonstrate the processual nature of embodied practice and the dynamic of identification" (20).

I read into Isaac's interest in leaving home and acquiring new names a desire for the freedom to reconfigure and reconstruct himself as a cosmopolitan self away from the singularity and confinement of the community's culture. Even before he had a chance to leave home, Isaac had begged his father to send him away, unsuccessfully. So Isaac had to make his own plans to leave. When what started as rumours of a socialist revolution unfolded into reality in their village, the narrator's father realised it is time for his son to leave home. Isaac thus left his home for Uganda. By the time he arrived in Kampala, Isaac was a nameless entity and that suited him perfectly.

Kimberly Benston argues that the act of unnamng involves the power of the sublime, a transcendent impulse to undo all categories, all metonymies and reifications, and thrust the self beyond the received patterns and relationships into a stance of unchallenged authority (4). Isaac's nameless status gives him the power to redefine himself through renaming and experience "a plurality of identities" (Kroetsch 52). Dropping all his names and remaining unnamed gives Isaac a chance to attain a plurality of identities through the different nicknames and names he adopts or is assigned in the novel.

The first time the narrator meets with his friend Isaac in Uganda at the university, Isaac nicknames the narrator "professor [because] with his skinny legs and narrow face he looked more like a professor than a fighter" (*Names* 4). The narrator does not protest against the nickname because he always "wanted to be a famous writer surrounded by like-minded men" (4). Therefore, that name corresponds to a part of himself. Accepting the nickname is a way of envisaging his dream of becoming a writer. From that moment Isaac takes to calling him "Professor or the Professor" (5). This marked the start of their friendship.

Later, in celebration of the paper revolution victory, Isaac suggests that is time for the narrator to choose a different name for himself. "You're no longer just the Professor [...] it's time you moved to something new. Choose someone famous, but not too famous" (40). The narrator chooses Langston because Langston had earlier attended the conference of writers at the university that gave shape to his early ambitions and the narrator instantly felt attached to this name. Here, the narrator associates himself with the famous Langston Hughes, therefore identifying with his dream of becoming a famous writer in the future and signalling his desire to be part of the global world by having a cosmopolitan existence. By picking the name Langston, Isaac affirms Rebecca Walkowitz' argument that "nicknames are informal, unofficial and improper but intimate partial appellations that register a diversity of selves" (143).

The day the narrator is released from hospital after he was beaten and left for the dead, his friend Isaac decides to give him another nickname, ironically stating "you look good. I'm going to call you Ali from now on" (*Names* 104). In nicknaming the narrator Ali, Isaac emphasises his status as an outsider in the society and a symbol of "Foreign terrorist threat to the nation" (88). By that time, the narrator is homeless because his landlord, Thomas, had kicked him out, citing that the narrator was in trouble with the government.

After war erupts in Uganda, the narrator is offered a chance to escape to The United States of America. In the small American town of Laurel, he meets Helen who nicknames him Dickens because his "English was perfect like someone talking in a Dickens' novel" (17). This is because, before Isaac left his home in Ethiopia, he had read the same Victorian novels a dozen times and assumed that was how proper English was spoken. The Victorian novels offer Isaac a perception of another distant culture which moulds his cosmopolitan attitude. This exemplifies Appiah's argument that "cultural purity is an oxymoron [because individuals] already live in a cosmopolitan life enriched by literature, art and film that come from many places and that contains influences from many more" (113).

In addition to the nicknames that Isaac is given and gives himself in the novel, Isaac is also renamed twice under different circumstances. The first instance is when his friend Isaac pays an old man and his son to take Isaac to their small village where it is safe during Joseph's war. On their journey there Isaac told them his birth name but "by the time [they] arrived at the village his name had been transformed into Daniel—a Biblically familiar name among the devoutly Christian people who lived there" (*Names* 213). This transformation of Isaac's name calls to mind Ganapathy-Dore's remarks about names in times of migration. She observes that names can be "shortened in length, altered in terms of spelling and pronunciation and can be changed to acclimatize to a different language" (20–1). Even though his name is converted to be acceptable in his new temporary home, it does not do much to camouflage his presence as an outsider there. As he says, while in the village at first he enjoyed hearing the children say the name as it sounded like a song. This attention later on becomes a "reminder of his place as a curious stranger—not totally welcome, but easily tolerated" (*Names* 219).

According to Bodenorm and Vom Bruck, names have the potential to fix an individual as a member of a certain recognised social group; their detachability makes names a powerful tool for establishing or erasing formal identity because names can be stolen, traded, suspended, and even erased (2–4). Their argument on the detachability of names is evidenced throughout the novel as the protagonist drops his names and picks different names in the course of the narrative. Later, at the height of the war in Uganda, his friend Isaac reassigns him his own name, Isaac, when he allows him the use of his student visa in order to give him the means of escaping the ongoing war through travelling to America.

As the narrator recalls, he “became Isaac as soon as he stepped on the plane” (*Names* 175). Clara Locatelli remarks that Isaac’s “naming and name appropriation signal a procedural construction of an on-going identity” (qtd in Francesconi 8). It is in the last chapter that Mengestu reveals Isaac’s birth name as “D—” (*Names* 253) which does not do much to end his anonymity in the novel. Through Isaac, Mengestu, constructs names as “never definitive products but as performative and open textual units” (Francesconi 2). Isaac’s anonymity gives him the freedom to be named and renamed, “signal[ing] a refusal of finality, of ending up the self, proffer[ing] instead the hope of endless renewal” (Benston 9), making the act of naming and the use of names in the novel an on-going performative process. The narrator takes Isaac Mabira’s passport that does not have Isaac’s picture and makes it his own. Once again, he sheds off his identity, picking a new one that would allow him to leave the African continent. This underscores how migrants have to reinvent their identities in the face of danger in order to survive.

Conclusion

In *All Our Names* Mengestu illustrates that a name is not enough to answer the question “who are you?” because an individual is made up of stories and experiences. Mengestu shares a similar sentiment in his argument that questions such as “who are you?” or “where do you come from?” tend to cast individuals into singular solutions, a notion he decries. According to Mengestu, “identities can be and should be much more fluid and much more layered” (Mengestu and Reed). All the names that Isaac acquires in the novel convey the meaning of the novel’s title, *All Our Names*, which imply that identity is layered, and all the names individuals acquire in their lifetime make up their identity.

In this article I have focused on how Mengestu presents the limits of a cosmopolitan world through the figure of Isaac, who is in search of a cosmopolitan existence away from home. In juxtaposing Isaac’s sense of alienation in Uganda and America, Mengestu highlights the politics of identity and belonging in postcolonial Africa and America. In Uganda, Isaac has to confront the politics of ethnicity, class, and nationalist discourses of belonging that prevent him from making a home in Kampala. In America, he cannot belong as a racialised other and his close relationship with Helen is considered inappropriate.

Helen’s perspective is very significant in the novel for presenting the views from the ‘centre’ with regard to racism in Laurel. Her romantic relationship with Isaac opens her eyes to racism in the town which prompts her to challenge this Othering of individuals because of their skin colour. Mengestu uses her to show that, if the question of race is to be conquered, it has to start from within the centre—the whites should be willing to engage with and accept the other. Mengestu also uses names as a narrative strategy in order to show that identity is never singular or fixed. The performative act of naming and renaming in the novel signifies and complicates the possibility of a single marker in containing an individual’s identity. Migrants’ identities are influenced by the past, present, and their daily experiences in the places they move to. As they try to adapt to these new places, they are forced to drop their names and take on new ones in their quest for inclusion and belonging. This shows that identity is both plural and hybrid because it is influenced by the politics and power structures in society, and is therefore always in the process of becoming.

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Eastern African women writers' 'national epics': A new force in creative fiction?

Annie Gagiano

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In this article, I bring five recent, substantial novels by Eastern African women writers together for the first time in a study regarding the texts as modern 'national epics', analysing some of their shared characteristics in foregrounding local participation in the making of East African ethno-national histories. I trace the novelists' implicit, open-eyed moral evaluation of their leaders and peoples, neither sentimentalising nor deriding the often terrible struggles of their peoples against both inside and outside powers that seek to keep them in subjugation. The texts eschew traditional heroic portrayal of single, male leaders in national epics and allow us to grasp diverse, communal contributions to the growth of nationhood, while giving larger, often central roles to women. The texts earn the epithet 'epic' by authoritatively demonstrating that their embodied, localised histories *matter*, testifying to the wide human spectrum of the peoples they portray; as novelistic acts they are impressive and moving bids for recognition. As post-colonial endeavours, the texts effectively decentre colonial interventions. While the chosen novels are shown to be relatable, their individual power of portrayal and aesthetic achievements are scrupulously differentiated. **Keywords:** 'national epics', Eastern African women writers, localised histories, authority.

In considering noteworthy developments in East African creative writing, one particularly striking phenomenon is the recent publication of novels by women authors depicting these writers' societies and cultures of origin on a broad spectrum that might be termed ethno-national in scope, with a focus on key moments and periods in the history of these peoples. Even though the chosen texts are quite unlike traditional African epics in obvious ways—they are printed texts rather than oral performances; employ prose rather than poetry or rhythmic incantation and are generally, if not exclusively, published by 'Western' presses; moreover (as 'histories') they are not focused on the single, heroic, male figure presented as a founder of the nation or people—they have epic scope and weight. These novels are neither 'Afro-pessimist' texts nor are they glorifications of the peoples, societies, or historic events they depict. Broadly speaking, while the narrative perspectives employed in the chosen texts are indicative of profound concern for and with the people they portray and implicitly indicate a sense of the significance of their lives and times, all five writers, in complex and carefully balanced evocations, expose some shameful, deplorable, and sometimes horrifying aspects of these social and historical realities. The implied relationship to the culture or people from whom these authors stem indicates their grasp of Frantz Fanon's perception that "national consciousness, *which is not nationalism*, is alone capable of giving us [African countries] an international dimension" (179, emphasis added). Such portrayals of their people's complex and 'morally mixed' history and relation to their context in a wider world, both of which these writers are deeply linked to (as their novels demonstrate), have been termed "affiliative critique" (Gagiano, "Women Writing Nationhood Differently: Affiliative Critique in Novels by Forna, Atta, and Farah" 45).

In this article I adopt neither a Lukàcsian nor a Bakhtinian perspective regarding genre identifications distinguishing epic from novel, for the five Eastern African novels are seen as accounts having epic scope and weight, but as earthed or 'homed' and communally focused, rather than as manifestations of the existential loneliness that Lukàcs (35) sees as producing the novel in its modern reincarnation of the epic. Yet, unlike Bakhtin's absolute cleavage between the epic (existing in an unchangeable and inaccessible past in his view) and the modern novel (342), the contemporary African novels engage with both distant and more recent local histories without mythically idealising the heroes and 'sheroes' they depict. Nor are the chosen novels, in the mixture of styles they

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exhibit, embodiments of the consistent “grandeur of diction” or “stately rhythm” that an expert like Knappert (28) ascribes to the Swahili epic.

I read the novels as imaginative responses to a yearning that the Southern African writer Bessie Head identified as “a search as an African for a sense of historical continuity, a sense of roots” resulting from the obliteration of “all traces of the true history” (86, 66). Whilst Chinua Achebe rightfully insists on the foremost importance of the teller of “the story of the land” in a brilliant parable, he sees this role as “hand[ed]” by Agwu (god of artists and diviners) to “a man of his choice” (124–5)—a gender partiality authoritatively rectified here by the five women tellers of the complex stories of their own peoples and lands.

In the article I focus on those aspects of the chosen novels that seem comparable regarding the manner in which they depict the nature of their respective ‘nations’ and portray the evolution of their people’s socio-scape; how they see time periods in relation to settings and how they—by means of density, variety, vividness, and affective intensity—construct communal, local imaginaries that powerfully contest and/or replace superficial and homogenising portrayals of ‘Africa’ as the continent of victims lacking both history and a future in which they are the principal determinants. In order to do so, the presented analysis considers the novels in the order of their publication. The Somali author Nadifa Mohamed’s *The Orchard of Lost Souls*, published in 2013, is hence the first text examined here, followed by Kenyan author Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor’s *Dust*, published in 2014. The next is *Kintu*, first published in 2014, by Ugandan author Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi, then *The Old Drift* by the Zambian author Namwali Serpell, published in 2019, and lastly *The Shadow King* by Ethiopian author Maaza Mengiste, which was also published in 2019.

The lengthy geographical stretch—from northern Somalia to the southern border region of Zambia—exceeds what is usually signified by the term ‘East Africa’, especially with the inclusion of a Zambian text. I point to an authoritative precedent, the inclusion of Zambian women’s writing in the noteworthy text *Women Writing Africa Volume 3: The Eastern Region* (2007), and to the fact that Zambia is one of twenty countries listed as comprising East Africa by the United Nations. Mainly, however, these five significant publications within a seven-year period indicate a noticeable spurt in women-authored fiction from this area that has significantly enlarged the scope of Eastern African literature and made important differences to the imagining of this region’s ‘nations’.

The novels are compelling representations of critical junctures in the authors’ societies or cultures of origin; delineating in vivid, experientially presented detail events and/or periods frequently ignored, differently perceived by earlier local writers, or seen from contemporary perspectives as misrepresented in earlier outsider (e.g. colonial writers’) accounts. Erasures of Eastern and other African histories are correctively supplemented in the five authoritative ‘herstories’ (here indicative of authorial perspective and/or the central characters’ gender) contained in the five novels. In his 1979 study of the African epic, Isidore Okpewho refers to the form’s “flexibility” as leaving room for “creative variations” (160).

In Goebel and Schabio’s lucid introduction to a 2013 study of postcolonial narrative genres (which opens with the editors’ observation of a concentration in postcolonial studies on “questions of subversion, parody, and mimesis”), the writers suggest a need to shift focus to “the evolution of new narrative forms”; inter alia “hybrids like the epic novel”. Goebel and Schabio furthermore point to “the re-articulation of the amazingly fecund epic form as a mould for the creation of traditional or emerging national, communal, and also individualized voices”, mentioning “a new kind of lyrical epic” and citing a thought-provoking reference to “the ‘resistant epic’” (1, 2).

Similarly, Griffiths and Rabinowitz, commenting on classical epics and Russian novels with epic dimensions, state that the epic “can easily flow into and out of” the novelistic corpus. Interestingly, they hold that use of an epic style “involves claims to literary legitimacy and cultural centrality of most interest to literatures on the periphery”, which chimes with the five authors’ implicit claim to or bid for both local and international recognition of previously side-lined African histories (19, 20). Although the same authors see the (classic) epic as formally most clearly distinct from the novel in encompassing “a final redemptive drift” (47), it is my contention that such a concluding promise, hint, or evocation of a people’s possible redemption is discernible in the five chosen novels—confirming their epic scope. Aesthetic shaping, complex moral evaluation, and responsible, focused, historical research combine in the making of these works. They are ‘big’ novels: large in scope, skilful, and confident in presentation—emphatically not *The Nation Writ Small*, as Susan Andrade titled her 2013 study of African women writers (see Boehmer’s phrase “small texts”, 257).

Since the publication of most postcolonial African novels by ‘Western’ presses is often taken as conclusive proof of their authors’ subjugation to non-African reading tastes and a demand by ‘Western’ publishers whose

commercial interests require editorial re-shaping of texts and narrative excisions to make the novels palatable to their supposedly primary reading public, I note that the novels addressed are all more clearly and fully apprehendable by African readers who belong to, or are familiar with, the featured cultures and have more knowledge of the depicted histories than readers who have less or no local knowledge. Nadifa Mohamed, in addressing the dictator Siad Barre's virtual extermination of the populace of the 'rebellious' northern city of Hargeisa by means of military strangulation, arbitrary arrests, as well as torture and ruthless bombing—the historical focal point of her novel—enlightens readers lacking in knowledge of this atrocity, but most Somali readers would instantly recognise references to the (differently named) leader in her narrative as pointing to Mohammed Siad Barre.

The Hargeisa atrocity—sometimes termed “the Isaaq genocide” or “the Hargeisa holocaust”, indicating Barre's attempt to exterminate this perceived ‘rebel tribe’ of northern Somalia during 1987–89—which to its survivors remains a dreadful, indelible memory, is for most non-Africans and many non-Somali Africans obscured by a vague awareness that Barre was a brutal oppressor whose fall occasioned bloody mayhem in Somalia. Hargeisa—the author's birthplace, the city where her mother had spent most of her life and of which she and *her* mother carried deep memories—was formerly a site of peaceful cohabitation. Using familial memories and research, Mohamed is able to convey a sense of life on the city's streets, in middle-class homes, in the military, or in a brothel.

This vividly realised and particularised sense of place and diversity of characters is equally strongly conveyed in the other novels—whether it is one setting that is evoked, or several. Just as Owuor's *Dust* alternates between Nairobi's teeming streets and the wide, sparsely populated reaches of far northern Kenya's semi-desert Turkana region, Makumbi's *Kintu* moves from the dignified, ritualised household of the eponymous 18th-century dynastic originator to the upheaval-prone, mostly urban lives led by Kintu's descendants in recent and contemporary Uganda. Serpell's *The Old Drift* focuses, in a gynocentric ‘dynastic’ account, in turn on three grandmothers' lives (one Italian, one British, and one Zambian) in Zambia, subsequently evoking a daughter of each woman and finally three grandchildren, who come together in a future but still deeply troubled society. Three places—*Mosi-oa-Tunya* (Victoria Falls), the Kariba Dam, and the city of Lusaka in its slums, clinics, or homes—remain this narrative's focal points, while Mengiste's *The Shadow King* moves out from an aristocratic home whose household servants, represented by an elderly and a younger woman, along with the lord and master and his imperious, deeply troubled wife, together shift into the life of guerrilla soldiers facing the full might of the Italian army during a long and brutal fight (the Italo-Ethiopian War of 1935–37) to rid Ethiopia of its Italian invaders—of whom two are portrayed in detail.

Chronological engagement with each novel in turn is not meant to indicate a line of literary development or a historical or thematic continuum among the novels, but allows each text the space for respectful individual attention. The fascinating, often troubled histories of the five countries are (by the authors in their representations, as they were in actuality) so deeply intertwined with their respective settings that no reader of these texts is ever likely to blur these five areas into a homogenised Eastern Africa, let alone merge them into a vague ‘Africa’—nor does the present article view the novels as constituting some kind of composite East(ern) African historical unity or identity.

The represented characters are locally embedded in their respective cultures and histories and their complex social, cultural, and familial networks are fully evoked with little attention given to neighbouring peoples. The authors unearth and revitalise obscured histories with the compelling “illocutionary force” that Maria Pia Lara (3) teaches us to identify in representations that succeed—by their affective intensity, striking insights, and communicative power—in replacing former inadequate or deficient renditions of their peoples' stories. The five evoked histories scrupulously include strife and struggle with both outside enemies and local oppressors, demonstrating wickedness and weakness as well as hard work, passionate commitments, and heroic moments in the lives of their predominantly African actors, participants, and agents, replacing ascriptions of passivity and victimhood to those too often misrepresented as merely acted upon.

Of primary significance is the unmistakable authority with which each of the five novels morally assesses the histories they invoke in ways resembling the workings of ‘truth and reconciliation’ commissions. The five works foregrounded here combine the testimony of the daring investigative journalist, the witnesses for prosecution and defence, and implicitly the judge's pronouncement—except that this is not by means of a single ‘sentence’ pronounced, but in a complex and lengthy narrative which is permeated by a finally assessing vision.

The authors' accounts depict not only, but primarily, indigenes' committed atrocities and heroic or quiet courage, as well as foreigners' perpetrations or their decency—the kind of complex and balanced representation

that persuades readers of the general, if not factual, reliability of these fictional accounts. Furthermore, each narrative is shown arising from and rooted in a *present*—with these roots traced into the past of each of the portrayed nations, exploring the nature of leadership in these societies, and the relationship of ‘the people’ with their humanly flawed leaders. None of the five portrayed societies is nostalgically seen, with the technologies of modernity and huge shifts to predominantly urban existence and the links to an international world shown to be present. The authors depict how each nation’s history compellingly influences its contemporary conditions—for even if poorly remembered, blurred, or erased, these pasts haunt and linger. Undoubtedly the novels are in the end themselves also *partial* histories—in the double sense of being incomplete or insufficient, and of revealing political, ethnic, class, cultural, gender, or generational (and other forms of) bias. Yet they have set in motion processes for the reclamation of local historical consciousness of the nation and its interaction with and place in the wider world.

In a kind of postscript to Nadifa Mohamed’s *The Orchard of Lost Souls*, the author herself testifies that, having lost her “extended family [...] friends, and [...] neighbourhood”, she wished “by [her] writing” to revive “these worlds”, assess “massive change [...] from the perspective of ordinary people” and also to show how “women have always played a role in warfare” (n. p. and 337). Her first novel traced her father’s early life, whereas *Orchard* responds mainly to female familial memories of the city of Hargeisa—recollections including her grandmother’s, mother’s, and her own. While the text has to date attracted too little scholarly study, it reaped high praise from sophisticated readers who saw past its generally more low-key style (e.g. novelist Aminatta Forna’s comments), compared to the four other texts examined here.

Centralised on women’s lives, *Orchard*’s characters represent three generations, classes or social roles, and possibly ethnicities—the childless widow Kawsar is probably a member of the persecuted Isaaq group; the young military officer Filsan a likely member of the Darood ruling clan dominant in the more southern parts of Somalia; whereas the orphaned refugee girl Deqo’s family origins, possibly Ogadeni, are indeterminate since she was abandoned in the Saba’ad refugee camp on the Ethiopian border. Together and through their interactions with one another and other Somalis, these three characters may represent their divided nation at this fraught time (the late eighties). Mohamed’s fictional account possibly contributes to the still widely disputed claim to nationhood of the 1991 self-declared Republic of Somaliland, whose capital is Hargeisa.

The experiences of the three women that dominate and structure the novel are strongly coloured by their gendered positions. I concur with Nick Tembo’s suggestion that “Hargeisa is the real orchard of lost souls” in this “desolate state” (5, 16), though perhaps “lost” indicates also what this society once was like, when life could be lived in grace and dignity. A 2001 UNDP (42) report stated that the Barre regime had “one of the worst human rights records in Africa” and in a Human Rights focused Africa Watch Committee report (9) it was estimated that “50,000 to 60,000 people were killed from 1988 to 1989 in northern Somalia” in what was in effect a war of state terrorism. Kawsar ruminates how “after seventy-nine the guns that were turned outward reversed position and became trained on Somalis instead” (Mohamed 14).

The focal characters interact initially when Kawsar—whose only child, an innocent adolescent, was arrested, tortured, and raped by the military and subsequently killed herself—tries to save little Deqo from five women brutally beating her for dancing badly at the Independence Day celebration. Kawsar is a figure of resistance to the cruel regime, but is forced to attend the event; her rescue of a girl-child from the women who have her in their clutches suggests a recuperative attempt to ‘correct’ her inability to protect her own daughter from imprisonment, torture, rape, and suicide. While Deqo escapes, Kawsar is jailed and later assaulted by Filsan, who viciously takes out her frustrations on the older woman and leaves her crippled and bed-bound in her home. Deqo later finds her there when the mass bombing of the city and near-extirmination of its civilian population has started—insisting that Kawsar accept the assistance of a (by then) disillusioned Filsan in order to escape the doomed city and reach the refugee camp where Deqo used to live.

While each of these characters has her own complex history, the resilient, enterprising, self-reliant Deqo is the most admirable of the three; not altogether comprehending what is happening, but a reliable witness—“hers are the eyes that always peer from behind walls or rocks, infuriating everyone with their watchfulness” (60). As Deqo (who is only nine) runs from an ‘initiating’ rape in the brothel where she has been sheltering and working, she sees a truck bed on which the corpses of three emaciated old peasants are exhibited, with soldiers resembling “hunters posing” with their kills—parallel examples of political and gender power abuse (116–8).

Mohamed complicates a simplistic gender binary of powerful, abusive males ‘versus’ weak, victimised women. Filsan (for example) later unjustifiably shoots down village elders when one of them attempts to hit her with

a stick—bravely objecting against the soldiers, that Filsan commands who are blowing up their village wells. Although she later feels the horror of her deed, she obediently appears on TV to present the event as an act of heroic patriotism. Filsan is Mohamed's most complicated character—an embittered young woman who, driven by ambition to prove her military worthiness to the father who brought her up in isolation (with himself) to punish her mother's desertion, soon finds herself thwarted by senior officers' humiliating sexism.

The widowed Kawsar is portrayed in an open-eyed yet compassionate manner—from a pre-Barre life of relative privilege, she is laid low by Filsan's assault to become a lonely invalid, emotionally devastated when her dearest friend decides to flee Hargeisa to live with family in Jeddah. Kawsar resigns herself to death by starvation or in military attack as neighbours are shot and social life collapses.

She yields reluctantly to her unlikely rescue by Filsan and Deqo—the latter presenting the three of them at the text's conclusion as a “family, however makeshift” (336) as they reach the UN refugee camp. Amidst horrors like ‘milking’ children of all their blood for wounded soldiers, and piles of shot civilians, there are redemptive moments. Mohamed's dense, unblinking, yet moving evocation of a terrible time provides insider's history and is a notable complement to those provided by Nuruddin Farah, Igiaba Scego, Cristina Ubah Ali Farah, and Safi Abdi, adding a ‘northern’ segment to the complex recent history of Somalia.

While Kenya may (generally speaking) have a more ‘respectable’ international reputation than Somalia, Owuor's *Dust* lays bare the ugly underbelly of this society and its legacy of secrecy concerning political violence and ‘extrajudicial killings’. Indeed, Owuor's vision of her country's murderous history closely accords with Grace Musila's vision of postcolonial Kenya as an “assassin state” (31), and her fierce narrative is an exposé of both British colonial and postcolonial Kenyan oppressive practices. Oppression is a key term here. When people dread murderous state violence against opposition, it keeps the inhabitants in fear of reprisal against the few from speaking out in protest.

Owuor's intricately constructed novel may be seen as holding Kenya's perpetrators and those complicit in their atrocities to account. It may also be read as responding to perceived inadequacies of the Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation Commission of Kenya. British colonial malpractices are depicted by Owuor in balance with, and as continued in, the atrocities of postcolonial regimes—yet the narrative does not endorse facile or indiscriminate condemnation of implicated individuals, whose difficult, anguishing choices and alignments are depicted with impressive subtlety and awareness of the complex pressures of this fraught historical period (see Gagiano's “Post-colonial Illuminations of Past Betrayals in Tan's *The Gift of Rain* and Owuor's *Dust*”).

The novel opens with the “assassin state” in action against an individual as police hunt for their prey: a desperate, doomed Moses Odidi Oganda—like many previous critics of state malpractices, a person of rare integrity and moral courage betrayed and let down to die—who is shot down in a gutter. Several times, Owuor inserts the ‘honour roll’ of murdered “prophets [...] Pio, Tom, Argwings, Ronald, Kungu, Josiah, Ouko, Mbae”—shorthand references to leaders who spoke uncomfortable truth to postcolonial power—and “the ‘disappeared unknown’” whom Owuor thanks in her own voice at the end of the book (23, 369). These widely known, never proven state assassinations are listed with other blatant, unpunished atrocities in one of the powerful “*j'accuse!*” moments of the text (262). Owuor's main instrument for exhuming Kenya's many “entombed silences” (22) is Odidi's conflicted father Nyipir Oganda—a police victim and the novel's most complex, implicated, yet compassionately imagined character, who was involved in both colonial-era and postcolonial atrocities before eventually himself falling victim to state-orchestrated brutality during President Kenyatta's Kikuyu-dominated rule.

As Nyipir and his recently returned child, Odidi's sister Ayani, sorrowfully collect Odidi's corpse to return it for home burial in northern Kenya, 2007 post-election violence erupts—“a country [...] tearing out its own heart” is Owuor's suitably brutal image (22). Through Nyipir, Owuor presents the 1969 shooting of the revered Luo leader Tom Mboya (widely suspected as orchestrated by the postcolonial regime) as “the meaning of clandestine [Kikuyu] oaths that made the rest of the country enemy territory to be owned” and “the purpose of the silences that had started before” (271)—the first sign of the terrible ethnic cleavages in multi-ethnic Kenya re-erupting whenever elections highlight governmental ethnic alignments. Nyipir states that “this death created a fissure in the nation, as if it had split apart its own soul” (272).

When Nyipir fell victim to suspicion of his non-Kikuyu ethnicity and was required to swear the Kikuyu loyalty blood-oath under severe torture, he could not bring himself to do so. He could not overcome a boyhood memory of a brave man of integrity who refused to allow a Mau Mau punitive killing; Nyipir's personal icon of

moral courage, loss of which is not worth the cost of survival. Nyipir was left maimed, impotent, and embittered against the state, becoming a cross-border weapons dealer and cattle rustler.

Owuor refers to postcolonial Kenya's undeclared, "slithering civil war" (indicating the state's slyness and ruthless cruelty), naming its official languages "English, Kiswahili, and Silence", but adds that "there was also memory" (272–4). Nyipir's memories, intermittently and slowly revealed, permeate the text. He had been an orphaned boy abused by an uncle when his father and brother joined British WW1 soldiers in Burma. After being helped to escape, he worked at a mission school. He increased his meagre earnings as exploited servant by assisting a most disreputable man whose 'job' was to bury corpses of both colonial and Mau Mau victims. This led to his recruitment into the colonial army by a forceful, maverick British officer with whom Nyipir would hunt down Mau Mau fighters. The Englishman was adored by a northern Kenyan 'native' woman whom he took as lover, but eventually attempted to kill as a final rejection.

Nyipir was himself in love with this Turkana woman and saved her life by shooting the murderous attacker, and this interracial killing becomes another of the secret deaths that haunt Nyipir and Akai (later his wife) just as Kenya is haunted by its many unquiet ghosts. The eventual burial of the Englishman's long-hidden skeleton near Nyipir's son's grave creates a moving reconciliatory moment between Nyipir and his former torturer, himself a former police officer deeply disillusioned with the Kenya he had served for so long. The narrative ends in departures, but also with Nyipir's wish for "forgiveness" and desire for "room [...] for trying again" (361). Owuor's complex, profoundly familial and socially rooted account indicts the Kenyan nation, but does hold out hope for "atonement" (357). The complexities of the narrative demonstrate how morally many-sided individual and communal Kenyan lives are or became under the terrible pressures of demanding times.

Kintu opens with the mob murder of a falsely accused 'thief', Kanu Kintu—the only male descendant in the direct line of the founding figure of the clan, whose histories Makumbi has placed at the centre of her people's history. The Kintu who was *Ppookino* (regional governor) in the 18th-century feudal, pre-colonial Ganda kingdom is presented in the opening chapter as an honourable but fallible leader. After the Prologue (set in 2004 like most of the narrative), Book I evokes life at the *Ppookino* Kintu Kidida's court in Buddu before moving into the 21st century, in which most of it is set.

The novel was rapturously received. Readers appreciate Makumbi's writing "not just [...] about Uganda, [...] [but] to Uganda" (see Makumbi and Kyomuhendo 40). The novel is as much a multi-generational family saga as a national epic; Uganda (chiefly Baganda) history is filtered through fascinatingly quirky family members' lives—often troubled, with especially difficult or cruel childhood experiences colouring adulthood. Partly because of its focus on individuals' relationships, with political events, power shifts, and civil wars mentioned as if 'by the way', the narrative provides a wry, tolerant view of the contemporary nation, despite the finger pointed at President Museveni (unnamed) in the Prologue to account for Kanu's death by communal stoning: "The word *thief* summed up the common enemy [of poverty and its many plights]. [...] *Thief* was the president who arrived [...] decades ago waving 'democracy' at them, who had recently laughed '[...] I was *sooo* naïve then'" (Makumbi xviii, emphasis in original).

Makumbi's novel ends on an ancestral curse exorcised after 250 years at a clan gathering, but can be read metonymically as tracing how a people, *like* an extended family, suffers a shared national fate and can (though after much loss and pain) heal by coming together. It is not an allegory; the four foregrounded Kintu descendants (Suubi, a young professional; Kanani, a fanatic Christian; Isaac, a middle-aged widowed engineer; and Miisi, a Moscow- and London-educated elder who has returned to the village) give readers access to national upheavals, describing close family members' conduct, experiencing changing social contexts, and observing the complex quotidian textures of Ugandan life—all tinged by their memories.

The life of the *Ppookino* Kintu Kidida, seemingly so solidly secure, privileged, ceremonially conducted, and prosperous, is evoked in its dense complexity and made to seem accessible and imaginable over the 'gap' of two-and-a-half centuries—a tour-de-force on Makumbi's part. Kintu's role turns out to be difficult, exposing him to political precarity and familial animosity and ending in dreadful loss and insanity. The curse is imposed by the Rwandan father of Kintu's adoptive son (renamed Kalema)—not because Kintu accidentally causes the youth's death, but because he fails to acknowledge and atone for the deed to the real father. In the penultimate section of the novel, Miisi (the only surviving direct male descendant, father of Kanu, though unaware of his death at the time) is enlightened about this ancestry (320–1) by two family elders who have come to inform him of the intended clan reunion in which he will have a leading role.

Later Ugandan history is incidentally related, insisting that when the British colonial intervention forced a “patchwork of fifty or so tribes” together under the Ganda *kabaka* as president, this was “against Ganda wishes”—though “the desecration of their kingdom by foreigners [under Obote] paralysed the Ganda for decades” (237). This loss and the succeeding socio-political insecurity are given as the reason Ganda families remain obsessed with educating their children. Some Kintu descendants (like Kanani the ‘evangelist’) remain believers in British achievements, whereas “the real Britain” (314) disillusiones Miisi (a Cambridge alumnus) with its racism and hypocrisy, turning him into both an atheist and an Afrocentrist (see his column allegorising colonialism as ‘hybridizing’ Africans, Makumbi 305–7). Makumbi appreciatively portrays rural ‘semi-modernity’ (216–9) and some still strongly traditional settlements (340). Mwesigire may observe that “the rural is not of interest to Afropolitan postnationalism” (112), but Makumbi, by contrast, depicts both urban and country life and social texture. She includes, inter alia, an interesting debate about Amin’s rule between the highly educated (Ganda) Miisi and an intelligent Muslim fellow villager (295–6).

While we are shown the general caring warm-heartedness and gregariousness of most Kintu descendants, Makumbi reveals many instances of the curse’s effects, or of dreadful behaviour in families such as child abandonment, sexual abuse, child neglect, insanity, sacrificial murder, and even incest, along with the common flaws of stubbornness, selfishness, or foolishness. Five of Miisi’s children are killed in the “Bush War” of 1981–86, and five die of AIDS. Miisi is unhinged by the devastating news that his remaining son Musa was killed in a Kampala slum, and makes his surviving child, his daughter (a general in the national army who loves him but can but seldom visit) his heir in a lucid moment. At this point Miisi lives as a ‘wild man’ and acts as Caretaker of the Kintu shrine near the Tanzanian border. The successful reunion of the family with its joyous and shocking revelations is succeeded by some sorrowful losses, but now such pain is alleviated by communal awareness of interlinked fates and shared concerns—hinting at a way forward for the broader nation.

In a *Wasafiri* interview with Sana Goyal, Namwali Serpell describes her desire to write a work with epic dimensions. *The Old Drift* is indeed a major national epic—conceptualising Zambia’s socio-political history (and future) as filtered through three generations in three families and covering almost a century. Irony permeates the text, however. In the first of many mosquito-sung recurring chorus sections, the swarm insists: “neither Oriental nor Occidental, but accidental is this [Zambian] nation” (Serpell 2).

The novel doubles as a sardonic ecological fable portraying a land pushed from its original paradisaic beauty and purity to decline through exploitation and manipulation by both outside and inside powers in an unholy alliance, until the country is at last cleansed (though vastly reduced and all-but erased) in an apocalyptic flood. Futuristic technologies are nearly wiped out and life returns to traditional, minimal modes of crop-growing in a small settlement that is Lusaka’s remnant where its slum area of Kalingalinga was located. The human inheritor of the three-family heritage is Naila’s son—great-grandson of Sibilla, and either Matha or Agnes—since his unknown father might be either of these two foremothers’ grandsons. The other survivors—the mosquito swarm—still survey and comment on human foolishness, mockingly ending the narrative by revealing the unknowable, all-powerful uncertainty at the heart of all existence—the true “old drift”.

Serpell’s view of Zambian society emphasises its fundamentally “syncretic quality” and she tells Goyal that she sees her country as a “contact zone” (Serpell and Goyal 46). While the ‘Western’ presence and role may seem over-emphasised, Serpell teases readers on the opening page, stating that “this is the story of a nation—not a kingdom or a people—so it begins, of course, with a white man” (1), and later in a local character’s private thoughts she mentions “the real story” of the Bemba people’s 17th-century arrival from the north at lake Shiwa (98). However, Serpell’s two European grandmothers—the Italian Sibilla and the British Agnes, one handicapped by over-abundant hair and the other by blindness—are both portrayed sympathetically and soon after arriving manifest their empathy with the locals. Sibilla joins Tonga elders protesting at being prevented from chosen death (by drowning) as their lands and ancestral graves are being flooded by the European-built Kariba Dam, whereas Agnes, whose housekeeper Grace becomes her main friend and confidante, fully embraces a Zambian identity. Matha, the only local grandmother of the three, is another independent-minded woman of passionate political—indeed revolutionary—convictions, although her grief at her apparent desertion by her lover, the father of her daughter Sylvia, incapacitates her for decades by unstoppable weeping and passivity.

Sylvia is the feistiest of Serpell’s three daughter figures. Snatched from Matha as a little girl, she becomes a prostitute, establishes a hair salon, and becomes the lover—and the “Lusaka patient”—of the brilliant AIDS researcher Lee Banda, Agnes’s son. He is married to the Zimbabwean beauty Thandiwe, but soon loses interest in

her after fathering his first son, Joseph, who is also intellectually orientated. Lee himself has contracted AIDS and one drunken night infects both Thandi and their second son, conceived in a single bout of sex, finally embittering Thandi, who leaves him (and Zambia). Sibilla deeply disapproves of her daughter Isabella's middle-class and mercenary tendencies. Politically, she 'rescues' Isabella's (and her endearingly portrayed Indian settler shopkeeper husband's) daughter Naila and introduces the girl to the poorer sides of Zambian society. Naila later arouses her lover Joseph's jealousy by betraying her strong attraction to Jacob, Sylvia's son—an autodidact engineer whose work designing microdrones ends up connecting his and Joseph's respective researches, the latter attempting to complete his father Lee's incomplete but risky search for an AIDS vaccine.

Serpell brings the three grandchildren—Lee's son Joseph, Sylvia's son Jacob, and Naila—together, as they eventually (working through many fierce debates and passionate political arguments) form a group of "three musketeers" (519)—possibly a punning reference to the mosquitoes, since they become social gadflies, striving as social revolutionaries against international and local Zambian incarnations of conformity, greed, and domination. Just as Sibilla helped Naila to see a larger Zambia distinct from her mother's narrow vision, a still spirited Agnes calls Joseph a "bootlicker" who failed to learn from her treasured, taped Marxist lectures when he tries to defend the corrupt Zambian government and its alliance partners China, America, Russia, and their combined 'development' projects (517–8).

Jacob belatedly discovers Matha's revolutionary past and she then uses the Bible to teach him to read. Naila, Jacob, and Joseph lead two idealistic, ill-considered and inchoate 'revolutionary' initiatives. The first inadvertently ends in mass, forced inoculation with an insufficiently tested AIDS 'vaccine' that Lee and Sylvia died of, when a mammoth drone pounces to hijack their protest gathering. The second, the musketeers' attempted interruption of Kariba's power supply in order to allow installation of a communication network independent of government, miscarries badly as they inadvertently block the great dam's sluices. Kariba's flooding is exacerbated by a prodigious rainstorm. Is it Nature's vengeance? The river god *Nyami Nyami*'s? The mosquitoes 'view' the engulfing flood as another manifestation of the universal, unpredictable "drift" coinciding with human error, frailty, and arrogance—Serpell's imagined Zambia's fate anticipating mankind's future.

Maaza Mengiste opens *The Shadow King* (a 'prequel', historically, to her first novel *Beneath the Lion's Gaze*, published in 2010) with the central character Hirut—decades after the main events of the narrative. A middle-aged woman, she is shown observing demonstrating (would-be) women revolutionaries in the seventies turbulence that overtook Addis Ababa before Emperor Haile Selassie was toppled. They seem naïve to her, "as if they do not know those who came before them" (4); unaware that women like herself became soldiers in the freedom struggle against the second Italian invasion of 1935–41 (the time span of her story). Mengiste describes her own belated discovery of female participation in this desperate war against a vastly better resourced and larger army by her great-grandmother. Her name, Getey, is assigned to Hirut's strong, admired, late mother—honouring this foremother, and the courage of "those Ethiopian women who fought alongside men", for war is never merely a male affair (n. p.), as Mengiste, too, demonstrates. While subtly depicting its characters and their inter-relationships and acknowledging the complex sources of their conduct, *The Shadow King* is more imbued with an epic tone (depicting portentous events and a *national* historic perspective) than its predecessor. Especially important is Mengiste's balancing portrayal of the servant girl and her aristocratic mistress—both in a fraught relationship with the main male character, *Dejazmach* (lord) Kidane, in an uneasy psycho-sexual triangle.

In this novel, Mengiste brings class and personal power imbalances strongly to the fore, along with (or exacerbated by) acute gender tensions. The servitude of the recently arrived Hirut (a young girl initially) and the (unnamed) cook (another, more unobtrusive, but central character, who has been in the household for a long time) is baldly stated: they are "two people who have been made to fit their lives around one woman and her husband" (13). Many Ethiopian peasants saw the invasion as an opportunity to end the aristocrats' hold over their lives: "these people who came to steal us away to work in rich houses" (21), as the cook says. Kidane's father set the pattern his son will continue with Hirut by assuming *droit de seigneur* over the body of female 'inferiors' with Getey, her mother, who finally rebels as Hirut, too, will. War with Italy pending, Hirut's treasured, if old, rifle—her only heirloom from her father—is appropriated by Kidane when Aster, his haughty wife, searches the servants' room for her own lost golden necklace—her wedding gift to Kidane.

The two women, indissolubly linked but bitter class and sex adversaries, remain so during the coming war in which they are also fellow fighters. When Aster finds the buried necklace, she viciously assaults Hirut. The cook explains the hidden source of Aster's fury: Aster and Kidane's only child (a boy) died, resulting in an unassuage-

able loss to the mother. When Kidane seemed to ‘replace’ their child with Hirut, eventually also making her his wife’s sexual replacement, her hatred intensified. The violation that initiated their marriage on her wedding night is forever resented by Aster the child-bride and Kidane’s ruthlessly domineering nature later manifests in the war when he rapes Hirut. Aster defies him by donning his father’s war garments to rouse Ethiopia’s womenfolk, while a subordinate officer (who lost his heroic son in their joint anti-Italian struggle) bluntly tells Kidane: “you’re not the first rich man to try to teach me my place” (254).

Mengiste’s novel acknowledges the terrible burdens of leadership, as well as its errors; unusually, she gives us insight into the mind of the vicious Italian officer Fucelli, Kidane’s contingent’s main enemy, *and* the guilt-ridden conscience of a Jewish photographer under his command who documents Fucelli’s atrocities (torturing and murdering captives and throwing bound prisoners down a precipice) which parallel Italy’s use of poisonous gas on Ethiopian land, water, and people to achieve subjugation.

Mengiste’s depiction of the terrible, complicated intertwinements of war and the baffling moral choices and almost impossibly steely resolve battle participation requires—its messiness, bloody confusions, grief, stoicism, and failures—are rendered with acute vividness. Increasingly, Aster and Hirut become leaders alongside one another despite the emotional tension with Kidane; the enmity and resentment between the two women remaining largely ‘underground’. When the war reaches an almost desperate stalemate for the Ethiopians and Italy’s cruel successes—aided by *ascari* from surrounding regions and including ‘scorched earth’ techniques—have all-but demoralised them, Hirut notices that a humble musician, Minim, strongly resembles the absent emperor (living in exile in Britain) and that he can enact the role of the revered leader to re-inspire the Ethiopians. Minim’s role is but one meaning of the novel’s title. Years after the war, when Hirut is a neighbour and friend to the widowed Aster, Hirut now married to “the great Aklilu”, and mother of two “strong” daughters (421), she understands its other meaning—that the war’s multiple participants and its several unacknowledged leaders such as Aster, herself, Aklilu and many other male fighters, Minim, the cook, and the brave and brilliant *mata hari* figure Fifi (who becomes Fucelli’s lover to pick up and remit Italian war intelligence to the Ethiopians), were and remain Ethiopia’s real, composite Shadow King—omitting both Haile Selassie’s and Kidane’s names from her list of Ethiopia’s saviours and placing Kidane’s name quite low down.

Hirut finally freed herself from Kidane by using a small knife appropriated from Fucelli’s battlefield corpse to end her then grievously wounded abuser and leader’s life (398), combining vengeance with mercy. This novelist’s understanding of the intermingling of private feelings, personal experiences, political and social tensions, and public events can only have come from probing thought and arduous emotional work. In intermittent sections, Mengiste portrays Haile Selassie as deeply troubled, but an ineffectual (shadowy) leader detached from the nation’s brutal, heroic strife.

“History is community”, states Jean-Luc Nancy, “which is the spacing of a ‘we’” (161–2)—a view borne out by the five major novels assessed above. The “we” in these East African texts profoundly implicates, affects, and includes the five authors in question, relating the writers to their national origins in their exploratory analyses of the kind of nation(hood) with which they are affiliated and from whose histories they themselves emerge. The five novels construct compelling moral-political assessments for their people. ‘Nations’ are portrayed in their teeming vitality and changing shapes as indissolubly interlinked human communities and settlements comprised of multiple, ineradicably individual participants striving to co-exist meaningfully and fulfillingly.

The five novels live up to Rita Felski’s characterisation of works of literary accomplishment as being distinguishable by having “the power to promote a heightened awareness of the density and distinctiveness of particular life-worlds” (46). The “awareness” conveyed, pointing to real countries and actual events, is “heightened” by the texts, not remaining a superficial recounting of events in chronological order, but instead functioning as interpretative, implicitly evaluative chronicles which together constitute overdue and enlightening foregrounding of (East) African histories *as* significant to humanity as those (hitherto so much better known) of Europe and other continents.

The above accounts clearly show that the chosen novels are not homogenous. It is nevertheless remarkable that five such noteworthy texts, all written by women writers and sharing salient characteristics, appeared in the timeframe of less than a decade of Eastern African fiction-writing. The novels all include plenty of domestic and familial detail, yet their primary concern is undoubtedly with crucial events or periods in the histories of the countries from which the authors originate, while in doing so each of them may be seen as engaging in some kind of historical restitution or in the contestation of preceding, alternative accounts of the local pasts they depict.

One may speculate that such a surge of writing of distinct quality—in terms of the excellence of careful conceptualisation as well as the characteristics I have mentioned above as constituting the kinds of novels they are—is an indication of the early 21st century social circumstances that have made the reception of African and women’s writing—by both readers and publishers—more appreciative. But they are also texts of their time, in that their authors have moved on beyond the initial preoccupation with the colonial incursion which, if featured, is by no means central to any of these novels—hence appropriately and timeously broadening the meaning of the term *postcolonial*.

The histories unforgettably depicted in these novels are the East African characters’ and authors’ own and the stake that such authors have claimed is unlikely to be overturned by reversion to outsiders’ accounts of the depicted times or moments as carrying greater authority. My article is partly intended to acclaim the literary, cultural, historical, and political gains made by the five fine texts discussed here.

In conclusion, I recapitulate the main points of this assessment of notable East African novels recently authored by women, beginning with my reasons for characterising them as “national epics”. Firstly, the writers have created epics ‘with a difference’—they engage with both historical and contemporary nation-forming events, but avoid hagiographic or romanticising perspectives. Secondly, the texts do not focus on single, male hero-figures, but depict the interactive participation of multiple characters as joint contributors to evolving nationhood—all depicting strong, interesting, and fully rendered female characters for their contributions to national struggles, especially the often overlooked wartime roles of women. Thirdly, the texts are strongly grounded in East African localities and vividly evoke urban and rural settings. The portrayed localities and references to locally known events appeal particularly to readers living in or with memories of portrayed events and settings, but are made accessible to international readers, insisting throughout that particular African peoples and histories *matter*. Fourth, the individuation of the large casts of characters in their psychological and cultural diversity puts Africans in the main roles of historical initiators and ‘sees’ them as central participants in unfolding events, insisting on their agency. Finally, the five novels exude unmistakable literary authority—a kind of commanding charge-taking and acceptance of responsibility and accountability for the histories the writers have rediscovered, both in family memories and through localised research reconstructed in compelling and meaningful *realisations* (in a double sense of achievements and of fictions that imaginatively incarnate the actual).

This is so even though all five novels inevitably embody authorial (cultural, political, and other) biases. Perhaps their five accounts remain incomplete—like all other histories—yet the novels’ complex density in rendering their memorable and multiple “stor[ies] of the land” significantly enrich and deepen East African historical awareness, and insistently inscribe their histories among others of our shared world.

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La République Démocratique du Congo: dramaturgies du conflit (idées et formes)

Renata Jakubczuk & Witold Wołowski

Democratic Republic of Congo: dramaturgies of conflict (ideas and forms)

This article, which focuses on selected plays by contemporary Congolese playwrights, has two objectives: the first of which is to illustrate how theatre production in the DRC in contemporary times has been devoted to highlighting various social and political conflicts within the society. The paper's second objective is to examine the aesthetic and technical aspects of the plays under study, such as the use of allegory, metaphors, verbal invention, proverbs, enunciative heterogeneity, voice orchestration, and theatricality encoded in stage directions (*didascalia*). Through its critical analysis of dramaturgy and style, the paper reveals the manner in which the authors display a heightened sense of awareness about conflicts within their society by employing an agonistic mode in their plot construction. The paper also highlights how the plays have contributed greatly to the development of writing for performance in Africa in general, and in the Democratic Republic of Congo in particular. **Keywords:** Congo theatre, conflict, diegesis, discursive strategies, esthetical methods.

Introduction


“Le théâtre africain existe. Il est plein d’inventivité et d’imagination”, écrivait Fiangor il y a vingt ans (11). L’affirmation est toujours vraie, même si l’on peut se demander si depuis cette date tous les auteur(e)s de talent ont vraiment eu accès à la diffusion éditoriale, et dans quelle mesure ceux ou celles qui y ont accédé restaient réellement indépendant(e)s par rapport aux ‘créations commanditées’, ‘productions sur objectifs spécifiques’ et autres ‘pesanteurs’ (Kabeya Mukamba, *et al.*), voire ‘disfonctionnements’ (Fiangor).¹ Quoi qu’il en soit, la production dramatique de la République Démocratique du Congo (RDC) présente des caractéristiques dignes d’intérêt, aussi bien sur le plan idéologique qu’esthétique.

Un autre point d’interrogation émerge du champ de la recherche où la situation semble elle aussi quelque peu ambiguë. D’un côté, les études africaines—au sens général—se portent très bien, de l’autre, en feuilletant les revues (*African Studies Review*, *Présence africaine*), on y trouve peu de textes sur le théâtre africain entendu à l’échelle continentale où l’on puisse trouver des repères sérieux d’ordre technique et idéologique.

Il en est un peu autrement des perspectives plus particulièrement nationales ou régionales où les interventions sont, certes, assez nombreuses mais dominées par les approches historiques et souvent scénocentristes (histoire et activité des compagnies locales).² Exploré sous plusieurs aspects à travers les études qui sondent le passé jusqu’en 1905, l’art dramatique de la RDC offre toujours un grand champ à l’investigation, surtout si l’on pense à l’époque plus strictement contemporaine et aux auteurs non encore défrichés ou insuffisamment mis en valeur pour leurs mérites artistiques et l’importance de leur message. Les articles repérables sur le réseau, explorant tout ce vaste domaine un peu à tort et à travers, ne sont pas aussi nombreux qu’on pourrait l’espérer pour une zone culturelle où plus de cinq mille auteur(e)s avaient participé à différents concours dramatiques organisés par la Francophonie (Fiangor). Chaque intervention qui contribue à compléter la grande fresque qui manque semble ainsi utile.


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La nôtre poursuit, comme le titre l'indique, un objectif double: il s'agit, d'un côté, de démontrer que le théâtre congolais contemporain est (ou continue à être) informé par de violents conflits de différente nature, et, de l'autre, d'examiner les stratégies d'ordre formel et esthétique qu'il met en œuvre. Ce dernier dessein, c'est-à-dire la tentative d'une exploration formelle, a d'ailleurs été l'un des facteurs qui ont déterminé le choix du corpus où, comme on le verra au cours des analyses, chaque texte offre une approche dramaturgique différente et une déclinaison stylistique spécifique. Les auteurs choisis sont au nombre de six: Pierre Mumbere Mujomba, Nlandu Mayamba Mbuya Tierry, Mumbal'Iké Namupot Mas, David-Minor Ilunga, Célestin Kasongo et Jonathan Kombe. Les textes des trois derniers figurent dans un volume collectif publié par Lansman. En abordant ce recueil, nous prolongeons d'ailleurs les études séminales de Maëline Le Lay et répondons aux suggestions explicitement formulées dans l'argumentaire du grand projet de recherche de 2015 (Kabeya Mukamba, *et al.* 2).

La question des innovations: deux “pactes de théâtralité” parallèles

Quand on parle aujourd'hui d'innovations dans l'univers du spectacle (et de l'écriture dramatique), il est nécessaire de prendre quelques précautions. Tout d'abord, il importe de tenir compte de la coexistence simultanée d'au moins deux ‘pactes de théâtralité’ qui restent en vigueur de nos jours: celui du théâtre dramatique et celui du spectacle, ou *event*, postdramatique et plus ou moins performatif dans son essence ou ses contours. Ce dernier est bien défini dans un article tout récent d'André Helbo qui écrit ceci: “Le théâtre d'aujourd'hui ne propose plus un univers de discours achevé fondé sur la cohérence du sens” (256). Le sémioticien belge indique ensuite un certain nombre de caractéristiques de ce “théâtre émancipé” de tout et, de ce fait, sémantiquement pulvérisé: multimodalité sensorimotrice, multistabilité, multispatialité, hypermédiatisation, autonomie des codes, effets de défocalisation, absence de l'auteur en amont de l'œuvre, chamboulement de toutes les relations et composantes de la théâtralité traditionnelle. Or, répétons-le avec insistance: ce n'est qu'un des pactes; cette définition ne concerne qu'une partie de la production théâtrale d'aujourd'hui—d'un ‘aujourd'hui’ largement entendu, cela est évident, puisque certaines expérimentations évoquées par Helbo et toute la mouvance lehmanienne, remontent aux années '70 du siècle précédent. En tout cas, le théâtre de la RDC n'en est certainement pas encore là, c'est-à-dire à l'étape d'une “iconomanie” médiaturgique (Marranca 19) et d'une “postmodernité techno-liquide” (Masotti 142) qui reposent uniquement sur le lecteur/spectateur en ce qui concerne le vecteur sémantique.

Avec le théâtre congolais, nous restons toujours dans le pacte numéro 1, c'est-à-dire dans la formule dramatique qui s'énonce ainsi: une instance en chair et en os, à l'identité bien définie, douée d'une psyché et d'une spiritualité individuelles, formule un message (intentionnel, cohérent, concret et intelligible) à l'intention d'une autre instance dotée de qualités analogues. Enfin, il s'agit là d'une communication culturelle relativement traditionnelle au sein de laquelle les auteurs cherchent constamment—et intensément—des solutions originales, innovantes et surtout adéquates par rapport aux problèmes qu'ils affrontent au quotidien. Ce dernier aspect, il faut bien y insister, reste déterminant dans la production dramatique qui fait l'objet de nos analyses: le douloureux quotidien, précaire et lacéré par des conflits, prime en quelque sorte sur le jeu esthétique, sans l'étouffer pour autant. “La mise en écriture de la réalité a toujours ouvert la voie à des questions d'expression et à la subjectivité imaginative, qui apportent aux faits sociaux réels un gradient d'utopie”, écrit très justement Kayembe (106).

C'est donc dans un cadre ainsi prédéfini que nous voulons passer en revue six auteurs qui ont désormais acquis une certaine visibilité (même internationale, comme c'est le cas de *La dernière enveloppe* de Mujomba) et qui, grâce aux solutions stylistiques et dramaturgiques intéressantes, ont leur part dans l'évolution de l'écriture théâtrale congolaise et africaine. Outre les procédés d'ordre compositionnel et discursif qu'ils essayent de mettre en œuvre, chacun de ces auteurs s'attache à monter des scissions et des antagonismes qui déstabilisent le délicat équilibre des communautés.

Du côté des conflits

Quand, en 1991, Jean Cléo Godin écrivait “Entre la censure et l'exaltation des idéologies dominantes, entre la critique des pouvoirs et la légitime revendication des droits, la dramaturgie [africaine] semble prisonnière, et pour un long moment encore, d'un discours social manichéen laissant peu de prise aux préoccupations esthétiques” (112), il était difficile d'imaginer que, trente ans plus tard, cette dramaturgie donnerait des preuves indubitables de renouvellement de l'écriture conçue pour la scène de théâtre. En 2013, Dominique Traoré parle d'une “poétique de la mémoire fragmentée” (201) qui caractériserait la dramaturgie de l'Afrique occidentale francophone. Tout en continuant à traiter des problèmes, toujours actuels, concernant les relations familiales, la situation des femmes,

les inégalités sociales, l'abus sexuel, religieux ou politique, les guerres, les textes dramatiques africains—dont ceux de la dramaturgie congolaise contemporaine—témoignent aussi des recherches esthétiques.

Sans se laisser dominer par les possibilités des techniques actuelles, les auteurs congolais visent plutôt la puissance de la parole et du texte dramatique. Quant au contenu, Mukala Kadima-Nzuji évoque le conflit, le vol et la corruption qui stigmatiseraient le théâtre congolais de la postindépendance (150). En effet, y aurait-il un dénominateur commun que l'on pourrait trouver dans notre corpus des textes dramatiques de la RDC contemporaine? La réponse n'est ni facile ni univoque. Néanmoins, insistons sur un aspect que l'on retrouve dans tous les textes, à savoir le modèle agonistique de la construction de l'action dramatique (Caillois 60–2; Kowzan 69; Pavis 13). La compétition et toutes sortes de conflits y sont omniprésents. Partout et à tous les niveaux, on y assiste à une lutte quotidienne—et souvent héroïque—des gens confrontés à des obstacles divers. Que ce soit par temps de guerre ou dans la paix relative d'un après-guerre, les personnages affrontent les difficultés liées à leur situation précaire, et cela avec une dignité avérée.

Conflit politique: aporie de la prison

Jonathan Kombe Kukya, acteur, scénariste et dramaturge congolais, choisit la prison comme contexte diégétique de ses pièces: *Les prisonniers d'Ékafela* (2011) et *La Place des éperviers* (2017).³ De l'aveu de l'auteur, il s'est inspiré de la prison d'Ékafela qui a existé en RDC, de l'histoire de Guantanamo et de son passage dans la prison où son neveu était détenu en 1996 (Kombe). Sa première pièce nous conduit dans une prison située sur une petite île entourée de mines et destinée aux criminels les plus dangereux. Tel Hassan, terroriste, est accusé d'avoir placé des bombes dans des lieux publics. Seul dans sa cellule, humilié et battu par Gardien, il assume docilement sa peine n'espérant plus rien de la vie jusqu'à l'arrivée de deux autres prisonniers, Umberto et Musafiri. Leur apparition perturbe profondément le protagoniste. Ce dernier, après avoir avoué les causes de son comportement (il tuait aveuglement car toute sa famille a été assassinée par des inconnus), écoute la confession de Musafiri, enfermé injustement, et celle d'Umberto, qui, motivé par des raisons de sa carrière politique, voudrait emmener Hassan pour le livrer aux familles des victimes. Sa mission échoue et, ne voyant aucune solution, il se jette sur une mine. Les événements de la pièce s'articulent ainsi en une intrigue agonistique dans laquelle l'aporie est liée à l'incompatibilité des motivations des personnages.

La prison sert de décor également à la seconde pièce de Kombe, *La Place des éperviers*. Ici, le dramaturge recourt à l'antonomase afin d'universaliser les problèmes abordés: le totalitarisme, la guerre, la révolte et la protection des droits de l'homme. Au fil de la conversation entre L'Homme et le Brigadier, le lecteur/spectateur est familiarisé avec la situation dans le pays, un territoire africain défini uniquement par le nom de "La Place des éperviers".⁴ L'agon se construit ici entre un représentant du pouvoir (un jeune garçon simple) et celui de l'opposition, un homme instruit, connaissant le monde: "Moi j'ai été en France, Belgique, Montréal, Australie, Los Angeles, Miami, Washington, Finlande, Pologne" (Kombe 9) et du monde: "Mais, j'ai des relations" (9). Leur dialogue est focalisé sur la libération de L'Homme qui essaie par tous les moyens possibles (y compris la corruption) de persuader le Brigadier d'ouvrir la cellule. Pourtant rien ne marche. L'aporie de la situation semble être évidente. Le gardien reste intransigeant jusqu'à l'appel téléphonique de son supérieur. La cellule s'ouvre soudainement mais L'Homme ne veut plus sortir ... il continue à parler, comme s'il voulait 'convertir' le Brigadier et informer le monde entier de la situation dans le pays: "Ces psychopathes fabriquent des armes qui détruisent des vies humaines [...] Ils circulent librement tandis que les innocents remplissent les pénitenciers [...] Nous sommes des héros ignorés [...] Mais sachez que notre sang criera vengeance" (Kombe 25). Compte tenu du déroulement du dialogue, durant lequel L'Homme ne dépasse pas les limites de la bienséance, son comportement final peut surprendre car le lecteur/spectateur ne s'attend pas à une telle manifestation de la force, du courage mais aussi de l'imprudence de la part du détenu.

Enfin, *L'Illusion* (2010) de Mumbal'Ikhe Namupot Mas où l'école catholique congolaise de la postindépendance devient une sorte de prison basée sur l'aporie relationnelle entre l'élève et l'enseignant.⁵ Construite de façon agonistique, la pièce oppose un jeune homme rêveur, intelligent et avide d'instruction à tout un système scolaire dans un pays postcolonial. L'élève, tel un prisonnier du système, paraît impuissant envers le pouvoir quasi totalitaire des propriétaires des écoles. L'hypocrisie et la corruption semblent être le menu quotidien des écoles tenues par des religieux, esclaves eux-mêmes d'une hiérarchie 'professionnelle'. Tout au long de la pièce, le lecteur/spectateur assiste aux humiliations du protagoniste opprimé par des frères, mais l'excipit est porteur d'espoir car le héros, devenu un haut fonctionnaire d'état, fait preuve de vraies valeurs catholiques.

Conflit de générations: conflit civilisationnel

Le conflit de générations n'est pas un phénomène nouveau ou propre à une civilisation particulière. L'art de Melpomène en connaît de nombreux exemples et le théâtre occidental en propose des variantes diverses depuis l'Antiquité (Électre, Antigone) jusqu'aux temps modernes où les exemples se multiplient, en passant par le théâtre classique (Molière). Quant à la construction dramatique, malgré les tendances—non seulement européennes—qui visent toute sorte d'hybridation générique, la jeune dramaturgie congolaise semble être basée sur des schémas assez traditionnels.⁶ On note un nombre relativement restreint d'indications scéniques et le déroulement de l'action s'appuie généralement sur des répliques directes et bien 'bouclées' des protagonistes. Dans ce contexte, il semble intéressant de mentionner la pièce de Célestin Kasongo intitulée *Tour de contrôle* qui se distingue parmi les autres textes choisis pour cette étude.⁷

L'intrigue est nouée autour d'un protagoniste quasi omniscient: Mungrandi. Ce personnage clé, détenant le rôle stratégique dans la diégèse de la pièce et se plaçant dans l'épicentre des événements, est propriétaire d'une cabine téléphonique publique dans un quartier pauvre d'une ville africaine. L'aventure est racontée par l'analepse où Mungrandi est un narrateur qui s'adresse à sa nouvelle cabine "Tour de contrôle 2". Par l'emploi de l'expression "Il était une fois...", l'incipit de la pièce pourrait suggérer une histoire agréable, un conte de fées destiné aux enfants. Rien de tel: Mungrandi—son nom, ne fait-il pas du reste penser à un maître du 'grand monde', une sorte de demiurge un peu cynique?—manipule son entourage jusqu'à l'arrivée de la catastrophe finale, "une exponentiation des malheurs de toute une famille" (Kasongo 44). Toujours motivé par des profits financiers, très puissant dans ses démarches, il échange son silence contre de gros billets de banque de dollars américains de Pingo, un étranger revenu chercher une descendance.

Le conflit auquel nous assistons dans cette pièce a une double nature car d'un côté, on y voit une confrontation entre deux civilisations (européenne et africaine: Pingo vs Mungrandi), ou "[des] conflits de cultures", selon l'expression de Puis Ngandu Nkashama (113), et, d'un autre côté, l'opposition entre le père et la fille (Pingo vs Lolita) qui incarnent deux générations différentes.

La pièce n'est divisée ni en actes ni en scènes. Le lecteur/spectateur assiste seulement aux événements majeurs de l'histoire présentée. Les séquences successives sont uniquement numérotées de 1 à 19, de même que deux autres pièces du même volume. On note des sauts temporels importants. Le protagoniste-narrateur relate ce qui s'est passé entre les apparitions successives des autres personnages: "j'ai décidé de jouer mon grand jeu pour faire pousser et croître mon maudit pain quotidien [...] Ce jour-là, j'ai gagné en une flemme cinquante fois ma recette journalière [...] Cette opération s'est répétée autant de fois que nécessaire" (Kasongo 56, 59). De surcroît, pendant ses interventions, Mungrandi-narrateur annonce au lecteur/spectateur les problèmes qui seront résolus plus tard: "de quoi un étranger pouvait-il parler avec une femme perdue dans un quartier bordélique d'une ville africaine? Pourquoi ne voulait-il pas se présenter lui-même? [...] Lolita était-elle donc une 'balle perdue'?" (Kasongo 48, 51).

Une autre technique pratiquée par l'auteur est la composition en abyme. Avant l'intervention du narrateur, le dramaturge introduit des mini-scènes 'jouées' par des "voix téléphoniques" qui ne sont pas directement liées à l'action. En effet, ces micro-mises en abyme correspondent aux moments-clés qui font évoluer l'action de la pièce. Il y en a quatre: (1) la première scène après le Prologue; (2) la première conversation entre Pingo et Maria; (3) la vente d'un aphrodisiaque à Pingo; (4) le chantage de Mungrandi et la révélation du secret. À l'instar de l'action-cadre, elles présentent des conflits que les personnages auront à résoudre.

L'auteur recourt aussi à des variantes de cette technique: une mini-scène jouée par le personnage de Mungrandi dans laquelle il imite les voix de Maria et de Pingo en train de se disputer au sujet de Lolita (séquence 17, 59) ou des petites histoires racontées à Lolita par son père afin d'attirer son attention et l'orienter vers le retour à l'école. De nouveau, une construction agonistique se profile, puisque Pingo finit par détruire la vie conjugale de son ex-fiancée, en révélant l'infidélité de Maria. Le conflit entre les parents biologiques de Lolita devient la source des malheurs qui adviennent à tous les personnages faisant partie de l'intrigue racontée par le narrateur.

Conflit familial: relations brouillées

Einsteinnette de David-Minor Ilunga repose, elle aussi, sur le heurt.⁸ L'intrigue met en scène quatre personnages banalisés en numéros (Un, le père; Deux, la mère; Trois, le fils; Quatre, la sœur) qui appartiennent à la même famille. En apparence, une famille ordinaire: le père a perdu son emploi, la mère fait tout pour joindre les deux bouts, le fils, chouchou de maman, veut être musicien, et la fille, chérie de papa, rêve d'entrer à l'université. Mais, sous les

apparences se cache toute une panoplie de conflits, de sous-entendus, de non-dits, de reproches divers, etc. L'appartement où vit la famille ne représente pas un *locus amoenus* pour ses habitants car leurs relations sont tout au moins ambiguës. Même si le contenu de la pièce invite à une approche herméneutique approfondie, faute de place, nous nous concentrerons sur l'étude des formes génératrice de conflits. Ainsi, à l'instar de l'exemple précédent, nous pouvons évoquer des micro-mises en abyme auxquelles les personnages recourent pour suggérer au lecteur/spectateur plusieurs interprétations possibles.

Au début de la pièce (séquence 2), dans un long monologue, Quatre, la sœur joue une scène où elle incarne trois personnages, des membres de sa famille. Elle prend aussi le rôle du narrateur en racontant l'histoire de son enfance, l'époque où son père a découvert les capacités intellectuelles de la fille. Elle le fait de façon ambiguë car il semble que cette situation puisse être interprétée comme le commencement d'une relation incestueuse entre le père et la fille. Dans la première séquence, nous lisons:

DEUX, la mère: Bonjour la deuxième bureau!

UN, le père: C'est pas une bureau, c'est ma fille.

DEUX, la mère: Qui pique la place de sa mère. (Ilunga 14)

Ce petit fragment jette aussi une lumière sur les relations entre les époux qui s'accusent réciproquement d'infidélité conjugale: le père autrefois et la mère à présent. Dans la cinquième séquence, Deux reproche au père: "J'en ai marre de jouer à la bonne femme douce et équilibrée même quand son homme saute de sa couche en pleine nuit et s'en va monter la garde dans la chambre de son 'Einsteinnette'" (32). Seulement dans l'avant-dernière séquence, après avoir révélé à Deux sa grossesse, Quatre avoue: "Un jour ton homme me croise au salon, prête à prendre la route pour l'école. Dès que je passe près de lui, il me stoppe net [...] Il me renifle, saisit ma main et me conduit dans la salle de bain [...] Je me suis rhabillée et ... il m'a conduite vite fait à l'école ... Où étais-tu maman?" (36).

Néanmoins, il n'est pas certain que *pater familias* soit le père de l'enfant de sa fille car nous apprenons aussi l'existence d'une mystérieuse lettre d'amour anonyme que le père découvre à la maison. Il reproche l'adultère à sa femme mais, dans la séquence suivante, c'est la fille qui avoue en s'adressant à son enfant: "Mais mon cœur chauffe d'amour pour le tireur. / Il m'a rendue folle. Et je l'ai griffé. / Je lui ai sauté dessus et te voilà" (35). La question reste ouverte.

Les rapports de Deux et Trois ne sont pas nets non plus. Tout au long de la pièce, la mère protège son fils contre les attaques du père mais elle se rend compte de la triste réalité: "Tu es un parasite [...] Ce n'est pas parce que je te sers de couverture que je ne peux pas te déshabiller" (25). À trente-deux ans, le fils reste toujours à la charge des parents car il veut être près de sa mère: "Moi j'avance dans la vie aux côtés de ma mère" (29). Mais cette dernière pousse son fils à partir en Europe et gagner de l'argent: "Ce que je te demande, c'est de blanchir d'euros mon sourire" (28) dit-elle à Trois. Nous pouvons donc douter de l'honnêteté des intentions de la mère envers son fils.

À l'instar des trois autres couples des personnages (père/fille, père/mère, mère/fils), la relation entre le frère et la sœur n'est pas tout à fait claire elle non plus. Tout au long de la pièce, ils ne s'adressent même pas un mot, tout en vivant l'un à côté de l'autre. Seulement *in fine* leur dialogue met un peu de lumière sur leurs rapports. En effet, le frère a toujours été jaloux de sa petite sœur: "Depuis tes couches, j'ai eu envie d'enfoncer du coton dans ta petite bouche. Je te lisais comme celle qui est là pour bousiller ma couche d'ozone. Bouffer mon espace vital masculin [...] Tu m'a arraché mon père. Partagé ma mère" (39) et la sœur lui enviait sa liberté, son insouciance, l'attention que lui accordait leur mère. Mais il y a plus encore, la sœur se déguise et met les vêtements de son frère pour (enfin?) parler sérieusement avec sa mère.

Le dénouement de la pièce mérite une attention particulière car les deux dernières séquences ne sont pas construites de la même manière que le reste du texte. Durant les parties 8 et 9, les personnages ne dialoguent plus. Ils prêtent seulement leurs voix pour exprimer les malheurs les plus douloureux. Ces deux scènes appartiennent à un autre registre, complètement différent du précédent, plus onirique que réaliste. Les personnages disent à haute voix leurs vœux, leurs désirs, ce qu'ils voudraient entendre de la part des proches et non ce qu'ils souhaitent leur communiquer. Or, l'excipit de cette pièce ne propose aucune solution aux problèmes abordés. La fin reste entièrement ouverte, rien n'est résolu et plusieurs solutions sont possibles. Les chemins des protagonistes s'entremêlent totalement, de même que leurs voix dans les scènes finales qui demeurent nébuleuses.

Conflit social et pièce-machine

Nous empruntons l'expression de "pièce-machine" à Michel Vinaver (43) pour désigner *La dernière enveloppe* de Pierre Mumbere Mujomba, la pièce que Jacques Chevrier situe "à mi-chemin de la farce et du cauchemar" (7).⁹ Divisée en quatre actes, elle est centrée sur le problème de la disparition d'une enveloppe contenant dix dollars américains. Une pièce agonistique par excellence puisqu'elle oppose le monde richissime des représentants du pouvoir corrompu et celui des citoyens soumis à une paupérisation croissante voire un néo-esclavage qui touche une grande majorité du peuple africain. La protagoniste, au nom bien révélateur—Mama Domina, propriétaire d'une quarantaine de villas, de centaines de voitures, des avions personnels et des millions de dollars invente un tas d'astuces pour ne pas rembourser dix dollars mensuels à son professeur d'anglais, mais la disparition de l'enveloppe sert seulement de prétexte pour présenter tout un système criminel du trafic d'organes humains contrôlé par Mama Domina.

En fait, le micro-conflit entre le professeur Frédéric Mafikiri et sa patronne paraît un prétexte pour montrer de façon camouflée un macro-conflit de tout autre acabit: les affaires illicites d'un groupe mafieux, organisation proche du gouvernement d'un pays africain anonyme. Le dramaturge atténue l'effet macabre (que l'évocation directe du problème de la contrebande des organes humains pourrait produire sur le lecteur), en introduisant des scènes grotesques. À titre d'exemple, citons le dialogue entre Mama Domina et Mario Premier, dans le deuxième acte:

Mama Domina: [...] L'or blanc, qu'est-ce que c'est?
Mario Premier: L'or blanc, c'est la moelle d'okapi.
M. D: Or ultraviolet?
M. P: Sang de pygmée.
M. D: Or vermeil?
M. P: Sang de nourrisson.
M. D: Or infrarouge?
M. P: Sein de mulâtresse ... (22)

Tout le déroulement de l'action témoigne aussi de la vraisemblance et rien n'annonce la solution finale qui, de nouveau, appartient à un autre registre: imaginaire, fantastique, irréel. Les billets de banque envahissent la pièce *ad nauseam*; advient une vraie apocalypse qui précède la tombée du rideau. Mais la fin de la pièce n'apporte pas de résolution. Le lecteur imagine facilement le domestique Kissimba et le neveu de Mama Domina, Boulos, qui prennent le relais pour continuer les affaires de leur patronne.

Du côté des formes

En ce qui concerne leurs origines, les auteurs abordés dans cette étude proviennent de différents horizons géographiques de l'immense territoire de la RDC, la plupart d'entre eux gravitent néanmoins autour du large pôle constitué par la capitale qui, par rapport à une longue tradition didactique (celle de Katanga notamment, mais non seulement), "est plus ouverte aux expérimentations avant-gardistes et au développement d'une esthétique originale" (Kunda et Le Lay 27). En tout cas, outre la mise en scène de tout un éventail d'antagonismes sociaux, les préoccupations esthétiques constituent sans doute le second dénominateur commun de la plupart des pièces qui nous intéressent ici. Un bref survol des principaux procédés paraît ainsi utile, d'autant plus que l'inventivité de certains auteurs mérite d'être mise en évidence. Ceci dit, les innovations dramaturgiques proposées par les auteurs dont il est question ici ne vont pas au-delà d'un certain seuil de sophistication qui caractérise l'écriture théâtrale moderne dans d'autres aires culturelles du monde, puisque, comme nous l'avons déjà dit, on n'est pas encore là dans un système de désintégration totale repérable dans les productions francophones ultramodernes (celles de Sonia Chiambretto, Simon Diard, Pauline Picot, Philippe Malone, Jean Gagnard, Claire Gatineau et de bien d'autres auteurs du XXI^e siècle).

Ce qui saute aux yeux, quand on lit les pièces congolaises contemporaines, c'est d'abord une grande variété stylistique qui s'y manifeste malgré une certaine récurrence thématique (conflits, violence, terrorisme, précarité, corruption, etc.). Le corpus ici examiné contient en effet des textes qui atteignent parfois un diapason très élevé (*La dernière enveloppe*), alors que d'autres s'inscrivent dans un registre moyen (*Les prisonniers d'Ékafela*, *L'illusion*, *Tour de contrôle*, *Einsteinnette*) ou dans une poétique—résolument et subtilement—terre-à-terre (*Misère*). Ces différences de style et de registre restent partiellement en corrélation avec les situations dramatiques explorées, les objectifs

visés et le caractère des personnages mis en scène: un clochard ou un gardien de prison n'emploient pas le même langage qu'un charlatan professionnel ou une *business-woman* ultra-snob.

Quoi qu'il en soit, une tendance générale se laisse percevoir à travers tous ces textes: celle d'une esthétisation consciente qui consiste à parsemer le dialogue de petites particules linguistiques et de syntagmes plus complexes constituant autant de points forts du tissu textuel et permettant ainsi de susciter et de maintenir l'attention du spectateur. Bon nombre de ces trouvailles témoignent d'un grand talent de certains auteurs—notamment de Mujomba, Kasongo et Ilunga—dont l'invention verbale est par endroits remarquable et digne de louange. On note également, à travers le corpus, une autre caractéristique propre à toutes les dramaturgies déjà mûres, à savoir la propension à l'hétérologie: mélanges des *genera dicendi* et des langues, inserts intertextuels, introduction du lexique local, création des codes autonomes, allégories astucieuses, etc. Sur le plan structurel, enfin, un certain nombre d'expérimentations se laisse percevoir au niveau de la plateforme interlocutoire (monologisation, polylogues, etc.).

Hétérogénéité et variété énonciative

Que l'on parle d'hétérologie, d'hétéroglossie (Todorov 79), de diglossie (Le Lay) ou d'autres phénomènes de ce genre, on pense toujours à une sorte d'hétérogénéité énonciative (Authier-Revuz 98) ou d'hybridité discursive (Wamba; Noumssi 28) qui s'obtient par l'immixtion dans un texte-énoncé—ici, dans le dialogue—de différents 'corps étrangers' vecteurs de voix et de langues autres que celles des interlocuteurs ou générateurs d'inflexions particulières. On en relève plusieurs cas dans notre corpus, mais nous en citerons seulement quelques-uns, les plus spectaculaires, à titre d'exemple. Dans *Tour de contrôle*, Mungrandi, "expert en aphrodisiaques", imite ainsi le langage publicitaire:

(*Exhibant quelques sachets contenant poudres et racines, il fait la publicité comme à la télé.*)

Chikassa 1: pour l'érection maximale.

Chikassa 2: pour la multiplication rapide des spermatozoïdes.

Chikassa 3: pour une dilatation maximale de la verge. (52)

La publicité de chikassa n'est qu'un échantillon d'un long discours de bonimenteur qui se déploie sur les pages de *Tour de contrôle*. Le personnage clé, Mungrandi, dont nous avons déjà décrit l'omnipotence et le rôle stratégique dans la diégèse, est en fait un brillant causeur qui sait embobiner sa clientèle avec art et même 'commercialiser' ses 'silences' (53).

Un autre exemple, un autre genre de discours: dans le dialogue de Un avec Deux (*Einsteinnette*) s'intercale la lecture d'un journal à travers laquelle on découvre une partie du contexte politico-social:

UN, le père: Oh! la farce! (*Il lit*) "Le peuple crie au scandale. Scandale socio-géologique, [...], scandale en énergie [...], scandale en bref."

DEUX, la mère: Qui est cet audacieux?

UN, le père: "Le Mouchard"

DEUX, la mère: Wow! Il n'a pas emprunté son label, celui-là. [...]

UN, le père: "[...] Mes voisins chatouillent mes côtes, mes asphaltes ne chassent plus la pluie dans la terrasse, ils? en dégoulinent. Je décaisse mon cash pour réparer les casses [...] Eh, Mundele Ndombe, toi le blanc à la peau noire! [...]" (14-5)

La présence de cette 'greffe' dans le corps d'*Einsteinnette* opère une ouverture du microcosme scénique vers le macrocosme de la réalité ambiante. Focalisée uniquement sur la situation familiale des protagonistes, la pièce bénéficie ainsi d'une certaine extension spatiale. Nous oserions même dire qu'il serait souhaitable que cette technique soit utilisée plus fréquemment, de manière à pouvoir équilibrer les poids respectifs de l'en-scène et du hors-scène, car c'est bien à cela que sert habituellement l'hétérologie au théâtre. C'est dans le même esprit qu'Ilunga utilise la "lettre anonyme" (32-3) et le poème d'Ichiro Hatano cité par Trois dans la conversation avec Deux (29). Et c'est encore la même stratégie que l'on retrouve dans *Les prisonniers d'Ékafela* de Kombe où certaines séquences du dialogue se déclenchent à partir des commentaires diffusés par un poste de radio présent dans la cellule.

Pour agrémenter le discours, les dramaturges congolais font aussi appel à des procédés moins spectaculaires mais toujours efficaces dans la diversification de la couche verbale. Il s'agit là des passages où s'immiscent des parlars locaux, des langues étrangères, des manières individuelles d'expression, des défauts de prononciation, des 'contorsions sonores' (Scherer 94): "Ayo ... ayo ... ne m'appéy pyus à zenuméyo, mon mayi est déjà de yetour. Je dois changer de cayte ZIM ..." dit une 'voix téléphonique' dans *Tour de contrôle* (43). Une autre voix torture le fran-

çais de manière analogue: “Ze ne r’attache paz à mon rit ... c’est rui qui court derrière moi. Ir me trouve plus berre que toi” (56). Enfin, une troisième rapporte en anglais: “Hello ... yes ... *I have exculpated the murder as you recommended it ... I’m waiting for my fees*” (“Bonjour... Oui... J’ai disculpé le meurtre comme vous l’avez recommandé... J’attends mes frais”; notre traduction.; 57). Des effets humoristiques ne manquent pas quelquefois d’accompagner ces intrusions hétéroglossiques, comme c’est le cas dans *La dernière enveloppe*:

Mama Domina: American fish, voilà ce que nous mangeons ici ... que dis-je, ce que weeathia. Pas de ces saltés de “maharaki” et de “makayabou” qui sentent les bateaux [...] You andastand?

Kisimba: Yes, you andastand, my boss.

Mama Domina: Pendant que vous broutez la crasse, Domestique, nous autres, nous mangeons la classe, you andastand?

Kisimba: Yes, you andastand, my boss. (26)

Le rôle de l’anglais dans *La dernière enveloppe* est du reste bien plus profond que celui d’un insert “exolingue” (Porquier 20). Ce que permet ici l’usage parodique de l’anglais, c’est surtout de ridiculiser le personnage clé, Mama Domina qui, sous les apparences d’une dirigeante aux ambitions cosmopolites, n’est qu’une simple criminelle passablement obtuse.

Invention verbale et codes autonomes

Lorsqu’on découvre, au début de *La dernière enveloppe*, que le menu du chien Mbwa Mabé comporte du “sang d’okapi”, du “foie d’aborigène” et du “rôti du pigmée”, une sorte de ‘check engin’ s’allume dans notre esprit: nous comprenons à ce moment là que la suite de la pièce nous réservera d’autres surprises de ce genre. Elles ne se font pas attendre longtemps, surtout que la souplesse du style de Mujomba parvient à nous maintenir sans cesse en éveil.¹⁰ Dès l’acte II, en effet, d’autres objets énigmatiques aux noms bizarres font leur apparition: l’or blanc, bleu, ultraviolet ... On y voit aussi le mari de Mama Domina, Mario Premier, contraint comme un simple élève à prendre de “petites leçons de vocabulaire” qui lèvent le voile sur une réalité des plus inquiétantes (voir aussi la première partie de ce passage dans la section intitulée “conflit social et pièce-machine”):

M. D.: [...] Définition commerciale du corps humain ...

M. P.: Le corps humain est la marchandise la plus précieuse de notre planète [...] le plus grand palmier à huile [...] Du cheveu à la cheville, toutes les parties du corps humain sont des ors, des cuivres, des niobiums, des coltans et des diamants.

M. D.: À quoi sert le commerce des organes humains?

M. P.: À alimenter les laboratoires d’Europe, d’Amérique et d’Australie. (23)

Ainsi, la petite cour de la grande pharaone se dote-t-elle d’un lexique secret à usage interne, conçu pour camoufler non seulement le trafic des organes humains, mais aussi les mystérieuses opérations de leur ‘extraction’ qui s’effectuent durant les rituels présidés par le “Prophète Vivant, Son Eminence Odon Mulawatu et ses douze acolytes”. Ce code secret joue un rôle fondamental dans le développement de l’intrigue, surtout à l’étape du démantèlement final des structures satanico-mafieuses échafaudées par la société ‘élitiste’ de Mama Domina regroupée autour du mystérieux “Contrat-Programme 214-412-241”. Ajoutons ici entre parenthèses que le même procédé est utilisé aussi par Kasongo dans *Tour de contrôle* où les aphrodisiaques ne peuvent s’acquérir qu’après avoir prononcé la phrase chiffrée suivante: “Mon serpent longtemps enroulé ne peut ni se dérouler ni cracher” (50).

On pourrait consacrer de longs développements aux heureuses inventions de Mujomba, mais comme l’espace imparti à cette étude n’est pas illimité, nous citerons seulement quelques lignes du polylogue clôturant l’aventure:

Kisimba: Adios, Mama Domina; chacun son Amérique!

Mama Domina: Aaaaah! Mes vertiges Concorde! [...] Mes troubles Sabena! Mes céphalées Suissair! [...]

Boulos: Allô! Allô! Hi, my friend!

Mama Domina (*ralant*): Aaaaaah! Mes convulsions Pan Am!

Boulos: Can I have Doctor Mike Dougall, please?

Mama Domina: Mes troubillons Camair!

Boulos: Doctor Mike Dougall of Washington ...

Mama Domina: Mes hoquets Lufthansa!

Boulos: Boulos ... Boulos bin Pavasa! It is about Mama Domina ... [...]

Mama Domina: Mes troubles Samouraaaaa! (70-1)

La dernière enveloppe représente un cas à part qui mériterait une plus vaste investigation, tellement le texte est riche et stimulant. En effet, sous le couvert d’une simple tragi-comédie rosse, il peut être lu comme une vague allégorie

reflétant et flagellant non seulement l'action destructrice des forces locales qui collaborent à maintenir le continent dans un "fledgling, neo-colonial state" (Osakwe 11), mais aussi l'entière structure du monde globalisé fondé sur le crime et les inégalités scrupuleusement programmées et mises en place avec méthode.¹¹

Proverbes, dictons, sentences

Certaines pièces congolaises ici examinées ont un faible très marqué pour les expressions proverbiales et sentencieuses, ce qui est dû aux traditions orales qui continuent à irriguer la théâtralité africaine, ainsi qu'au fait que le proverbe, 'indice de cohésion sociale', a en Afrique une valeur "rassurante et même euphorique" (Scherer 64). Kunda et Le Lay insistent eux aussi dans leurs travaux sur le didactisme omniprésent dans la littérature dramatique africaine. Les proverbes et les structures similaires participent de manière évidente de ces intentions didactiques.

Il est évident qu'on ne saurait soutenir la thèse selon laquelle toutes les pièces de notre corpus tendent à s'organiser autour d'une ou de plusieurs sentences, mais il est tout aussi patent que ce genre de formules fait partie de l'arsenal rhétorique régulièrement mis à profit par les dramaturges congolais d'aujourd'hui. Voici quelques exemples repérés dans *La Place des éperviers*, pièce exceptionnelle sous ce rapport: "Les anges terrestres tirent à gauche" (1, 5, 21); "La vie est faite des choses inexplicables et impénétrable" (2); "La force de l'eau est détruite par la vaporisation en nuage que le vent chasse" (3); "La force de l'homme est neutralisée par la peur que le sommeil efface. L'amour détruit la mort" (3); "Un grand feu fort et incendier que les sapeurs ne maîtrisent pas finit par être éteint par une forte pluie" (3); "La faiblesse du faible est une puissance inépuisable" (3); "Il faut quelques années pour retenir le SCAR [...] Supporter ses [d'une femme] caprices. Comprendre ses inquiétudes. Accepter ses ordres. Recevoir sa soumission" (3, 8); "L'heure est inconnue/Le poisson sera pris au filet fatal/Les oiseaux pris au piège" (6); "La bouche qui parle trop ne manque pas de péché" (10); "Le silence du faible est une puissante bombe dangereuse. La force du puissant n'est qu'un feu de paille" (13); "On ne donne que ce qu'on a" (19); "Il [n'] y a de bonheur à l'homme que de manger et de boire. C'est sa part qu'il a sous le soleil" (20); "Celui qui veut la paix, prépare la paix, cherche la paix, trouve la paix et vit la paix/Celui qui veut la guerre, prépare la guerre, cherche la guerre, vit la guerre et meurt de la guerre" (22); "Nous sommes des héros ignorés"(25).

Ne serait-il pas possible d'affirmer, malgré une certaine dilution de toutes ces formules dans le dialogue de l'Homme et du Brigadier, que *La Place des éperviers* s'appuie sur une rhétorique sentencieuse? Il est clair que oui. Du point de vue du public local, cette rhétorique renforce encore davantage le potentiel dramatique de l'œuvre dans la mesure où celle-ci est vecteur d'une dramatisation inhérente comme l'observent les linguistes pragmatiques et les folkloristes. Les premiers, comme Odebumi, travaillant justement sur les proverbes dans le théâtre africain, y voient des 'pragmèmes' communicationnels spécifiques influant sur le développement de l'échange (avertissements, conseils); les seconds (Karasik) y décèlent "des représentations théâtrales en miniature" et des images des "situations axiogéniques" (26, 32). Les sentences listées ci-dessus ne correspondent-elles pas exactement à ce profil et ne font-elles pas penser à l'écriture désormais classique de Ngandu Nkashama: "Il n'y a pas d'arbres qui tiennent contre la bourrasque [...]" (9).

Plateforme interlocutoire

Avec la problématique de l'interlocution (Jacques), on passe à un niveau supérieur d'organisation textuelle, celui où le texte s'articule en répliques et unités plus complexes. Certes, on n'est pas autorisé à l'affirmer à propos de toutes les pièces de notre corpus, mais la plupart d'entre elles s'émancipent par endroits de la formule interlocutoire traditionnelle où un A parle avec un B à travers des canaux parfaitement transitifs ou 'transitables' et dans un espace-temps qu'ils partagent tous les deux. Nous avons déjà vu quelques lignes du polylogue final de *La dernière enveloppe*, où se manifestait une tendance à la choralité, mais d'autres exemples confirment la thèse (Voir la définition "a minima" proposée par Mégevand 37). Voici un bref extrait d'un long polylogue semblable qui clôt *Einsteinnette*:

Sur scène, les quatre personnages dispersés, presque immobiles dans une activité familière. Ils ne dialoguent pas.

Pleurs de bébé. [...]

DEUX, la mère: Où est ta sœur, il faut que je lui parle?

TROIS, le frère: J'entends des voix. Peut-être des sons. Sauf que ce n'est pas ma guitare.
 (Pleurs de bébé)
 TROIS, le frère: Nobody! For a long time. For a long, long time.
 UN, le père: Qu'est-ce que c'est que ce thé?
 TROIS, le frère: Ne pars pas !
 UN, le père: Elle aura bientôt son Bac. (37–9)

Dans *Tour de contrôle*, ce genre de collage polyphonique va jusqu'à devenir un des principes compositionnels, puisque le texte de la pièce comporte cinq séquences presque autonomes où des "voix téléphoniques" se font entendre dans un pêle-mêle d'énoncés "déseiboités" (Danan et Ryngaert 24):

- Allo ... ma femme voyage pour deux mois. A nous la liberté. Rendez-vous ce soir à 19h00 chez moi.
- Allo ... Bonjour professeur. Un échec non délibéré dans ton cours me priverait de gravir une marche. J'aimerais te rencontrer.
- Qui t'a donné mon numéro?
- Aro ... ze suis agressé ... au secours ... Aro M. R'inspecteur de ra porice. Aro ...
- Allo ... oui ... Appelle-moi dans une heure, ma femme est au salon.
- L'appareil de votre correspondant est soit volé, soit hypothéqué. (43)

On voit bien qu'il ne s'agit pas là d'une "interaction verbale" telle que l'entendent les conversationnistes (Kerbrat-Orecchioni), mais bien des bribes de conversation alignées sans ordre apparent, d'un patchwork d'extraits d'échanges, d'une "chambre d'écho traversée par la rumeur du monde", selon la formule métaphorique de Baillet (28). Cependant, ces quelques bribes suffisent pour annoncer le contenu de la pièce qui va se déployer par la suite: on est là, en effet, dans un quartier pauvre et 'bordélique' d'une ville (congolaise?) indéterminée, et dans une triste histoire d'infidélité avec, à la clé, les manipulations d'un téléphoniste-proxénète.

Outre les polylogues, on peut relever quelques autres formes intéressantes et dramaturgiquement fonctionnelles. L'une d'entre elles est la présence, dans le cadre participatif, des témoins non ratifiés, "bystanders" ou "overhearers", le schéma du cadre participatif proposé par Kerbrat-Orecchioni (86). On repère des situations de ce genre à deux reprises dans *Tour de contrôle* où Mungrandi (48) et Lolita (59) interceptent des conversations qu'ils n'auraient pas dû entendre.

L'autre forme qui complexifie la structure de la plateforme interlocutoire est le dialogue rapporté à l'intérieur d'un monologue. Deux occurrences de ce procédé nous paraissent dignes d'être relevées: le long monologue de Trois dans *Einsteinnette* (19) où la fille rapporte une dispute familiale qui laisse percevoir l'ambiance tendue régnant au sein du foyer, et le monodiscours narratif de Mungrandi où celui-ci, en "imitant les voix", nous fait entendre la conversation de Pingo et Maria dans *Tour de contrôle* (59).

La technique suivante consiste à exploiter différentes possibilités offertes par l'introduction dans le texte de la pièce des passages chantés. Un peu détachées du flux principal de l'action—ou créant justement ce sentiment de détachement—les chansons amènent d'habitude un moment de détente poétique à fonctionnalité très variée. Ainsi, le "drum" de Trois dans *Einsteinnette*, nous conduit-il un instant dans l'univers intime du frère-artiste, univers bien distant des 'hypoténuses d'hyppopotame' dans lequel nous plonge l'insalubre admiration de Un pour Quatre: "Faut que je dégaine ! [...] / Ma caboche nucléaire, / Chargée! / Mon cœur peloton d'ogives, / Tic-tac !" et ainsi de suite (22–4). Utilisée un peu différemment, la chanson de la fille dans *Misère*: "Amour réciproque [...] / Quand bien même ils médissent de nous" (7), s'infiltré dans les rêves du Clochard 2 pour se muer imperceptiblement, dès qu'il se réveille, en *Misère*, figure allégorique et fantomatique qui hantera tout le dialogue des habitants de la décharge.

La quatrième stratégie, enfin, que l'on détecte dans *Les prisonniers d'Ékafela* de Kombe, est celle d'un montage de monologues qui, au fur et à mesure, se transforment en un dialogue régulier: "Hassan et Umberto sont chacun dans leur coin et, au début, se parlent à eux mêmes" (74).

Dialogue philosophique

Créée en 1985 à Kinshasa, *Misère* met en scène trois clochards "mi-fous, mi-philosophiques" (4^{ème} de la couverture). Cette définition-éclair de la situation est juste et signale que la pièce en renoue avec la longue tradition des dialo-

gues philosophiques (de Platon à Ackroyd). En effet, les clochards de Nlandu Mayamaba Mbuya Thierry, campés dans un décor explicitement beckettien—“*Le premier clochard dans un pousse-pousse, le deuxième dans un fût, juste à côté*” (7)—mènent un débat stylistiquement fruste, dépouillé et synthétique, mais qui touche, comme il se doit dans un cas pareil, des questions fondamentales: Dieu, misère, bien, mal, justice, foi chrétienne, fidélité, sexe, débauche, inceste, hypocrisie, corruption, argent, morale, vingtième siècle, vitesse, péché, liberté, mort.¹² Tout ceci, dans un enchaînement de répliques ultra-courtes, simples et sentencieuses qui n’y vont pas par quatre chemins. On pourrait parfois reprocher à Mayamba un excédent de schématisation et de pathétisme, néanmoins il vise très juste à certains moments et sa pièce reste parfaitement actuelle. Le vingtième siècle, celui de la ‘vitesse’, de la ‘contradiction’, du ‘sexe’, de la ‘mise en bouteille’, y est jugé très négativement: “Si Saint-Pierre pouvait revoir son Eglise... ! / – Quel nuage sur son autel !” (10); “Du temps de nos pères, les buissons abondaient. Mais jamais ils n’étaient souillés. De nos jours, plus de buissons, les routes sont éclairées et en dessous des poteaux ...” (23); “La nouvelle Misère. – Richement vêtue ... / – par la débauche incestueuse. / – Kapinga ! / – La fille de quinze ans ... / – ... devenue majeure ... / – ... par ordonnance présidentielle !” (25); “Mieux vaut voler beaucoup à un pauvre que peu à un riche.” (32); “La frousse est le dictateur ... / – ... d’une société cloîtrée.” (39); “[...] La loi est devenue l’acolyte du mensonge.” (40)

Cela suffit; tout commentaire idéologique est superflu. Observons seulement une technique adialectique (Wołowski 51–4) dans la conduite du discours: des phrases divisées en segments dont chacun est attribué à un des trois interlocuteurs. Ce genre d’échange ne saurait même pas s’analyser en termes de “bouclage”, proposé par Vinaver (903) et développé par Danan, puisqu’il s’agit là d’un simple partage des voix obtenu par une segmentation continue des énoncés, forme proche de ce que Danan appelle “dialogue narratif” (43).

Un bref examen des didascalies

La couche didascalique, composante fondamentale du texte dramatique, recèle souvent des éléments intéressants, dans la mesure où c’est surtout là que le dramaturge inscrit la ‘pré-vision’ théâtrale de son œuvre. “La tâche du sémiologue [...] dans le domaine du théâtre, est de trouver à l’intérieur du texte des éléments spatialisés et spatialisables qui assurent la médiation texte-représentation”, écrivait Ubersfeld (152). Hélène Laliberté redit exactement la même chose quand elle se propose de “dégager d’une œuvre [du texte dramatique] des particularités utiles et tangibles pour une mise en scène” (133). C’est ce que l’on pourrait appeler *lecture scénologique* du texte dramatique. Essayons donc de voir ce que l’on peut retenir des indications scéniques présentes dans les textes de notre corpus.

Théoriquement, tout projet de mise en scène inscrit dans le texte devrait intégrer tous les principaux “langages” théâtraux, selon les bons vieux préceptes de l’harmonie intersémiotique (Ingarden 533) et de la convergence des codes (Bogatyrev 530). Cependant, chaque situation dramatique particulière suppose une configuration intersémiotique optimale: un choix précis de dominantes codiques. Ainsi, est-il logique que certaines pièces de théâtre accordent une place privilégiée aux effets sonores, d’autres aux effets lumineux, d’autres encore au jeu des accessoires.

Son

Jonathan Kombe, pour commencer par les situations les moins compliquées, mais très exigeantes scénographiquement, témoigne d’une préférence pour l’exploration de la phonosphère ou sonosphère, comme le dirait Mervant-Roux. Enfermés dans leurs cellules, les protagonistes des textes de Kombe n’ont, en fait, qu’une perception limitée (sonore) du monde qui les entoure. Les bruits de la rue (5) et des assiettes (10), la “musique” accompagnant le récit de la manifestation du peuple salemaboen (14), les cris du brigadier et les sonneries de son portable constituent le principal “décor” dans *La Place des éperviers*. Dans *Les prisonniers d’Ékafela*, seules les voix radiophoniques et quelques autres bruitages (hélicoptère, explosion) apparaissent dans le ‘soundscape’ textuel de la pièce. Des effets plus complexes sont à noter dans *Misère*: la figure allégorique éponyme y “naît” du chant de la jeune fille (7); une cloche retentit juste au moment d’une prière (9); un bêlement de la chèvre s’associe sémantiquement à la corruption (31); des chants de deuil et des pleurs font un contre-point ironique aux funérailles grotesques de Budi “tué” par son médecin et par la “fatigue de payer” (36).

Mais ce qui est remarquable dans *Misère*, pièce rédigée avec un sarcasme hautain et un détachement brechtien, c’est l’extrême variété des tons et des inflexions vocales qui changent constamment, tel un kaléidoscope. Voici les notations didascaliques désignant le mode d’expression des clochards: “*calmement, enjoué, mélancolique, solennel, avec dégoût, blagueur, avec un rire complice, en apparté, outré, sur le ton de la confidence, hurlant, désespéré, fou de joie, souriant,*

inquiet, énervé, surpris, se bouchant le nez, sèchement, ébahi, se lamentant, menaçant, amusé, imperturbable, effondré, aux allures militaires, furieux et déconcerté, faussement amical, ironique, désespéré, sarcastique".

Ce jeu des tonalités affectives rappelle les arabesques tonales de Jean Vauthier (*Bada*), et il constituerait, il faut bien le souligner, un grand défi au niveau de la mise en scène.

Lumière

Les auteurs ici examinés s'adonnent parfois, aussi bien à travers les didascalies qu'à travers le dialogue, à des opérations sémiotiques intéressantes basées sur les effets lumineux. Le jeu du clair-obscur domine. Dans *Misère*, avec les mots "tout se fait dans la clarté. Et quelle clarté" (Clochard 2), le noir vient subitement—et ironiquement—interrompre la scène et déconstruire le discours: "[clarté] ... remplie d'obscurité", précise aussitôt Clochard 1 (24). Notons en outre que le changement d'éclairage (fonction modale de la lumière par opposition à sa fonction déictique) pourrait, tout au long de cette pièce, marquer les nombreux jeux de rôles effectués par les trois protagonistes (leurs "scénarios"). Ce procédé est d'ailleurs explicitement signalé à deux reprises: "Obscurité totale" (42), et "La lumière baisse" (45).

Une opération analogue, quoique visant d'autres effets sémantiques, est plusieurs fois réitérée dans *Einsteinnette* où les moments de conscience et d'angoisse, rendus sous forme monologale, coïncident avec les coupures de courant, les assombrissements de la scène ou la simple présence de la lampe (17–9, 29, 36). La fille-lumière qui "a illuminé son père avec son cogito" (19), n'apparaît-elle pas ainsi sous un jour assez gris? Le noir, au théâtre—ne l'oublions pas—est "matière et lumière" (Perruchon 181).

Objet

Le dispositif scénographique programmé dans le texte de la *La dernière enveloppe*, sans doute le plus sophistiqué de tous ceux que nous venons de voir, réunit toutes les composantes du langage théâtral. Il importe cependant de souligner que la place centrale revient ici à l'accessoire, à l'objet, aux choses. On doit d'abord imaginer l'incroyable empire de Mama Domina: dizaines de villas luxueuses, parkings, piscines suspendues, dépôts, avions, faune sauvage, chaînes musicales, bouteilles de whiskey, ordinateurs, caméras, coffres-forts, télécommandes, etc. Bref, un monde à la fois technicisé au possible et orwellien. Il est vrai que le texte de Mujomba met en place un décor parlé, une scénographie verbale, plutôt qu'un système de praticables, néanmoins une bonne mise en scène de la pièce—unique par son humour, forte par son message et ultramoderne par son *set*—exigerait un projet scénique grandiose, menaçant, technocratique, et non nécessairement 'africain', puisque *La dernière enveloppe* a une portée universelle. Pour voir à quel genre de difficultés se heurterait ici l'éventuel metteur-en-scène et son équipe, lisons la dernière didascalie:

Quatre coffres-forts se brisent sur le bar. Un serpent sort de l'un d'entre eux et menace Boulos avant de se changer en plusieurs kilos de pièces de monnaie [...]. Des sirènes sonnent de partout. Des tiroirs s'ouvrent, libérant leur cargaison de billets et de pièces, et se referment, tout comme s'ouvrent et se referment les portes et les fenêtres. Les lumières clignotent, multicolores. Prise de convulsions, Mama Domina tombe comme évanouie sur la moquette. Une pluie de billets recouvre tout et l'ensevelit. Boulos essaye de l'endéager et de la remettre, comme une chose, sur le canapé, au milieu d'un orage de billets fous, d'une virevolte infernale d'arcs-en-ciel, d'éclairs et de tonnerres, d'un festival de coffres-forts enragés et d'un concert cacophonique de cris d'animaux féroces et de sirènes. Le rideau tombe sur cette apocalypse. (71)

Par le fait qu'elle touche, défait, écrase et accuse, cette tornade de billets qui emporte tout ce monde objectal (et faussement humain), n'a-t-elle pas une vraie dimension "psycho-plastique" postulée jadis par le génial scénographe tchèque, Josef Svoboda (1992)?

Conclusion

La "nouvelle dramaturgie" de la République Démocratique du Congo, selon l'expression de Israël Tshimpamba Mouckounay, est sans doute un phénomène plus large et plus complexe que ce que nous avons tenté de présenter dans cette étude. De plus en plus de textes paraissent sur le marché éditorial, même s'ils n'arrivent pas toujours à percer et se faire reconnaître à l'échelle mondiale. Les textes examinés ici, sauf peut-être deux exceptions, nous semblent avoir atteint un certain degré de visibilité ainsi qu'une qualité comparable à celle qui caractérise l'écriture dramatique contemporaine considérée au niveau universel. Représentant chacun une forme différente, parfois très sensiblement différente, ces textes semblent pourtant partager deux propriétés essentielles. En effet, chacun de ces textes repose sur un antagonisme plus ou moins violent et propose des solutions esthétiques intéressantes

qui témoignent d'une évidente recherche d'innovation. La notion d'*innovation* est bien entendu à prendre avec une certaine précaution, dans la mesure où il s'agit ici de procédés, certes modernes, mais s'inscrivant, tout compte fait, dans le cadre d'une vision assez traditionnelle, si l'on les compare à ceux utilisés dans les réalisations issues de la postmodernité. La tendance à moderniser est pourtant évidente et elle se fait justement à travers le perfectionnement des techniques dramaturgiques. Le fond idéologique, lui, reste le même.

Même si l'on pouvait croire qu'avec le temps, les blessures historiques et sociales se cicatrisent et que l'intérêt doit migrer vers des sujets moins douloureux et plus réflexifs, il n'en est rien. Les nouveaux dramaturges congolais édifient leurs œuvres autour des situations de heurt violent, de télescopage frontal, de confrontation permanente, en s'inscrivant ainsi dans la lignée de leurs confrères aînés. Qu'il s'agisse de conflits civilisationnels (*Misère*), politiques (*Prisonniers d'Ekafela*), sociaux (*La dernière enveloppe*), religieux (*L'Illusion*) ou familiaux (*Einsteinette*, *Tour de contrôle*), c'est invariablement une guerre, une trahison, une tricherie, une violence qui servent de matrice thématique aux textes congolais contemporains. La vision du monde qui s'en dégage est, dans l'ensemble, assez grise, déprimante et inquiétante malgré tous les efforts entrepris par les auteurs en vue d'une exorcisation ou, du moins, d'un amortissement. Celui-ci semble s'accomplir entre autres par des recherches formelles conduites délibérément et, parfois, avec un succès évident (*La dernière enveloppe*, *Tour de contrôle*). Sur ce versant rhétorique et technique, on découvre en effet de nombreux procédés et stratégies qui rendent un peu moins désolant ce vaste champ de bataille. Trouvailles linguistiques originales, formules proverbiales, usage des nouvelles technologies, recours à des dispositifs interlocutoires complexes, effets de lumière, de son, de rythme—autant d'éléments qui rehaussent la valeur intrinsèque des 'nouveaux' drames congolais et qui les intègrent de plain-pied au patrimoine théâtral mondial.

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Notes

1. Voir à ce propos un bref interview avec Rogo Koffi M. Fiangor ("Paroles d'auteurs") relatif à son étude intitulée *Théâtre africain francophone* qui brasse 30 ans de l'écriture théâtrale africaine (1967–97). Les "dysfonctionnements" dont parle l'auteur sont ceux du grand Concours dramatique interafricain.
2. Les ouvrages monographiques (Conteh-Morgan; Mumbal'ikie; Gray), se concentrent sur la composante idéologique, et ne font aucun état des dramaturgies strictement contemporaines. L'étude de MacDougal sur Mwondo Théâtre relève explicitement de l'analyse du spectacle et de l'histoire culturelle. Celles de Muikilu Ndaye, Le Lay et Kunda, Le Lay, tout en débattant un vaste terrain (Katanga), ne touchent pas au corpus ici en cause (Kinshasa) et ce sont encore, essentiellement, des "aperçus historiques". Historiquement parlant, *Le Répertoire bibliographique du théâtre en RDA de 1905 à 1960: des initiatives missionnaires aux appropriations locales. Matériaux pour une histoire culturelle* et "La hiérarchie catholique et la pratique théâtrale au Congo belge") embrassent la période 1905–60. Parmi toutes ces contributions précieuses, mais limitées dans le temps aussi bien que dans le champ focal, c'est seulement la dernière en date, celle de Kunda Mutoki qui affiche, dès le sous-titre, un intérêt prononcé pour le 'personnage' et, en général, pour les moyens d'expression artistique.
3. Jonathan Kombe Kukya (né en 1961 à Kisangani), criminologue de formation, est acteur, auteur et cinéaste. Fondateur de la Compagnie Théâtrale "M" Majuscule, membre de *Tarmac des Auteurs*, après la période théâtrale, à présent, il se consacre essentiellement au cinéma. Son objectif est la formation des enfants aux arts scéniques et audiovisuels.
4. Le nom de ce lieu peut renvoyer au jeu vidéo *Word of Warcraft* où dans les Royaumes de l'Est, dans la ville de la horde, dans la Zone des Bois des Chants éternels, nous pouvons trouver "La Place de l'Épervier". Cette référence viendrait à l'appui de l'hypothèse sur l'omniprésence de toute sorte de conflit dans cette jeune dramaturgie.
5. Mumbal'ikie Namupot Mas (né en 1953 à Mbeni) est docteur ès lettres à l'Université de Kinshasa et l'Université Paul Verlaine à Metz. Auteur de nombreux articles scientifiques, il est professeur associé et enseigne à l'Institut supérieur pédagogique de Kikwit et de Bulungu.
6. Depuis la révolution des années '50 du XX^e siècle entamée par Ionesco, Beckett, Genet, etc., on observe une extraordinaire flambée des formes hybrides dans le théâtre français (Wolowski, "Du texte dramatique au texte narratif").
7. Célestin Kasongo (né en 1969 à Kolwezi) est acteur de théâtre et écrivain. Il dirige une troupe amateur à Lubumbashi et donne des cours de chimie.
8. David-Minor Ilunga (né en 1986 à Kinshasa) est économiste, comédien et écrivain. Il est également membre du Tarmac des Auteurs et bénéficiaire du projet "Les écritures kinoises".
9. Pierre Mumbere Mujomba (né en 1956) est comédien, metteur en scène et écrivain. Il a fondé et dirigé plusieurs compagnies de théâtre au Nord-Kivu, à Kisangani et à Kinshasa. Lauréat de plusieurs prix et concours, actuellement il vit aux États-Unis.
10. Il n'est pas étonnant que la pièce ait obtenu le Grand Prix du concours "Découverte RFI Théâtre Sud 99".
11. Allégorie, comme on le sait, peut être entendue de manière très large. Dans le domaine de l'allégorie théâtrale, il est utile de se référer aux travaux de Campana où l'auteur passe en revue les différentes définitions du terme: "*extended metaphor*",

- “other speak or doublespeak”, “veiled communication”, “protean device”, “generation of narrative structure out of wordplay”, “ritualized form of information processing”, “phenomenologically simultaneous appearance of two things in the same image” (327).
12. Nlandu Mayamaba Mbuya Thierry (né en 1954) est actuellement professeur de littérature anglaise et américaine à l’Institut Supérieur Pédagogique de Kinshasa, et animateur de plusieurs troupes de théâtre dans cette même ville.

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Teacherly aesthetics: Literature and literacy in Binyavanga Wainaina's works

Ruth S. Wenske

Teacherly aesthetics: Literature and literacy in Binyavanga Wainaina's works

In this paper I use the concept of teacherliness to explore the connections between literature and education in Binyavanga Wainaina's memoir *One Day I Will Write About This Place* and his opinion pieces on education. I read Wainaina's texts against the way the literature/literacy duality has been envisioned in historical discourses, arguing that deeper pedagogical questions were largely overlooked in the intersections between the two theoretical fields. To address this lacuna, I use Paulo Freire's theory of Critical Pedagogy to analyze historical debates of curriculum and canonization, as well as Wainaina's more recent engagement with the Kenyan educational system, in which questions on *how* to write are intertwined with thoughts on *how* to teach. After detailing this history of literature and literacy in East Africa, I explore the themes and aesthetic devices that Wainaina develops in *One Day* to reflect on his own role as an educator in the context of his troubled relationship with his own schooling. By focusing on the theme of failure and Wainaina's embedding of oral structures into his text, I suggest Wainaina's work offers insights and concrete narrative patterns that might become fruitful tools through which educational theory and literary analysis might illuminate each other's blind spots, specifically in regard to oral skills in education. **Keywords:** African literature, autobiography, critical pedagogy, self-writing, orality, teacherliness, Binyavanga Wainaina.

Introduction


When selected as one of *Time* magazine's "100 most influential people of 2014", Chimamanda Adichie described Binyavanga Wainaina as "[t]he best-known Kenyan writer of his generation". Though he only published one book, his acclaimed memoir *One Day I Will Write About This Place*, before his untimely passing in 2019, Wainaina left behind a large collection of short stories, essays, video speeches, and interviews. This includes the sardonic short essay "How to Write About Africa", the most forwarded article in *Granta's* history, and "Discovering Home", which won the 2002 Caine Prize. Yet his success, rivaled by few contemporary authors, is also largely due to his activism and public persona. Among Wainaina's most influential acts was his public coming out in the essay "I Am a Homosexual, Mum" in January 2014, published on three websites simultaneously as a lost chapter from *One Day*. As Neville Hoad writes, Wainaina's advocacy for gay rights in Kenya made him into "an emblematic African homosexual" (188). Equally important was Wainaina's establishment of *Kwani?*—a literary magazine aimed at publishing work by new Kenyan writers (Hoad 186). Against criticism of *Kwani?*'s reliance on donors, Jeanne Marie Jackson describes its success in becoming "a nursery for a good many other home-grown talents and texts" (261). Thus, though Wainaina's acclaim reverberated throughout Africa and beyond it, his literary and political activism was most immediately targeted at, and felt in, East Africa.

My point of departure in reading Wainaina is that he was operating within, and against, a specific East African tradition that has its roots in the 1960s, in which literature and education are read side-by-side. This tradition has since followed a dual literature/literacy trajectory, where ongoing discussions on the links between literature and education range from disputes around the set books in secondary schools' curricula to the well-known language debate that links the language of literary production to Literature-in-Education (LIE) policy. Kwame Anthony Appiah states the importance of recognizing this connection in the study of African literature, emphasizing its pedagogical aspects:

The role of the colonial—and, alas, the post-colonial—school in the reproduction of Western cultural hegemony is crucial to African criticism because of the intimate connection between the idea of criticism and the growth of literary

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pedagogy: for the role of literature, indeed, the formation of the concept, the institution of “literature,” is indissoluble from pedagogy. (61)

As one aspect of this literature/literacy tradition, I suggest that Wainaina’s use of aesthetic patterns, defamiliarizing metaphors, and anthropomorphism foreground a kind of pedagogy, where *how to write* raises questions regarding *how to teach*, combining *teacherly literary aesthetics* and *teacherliness as pedagogy*. These readings seek to move beyond existing debates on the literature/literacy connection, which have become entrenched in questions of *what to write* (and read) and *what to teach*—questions of syllabi, curricula, set books, and canonization. To this end, I reflect on the text’s pedagogical registers, which link literature and literacy in new ways.

Here I adopt Harry Garuba’s framework of the “teacherly text” to explore how teacherliness has changed over the last sixty years, marking a transition from top-down didacticism to processes “through which a new un-learning and learning may begin” (29). The new teacherly model that Garuba develops replaces the understanding of teacherliness as top-down authoritative learning with pedagogy that is dialogical and open-ended:

The teacherly task conceived as a hierarchical passing down of knowledge between teacher/leader and pupil/people has given way to a more ‘democratic’ model, in which thematizing the issues in ways that provoke discursive engagement now appears to be more prevalent. This is understandable because [...] the issues that agitate the contemporary crop of writers are not as amenable to neat resolutions and discursive closure. (Garuba 17)

My main argument is that Wainaina’s writing, much like his efforts to publish a new generation of Kenyan authors, attempts to revolutionize East African literature by introducing this kind of teacherliness as an aesthetic and pedagogical foundation of creative writing. In order to better grasp this use of teacherliness in *One Day*, I begin with a brief contextualization of this model within educational thought, since Garuba’s framework runs parallel to debates that are taking place in educational criticism, specifically in East Africa. Furthermore, Wainaina himself has authored critiques of the Kenyan educational system which echo these educational paradigms, giving further grounding to such readings in the East African context. I will then use the insights from educational theory to reflect on the historical discussions around literature and literacy, and consequently, to read *One Day* as a teacherly text in which failure and success are central motifs towards challenging old conceptions of teacherliness.

Educational theory and literary teacherliness

Garuba’s teacherly model cited above is based on a type of pedagogy that has become increasingly popular over the past decades: learner-centred education (also called child-centred pedagogy, or CCP). Martial Dombélé and Pulane Lefoka describe CCP as participatory and interactive learning that is grounded in the learner’s immediate environment, “with a view to fostering conceptual understanding, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills” (536). Like the new teacherly text, CCP is based on dialogical learning, where “open-endedness is deliberately offered as an invitation to discussion and debate” (Garuba 19). Learner-centred education is becoming increasingly popular also in East Africa, where traditional teaching practices are considered “as teacher-centred, lecture-driven, rigid and authoritarian” (Altinyelken 152). In Kenya, the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) introduced in 2017 marks such a large-scale reform, which aims to shift top-down exam-oriented learning to a focus on the skills that young people need in the work market and as citizens.

According to the website of the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development, the CBC is meant to instill three key components: *Competencies* that are relevant to the 21st century work market, *Character* that is reflected in personal values and parental involvement in education, and *Creativity* aimed at problem solving and innovation. These are precisely the competencies that Wainaina described as missing from Kenyan schools, both in his memoir and in his more direct engagements with education. Wainaina’s short essay “Schooling for Small Minds”, published three years before *One Day*, critiques schools in Kenya for being places where “[i]deas have no value”, where “[e]very bit of creative thinking, of bold idea-ing, of do-it-yourselfing is removed”, and where the end result is “brain-dead robots”. Indeed, he points to the many absurdities that people accept due to this lack of independent thinking, for instance the pressure to go to university when there are no jobs for graduates. His message—that learning should be more creative and geared towards critical thinking—is precisely that of the new Competency-Based Curriculum.

Moreover, Wainaina holds the government responsible for education being elitist and corrupt, which are the same problems that Maurice N. Amutabi cites as the reasons that the CBC reform was introduced. (Amutabi

describes how parents would bribe head teachers, enroll their children in several schools, and encourage cheating. The 8-4-4 curriculum—the pre-CBC curriculum—thus served the elite and fostered cut-throat competition, while overlooking the skills and knowledge young people need in 21st century Kenya.) Wainaina traces this to the colonial history of education, which undermined critical thought as part of its design to foster a class of civil servants: “We took the colonial system, which was designed to produce dutiful people who don’t ask questions, and perfected it” (“Schooling for Small Minds”). This criticism resonates with Paulo Freire’s influential approach of Critical Pedagogy, proposed in his 1970 book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Freire argued that formal education exacerbated inequality in postcolonial settings where elites were already in place and literacy levels were low. He claimed that schools became another structure of domination that effectively preserved colonial hierarchies because the elites sought to maintain the status quo (94), using passive “banking education” to keep the masses from developing independent thinking or questioning authority (72–3).

Wainaina develops these ideas in a series of video essays titled “We Must Free our Imaginations”. Published just three days after his widely publicized coming out in January 2014, the video essays focus on the links between schools, creativity, and writing, advocating for an educational system that “makes us think and innovate” (“We Must Free our Imaginations (1/6)”, 2:54). Lamenting the lack of critical thinking and Kenyan society’s over-emphasis on certificates, science, IT, and religious dogma, Wainaina prescribes creativity as the remedy for society’s many ills: “To make new things we have to imagine, it’s just simple. So, when you say you remove art from school so people can become scientists—now with what imagination?” (“We Must Free our Imaginations (6/6)”, 1:35)

Furthermore, Wainaina emphasizes this creativity as a political act, much like Freire’s idea of ‘conscientization’, *conscientização* in the original, connoting dialogical or ‘problem-posing’ learning that foregrounds learners’ agency and knowledge (104–9) and raises learners’ political awareness (147). Wainaina sees this as the basic connection between literature and teacherliness: “I want this generation of young parents to have their kids see Africans writing their own stories, printed their own stories, that simple act, I think that’s the most political act that one can have” (“Imaginations (1/6)”, 0:27). Whether or not Wainaina’s activism influenced CBC’s introduction in Kenya is speculative and beyond the scope of this paper. But though the implementation of CBC faces severe challenges, much like similar reforms in East Africa, it marks an important development that again shows how educational and literary discourses follow similar and interconnected trajectories.

There is of course a difference between educational practice/theory and literary scholarship. The connection between old-school, top-down didacticism and the colonial system has certainly been challenged in the literary context, where the first generation of African writers was already invested in dismantling colonial legacies. For instance, the university memorandum “On the Abolition of the English Department”, written by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (then James Ngugi), Taban lo Liyong, and Henry Owuor-Anyumba, sought to “reject the primacy of English literature and cultures” (94), as Ngũgĩ writes in *Decolonising the Mind*. The three lecturers from the University of Nairobi argued for “placing oral-literature (orature)”, as well as “Kenya, East Africa, and then Africa” (qtd in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o 94) at the centre of the syllabus, suggesting that “the English Department be abolished [and] that the Department of African Literature and Languages be set up in its place” (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, Lo Liyong, and Owuor-Anyumba 439). Yet it never occurs to the three authors to question the very structure through which they make these claims: the university itself, and its teacher-centred structures that saw the European-educated professors as the ultimate teachers of modern Kenya.

Though “Abolition” certainly adopts certain tenets of Critical Pedagogy in challenging the Eurocentric curriculum, the CBC proposes an important addition in challenging the exam-oriented and unequal structures of formal education more broadly. This is the reason I maintain that it makes sense to read literature—and in this case literary teacherliness—alongside educational theory. In the last part of this article, I return to this premise, and look more closely at how Wainaina’s negotiation of teacherliness also critiques certain aspects of learner-centred education. But I start with a brief historical overview in order to understand how intrinsically the idea of teacherliness it is tied to the East African literary scene, suggesting that it is no coincidence that a Kenyan author is the one to challenge these literature/literacy conceptions.

Historical background

The Conference of “African Writers of English Expression”, which was held at Makerere College a few months before Uganda gained its independence in 1962, needs little introduction. As Peter Kalliney puts it, the conference “announced the birth of postcolonial African literature in English [and] started the debate about the appropri-

atness of using imperial languages in literary production” (349). Furthermore, Mũkoma wa Ngũgĩ’s recently published book *The Rise of the African Novel: Politics of Language, Identity, and Ownership* sees the conference as a watershed moment in the canonization of African literature, as it “derailed the African literary tradition from one of writing in African languages and subsequently getting translated into other languages, and started us on the path of the realist African novel in English” (17). Kalliney also notes that the focus on the polemical language question has been so pronounced that it has obscured other aspects of the conference—for instance the participants’ overwhelming focus on literary technique (342) and modernist aesthetics (350). It is this sort of aesthetic focus that I wish to regain by tracing how pedagogy has been overlooked as a legacy of the Makerere conference.

An episode that encapsulates this oversight is the debate following Obi (Obiajunwa) Wali’s 1963 article “The Dead End of African Literature” in *Transition*. Wali writes that “the secondary place which African languages now occupy in our educational system would be reversed if our writers would devote their tremendous gifts and ability to their own languages” (14–5). To this, Es’kia (then Ezekiel) Mphahlele replied in the next issue of *Transition* that Language-in-Education policies were largely decided by colonial administrations and cannot be the responsibility of writers. Mphahlele uses the notorious example of Bantu education in South Africa to further argue that the aim of using African languages in schools is “obviously to arrest the black man’s education” (8). Wali and Mphahlele differ on their view of curriculum: while Wali claims that writers should supply materials for teaching African literature up to university level (15), Mphahlele disagreed, arguing that “literature can be kept on an infantile level is by promoting a school literature in such a way that the man who wants to write for an adult audience does not stand a chance of being published” (9). Yet, while they quarrel about the role of literature vis-à-vis language and curriculum, Mphahlele and Wali do agree on these as crucial links between literature and education. Therefore it never occurs to them to question the pedagogical structures of schools or universities, which were also European imports and were pivotal to the questions they debate—much like the authors of “Abolition” after them.

The legacy of this debate endures, as is evident in the way it shapes Wa Ngũgĩ’s recent intervention regarding East African education in his book. Like Wali and Mphahlele, Wa Ngũgĩ envisions education and the literary scene as closely intertwined: he speaks of how language policy in school affects authorship in Kenya (chapter one), he goes into detail regarding the rationale of educational publishing of both textbooks and fiction (chapter four), and finally, he discusses the impact of these on the canon of African literature and the privileging of the realist novel over popular genres. While Wa Ngũgĩ seeks to challenge this aspect of what he calls the Makerere legacy, he considers the literature-literacy connections in three emblematic ways that all have their roots in the 1960s Makerere milieu: questions of language (Europhone vs. African languages), questions of syllabi and curriculum, and questions of publication (textbooks and set books) and canonization.¹ Wa Ngũgĩ, like Wali and Mphahlele, also never questions the pedagogical methods or structures of schools, nor the effect this has on economic and social capital, as well as creativity and imagination. Yet educational thought, and specifically tenets of Critical Pedagogy and how these are implemented in the CBC, might be useful for thinking in new ways about the impact of formal structures of schooling on the East African literary scene.

The tendency to reduce links between education and literature to several technical aspects is evident in an episode that is largely forgotten in literary history. For in the first two weeks of January 1961, another large-scale international conference, with over 60 representatives from 23 Commonwealth countries, took place at Makerere: “The Commonwealth Conference on the Teaching of English as a Second Language”. As Robert Phillipson writes in *Linguistic Imperialism*, the conference was a seminal event in the field of English Language Teaching in Third World countries, known for perpetuating the fallacy that native speakers are the ideal language teachers (194). The conference is well-known in educational circles but is never mentioned in a literary context. This in spite of its focus on how “language and literature should be brought together, and examined together” (18), as the conference report states.

While the two conferences were from different disciplines and catered to divergent audiences, both centred on the use of English as a second/foreign language in multilingual and soon-to-be postcolonial societies. Indeed, the 1961 conference report shows how central the question of literature was in the teaching of English.² What is more, the two conferences—together—set the stage for the links that would come to dominate how African educators and intellectuals would come to think of the literature-literacy connection. Two attendees of the 1961 conference in particular brought these ideas into wider circulation. One was Norman MacKenzie, an English professor from the University of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, who had in 1959 published the essay “The Place of English

in African Education". MacKenzie's writing brought together Language-in-Education policy with readings of Achebe and Tutuola and had direct influence on the overwhelming use of English in schools in ex-British colonies, as well as the canonization of Achebe and his conception and use of English in African literature. Recently, Wa Ngũgĩ revisited MacKenzie's role in perpetuating Eurocentric views of African languages, cultures, and fictional writing (*Rise* 19; 36–7). Additionally, Norman (Derry) Jeffares was arguably the attendee of the 1961 conference who had the greatest impact on African literature in years to come. As Chair of English Literature at the University of Leeds, Jeffares hosted the first Conference of Commonwealth Literature in Leeds in 1964, which Alastair Niven calls "one of the most influential conferences in the field of English studies in Britain in the twentieth century" (143).³ The keynote speaker at the 1964 conference was Chinua Achebe with his well-known essay "The Novelist as Teacher" (later published in *Commonwealth Literature*, the conference proceedings edited by John Press). Garuba, as others before him, identifies Achebe's essay as instrumental in making didactic 'teacherly texts' the modus operandi for the first generation of African writers, as "this 'teacherly' task [was] part of the responsibility of the entire class of decolonizing nationalist intellectuals" (15).

Like Garuba, Ainehi Edoro singles out Achebe's essay as the moment that established "the traditional notion of the African writer as a social figure and the notion that writing is a powerful tool for collective action against social power" (30–1), even as she traces how this notion is moving away from Achebe's original top-down didactic model. Though Edoro does not directly speak of open-ended teacherliness, she also critiques the idea that the author, as Achebe's novelist-teacher or Wole Soyinka's "social visionary", imparts knowledge as an expert set apart from society. Instead, Edoro highlights how the author is embedded in society: "how ideological constraints and material conditions construct the creative mind and define the nature of its creative functions and relationship to the collective" (30).

It might be a coincidence that Jeffares—after attending the 1961 conference that stressed the importance of literature in the teaching of English—became a close associate of Achebe, and that their acquaintance was instrumental to the publication of Achebe's landmark essay. Yet my point is that ideas from the different gatherings were being shared and disseminated, thus no doubt influencing what was slowly coalescing into the mainstream, or the canon, of modern African literature.

Reports from subsequent conferences of the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies (ACLALS), including another one at Makerere in 1974, all demonstrate a preoccupation with these three specific links between literature and education: the language of writing vs. Language-in-Education in schools, curricula/textbooks vs. publishing/canonization, and the idea of the novelist's social responsibility as teacher. For instance, C. D. Narasimhaiah reports that in the ACLALS 1971 Jamaica conference, Kamau (then Edward) Brathwaite, V. S. Naipaul, and Raja Rao held a panel on "the Writer's Function in Society" (121), while John Spencer went into dilemmas of bilingualism and the importance of "societies learning their own languages before they learnt English" (125). Anniah Gowda, reporting from the 1974 ACLALS conference at Makerere, mentions four writers who raise a related question: Trinidadian Arthur Drayton, who had also attended the 1962 Makerere conference, presented a paper "which argued that the writer should involve the masses in his medium" (220); Somali Nuruddin Farah, whom Garuba uses as his example of the new generation of 'teacherly' writers, talked about Somalia's efforts to develop a literature of its own (221); and Peter Nazareth's essay "The Social Responsibility of the Third World Writer: An African Dialogue" criticized authors who wrote for the colonial masters and elite rather than the people, to which Achebe added a paper entitled "Colonialist Criticism", which asked African critics "to take control of our literary criticism" (qtd in Gowda 222). Both conference reports mention Norman Jeffares as instrumental in organizing the conferences through his work with ACLALS.

These are the links that Wainaina's writings challenge. For as Garuba's argues, "the 'teacherly' pillar of post-colonial aesthetics and literary culture has not been taken as seriously as it should, as it is often confused with a didacticism seen as going against the grain of contemporary conceptions of literature" (18), thereby obliterating new evolving conceptions of the literature and education link. Here Wainaina's teacherly ethos, which draws on tenets of Critical Pedagogy and combines it with an aesthetic focus, brings together *what* he writes about and *how* he writes it. Also, his activism, which builds on his critiques of schooling in Kenya, constitutes an element of this new form of learner-centred teacherliness, albeit one in which textual and referential factors require some untangling.

Literature and literacy in the works of Binyavanga Wainaina

When Wainaina passed away in May 2019, the web was flooded with dozens of tribute essays that portrayed Wainaina not only as an exceptional author, but also as a mentor.⁴ For instance, Wainaina's friend and colleague at *Kwani?* Parselelo Kantai writes: "It is almost unbelievable how many people Binyavanga touched, how many lives he quite literally transformed in the decade and a half that he worked as a writer and activist. [...] He freed a generation to begin imagining itself into being". Christine Mungai, who did not know Wainaina personally but rather got to know him by reading *Kwani?*, likewise asserts: "Binyavanga Wainaina inspired me and a whole generation of Kenyans to put pen to paper. I would not be a writer today if it wasn't for Binyavanga Wainaina". Indeed, according to Wa Ngũgĩ's article "Our Man of the People", "Binyavanga was my generation's conscience, our James Baldwin and Achebe rolled up in one".

Without going into Wainaina's personal life, I mention these testimonies as they outline a fundamental aspect of the teacherliness that he negotiates in *One Day*: his combined focus on the *what* and *how* of writing and teaching. Yet precisely because Wainaina's educational zeal is so easily grounded in popular discourse, my close readings aim to zoom in on how teacherliness is constructed as an aesthetic and poetic layer of the text. Here I follow Elleke Boehmer's suggestion to move beyond the reductive view of 'postcolonial aesthetics' as an oxymoron, which has "led critics to overlook or side-step questions of poetics as the 'real world' issues it has sought to confront have appeared by contrast so urgent" (1). As a challenge, Boehmer asks, "How could postcolonial writing be both political *and* concerned with formal and even aesthetic principles?" (19, emphasis in original)

Teacherliness becomes an answer to this question. Much like Garuba's argument regarding novels that do not "offer the kind of closure or neat resolution that the ideologically driven programmatic text requires" (19), I consider Wainaina's works for their self-reflexive engagement with literature and literacy, so "that their open-endedness is deliberately offered as an invitation to discussion and debate" (Garuba 19). This open-endedness is often a matter of the text's form and narrative techniques rather than its content. After all, *One Day* is not a thriller: we know the story ends with Wainaina becoming a successful writer. What remains uncertain, as if left to be endlessly re-constructed, is the very process of narrativization that makes the past present and gives it meaning; for turning memory into narrative changes the past, so to speak. Wainaina's coming out through a "lost chapter" from *One Day* highlights this unfinishedness quite clearly, as "I am a Homosexual, Mum" draws attention to the almost-complete absence of romantic and sexual layers in Wainaina's memoir, thereby changing how certain episodes are now read.

Autobiographical self-reflexivity as teacherliness

One Day details Wainaina's coming-of-age in Kenya in the 1980s and 90s, starting from early childhood and following him until he becomes a successful writer. Throughout the narrative, Wainaina often uses a stream-of-consciousness-like narrative voice that mimics a child's (later youth's) point of view, which highlights the specific stakes of representation within the genre of the autobiography. As Roger Berger writes, African biographies in particular carry a burden of referentiality as they "must account both for the synchronic realities that emerge from the localized experience of specific writers and for the diachronic, historical developments that presented different imperatives for different historically situated writers" (47). In line with this referential impetus that sees autobiography as representative of collective processes, critical readings on *One Day* have so far focused on its negotiation of the nation/nationality (Krishnan) and political representation (Knighton).

At the same time, as an act of self-representation, the autobiography is always haunted by the subjectivity and narrativization of seeing oneself. Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan notes that "the problem with self-writing is that it is precisely the doubleness of the first person perspective which makes it impossible for the self to 'tell itself'" (5). Consequently, according to Philippe Lejeune, "the paradox of the literary autobiography, its essential double game, is to pretend to be at the same time a truthful discourse and a work of art" (124). In other words, mimetic referentiality is not the only—sometimes not even the primary—yardstick of the autobiography. Equally important is the author's process of self-representation, as it is the site that brings together the narrated and the experienced; indeed, where questions regarding the boundaries between narrative construction and its real-world referent—between text and context—can be brought up. To separate the two, I use the name Binyavanga to refer to the speaker in *One Day*, in order to distinguish him from Wainaina the author.

In *One Day*, Binyavanga's *Bildung* as a writer is what brings text and context together. Wainaina foreshadows his process of becoming a writer by describing his obsession, from early childhood, with the way language conveys meaning. This, in my reading, becomes a kind of teacherly aesthetic, where self-reflexive engagement

with literacy—in the sense of lexicon, grammar, and style—become the foundation for Binyavanga’s literary aspirations. An early technique for establishing this self-reflexive emphasis is Wainaina’s use of anthropomorphic metaphors, which play on uncertainty and open-endedness rather than pinning down meaning: “My new word *bureaucrat* is running around my mind in a panic, stamping and coding and reminding me to never forget that one day, one day I will arrange the words right for this strange night” (52, emphasis in original); “I do not have enough words for all this. [...] Words must surround experience, like Mum’s new vacuum cleaner, sucking all this up and *making it real*. Whoosh” (53, emphasis added).

Through the use of anthropomorphism, the narrative voice seems to try to capture the impossibility of representation. In the words of George Levine: “Language, finally, can ‘represent’ only other language” (8), so that “language, in representing reality, most forcefully demonstrates reality’s absence” (7). Yet Binyavanga contradicts himself: he claims not to have enough words, yet immediately finds the right concept—the vacuum cleaner—as a metaphor for this lack. Through this mirror game, the anthropomorphisms function self-reflexively to play with the ways in which the book itself—made up of language—‘surrounds experience’. As if winking at the reader, Wainaina challenges the impossibility of telling oneself, or of capturing his point of view, leaving it open-ended rather than undoable.

Temporality and self-writing as elements of teacherliness

The anthropomorphism, together with the use of short sentences and sounds effects (“whoosh”), all seem to convey a child’s view of the world. Yet, at the same time, the sophistication and humor, and the foreshadowing of the future in the line “one day, one day I will arrange the words”, also play on the tension between Binyavanga-the-adult looking back and Binyavanga-the-child anticipating, both reinterpreting, indeed, finding words.

As Apollo Amoko writes using Lejeune’s concept of the ‘autobiographical pact’, the text “enact[s] a reversal of the linear progression of time” (203). But while Amoko remarks that autobiographical texts derive authority from being “not simply literally true but also personally experienced” (203), temporality in *One Day* functions to undercut such a clear segue between life (past) and representation—the latter standing in not only for the present, but for the recursive temporality of hindsight.

Wainaina himself describes this anachronism: “Hindsight will pull facts to its present demand; it is the dental brace that will reshape your jaw, your resolve. When hindsight desires enough, it obliterates uncertainty. All the selected past becomes an argument for action” (*One Day I Will Write About This Place* 59). As before, anthropomorphism here functions through inconsistencies. For contrarily to what Binyavanga claims, looking back does not obliterate uncertainty.

Retrospection is both constructed and constantly evolving, even if pinned down momentarily by the act of writing. As Hoad explains, “[t]he past for Wainaina is always being reimagined from the exigencies of the present” (186). Though this holds true for all autobiographies, the self-reflexivity in Wainaina’s engagement with time clearly echoes his preoccupation with language, suggesting that this is part of the book’s teacherly ethos—its constant, repetitive need to question itself; to provoke thought and doubt through humorous and innovative imagery.

Temporality thus becomes instrumental in the book’s negotiation of self-writing as both medium and theme. One keyword in particular—thirst—bridges past and future in regard to the process of writing as self-reflexive representation. First, at the very beginning, seven-year-old Binyavanga becomes aware of language: “This word, thirst, thirsty. It is a word full of resolution. It drives a person to quick action. Words, I think, must be concrete things. Surely they cannot be suggestions of things, vague pictures: scattered, shifting sensations?” (*One Day* 5)

Much later, when in his twenties he realizes that he wants to become a writer, the same word lies at the core of his self-doubts. Yet the narrative style has changed: the sentences are no longer short, simple, and repetitive.

Instead, Wainaina structures his thoughts through doubleness: for each claim, there is a parallel part that is either a repetition, the opposite, or a conditioning of the first:

A	B	A	B	A
I am afraid. If I write, and fail at it, I cannot see what else I can do. Maybe I				
	B		A	
will write and people will roll their eyes, because I will talk about thirst, and				
B		A	B	B
thirst is something people know already, and what I see is only bad shapes that				
mean nothing. (143)				

This AB structure gives a rhythmic, almost prosodic register to the intersection between past, present, and future that the word “thirst” evokes, while drawing on an oral aesthetic of repetition, where sentence segments are paired around a juxtaposition of fear/failure against Wainaina’s writing. Here I follow Eugene B. McCarthy and Christopher N. Okonkwo’s readings of Achebe, where they excavate antiphonal structures in the text. Like the two scholars, I consider Wainaina’s text, especially its use of twofold AB structures, as a narrative device that foregrounds rhythm and repetition as a sensibility of orature. Comparing the two conceptions of “thirst”, we recognize the growth from child into adult into artist: if at first Binyavanga is unsure of the function of language itself, this turns into an anxiety regarding his own ability to represent himself through language. Furthermore, the doubling sets up fear/failure as parallel to writing/not writing. Like the two images at the end of the paragraph above—“bad shapes” that “mean nothing”—Wainaina uses a question-posing rhetoric, to use Freire’s term, through the theme of failure: what if words can’t capture experience? Or worse, what if Wainaina can’t?

This theme becomes more pronounced throughout the book, and like here, also pertains to the duality of individual and collective. For in the last, long sentence, the twofold structure has an A part that focuses on future Binyavanga: “I will write”, “I will talk”, and “I will see”. The following B part is the imagined response from “people”—the readers—which implicitly points to the future, and to an imagined collective. Referencing the readers also creates a *mise-en-abyme* effect where the world outside the text is drawn into it, suggesting that we—the real readers—play a part in the story, making it necessarily unfinished. Implicitly entailed is the question of addressee. To whom is this teacherly aesthetic directed? To (East) African readers? To readers of “world literature”? To the global citizen?

Rather than suggest a definitive answer to these questions, it might be more useful to consider the *mise-en-abyme* as a reader-centred moment that explicitly foregrounds the reader’s role in making his/her own interpretation of it. As Jesse Weaver Shipley has argued, it seems as if Wainaina’s text makes the point that “[s]ustained uncertainty alternately encourages participants to find new meaning in unexpected connections and innuendos and frustrates those who seek definitive interpretations” (10). The question of the implied audience also foregrounds Wainaina’s national situatedness, bringing me back to Wainaina’s more direct engagement with the educational system in Kenya. Wainaina contextualizes his own experiences at school within national and global processes taking place in Kenya, as Madhu Krishnan notes: “Like the patterns of his life that do not fit together, so pulse the incongruous idioms of the nation” (80). In other words, I focus on the specific stakes of narrative teacherliness in the East African context.

The literature-literacy conundrum

The explicit engagement with representation and hindsight, and its aesthetic negotiation through doubling and defamiliarization, uses the difficulty and open-endedness of narrative time to oil the mechanisms of self-writing. But this is only one aspect of Wainaina’s teacherly ethos, which is supported by his more direct engagement with education.

Formal schooling is a central theme in *One Day*, one that often intersects with the episodes that predict Binyavanga’s artistic and writerly tendencies. His thoughts on education are, above all, contradictory: he describes how public education in Kenya is deteriorating due to the IMF’s structural adjustment program, while calling the educational system “Kenya’s single biggest achievement”, and “truly the only thing that works in Kenya” (90). This is all the more surprising after his own schooling (most of it before the structural adjustment era) is tainted by tribal biases, hierarchies, and corruption (60, 64, 84).

Much like Krishnan's reading of the nation/nationalism in *One Day*, "the contradictory, complementary, and contrarian play of multiple levels of idealization and renunciation that resound across the narrative" (79) mark Wainaina's representations of education in Kenya, as he becomes increasingly conscious of how deeply education is embedded in politics and global networks of power. Here his hindsight hints at his investment in educational thought.

What Krishnan calls idealization and renunciation is, in *One Day*, reflected in a rhetoric that moves between narratives of failure—such as his fear of failing to write well—and the foreshadowing of his later success as a writer, such as the statement "One day, I will write about this place" (152). While much of the tension between failure and success pertains to his future writing, it is Wainaina's inconsistent educational experiences that ultimately allow him to question the categories of failure and success, as he oscillated between academic requirements and what really interests him—fiction. The two forms of learning, formal and informal, authoritative and learner-centred, underlie Wainaina's negotiation of both school and writing.

The "shifting and often simultaneous deployment of belonging and alienation" (Krishnan 79) is nowhere as evident as in Wainaina's sense of 'belonging' to school. From the book's first page, Binyavanga speaks of the centrality of school in his life, describing himself as one of the best pupils in class (56, 59–60). But he also frequently cuts class to read: "I am still reading novels everywhere, and I am always in trouble with Mum" (55). In high school, he not only reads books, but also starts producing literature as an alternative to studying: "I spend all useful time in my advanced-level years making plays and novels, or reading and looking for scholarships in America with my best friend, Peter Karanja, who loves novels as much as I do. I do not study much" (87).

Though Binyavanga never refers to it in explicit terms, reading and creative writing become his informal education, carried out at the expense of his formal schooling. It is his spontaneous critique of his schooling, and his first experience of being learner-centred: educating himself. Paradoxically, his autodidacticism draws him away from school, while also making him one of the top students in English in Kenya in his fourth form exams (87).

The collision between education and writing is perhaps most pronounced when Binyavanga starts university:

After school, I spend a term at Kenyatta University, doing an education degree and majoring in French and literature in English. I am terrified I will end up becoming a schoolteacher. A fate worse than country music. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o is a writer and playwright, a Kenyan playwright, and people say he says that women should not perm their hair or wear lipstick. I have permed my hair. I like it. [...]. I love writing. I love the theatre. I fear writers; they want to go too deep and mess up the clear stepladders to success. I cannot see myself being this sort of person. (87–8)

In the same paragraph, Binyavanga claims to be afraid of becoming both teacher and writer, framing both vocations in a terminology of failure, albeit humorously: one a fate worse than country music, the other messing up the clear stepladders to success.

Though the two careers seem mutually exclusive in this context, the example of Ngũgĩ connects the two: Ngũgĩ is the kind of writer Binyavanga cannot imagine himself becoming because the latter follows the old prism of 'the novelist as teacher', telling the young generation what to do and not to do. Moreover, Ngũgĩ, who perhaps more than anyone embodies the teacherliness of East African literature, situates Wainaina's teacherly rhetoric within the specific Kenyan context and its literary history: after all, Ngũgĩ not only represents the African-languages side in the language debate, but also pioneered the abolition of Eurocentric university English departments.

Yet Binyavanga is not so easily convinced by Ngũgĩ's teacherliness: he likes his perm. Likewise, the idea of becoming a teacher is unappealing because it represents old-school teaching that is hierarchical and authoritative, or worse, corrupt. Binyavanga also does not want anyone to mess up the stepladder to success—the importance of school—for he is a good student after all. As Krishnan remarks about the Kenyan nation, its educational system also "unfurls in a complex and often-contradictory network of affiliations and disavowals, sites of engagement and disillusionment" (79), leading to anticipated and often contradictory dreams of failure and success that are as humorous as they are serious. The contradictions between society's conflicting expectations are even more pronounced when, a few pages later, Binyavanga reads Ngũgĩ and tries to reconcile the latter's teacherly ideal with what Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff call multiple African modernities (118–20): "I read *Decolonising the Mind* by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o a few weeks ago. It is illegal and it was thrilling, and I had vowed to go back to my own language. English is the language of the colonizer. I will take Gikuyu classes, when I am done with diversity and

advertising, when I am driving a good car. I will go to the village and make plays in Gikuyu, in my good new car. I will make very good decolonized advertisements for Coca-Cola. I will be cool and decolonized. An international guy. Like, like Youssou N'Dour. Even Ngũgĩ is in America" (*One Day* 92).

Narratives of failure

Ultimately, Binyavanga's ferocious reading habits are both the result and the downfall of his success as a student, a process which culminates in the years he spends in South Africa. He goes there to do a degree in finance and marketing at the University of Transkei (93), yet finds himself attending class less and less, until he effectually drops out and spends most of his time reading books alone in his room (104–5). He never completes his degree, so that when he comes home to his parents, years later, there is a mutual understanding of failure: "They are worried about me and, for the first time in my life, worried enough not to bring it up. I have not spoken to them about my stalled degree in a long time. They know. I know" (128).

Speaking in terms of failure and success is a recurring strategy in Wainaina's contradictory engagement with teacherliness. But this changes when he has his epiphany regarding his true vocation. It takes place during a night of dancing, talking, and drinking in upcountry Kenya as part of his work in agricultural extension for his father's company—a job he is given after failing to get a degree in South Africa. Right before his moment of inspiration, he starts formulating his thoughts in a manner than conveys a profound teacherliness:

Our shells crack, and we spill out and mingle. I care so much for these things that sit under the burping self-satisfaction of the certificated world. Maybe I am not just failing; maybe there is something I have that I can barter, if only for the approval of those I respect. [...] Maybe I can help people see the patterns they take for granted. (141)

Like the somewhat drunk and ecstatic state of the scene itself, the figurative language defamiliarizes the clear-cut lines that have had such a decisive role in his life: failure/success, certificate/knowledge, himself/others.

What he earlier called "the clear stepladders to success" he now sees as "the burping self-satisfaction of the certificated world", possibly because he has not been able to turn his good grades into the predicted success. The phrase "maybe I am not just failing" in particular resonates his old and constant fears of not being able to convey meaning, of not meeting his parents' expectations, and of the vagueness and inconsistencies that have marked his engagement with the world around him.

The paragraph is set up as a dialogue between the collective and the individual, starting with the dancing crowd that surrounds him, into which he embeds himself using the words "our" and "we". He returns to his own emotions ("I care so much"), but these are focused on the collective of the "certificated world". He then uses the metaphor of bartering—reciprocity—and social approval as measures of success, referencing "those I respect" as collective that constitutes his self-worth. As Ayelet Ben-Yishai claims, the text functions to construct categories of belonging, "[c]reating, maintaining and reifying these commonalities—generating a 'we'" (204). Put differently, Wainaina uses the narrative not to reflect on the collectives around him, but to construct them.

Finally, the ethical and public sentiments of caring, bartering, and gaining approval lead him to a new definition of success: "help[ing] people see the patterns they take for granted". Binyavanga uses the word *patterns* frequently to describe both flow and coherence, as well as expectations and rigidity, in people's behavior. "Patterns" is also a term Binyavanga uses frequently to describe himself and others. As such, it captures his oscillation between positive and negative, between consistency and inconsistency: "We assume whole things, when a stranger's movements show a pattern that seems consistent but a single sharp contradiction arrives and a person becomes not whole but a series of mistakes: bits and parts" (*One Day* 93). Perhaps in this context it also suggests a breach in his own patterns: his fear of becoming a teacher.

The oscillation between individual and collective marks a turning point in Binyavanga's view on meaning-making and education, where he tears himself free from the tyranny of formal school as the only equivalent of learning. The teacherly sentiment in this statement follows the logic that has been set up in Wainaina's self-reflexive engagement with language and temporality: he does not wish to impart knowledge or meaning (though this is arguably the 'something' he has to barter), but to open up knowledge and meaning to new interpretations that 'people'—be it of 'those he respects' or the readers—need to find for themselves—to see what they take for granted.

Arguably he has been teacherly in this sense all along, at least retrospectively. But this is the moment of clarity, followed soon after by a more concrete realization of his desire to become a writer. The moment is told using

an AB structure similar to the one above, where sentence segments form dualities that repeat, rephrase, or add to each other:

A	B	A	B	A
It is clear—so clear. All this time, without writing one word, I have been				
	B	A	B	
reading novels, and watching people, and writing what I see in my head,				
A		B		A
finding shapes for reality by making them into a book. This is all I have done,				
B	A	B	A	B
forever, done it so much, so satisfyingly. I have never used a pen—I have done				
		A	B	
it for my own sensual comfort. If I am to grow up, I must do some such thing				
for others. (143)				

By equating growing up with doing something *for* others, Wainaina seems to echo the old ethical premise of the novelist as teacher.

Yet the repetition of each statement privileges a reading that is grounded in doubling rather than straightforwardness. For the paragraph highlights oral aesthetics of repetitions and rhythm—much like Binyavanga’s realization that he has, in fact, been ‘writing’ orally all his life, without using pen and paper. It thus marks a distinction between past (“all this time”) and future (“grow up”), between private (“for my own sensual comfort”) and public (“for others”), oral (“finding shapes for reality”) and writing (“making them into a book”). The way Wainaina uses these binaries to scaffold his idea (I) of “do[ing] some such thing for others” also sets up education and writing as another explicit duality: writing in this paragraph is equated to teaching.

However, because of the many contradictory instances that foreshadow this moment, which have repeatedly demonstrated the shortcomings of both representation and education, writing/teaching is not reduced to a didactic enterprise. Indeed, the early phases of Binyavanga’s process of writing are enabled not in spite of, but *because* of his failures and oral skills—his ‘finding shapes for reality’, e.g., in metaphors and anthropomorphisms.

Much like Binyavanga’s reading habits that constitute both failure and success in the narrative, the process described in this paragraph offers new ways to think about learning—and specifically the many registers of orality that undergird both classroom and informal instruction. As such, Wainaina’s self-reflexive description of *how* he writes reflects on *how* he envisions teaching: as a dialogue in which self and others engage together in finding shapes for reality, in a process that brings formal and informal modes of learning together—much like Freire’s idea of problem-posing education. But what Wainaina adds to the educational paradigm of learner-centred education that foregrounds dialogue, open-endedness, and critical thinking, is his deconstruction of the binary of failure and success.

Implications: Returning from literature to educational theory

Wainaina’s questioning of categories of failure and success is a significant intervention that echoes critiques of learner-centred education in African contexts. As Richard Tabulawa notes, learner-centredness purports to promote “individual autonomy, open-mindedness and tolerance for alternative viewpoints. All these are in line with the individualistic Western culture”, so that “learner-centredness invariably promotes the reproduction of capitalism in periphery states” (11–2). Moreover, CCP is overwhelmingly “promoted by international donor agencies for ideological purposes rather than for realising educational or pedagogical objectives” (Altinyelken 154), making it, paradoxically, a North-to-South, top-down framework: participatory education that is introduced in the most authoritative manner.

What is more, the implementation of learner-centred educational reforms is often met with severe challenges as teachers do not feel there is anything wrong with their pedagogical practices or find themselves overwhelmed by a new system without the necessary training or learning materials. At the same time, teachers also recognize the advantages of such reforms, for instance in making learners more active in their education, and better prepared for life in the informal work market.⁵

This is where Wainaina’s engagement with teacherliness might be helpful in tracing the ways in which learner-centredness remains multi-layered and contradictory but might still serve as a foundation for growth.

Wainaina's theme of 'not just failing' offers a productive way to think through this paradox—and others—without reducing them to one-dimensional fiascos. Indeed, Elizabeth Metto and Lazarus Ndiku Makewa argue that learner-centred teaching would allow Kenyan youths to “be prepared effectively to face life challenges of the 21st century” (23), showing that in the dynamic and heterogenous educational system of Kenya, there is no one-size-fits-all way towards better education.

Perhaps, as Angeline M. Barrett has argued, the key is *not* to view learner-centred and teacher-centred pedagogies as mutually exclusive, but to recognize the conditions and dynamics in which they complement each other. For instance, even if Wainaina advocates for a kind of teacherliness in which he, as writer and activist, is not seen as an authoritative teacher, but rather as a question-posing member of society, much of his influence is no doubt linked to his status as celebrity and public intellectual: it is at once teacher-centred and learner-centred.

Likewise, though there remains a tension between top-down (and North-to-South) educational models and local grassroots practices, the two are more often than not intertwined. In the context of CBC in Kenya, this movement beyond either/or narratives might suggest that a slow and partial move to learner-centred education is not indicative of the failure (or success) of the reform, but rather should be seen as one of many steps in a complex process towards better education in Kenya. The task is to see which elements work and in which contexts, while recognizing the inseparability of various forms and orientations of education. Both literature and literary theory might be a useful tool towards this end, especially as these display a kind of teacherliness in which “uncertainty and contradiction can be modes of knowing” (Shipley 1).

Just to suggest a few possible readings, we might think of existing modes of learning that still function outside or alongside school (mentorship, community, parenthood) as proper education; or see alternative modes of knowledge production such as oral skills, or oral pedagogy, as valuable in and of themselves, and not just as failures of rote learning or cramming.⁶

At the same time, Wainaina's teacherliness might also suggest that we re-think narratives of failure that pertain to East African literature, for instance the claim that local publications are “poorly designed, poorly edited, and poorly marketed” (Wa Ngũgĩ, *Rise* 157) because East African presses are “still functioning on the rationale of educational publishing” (148). Maybe they, too, are not just failing, but rather functioning according to a teacherly rationale that is obliterated by the new privileging of learner-centred teacherliness, or by the either/or view of literature as educational *or* as aesthetically driven.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have discussed how Binyavanga Wainaina's work negotiates ideas of teacherliness in his memoir *One Day I Will Write About this Place*. I've shown how Wainaina's texts correspond to the *Zeitgeist* of contemporary African literature, and also of current educational theory, while maintaining their rootedness in East African literary and educational discourses.

Through the lens of Critical Pedagogy, I have outlined how these discourses give an incomplete picture regarding how the two realms of letters have informed each other, both in the past and in the present. Though the full extent of the influence of the 1962 Makerere conference on the East African literary scene is beyond the scope of this paper, my main point is that pedagogical questions were left out of debates following the conference, and that this is an ongoing omission.

By bringing literary and educational theory back into dialogue and excavating their historical links in East Africa, and their present turn with the introduction of the CBC reform, I offer a framework for understanding Wainaina's often-contradictory engagement with education and suggest that East Africa is pivotal for understanding the literature/literacy duality in African literature more broadly.

To this end, I have used educational theory to think through the way Wainaina engages with education—both as a theme and as aesthetical-pedagogical devices in the text. Focusing on Wainaina's use of metaphors and temporality to foreground the self-reflexive stakes of the autobiography as a genre, I have zoomed in on a repetitive AB structure that draws on oral sensibilities to construct teacherliness within the tension between private/public, past/future, oral/written, and failure/success.

Through these readings, my main argument has been that Wainaina sets up teaching/writing as an important duality that undermines a binary view of failure and success. This, I argue, allows literary and educational theory to illuminate each other's blind spots, specifically in regard to the new CBC reform, as 'not just failing'. It also offers an example of how aesthetics and political readings scaffold each other. Finally, I suggest avenues

for further research on both literature and education, for instance on the use of oral patterns and skills as part of classroom practice.

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Notes

1. *Transition* magazine gave a publishing platform to a group of thinkers that included Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (then James Ngugi), Okot p'Bitek, Rebecca Njau, and Ezekiel Mphahlele. Billy Kahora traces the group to the "Makerere Writers Club", corresponding to what later became known as the "Makerere school" of thinkers, which also included Jonathan Kariara and John Nagenda who had attended the conference, as well as Taban lo Liyong, Peter Nazareth, and David Rubadiri.
2. The explicit connection made at the conference between literature and language instruction is imbued with idealism: according to the 1961 conference report, educators are given the task of teaching "fiction in English with enjoyment and appreciation" (14), of encouraging pupils "to develop the capacity for enjoying one of the most important arts practiced by English-speaking people" (15), to remember that "wide reading should be the keynote" (15), and to "provide as much intrinsic motivation as possible" (16). British culture was the core of this lofty project: "Reading should include fiction or works of the imagination because such writing is an essential part of English, because it offers an unique and satisfying human experience, and because the language cannot properly be learnt without it" (14).
3. The 1964 conference in Leeds led to the establishment of The Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies (ACLALS) and *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*. For further details see James Currey's article "Ngũgĩ, Leeds and the Establishment of African Literature" in the *Leeds African Studies Bulletin*, where Currey traces the role that the University of Leeds played in the African literary community, focusing on the time Ngũgĩ spent at Leeds on a British Council scholarship (1964–7).
4. Dozens of authors shared long and detailed accounts of what Wainaina had meant to them. Among these were Isaac Otidi Amuke, Billy Kahora, Pwaangulongii Dauod, Judy Kibinge, Ike Anya, Niq Mhlongo, Parselelo Kantai, A. Igoni Barrett, Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor, Sada Malumfashi, Oris Aigbokhaevbolo, Norbert Odero, Dami Ajayi, Nanjala Nyabola, and Romeo Oriogun. While having different levels of acquaintance with Wainaina, they describe him in surprisingly similar ways: all speak of his generosity in terms of time and feedback. All mention his genuine interest in their work and how he opened doors for them. A recurring story is of how he answered emails from aspiring writers—even those he barely knew—quickly and thoroughly, later following up on the correspondence. All describe a chaotic, lively, politically engaged force of nature who, above all, loved talking about grand ideas, and who created a community around him.
5. For instance, Jane Amunga, Dinah Were, and Irene Ashioya found that over 90% of teachers felt the CBC was indeed making learners more enthusiastic and involved in their studies (69), yet they found that most parents were unhappy about the active role they were supposed to take in their children's learning (67–8). Like them, Marion Daina, as well as Eliud Wambua Muasya and Samuel N. Waweru, also show that the CBC's implementation in Kenya faces many challenges that are typical of educational reforms in low-income countries: understaffing, high teacher-pupil ratios, inadequate teacher training, meagre parental involvement, and a lack of learning materials, particularly for digital literacy. Nevertheless, all researchers also found that CBC has benefits if integrated well.
6. The term oral pedagogy has been used to describe processes of learning and communicating knowledge that are not written-based, which offer an alternative to "writing-based consciousness" (Haynes 96). See works by Lance W. Haynes, Jeffery Dryer, Madonna Stinson, and Robin Alexander for examples. Daniela Merolla considers the many kinds of oral literary productions that have also played a role in African structures of education, and which continue to be influential both side-by-side with formal education, and through evolving new media formations.

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Proximate historiographies in Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi's *Kintu* Russell West-Pavlov

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Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi's novel *Kintu* (2014) places alongside forms of historical fiction familiar to European readers, a form of historical causality that obeys a different logic, namely, one governed by the long-term efficacy of a curse uttered in pre-colonial Buganda. The novel can be read as a historiographical experiment. It sets in a relationship of 'proximity' linear historical narration as understood within the framework of European historicism and the genre of the historical novel theorised by Lukács, and notions of magical 'verbal-incantatory' and 'somatic' history that elude the logic of hegemonic European historicism but nonetheless cohabit the same fictional space. Makumbi's novel thus sketches an 'entanglement' of various historical temporalities that are articulated upon one another within the capacious realm of fiction, thereby reinforcing a cosmic ontology and axiology of reciprocity and fluid duality whose infringement in fact triggers the curse at the origin of the narrative. **Keywords:** historicism, historical novel, metahistoriographical fiction, proximity, Ugandan historical novel.

Introduction


In the opening of Makumbi's novel *Kintu* (2014), a young man named Kamu Kintu dies during a mob lynching in Kampala's slum quarter Bwaise.¹ The inaugural episode, set in 2004, appears to be cut loose from the rest of the plot, but during the course of the novel, more and more connections emerge. The narrative thus appears as a causal enigma whose linkages only gradually become clear. The delayed unlocking of the mystery of Kamu Kintu's lynching thereby makes space for another set of causalities indexed by the victim's name: 'Kintu' evokes and indeed provokes the reiterated effects of a curse uttered upon his clan more than two-and-a-half centuries earlier. In 1750, the expatriated Tutsi Ntwire utters a curse upon the Ganda noble Kintu Kiddu who is responsible for the death of Ntwire's son Kalema (50), a curse that will afflict Kintu's descendants over successive generations. Kamu Kintu is the most recent direct descendant and bearer of the accursed name. In this way, Kintu elevates forms of historical causality that would normally be dismissed as 'superstition' (Chakrabarty 104) to the same level as conventional historicism.

Makumbi's novel has been hailed as an epic work of contemporary Ugandan, and indeed Eastern African literary creation (Evers; Lipenga; Mwesigire; Nabutanyi), in accolades that seem well-earned given the 400-page span of the novel, and its ambitious attempt to encompass pre- and postcolonial Ugandan history. No less significant are the implicit claims it makes for understandings of historical causality that lie outside the customary purview of putatively 'universal' Western historiography. The novel deploys historical fiction to suggest ways in which alternative historiographies may coexist in an 'entanglement' (Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* 14, 16; Nuttall 2–4; Werner and Zimmerman) with European versions of history and its writing. In this article I investigate *Kintu*'s interventions into the imbrications of various types of historiography within the framework of historiographical *fiction*, a capacious genre that proves to be more accommodating of such experimentation than most historical writing. This article mobilises the notion of 'proximity' as a conceptual instrument forged in current work on contemporary African literatures and cultures (Fontein; Iheka 21–56; West-Pavlov) to conceptualise the articulation of multiple versions of history in Makumbi's novel.

The article makes three connected claims, proceeding in a dialectical manner. First, *Kintu* suggests that the 'evenemential' causality of 'historicist' history is also inhabited by an alternative causality, that of the curse itself,

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indeed, that of the curse-as-history. I explore two salient aspects of the curse-as-history: that of the curse as a verbal-incantatory history; and that of the curse as a somatic and environmental history. Second, the symptoms of the curse, in which language and bodies are intimately entangled, systematically allude to a principle of duality and reciprocity whose infringement is the original trigger for the curse. Third and finally, in a synthesis of these two claims, I show how the novel combines a pluralised historical consciousness with an ontological principle of duality, in a flexible epistemological structure that eschews hard dichotomies. The novel itself, then, is a performative instantiation of the non-synthetic conjoining of incommensurable types of history that results from such a principle as it is played out at all the levels of the fictional text.

Forms of history

Unlike a novel such as Moses Isegawa's *Abyssinian Chronicles* (2000), which offers an epic panorama of Ugandan and Eastern African history, on occasions in a literally god's-eye manner (306; see West-Pavlov 105–6), Makumbi's breadth of vision does not seek to portray the history of the postcolonial era in documentary depth (contrary to the claim made by Nabutanyi 369). Makumbi seeks to "give Ugandans a taste[s] of their long and complicated history" (Makumbi and Underwood) predominantly in the forms of hints at key moments of the second half of the twentieth century, from Independence via Obote and Amin and beyond. However, these indices are almost always passing references that only briefly key her tale into what Braudel, rebutting the dominance of an empiricist historiography of human actions, referred to as "eventive" or "evenemential" history (I, 21). The novel repeatedly references but then discretely sidelines Uganda's post-Independence history: "Since nothing had been heard of [Magda] since the 1970s, it was assumed that she had died during the bush war of the 1980s" (*Kintu* 214); "It now occurred to Isaac that Sasa could have been one of Amin's people who fell from grace after the war" (259). It is not that Makumbi is not acutely interested in post-Independence history, as is evinced by her own commentaries on the novel (Makumbi-Morris 310–1). Rather, the meagre sketchiness of this political history serves a significant purpose: namely, to make ample space for the curse as an alternative historical causality, agency, and structure.

Jameson (69) has famously described what he called the "third-world novel" as, quite literally, "*an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society*" (emphasis in original). Characters in *Kintu* occasionally generalise the curse to make it something approaching an allegory of human existence: "Our own cursed world!", laughs Nnabaale; and for Miisi, "the mind was a curse: its ability to go back in time and hop into the future to hope and worry was not a blessing" (360, 364). But these are misreadings of the curse, which is not a metaphor for history, but far more a force in history. In *Kintu*, the curse, which kills the progeny of Kintu throughout his clan for two-and-a-half centuries and more before it is overcome, does not work as an allegory for something else in history (even though a history of racism, (neo)imperialism, and oppression is undeniably omnipresent in the interstices of the action). The curse cannot be translated into something other than its own effectiveness (a more potent version of what German reception theory calls *Wirkungsgeschichte*, or 'effect-history'; see Jauß and Culler 59–64). The curse, quite simply, works in history.

What are the specific characteristics of this curse-as-history as depicted in Makumbi's *Kintu*? In what follows, I will note two salient aspects: that of the curse as a verbal-incantatory history; and that of the curse as a somatic history.

First and foremost, the curse must be understood as a historical causality that functions according to the principles of 'proximity' underpinning oral communication (Finnegan; West-Pavlov). 'Proximity' in this context indexes the workings of instances of language that do not describe, depict, or represent the world, but, as incantatory language, exert a direct and spatially immediate causality within the world (Olúpòṅà 99). Paulo Kalema's grandfather Kanini understands this when he balks at Paulo's self-imposed change of name to Kalema—the name of the semi-adopted son and quasi-twin whom Kintu Kiddu accidentally kills in the first part of the story, thereby provoking the curse cast by the boy's biological father, Ntwire. Kanini notes that "[t]he coincidence of the name was *too close* to the curse" (161, emphasis added). The proximate curse-as-history cannot be understood as a speech act merely in the sense of Austin, Searle, or even Butler (*Gender Trouble; Excitable Speech*); the curse as history does not merely provoke actions via a discursive-cognitive process. Rather, the novelty of Makumbi's tale is double: she endows the speech act with an enhanced form of incantatory, physical potency evoked by Taussig's notion of 'contagion' (47, 220), and then she swivels the affective, somatic immediacy and synchronicity of orature communication onto the diachronic axis. In this way, "words not only travel, they acquire arms and legs along the way" (*Kintu* 53). To this extent, the curse-as-history is part of the fabric of historical causality in a way that

eludes the customary rationalist conceptions of causality guided by human intention and action or by empirically documented processes. The incantatory word cannot be accommodated to either of these notions of causality.

Several characters in the contemporary parts of the novel underestimate the potency of the curse-as-history. In their ignorance of the power of names they inadvertently confirm the force of names as the anchor-point of the curse-as-history. Suubi, for instance, blithely dismisses the names as sites at which the curse takes effect:

N is for Nakintu but I don't use it really. Nakintu is the feminine version of Kintu. The name 'Kintu' is clanless, any clan can use it. Things like clans don't matter to me, really. [...] Yes, Suubi means 'hope' but my parents never really told me what they were hoping for. I have no attachment to names really. (*Kintu* 143)

As is observed so often in the novel, which is dominated by a “cruel sense of irony” (29), when characters repress one part of their heritage, they merely accentuate another part. By naming herself Nakintu, Suubi suppresses her name and status as ‘Nnakato’ (i.e., the younger twin, the derivative copy of the original, more dominant twin-soul, or Babirye, her dead twin sister Ssanyu, with whom she is locked in a life-long struggle). But, by the same token, as her Aunt Kizza points out, rectifying the elision (150), Suubi inadvertently reveals her kinship with Kintu (‘Nnakintu’). In claiming to be clanless, she paradoxically cements her allegiance with the Kintu clan. And, indeed, she does embody hope, not via the empty placeholder of the non-existent parents, but because she eventually both accepts her clan membership and manages to overcome the “primal conflict” (9) with her sister: she preserves the twin in the concrete form of a wooden necklace around her neck that ensures an enduring proximity, and thus physical community, of the two (403–5). Ultimately, Suubi embodies an “attachment” via—and to—names that drives the curse, and persists, in a positive form, after its resolution. This is an ‘incantatory’ force of language that joins bodies to one another, synchronically and diachronically over a *longue durée*, in an eminently somatic fashion.

I dwell on a similarly instructive act of ironic (mis)naming. Paulo Kalema drops the name Kalemanzira, inherited from an itinerant Rwandan water carrier his grandparents claim was his biological father. Mistakenly thinking, however, that evidence of his illegitimacy will shame his family, he fails to realise that illegitimacy is in fact an alibi for a greater shame—that of the incest committed by his adolescent mother Ruth with her twin brother Job (375–9). Contracting ‘Kalemanzira’ into ‘Kalema’ (the name of the boy killed by Kintu), he thereby reveals a secret even more dangerous than the other two—that of the curse: “Nonetheless, he insisted on being called Kalema if Kalemanzira was too much for his family” (208). The deeper irony, then, lies in the fact that the “too much” that Paulo Kalema seeks to cover up out of respect for his family in fact lays bare another, more powerful “too much”—the deadly burden of the name of the primal victim killed by an adoptive father to which he remains oblivious until much later on. All his linguistic manoeuvring merely cements and reinforces the incantatory, somatic power of names in history and indeed their power to drive history.

Second, the curse as history has a ‘somatic’ character that is not merely restricted to humans but extends to their environment. Here, ‘somatic history’ is meant in the sense coined to describe the Southern African San shaman’s stance towards rock art, one of somatic involvement rather than distanced spectatorship (Blundell 173), which spills over to include the place in its entirety (Morris 134–5). Emblematic of this form of ‘environmentally somatic’ history is a tree close to Kintu’s residence that is intimately connected to the curse and recurs throughout the narrative. Kintu comments to his son Baale, soon to be struck down by the curse, “There has always been such a tree in this place [...] It’s always the same size though, I don’t know whether it’s the same tree or if one dies and another grows” (*Kintu* 55). The tree embodies the principle of organic continuity in discontinuity, both in the curse that strikes fatally again and again, and in the family whose genealogical continuity paradoxically provides the very condition of possibility of the curse’s longevity. This tree is where the twin-mother Nnakato, Kintu’s wife and the mother of the quasi-twin Baale, hangs herself after her son dies (79–80), but the self-same tree grows in the identical place two-and-a-half centuries later (362, 301). The tree is also a metaphor of the way history (as narrative) persists in the midst of history (as repeated destruction and persistent misfortune). It is Suubi, meditating upon her erased memory of her own traumatic childhood, who retrieves faint fragments of the tale of Kintu as recounted by her grandmother: “there was only blankness. [...] She could find no [...] dreams from that life in her memory: just the voice telling that story and the tree they sat under when the sun glared” (92). This is why Isaac, another contemporary descent of Kintu, wonders: “Does the ground remember Kintu’s feet? The ground had a memory he was sure: it was beyond comprehension, beyond sight and beyond touch but he knew it” (352). The curse-as-history is an ‘environmental somatic’ history, because it is a grounded history embedded in the natural world. Thus the dead communicate with the living, not just in the form of dreams and visions—when we are told

that after his death “Kalema had not made contact” (44), this is a disturbing sign of rupture—but also in the form of animals such as a cobra, sundry other snakes or lizards, birds, and even leaves (36, 243, 342).

Bees, a recurrent motif throughout the novel, instantiate this embedded ‘environmental somatic’ history. In close proximity to the pink-barked tree is the hive of bees that Kintu and Baale harvest. The bees return again and again in the novel, bestowing a visitation upon Miisi the very day Kamu’s death is revenged, on Good Friday 2004, thereby triggering the crypto-paschal dénouement of the tale: “As the cloud approached, Miisi saw it was a swarm of bees. He could even see the individual bees. Each bee flew in its own circle pushing ahead, returning and pushing ahead again. Yet, in spite of this dizzying flight, the swarm moved forward as one” (282). The image of looping, circular, or cyclical non-linear history is a common one in postmodern historiographical fiction, whether from Europe (Swift 132, 135, 140) or Africa (Isegawa 471; Mahjoub 245; Palangyo 129). What is more striking in this context, however, is the notion of the sameness within constant change as the bees pursue their inexorable forward movement. The bees thus embody, not as metaphor or symbol, but as a concrete manifestation elsewhere borne out in language, the curse-as-history.

By the same token, however, they are part of the natural world in its typification of the fundamental principle of unity in multiplicity and its constitutive rule of reciprocity, the very antidote to the originary infringement that triggers the curse at the outset: “The most important thing is to take only some [of the honey], maybe half. Just as you pick wild fruit and must throw some back to the wild, so must you leave honey for the bees”, Kintu instructs Baale (*Kintu* 56). The bees embody both the curse and the contravened principle that triggers the curse, and their return “to claim their territory” (286) anticipates the clan’s restoration of the traditional shrine, where the bodies and spirits of Kintu, Nnakato, Baale, and Kalema will be put to rest.

Environmental somatic’ history with its overflowing of the borders of time and space is most striking for the way it eschews the distinct temporal parcellation crucial to Western conceptions of history. If historical understanding in Europe since the end of the early modern period has been structured by the concept of a distinct segmentation between past, present, and future (Koselleck), the curse-as-history, by contrast, is characterised by a principle of proximate adhesion, whose functioning is verbal-incantatory and somatic-spatial. To ‘call’ someone by a name is to ‘call down’ the curse upon them, or alternatively, at the end of the novel, to invoke a counterforce that neutralises the curse: “‘If Nnakato has been calling then this is us answering,’ Bweeza stated extravagantly” (*Kintu* 344). Proximate contagion and incommensurable cohabitation are the guiding principles of an alternative mode of verbal-incantatory and somatic-spatial history that itself cohabits, in close proximity, ‘Western’ historiography. Trees, bees, snakes, and figures in visions, and the curse they accompany, nestle at the interstices of a factual-evenemential historical narration—one that encompasses an almost anthropological description of the vagaries of Bugandan local and royal politics in the pre-colonial period, and the turbulent transition from the late colonial to the post-independence and later post-Amin periods. Such heterogeneities of historical causality can be contained, but not reduced or resolved, by a fiction in which characters persistently find themselves “floating in two worlds” (388). Indeed, what Chakrabarty has called the “irreducible plurality in our own experiences of historicity” and a “plurality of times existing together” (108, 109) transpires to be the salient characteristic of the principle of unity in multiplicity to which I now turn.

Singular plural

The historical causality that *Kintu* dramatizes within historicism eschews segmentation and discrete elements of causality and proposes, instead, an incantatory, somatic, environmental history whose basic principle is proximity. This notion of historical causality does not disable the more abstract, universal historicism that has become hegemonic and self-evident since the European Enlightenment, but is entangled with it within the novel’s fictional story world. Makumbi’s novel thus proposes a more universal principle of reciprocal unity in multiplicity that constitutes the underlying moral imperative that the author tables as a response to the socio-political malaise of contemporary Africa.

Once again, however, this principle is presented in the novel via a somatic manifestation. It is striking that those struck with the curse consistently present symptoms that disturb the symmetry of the human body. In the inaugural lynching episode, Kamu Kintu’s left eye is destroyed, leaving his right eye staring, mimicking his ancestor Baale, Kintu’s doomed son (xix, 77, 88) and numerous other victims of the curse are afflicted on only one side of their body (284). This is symptomatic of a fundamental failure of reciprocity, emblematised, for instance, by Kamu’s failure to pay debts (xv, xvii), to which I will return in more detail below.

This destabilisation of human ambidexterity is counteracted in the novel by one salient instance of a positive duality that, significantly, exceeds the singularity of the individual body. It is worth dwelling on this instance because it possesses a broader significance across a range of African cultures. The predominant manifestation of unity in multiplicity in *Kintu* is to be found in the figure of identical twins, who inhabit every corner of the novel. Kintu's two main wives are twins, the wife who bears his children first give birth to four sets of twins (12), and his adopted and biological sons are said to be twins (24). Kintu's more or less successful attempts at dealing fairly and judiciously with these various sets of twins (15) are at the centre of the bundles of actions, many of them "reckless" (44) in terms of cosmic balance that culminate in the curse.

Twins are most important in the novel because across a range of African societies, in many different forms, they give social expression to the complex relationships between sameness and identity, homogeneity and heterogeneity, singularity and multiplicity, as they complement and contradict each other in a single social site (Peek; Renne and Bastian). In *Kintu*, twins are envisaged as the result of "primal conflict" that leads to a "splitting of the soul" (8–9). Twins thus focalise fundamental anxieties about adjudicating the conflicts that beset societies at various scalar levels: "If the soul is at conflict even at this remote level of existence, what chance do communities have?" (9) But just as the figure of the twin provides an objective correlative for conflicting, polarised values, so too the figure itself can be conceptualised as a site of conflict *and* of harmony. A range of ethnographic and sociological evidence from many regions and cultures in Africa shows that twins are both demonised and venerated, that invidious injunctions such as the ritual killing of twins may be contravened by real practice, and that conceptions of twinship can change significantly over time. It is significant that the figure in the novel whose conflict with her dead twin is most protracted and almost fatal, Suubi, and whose father Wasswa is said to have murdered his twin brother (98), is also the one who resolves the conflict most successfully. Twins are thus the embodiment of the central complex of unity in multiplicity and multiplicity in unity, an embodied manifestation of "being singular plural" (Nancy), and the concomitant complexes of reciprocity or animosity that are the novel's profoundest concern.

At least two important concomitants of this complex can be enumerated in the novel. The first is the dyad masculinity-femininity. *Kintu* implicitly attempts to shift traditional blame for cosmic "guilt from the woman to Kintu" (Makumbi and West-Pavlov). Kintu is not portrayed as an inherently bad ruler and is given credit for many judicious actions; he is depicted as a good husband, to his first, beloved wife at least, and he is never at ease with the masculinist dictates of Baganda society (Kintu 4, 6, 13–14, 70). But he uses femininity as a term of abuse (4), blames political unrest on women (6), and makes fatal mistakes that, he recognises too late, his wife would intuitively have avoided (29). Contemporary masculinity is depicted as predominantly rapacious and predatory: as a starving child, Suubi "did not steal from men [on the market], because when they caught you, it did not matter how thin you were, men had no hearts" (104). As a rule, in *Kintu* the women survive more often than the men, and of the couple Kintu and Nnakato, it is the feminine figure who persists in popular oral lore. In the community where the clan's shrine is reconstructed, the myth has been re-written by the peasants to shift the emphasis from Kintu and the curse, to Nnakato and the feminine lineage: "Kintu Kidda, the essence of everything, had been erased from Kiyiika's memory while Nnakato had flourished to divine proportions" (342–3). The ethos that her memory cultivates is an ethos of reciprocity: "When you harvest anything—fruit, vegetables, honey—leave half behind for her [Nnakato]" (343). Significantly, this injunction almost identically replicates Kintu's injunction to Baale while gathering honey (56). It is such an ethos of reciprocity that the text proposes as the substance of a pragmatically democratic, patient, and constantly renegotiated co-existence between the partners in a marriage relationship. "If you treat Ntongo well and if you don't try to be perfect, things will work out in time", Baale is counselled (74).

This is not to suggest that the basic binary of male and female is hypostatized by the novel: at least several other options are gestured towards, including a portrayal of pre-colonial homosexuality (41–2) and an exemplar of unruly femininity in the person of Zaya, the mother of Baale's child Kiddu (19–21; see Nabutanyi). Rather, the dyad masculinity-femininity, like twinship, offers a template for the basic social unit of reciprocity—even though real communities inevitably prove to be more complex and more intricately reticulated than any duality would suggest. It comes as no surprise, then, that Makumbi's second novel *The First Woman* (2020) shifts its attention from Kintu, the first man, to Nambi, his partner, in a further exploration of the gendered nature of the unity in diversity of fundamental social units.

The second concomitant of twinship is nature: humanity and nature, as an avatar of twindom, constitute the cosmos. Kintu explains to his son Baale that “the bees that live on top of Mayirika Hill are to be treated like a brother” (*Kintu* 56). From the outset, nature as the partner of humanity is stressed at crucial conjunctures in the text, as in the passage pertaining to the bees:

Remember not to come in a foul mood. [...] Sometimes Kayuki [the spirit incarnated in the bees] is in a mood. When the bees will not leave or when they're aggressive, go home; return when he's in a better mood. [...] The most important thing is to take only some [of the honey], maybe half. Just as you pick wild fruit and must throw some back to the wild, so must you leave honey for the bees. (56)

Kintu's injunctions are moral precepts whose basic message is always that of a multiplicity in which reciprocity creates unity.

Custom and ritual are merely extensions of such rules of respectful reciprocity that encompass every aspect of life. The infringement of such rules is the cause, ultimately, of the curse. Kintu, despite his seeming knowledge of such regulations, commits a series of contraventions of custom. He ignores a host of premonitions and auguries (29). Kalema drinks from Kintu's taboo gourd, leading to the slap that kills the boy (27). The lad is buried under the wrong tree, in a twisted position, because Kintu neglects to supervise the burial, and is then stripped of his burial sheet (30, 37, 38). Kintu fails to hold funeral rites for the boy (44), to tell his wives, and to inform Ntwire of the boy's death (45–7, 49–50). All these violations of custom are disturbances of reciprocity, even when it may have the appearance of a simple interdiction or an instance of “respectful distance” (287). Kintu is of course not the only one to commit such transgressions. Ntwire infringes the conditional hospitality of the Ganda people: “while Kalema blended into Kintu's vast household, Ntwire hovered at the peripheries of the community. Unlike the Tutsis who found their way to the capital and assumed Ganda names on arrival and married Ganda spouses, Ntwire stood aloof” (24). The curse that he utters is doubly “vindictive” (91) for it punishes the infringement of reciprocity from a stance of non-reciprocity. When the malevolent spirit of Ntwire confronts the clan in its contemporary mobilisation to put the curse to rest, it continues to refuse to speak Ganda, swearing instead in Lunyarwanda (372), and it takes a bevy of victims' lives in a final orgy of revenge (395). Not even the curse is reciprocal, seeking the re-establishment of a disturbed equilibrium, but is excessive and potentially infinite in its temporal reach.

The text in its entirety is a bitter paean to a basic, underlying principle of constitutive connectivity and reciprocity that recurs frequently as a principle of social cohesion in many African societies. It is given expression by Achebe's famous dictum to the effect that “[w]herever Something stands, Something else will stand beside it. Nothing is absolute” (68). Mbembe describes this neighbourly impulse within African thought as a principle of “compositionality” (“Africa: Continent of the future” 13), implying com-(with)-position-ality as the basic condition of social life and cosmic existence. Nyamnjoh calls this ethos “conviviality” and sees it as arising from the basal incompleteness, in other words, the originary connectedness of humans (261).

Ntwire emblematises a willed lack of connection and conviviality: “*Ntwire stood away from everyone, and everything*” (90, emphasis in original). The turn of phrase negates, word for word, Achebe's dictum. Ntwire's negated ‘conviviality’ wreaks a disruption of genetic connectivity as it unspools its own perverse connectivity across history. Other manifestations of this negated connectivity are Kanani's house, “split into two worlds” of separate parents' and twins' domains (177), or the “war between the new and the old” (217) that sunders Africa from top to bottom.

The great paradox, of course, is that the curse, with its perverse continuity across time and its ‘contagious’ adhesion to names, demonstrates that connectivity cannot be negated; it can only be perverted, turned into something destructive. Conversely, however, the curse can also be exorcised and thus resolved, so that vibrant connectivity is restored. This is the paradox that resides in the very title of the novel: the name “Kintu”, which becomes the linguistic trigger and medium of the curse, is also “a variant of the term ‘*obuntu*’ or ‘*Ubuntu*’” (Ryman, n. p.). This makes it a marker of co-humanity and co-existence par excellence, because *ubuntu* famously explains humanity as personhood through other persons, and more generally being through co-being.

Like the bees that incarnate the continuity of the curse when they come in a visitation to Miisi at the end of the novel, this synchronic and diachronic connectivity is in itself neither good nor bad; continuity and connectivity, whether synchronic or diachronic, is simply in the nature of things in this non-compartmentalised cosmos. Indeed, good and evil themselves cannot be separated from one another, but are simply the positive or negative

faces taken by the various inflections and calibrations of connectivity as they are wielded or deployed by actors in the universe. “Nature is as ugly as it is beautiful”, says one character (*Kintu* 360), and Kintu feels “betrayed by the rock and the tree” that enable Nnakato’s suicide after the death of their son Baale (79–80). Yet the simple fact is that nature, like humans, can easily shift from the principle of reciprocity to a stance of vindictiveness and malice because these are two sides of the same coin of connectivity. Even nature evinces the profound ambivalence of duality, which can oscillate between collaboration and enmity. It’s not simply that Kintu infringes reciprocal and ethical action. Many of his actions are ethically noble. Rather, what is at stake is the proximity of good and evil, their status as ‘identical twins’, and the necessity of constant vigilance to preserve social stability and the common good. The ethical task of humanity is thus to work hard to maintain relationships of reciprocity and generosity, not an office of sinecure, so as to prevent them tipping over into destruction.

Such ideas culminate in a notion of history which is a tangible, material, ontological network of connections infused with ethical agency and responsibility accruing to all actors in the cosmos. Miisi may claim that “[t]o forge a link between the coincidental events of New Year’s Day and the arrival of the bees was too tenuous” (290), but such “separatism” is an essentially modern approach that only emerges in the early modern period and can never claim absolute and universal validity (Ghosh 56–9). This “separatism” is ethically problematic because, as an ontological assumption, it removes the basis for connectivity that furnishes the ground of normative co-existence; it generates a notion of history in which causality is a merely mechanistic affair stripped of its normative foundations. Thus, the apparent marginalisation of ‘evenemential history’ that characterises Makumbi’s novel is in fact a deliberate strategy to restore its ethical fabric.

Historiographical epistemology

It becomes apparent, at this juncture, that *Kintu*’s staging of an entanglement of ‘evenemential’ and ‘incantatory’ or ‘somatic’ history constitutes a significant effort to recalibrate the epistemology of historiography as it relates to African temporalities. Makumbi’s project addresses a number of deep-seated and enduring historiographical dilemmas.

The writing of African historiography has been dogged by two fundamental problems. The first was to assert that Africa had a history, in the face of enduring European claims to the contrary: Hegel in the 1830s pontificated that Africa “forms no historical part of the World; it exhibits no movement or development” (91, translation modified). Trevor-Roper could say, as late as the 1960s, that “at present there is [no African history], or very little: there is only the history of the Europeans in Africa” (cited in Gilbert and Reynolds xi). Such claims were rebutted by cultural nationalist historicism (Neale; Ogot; Reid, *A History of Modern Uganda* 30–2). Inherent in their work, however, was a second problem, namely, to show that African forms and experiences of life in their full complexity were worthy of being included in history. Kissinger, for instance, claimed that “[t]he axis of history starts in Moscow, crosses over to Washington, and then goes to Tokyo. What happens in the South is of no importance” (qtd in Prasad 4). The task was now to revalorise that Southern historical experience and its historiographical forms. In such a context, oral history, for instance, gained a particular importance (Ogot 205–7).

The two problems are linked because inverting the relationship just sketched, the denigration of African forms of life served to legitimise the disqualification of Africa from history. To tell stories of African history that allow at least the substance of complexity in past times to be given narrational space poses a central problem. For that substance can often only be categorised as ‘legend’ or ‘superstition’ within the narrowly positivist, empiricist, and realist mode of narration of the past that Western historiography takes for granted (Santos 172). To admit Africa to history on its own terms is, quintessentially, to interrogate the stranglehold of realist narration upon historiography. It is, fundamentally, to question the exclusive validity of ‘evenemential’ history and its empiricist presuppositions. Addressing directly the agency of gods and spirits in historical action in non-European historical contexts, Chakrabarty explains that:

A narrative strategy that is rationally feasible in the modern understanding of what constitutes public life—and the historians speak in the public sphere—cannot be based on a relationship that allows the divine or the supernatural a direct hand in the affairs of the world. [...] Historians will grant the supernatural a place in somebody’s belief system or ritual practices, but to ascribe to it any real agency in historical events will go against the rules of evidence that gives historical discourse procedures for settling disputes about the past. (104)

'Evenemential' history is haunted by the ghosts of its others, but is blissfully oblivious to their stories in its rationalism.

Historians working in the wake of the 'ontological turn' (Anderson 117–26) might address this dilemma by suggesting that "to produce histories that are more ethically defensible, more philosophically robust, and more historically meaningful, we need to analyse each non-modern lifeworld on its own ontological terms, in its own metaphysical environment" (Anderson 2). Such a solution merely displaces the problem, however, onto a different spatial terrain, taking difference, rather than universal sameness, as the principle of historiographical writing. Such difference, even when stripped of its hierarchical burden from the colonial past, assumes, however, a clear temporal, and thus spatial, distance between the two histories.

What happens, however, when the two merge in what Santos calls "intertemporality" (177)? Such an intersection occurs in *Kintu*, both in spatial terms, where an irreducible mix of West and non-West can be combined in one person such as Miisi, the Cambridge-educated sceptical traditionalist who is tasked with banishing the curse, and in historical terms, as is the case with the curse-as-history, running as it does from pre-modern, pre-colonial times into the digital present according to the identity of naming. *Kintu* thus forces a dilemma: how to reconcile these two principles when they converge, indeed collide, in the same time and space. In order to do this, we need not only a paradigm of difference (historical and cultural), but also one of proximity and similarity (historical and cultural). These two paradigms, in turn, need to be brought into neighbourly proximity, in a manner that can best be described by the philosophical oxymoron of "being singular plural" (Nancy).

This is not a paradox imposed upon the text from outside. Miisi personifies the dissonance between these two ways of knowing history, and eventually goes mad because of his failure to reconcile the two epistemic paradigms: "Miisi was endowed with both cerebral knowledge and a non-cerebral way of knowing. But every time ours popped up, he squeezed and muted. He worshipped cerebral knowledge. [...] So he was sacrificed [...] for knowing and refusing to know" (410). Miisi is a writer who embodies his own parable of "Africanstein", a tragic and perplexed indigenous figure reconstructed out of prosthetic European limbs (306–7).

Whereas Miisi describes the conundrum but cannot resolve it himself, Makumbi's *Kintu* suggests that fiction is an apposite mode for confronting this dilemma. Creative historiographic fiction is capacious enough to include a range of different degrees of 'realism', posited as it is, by definition, upon at least some element of "willing suspension of disbelief". Fiction can accommodate various modes of historical reality in a way that most historiography cannot. *Kintu* thus furnishes a seamlessly merged hybrid of 'evenemential' or 'eventive' history (Reid, *Political Power in Pre-Colonial Buganda*) with something approximating a history written in the wake of the 'ontological turn' (Anderson 117–26). For instance, detailing the violent internecine conflicts that racked Baganda royal politics, Makumbi explains the unusual stability of Ssemakokiro's reign as Kabaka from 1797 to 1814 despite its origin in a fratricidal coup: "Ssemakokiro, unlike his father, was quick to appease his brother's blood. First, he banished all the men he had sent to kidnap Jjunju, including their extended relations, from Buganda. Then he renamed his palace Jjunju. It worked for Ssemakokiro because he died of natural causes in 1814" (81). The careful observation of ritual practices, which belongs clearly to the 'ontological turn' and is awarded truth value according to its historical epistemological context, is employed to explain a history so unmistakably 'evenemential' or 'eventive' that it can be precisely dated.

The one-thing-next-to-another that is Achebe's motto, or the paradoxical notion of "being singular plural" is a principle that holds good not only for twins, for the genders, for humanity and nature, but also for historiographical epistemology, and finally, for the shape of material reality itself, so that a much broader spectrum of causal networks than mere "natural causes" has to be admitted. *Kintu* lodges an appeal for an ethos of reciprocity at this level of universality because the text believes that such reciprocity is the only solution for social and geopolitical reconciliation in our troubled times.

In *Kintu*, to adopt Miisi's voice, there "was an ancient story kept alive by the breath of belief". Miisi claims that "[i]t did not matter that he did not believe the spiritual aspect of it: what mattered was that for some reason, tradition had preserved the history of his ancestry" (343–4). Makumbi's text eschews such weak relativism, and clearly does 'believe' the story, not merely because it makes a story of the story, but because it brings multiple stories into proximity with one another and hesitates to differentiate between 'fictional' fiction and 'true' fiction within its own boundaries. The ethical force of such epistemological generosity obviously reaches, however, well beyond the covers of the book.

Notes

1. Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi's *Kintu* was first published by Kwani? in Nairobi in 2014, followed by One world in London in 2018; all subsequent references (page numbers only) are to the latter edition. I would like to thank Makumbi for an instructive email dialogue during the writing of this article.

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African literature, metonymic gaps, and the *Gandasation* of metropolitan language in Jennifer Makumbi's *Kintu*

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African literature, metonymic gaps, and the *Gandasation* of metropolitan language in Jennifer Makumbi's *Kintu*

African literature has its roots in the continent's oral traditions, while its written mode started as an offshoot of European colonialism. The literature is characterised by paradoxes, one of which is linguistic dissonance. The linguistic incongruity draws attention to the illogicality of African literature ventilating indigenous episteme through exogenous tongues. Though the question of linguistic discordance in African literature is not new, it still generates ripples, and currently attracts tremendous interest of the present crop of African women writers who produce texts that conflate both indigenous and exogenous languages to possibly strengthen the conviction that one language is no longer the sole organiser of worldview. Jennifer Makumbi is one such writer. The Ugandan has succeeded in writing herself into global reckoning by telling a completely absorbing, canon-worthy epic. In her narration of a riveting multi-layered historiography of Buganda/Ugandan nation in *Kintu* (2014), the novelist bridges metonymic gaps between Luganda and English. She attenuates the expressive strength of English and projects Luganda as another veritable source of knowledge generation. In this article I examine how Makumbi bridges cultural and linguistic gaps in the novel. I employ *metonymic gaps* as a conceptual model to expound the deployment of indigenous *knowledges* in a Europhone African text. I mine the overall implications of this practice in African literature, and argue that Makumbi aggrandises Luganda epistemology to resist European heteronomy of African literary expression. Consequently, her text becomes a site of postcolonial disputations where *marginal* and *minor* literatures/cultures jostle for supremacy. **Keywords:** Jennifer Makumbi, world and African literatures, Buganda/Ugandan historiography, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari.


Introduction

Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi is, without doubt, one of the finest literary writers to have come out of (East) Africa. With an enthralling creativity reflecting in her crisp and punchy writing style, the Uganda-born novelist has continued to deploy her prolific imagination in the publication of gripping narratives that are simply unputdownable. She started off as a short story writer with the publication of "The Accidental Seaman" in the 2012 Moss Side Stories project of Manchester Academy.¹ The writer followed suit with the publication of another short story, "Let's Tell this Story Properly" in 2014, which won the 2014 Commonwealth Short Story Prize. She also published *Manchester Happened* in 2019, *The First Woman*, and *A Girl is a Body of Water* in 2020. With a touch of historical realism and intelligent use of analepsis and prolepsis, Makumbi gives the reader *Kintu*, an evocative historical text that (re)constructs spatial and temporal settings of a people's history.

The writer succeeds in publishing one of the Africa's most delectable, expressive, and evocative historical texts and the text reads much like Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967, 1998). *Kintu* enters into an inter-textual dialogue with Márquez's opus by presenting a multi-generational narrative of the Kintus, almost the same way Márquez tells the multi-generational story of the Buendías. In her epic, Makumba uses her traditional Luganda oral literature and language to reflect her background as an African writer who imprints on the colonial language (Ilo 13). The appropriation of Ganda verbal arts provides her ample opportunities to narrate the aetiological myth of her people and (re)present Uganda as a nation bedevilled by growing inequality and sundry post-independence decadence. The brilliant use of Buganda oral traditions in her literary productions

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further limns the novelist as an enormously resourceful creative writer emulating prominent African novelists, such as Mphahlele, Achebe, and Ngugi. Much like what she demonstrates in *Kintu* and *The First Woman*, Makumbi's proclivity for situating African postcolonial crises in their historical contexts and her deliberate minorisation of the English language makes her stand out from the latest generation of African women writers. These women writers often deploy linguistic strategies to "reconnect with [their] 'mother tongue', and develop some sort of 'voice-print'" (Zabus xviii), enabling them to organise their thoughts accurately as they meander the interstices of indigenous and endogenous languages for the representation of realities in their minds.

With regard to her poetics, Makumbi is a writer whose artistic vision is constrained by a number of tropes. Her poetics draws on gender issues, postcolonial disillusionment bedevilling Africa, and regressive cultural practices that possibly validate European humanoid conception of Africans. Interestingly, there is an apparent inter-textual thread connecting her poetics to literary works produced by the third generation of African women writers. This generation of writers explores collective wisdom or conscience and believes in the deployment of indigenous cultural values in fictional narratives written in European languages. This is done to assert their Africanity, subvert or transgress European literary canonicity, deflate the Western vaunted ego, and, most importantly, rescue African literature from the abjected status to which it is confined. The writers have equally shown how to subtly turn African literature to a site of transgressivity by supporting vivification of the waning zeitgeist of early African critics who advocate severance of ties between African literature and hegemonic European languages.

To this generation of women writers, African literature has come of age, and should begin to assert its independence from undue Western Universalist influence. The writers, including Aminatta Forna, Lola Shoneyin, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Taiye Selasi, Helen Oyeyemi, NoViolet Bulawayo, Sefi Atta, Petina Gappah, Maaza Mengiste, Kopano Matlwa, and many others, distinguish themselves by raising social consciousness about intersectionality and identity politics in African literature.² They also direct their curiosity towards interrogating European linguistic heteronomy of the literature. These writers may not have imbibed the *bolekajaist* fervidness or nationalist ideology of some of the early African writers; they, however, share some of the convictions of these critics and writers. This they indicate by de-Europeanising and, at the same time, Africanising the language, style, symbols, and the entire narrative landscape of their stories. They demonstrate how African writers can privilege indigenous languages or cultural values in texts written in exogenous tongues. The writers also escape being labelled "protest writers" due to the systematic and non-combative style of their subversive politics. The politics is operationalised through their deployment of metonymic and linguistic strategies surreptitiously to taper or transgress dominant European languages in their works. This approach enables them to challenge the alterity of African literature and reverse the major-minor asymmetry that has dogged world literature for decades.

Apart from advocating the inclusion of indigenous themes in Europhone African literature, Makumbi and, by extension, the coterie of third generation African women writers, believe in the use of exogenous languages in African literature. However, they seem to say that the languages must be Africanised and be made to carry the weight of their indigenous, cultural, and epistemological codes. Just like these writers Makumbi intersperses her writings with Ganda cultural terms, even though she writes in English. The deployment of local words and cultural terms in Europhone African texts enables Makumbi to carve out African identity and push indigenous episteme into the purview of mainstream literature, which reinforces Universalist tendencies and relegates other literatures to the margins. She asserts African Self, and this assertion is part of the Africanist project that seeks to privilege African cosmology, ontology, and epistemology in order to halt the gradual fragmentation or loss of African cultural values believed to be under the attack of European cultural hegemony. Aside from the noticeable Africanist agenda often set by Makumbi and other contemporary African women writers, they equally explore their indigenous *knowledges* to attenuate or abrade the assertive and exacting imperial languages, and force languages to pay homage to home-grown African episteme. The practice of de-Europeanising the language of African literature is not in any way new, as many of Makumbi's predecessors also wove their indigenous epistemologies into their narratives; the practice, however, may not be as pronounced as it is now among the third generation of African women writers. Besides, situating the practice in the present may further validate the past-present inter-textual dialogue, since the present always involves the past in fictional interrogation of human conditions (Dalley 18; Eze 311).

In this article I study *Kintu* with a view to examining Makumbi's transgressive thought and the binary politics underlining the deployment of indigenous Ganda epistemological perspectives in her text. I seek to interro-

gate the social and cultural meanings that the Ganda episteme inserts into the body of Europhone African text. I argue that Makumbi, like other third generation African (women) writers, pushes for the recognition of African knowledge production. I submit that the necessity of this recognition is contingent on exploring abundant indigenous epistemology in African culture. Drawing on the raging polemics in postcolonial discourse about the interchanges between the centre and periphery and how the periphery desires a reordering of imbalances between the powerful and weak nations/literatures, I specifically address linguistic or metonymic agencies used by the periphery to restructure the asymmetric relationship it maintains with the centre in African literature. Though not new in African literary criticism, since this postcolonial conflict has often dominated debates in African literature right from its inception, I bring Makumbi into this discussion to validate the emergence of African female subjectivity that lends its voice to the debate and consequently challenges patriarchal domination of African narratives. Her involvement similarly broaches the gender question in African knowledge production. The novelist thus becomes a postcolonial (feminine) voice that evinces how African women writers consolidate, broaden, or subvert the age-long quest for the indigenisation of African literature.

Specifically, my interests are on the subsisting paradoxes that shape African literature written in European languages, especially the English language. Bearing in mind the question of femininity, the article interrogates the ambivalent condition of Makumbi as a Europhone African woman writer and how she bridges metonymic gaps or linguistic paradoxes in her novel, as well as how she reconciles the noticeable ambivalences. These ambivalences seem to have atomised her writings into unequal fragments engendered by her ingenious way of conveying her socio-cultural, economic, and political thoughts through the ethos of languages or cultures that are not hers. Rather than applauding the fulmination of some African critics and joining them to condemn the deployment of African cultural terms, philosophies, and episteme in literary texts expressed in English, French, or Portuguese, I appraise and commend this linguistic/literary syncretism. This is justified by the need to draw attention to the postmodern fad commonplace among recent African women writers who have carved a niche for their writings by deliberately (or otherwise) resorting to their indigenous languages to borrow, translate, or copy wholesale linguistic, philosophical, and literary images. While they do this for many reasons, one of the factors aiding the trend is the desire to assert the individuality, originality, or authenticity of African literature. The trend is also aided by their conviction that the literary tradition can compete favourably with other global literatures and partake in the global inter-literary communication as co-equals (Ljuckanov 219). It also emphasises what Isaiah Ilo calls “indiginist hybridism” (13), enabling modern African writing to express African content in Europhonism.

Using *metonymic gap* as a conceptual model, I examine linguistic strategies employed by Makumbi to bridge cultural gaps between indigenous and exogenous languages in her novel. I discuss the use of metropolitan language(s) in African literature and the attendant consequences for readers in Africa or elsewhere. I critically discuss the deployment of metonymic gaps as a postcolonial construct employed by African writers to challenge the alterity of African literature among the melange of global literatures. Apart from using the model to assert the relevance of African literature, African writers—who are increasingly disquieted by the subaltern status of their mother tongues—seem to have hatched a plan to address the linguistic dissonance by carefully inserting their local *knowledges* and philosophies into their works written either in English, French, or Portuguese. The writers use metonymy as a literary tool to assert or challenge established hierarchies, conventions, and worldviews (Cooper 10), or “disrupt[s] imperial language as [a] unique cultural capital and reposition[s] the language in a myriad of cultural, anthropological, philosophical and ideological contexts” (Teke 72). This subversive agency enables post-colonial writers to project their cultural identities, syncretise indigenous African philosophies with a Western thought system, and covertly whittle down the strength of European linguistic force believed to have wreaked epistemic violence on indigenous epistemology.

To this end, I discuss the deployment of metonymic gap as a dominant practice in African literary productions. The practice, though challenging European linguistic imperialism in African literature, charts a new course for world literature—the hybridity of both major and minor languages in literary productions, especially in cultural spaces that were once colonial territories of European superpowers. This is the specific perception of African poetics on world literature, and it offers a robust insight into the re-definition or re-conceptualisation of minor literature beyond Deleuzian and Guattarian theorisation on major-minor literature. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari conceive minor literature as the literature which does not come from a minor language, but a literary mode that a minority constructs within a major language (16). Using *Kintu* as a template, I argue that the text contains effusive display of indigenous Ganda cultural terms that help to taper the strength of the superstrate lan-

guage used in the text. Makumbi employs substitution, deletion, amplification, trans-linguaging (code-switching), textual heterolingualism (code-mixing), and contextualisation as transgressive discursive models to subvert normativity, gainsay Universalist tendencies, and break boundaries of orthodoxy in African literature. This is indicated through her deliberate use of a number of Ganda cultural expressions in *Kintu*. Effusive use of Ganda words and phrases, such as “*kanga*”, “*lukiiko*”, “*namasole*”, “*ssenke*”, “*migguggu*”, and many others, enables her to transgress the canonicity of the metropolitan language by domesticating and subjecting the structures, grammar, logic, and beauty of the language to her indigenous epistemological groundings.

Buganda cosmological myth and *Gandasation* of the English language

Kintu provides an intellectual platform to debate Euro-western historical distortions of African realities and civilisation. The text is a counter-narrative that seeks to clear the air or subvert these disabling, conflicting myths about Uganda and the entire Black world in general. In fact, this explains the Afro-positivist, pan-African, or negrophilic appeal of the novel. Apart from Ganda historiography, other equally important themes in the novel include gender politics, the need to reconstruct the Ugandan story to accord women a primal place of importance, postcolonial crises bedeviling Uganda, HIV/AIDS, poverty, and other important motifs that postcolonial texts always fixate on. Of importance to the present article is that, irrespective of the tropes and their interpretations, Makumbi ingeniously adheres to the *credo* of the third generation of African writing by interspersing her narrative, though written in English, with Ganda cultural terms. This helps her to create a text where two warring languages contest for space and recognition. As will be proven later, she must have done this either for the sake of cultural identity or to help free African literature from undue influence of a foreign language, or possibly to save African literature from the *precipice of oblivion* to which it has been pushed by the metropolitan literatures. Makumbi uses various linguistic tools to signify the *Gandasation* of the language of her novel. Inserting Ganda words, phrases, cultural terms, folksongs, and oral traditions into the body of a text written in English helps to position the writer as a postcolonial voice who has succeeded in tapering the strength of the Europhone tongue used in African literature. Her major objective can, therefore, be surmised as a calculated attempt to privilege the indigenous over the exogenous. This is conceived as her contribution to the campaign for the de-colonisation of African literature that resonates convincingly with the latest breed of African writers.

The novelist reconstructs the image of postcolonial Uganda and situates it within the Buganda aetiological myth to interrogate certain tales, beliefs, and perceptions of the nation regarding its pre-colonial histories and post-colonial realities. The realities need to be rejigged to reveal immanent contradictions in the Western distorted myths of Africa fostered on the African imagination. One of the imposed myths is the Judeo-Christian *untruth* tracing the genealogy of Black Africans to Ham. Ham is one of the three sons of Noah who was cursed by his father for seeing his nakedness, and subsequently became a slave to his brothers (Shem and Japheth). Racist European theorists often leverage this *untruth* to hoodwink Africans and make them accept their subjugated position as a corollary of the Hamitic ancestral curse without interrogating it to verify its truism (Amolo 48–9). A myth like this needs to be touselled and reconstructed, so as to rewrite African history or the pre-colonial Ugandan history that the imperial powers garbled to suit their own selfish ends. Just like Achebe, Ngugi, and other postcolonial African writers, Makumbi uses her epic to tell her native Buganda/Ugandan story; after all, self-narration affords writers the opportunity to dispel insinuations and negative stereotypes.

Kintu is an eponymous multi-layered story of Kintu Kidda, the *Ppookino* of Buddu Province, and his scions who inherit a curse from their progenitor (Kintu Kidda). On one of his journeys to pay obeisance to Kyabaggu—the new *Kabaka* and paramount ruler of Buganda kingdom at Lubyia in 1750—he inadvertently kills his foster child, Kalema. Kalema is the biological son of Ntwire, a Tutsi and herdsman who lives on the outskirts of Kintu’s village looking after Kintu’s cattle. Kalema is on an errand to get drinking water for Kintu at a spring in o Lwera where Kintu and his entourage have sat down to eat at a campsite before reaching Lubyia. Kalema breaks a taboo by drinking from Kintu’s gourd. He is oblivious that Kintu is at his back, having arrived at the spring from the undergrowth nearby where he has gone to relieve himself. Kintu slaps Kalema’s jaw, and the boy falls to the ground. He dies in the process and is buried shabbily by the roadside. Ntwire places a curse on Kintu and his descendants when told about the death of his son. On receiving the news, he simply replies: “I am going to look for my child. If he’s alive, I’ll bring him home and apologise. But if I don’t find him—to you, to your house and to those that will be born out of it—to live will be to suffer. You will endure so much that you’ll wish you were never born. [...] And for you Kintu, even death will not bring relief” (56). With Ntwire’s curse, many generations of Kintu Kidda suffer a

lot of misfortunes, one of which is the lynching in 2004 of Kamu Kintu at Bwaise market. He is arrested by the Local Councillors for Bwaise Central out of envy for owning a “gleaming 5-CD *Sonny* stereo (a fake Sony model, made in Taiwan)” (xv, emphasis in original), and a “tiny *Panasonic* TV (also made in Taiwan)” (xv, emphasis in original). To break the curse, a meeting that brings together all the Kintus scattered all over Uganda and beyond is called.

As Amolo observes, the Kintu myth bears intertextuality with the Judeo-Christian Noahic curse on Ham, as both myths relate to the inter-generational woes that befall a people as a result of the supposed misdeed of their ancestor, and the traceability of the myth to the dystopian image of Africa by the West (48–9; 340). Just as the misadventure that befalls Kintu’s scions is traced and reinforced by the belief in Ntwire’s curse on Kintu, Africans are made to believe in their underdevelopment and the fatalist conditions that reinforce it. The West misinterprets the Noahic myth and (re)-constructs it to perpetuate or justify the dolour of Africa. To them, Africans are scions of Noah; they inherit their black skin colour from Noah’s curse (Amolo 48; Makumbi 340). The significance of the myth in contemporary African scholarship is affirmed by Birgitta Farelius who argues that the Hamitic hypothesis belongs to a Euro-centric historiography about Africa (107), noting that the Hamitic myth still lingers on in African historical writings. He maintains that unless Africans make an attempt to liberate themselves from “the projection of European dominant mentality as expressed in the creation of the Hamite, it is difficult to break ground and gain new knowledge [or] deeper understanding” (107) of the African Self, which, according to Augustine Nwoye, needs to be remapped in order to engender a better understanding of the continent in the 21st century (119).

By even re-methifying Buganda myth (Amolo vii), Makumbi has indicated her interest early in *Kintu* to nativise her narrative which may be best told in *Gandaglish* (*Gandaised* English), because myth is best narrated from the point of view of the culture that owns it. Prominent among the linguistic tools she uses to bridge the gaps between English and Luganda is translation. Since the English language is “steeped in imperialist and patriarchal tropes and symbols” (Cooper 1), Makumbi is “challenged to find an English into which to translate [her] [...] culture, language and knowledge base without being sucked into some of those older tropes and imperial metaphors” (Cooper 1). She adopts Brenda Cooper’s approach, advocating the need for African writers to be concrete, literal, and focused on the shape and rhythm of words themselves as objects, or incorporate words and wisdoms from their indigenous languages and rely quite heavily on the enabling potential of the rhetoric of metonymy (1).

Makumbi, for instance, substitutes the Ganda/Bantu word, *kanga*, for a “woman’s wrapper” in the sentence: “She picked a *kanga* off the floor and wrapped it around her naked body” (xiii, emphasis in original). While the primary function of clothes is to cover body nakedness, the semantic and cultural implication of the Bantu word (*kanga*) may have been lost on non-Ganda or non-African readers. Its use suggests monolithic hermeneutics (as a mere covering cloth), whereas the clothing is equally used for other purposes and worn in many other ways apart from being wrapped around a woman’s body. While the term refers to a fabric or covering cloth often worn by women, it can be worn “as a skirt, a shawl, an apron, or a head wrap. They are used as a towel, pot holder, tablecloth, curtain or blanket. Mothers often use a *kanga* to carry a baby on their back” (Kathy in Kenya). Interestingly, the clothing is also used as a site for recording and passing across important messages, proverbs, and information. Drawing from the foregoing explanation, to translate *kanga* as merely a “woman’s wrapper” is to limit its cultural meaning and epistemological grounding, yet this is the interpretation that most non-Ganda readers are likely going to give the cloth. As a syntagmatic element within the sentence, the implicit understanding of the sentence rests on the word (*kanga*), and the sentence may lose sense should it be removed completely. As a way of interrogating the postcolonial, transgressive politics that the Ganda cultural term is used for in the expression, one may ask: why did Makumbi use her local term rather than expressing her thought simply in a metropolitan language? The inferable response is possibly to taper the strength of a hegemonic tongue and project the beauty of her indigenous language. Her intention is probably to prove that Ganda culture is not inferior to any other around the world, and that it is a veritable source of knowledge production. The foregoing is buttressed by the Ganda proverbs: “*Omuggo oguli ewa mulirwano, tegutta musota guli mu nju yo, [...] [meaning] ‘A stick in your neighbor’s house can never kill a snake in your house’ [and] Ama gezi muliro, bwe guzikira ewuwo ogunona ewa munno, [meaning] ‘Wisdom is like fire, when it is extinguished in your home, you get it from the neighbor’*” (Gichure 115, emphasis in original). The former implies no culture is so poor that it cannot teach anything positive to other cultures, and the latter implies no culture is so perfect that it cannot learn from other cultures (Gichure 115).

Makumbi uses Ganda epistemology to teach Western culture, believed to often display a hubristic attitude towards others, certain truths. One of these truths is to point world literature to the path it should tread in the

21st century—the path of multiculturalism. She advocates the belief that the source of knowledge production is not monolithic and does not begin or end with the Western academe or culture. To her, there are other sources of knowledge production outside Europhone sources. Other sources of knowledge need to be acknowledged, since they are veritable platforms for knowledge distillation.³ Besides, they enrich human knowledge and contribute immensely to global literary studies. Makumbi seems to claim that global knowledge production should be inclusive, rather than exclusive. She spurns the chauvinist ideology deepening superiority and/or inferiority of cultures/literatures because of her conviction that no knowledge is minor or major. To Makumbi all *knowledges* are useful for the advancement of humanity, irrespective of sources. The structuring of the sentence, “She picked a kanga off the floor and wrapped it around her naked body”, arguably lends credence to the foregoing, as it appears that Makumbi deliberately privileges her indigenous tongue to compel non-Ganda, non-African readers to familiarise themselves with the episteme. The implication of this is that she amplifies the postcolonial voice speaking to the centre that: “I am using your language so that you will understand my world, but you will also know by the differences in the way I use it that you cannot share my experience” (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 123). She interrogates the subalternity of African literature and constructs a different image for it as a corpus that has migrated from the margins to the centre of world literature. This is a transgressive thinking, a postcolonial agenda to reverse the marginal-core ordering and advocate for a systematic projection of indigenous thoughts in African literature. Makumbi’s poetics is characterised by this postcolonial agenda, and it reverberates convincingly in *Kintu* and *The First Woman*.

To demonstrate the zeitgeist of her generation and its undercurrents, Makumbi explores the vast repertoire of her Ganda cultural terms which undergird her people’s epistemology, ontology, and cosmology to taper imperial English in her fictional narrative. Most importantly, she evinces the practicability of mixing indigenous language (its lexis, grammar, syntax) with that of an exogenous language, so as to create ambivalent texts without compromising standard. Consequently, she employs linguistic (metonymic) strategies to achieve her goals. I conceive the linguistic strategies as metonymic when positioned by the writer to represent a whole, or used as a substitute for someone, groups, concept, or things. Makumbi decidedly translates many Ganda words, cultural terms, and belief systems into English to possibly weaken the strength of the English language. She uses various translation techniques, including literal translation, replacement, or substitution to achieve this aim. When certain words or statements are translated from one language to another, the idea is to make the translated text reach non-speakers. More often than not, when the translation is done the target language bears the brunt of translation politics. Though the language still looks like its original self, if checked properly its strength may have been weakened as it is compelled to carry the weight of the source language. In the realpolitik of world literatures, this practice often affects the metropolitan language(s).

The novelist indicates her transgression of the orthodoxy by employing substitution and trans-linguaging as a linguistic strategy to *deliberately* undermine the strength of the English language in her text. She italicises some of the indigenous terms and, in many other instances, leaves them un-italicised. Code-switching or translanguaging in *Kintu* is functional and deliberate; it is not done unconsciously. As a matter of fact, it is used as a linguistic tool to “leave the Western reader fragilised and at times incapacitated to discern full textual meaning without trying to engage with the strategically infringing language” (Teke 77). One of the functions Makumbi uses this linguistic strategy for is to make it serve as a vehicle for cultural signification and identity. She similarly employs the strategy to indicate the otherness of African language, culture, and literature in a Europhone African text, and expose how the indigenous and exogenous tongues conflict with each other, leaving the former triumphing over the latter (Zabus 2). She creates a scenario in which an imperial language suppresses an indigenous one, and, by so doing, exposes the hypocrisy of Europhonism to confine indigenous tongue to the periphery. Makumbi, however, challenges this injustice by interspersing Europhonism with indigenous expressions. To this end, she ingeniously subverts the English language to portray her disavowal of Europeanisation or *English-ation* of African literature, since the literature of any people often constructs a definitive image for them or defines the language of the people (Ukam 46).

Some of the cultural terms in the text are italicised and translated, while quite a few are translated but not italicised. It can be argued that italicised cultural terms are used to foreground the *marginal* status of language/culture inserted in the body of a metropolitan language/culture. Some of the terms are expressed in the following sentences: “enkejje [small fish that look like tilapia] fish powder for children” (38); “If she plays her *mpiki* [black seeds used in a local board game known as *manchala*] well” (44); “Kyabaggu climbed the podium and walked to

the *namulondo* [the throne]" (45); "in front of them, Ssentalo the Ssabatabazi's [a super warrior's] freshly severed head glared at them like a ghoulish trophy" (45). These terms, therefore, become metonymies standing for an *othered* language, culture, and literature within the body of an imperial literature, language, or culture. Considering the structure and mode of use of these terms, their intra-sentential usage suggests alterity, difference, asymmetry, and marginalisation of African language, culture, and literature in a cultural space to which it is autochthonous. It reads like the terms are caged and handicapped by a powerful hegemonic Western force, just as it suggests metaphorically that African culture, language, and literature are under the oppression of the West. However, the reverse seems to be the case, because the writer uses an indigenous language to covertly abrade an imperial tongue.

She also uses the translation strategy of amplification to provide additional information about some Ganda terms in the text. By so doing, she gives literal translations of the terms, phrases, and expressions to possibly make their meanings accessible to non-Ganda speakers. Examples include: "lukiiko, the parliament sessions" (5); "king's mother, *namasole*" (6); "Reeds had given way to *ssenke*, a sturdy grass accustomed to stingy weather" (14), "*e Jikiriti*, the burial shrub for dogs" (33); "*ssabasajja*, man above men" (35); "kisaakaate, the fencing" (38). While some of the amplified terms are nouns in apposition, though each of the two nouns belongs to the languages of the centre and margin, respectively, they jointly refer to the same concept or idea. This narrative style enables Makumbi to create correlates of ideas or transfer these ideas from an indigenous language to an exogenous tongue. The practice has two implications: one, it has a political undertone, as the writer may have adopted this approach to indicate the intrinsic symmetry between English and Luganda. Two, she may have adopted this style to reveal the depth of inadequacy that the English language possesses to express with exactitude certain indigenous episteme and cosmology.

To further corroborate this view, there are some Ganda cultural expressions that unsettle the expressive strength of the English language. If English is forced to convey them, they may lose their philosophical exactitude and succinctness. Epistemic terms like "Gatonya", "*ekyogero*", "*mwana akaaba*", "*musenene* rains", and many others are deeply steeped in Ganda philosophy. Besides, they are carriers of the Ganda epistemology. So, literal translations of such words are difficult to come by, because doing so may lead to misrepresentation and devaluation of a people's worldview. *Gatonya*, for instance, is a Luganda name for the month of January. It is always a month that is hot with a lot of bananas/plantains (*matooke*) ripening in the plantation. *Gatonya* literally means "they are dripping". This is probably inferred from the fact that there are always bountiful harvests of *matooke* in January, just as many are left un-harvested to rot away in the plantation. When bananas rot, they turn black and drip water, hence the term "dripping" or *gatonya*. *Ekyogero* refers to the herbal bath prepared for newborn babies, but the import of the word goes beyond that, because among the Ganda many people always attribute the success of a person to the herbal bath prepared for him or her. *Mwana akaaba* literally means "the child is crying" in Luganda. *Mwana akaaba* buns are often given to crying children to pacify them, hence the name. *Musenene* is derived from the word *nsenene* (grasshoppers). *Musenene* is also the name given to the month of November in Buganda, because grasshoppers often invade Buganda in large numbers. This month is also characterised by heavy rainfall, and the more it rains, the more grasshoppers invade the land.

Noticeable in Makumbi's novel is the peculiar usage of the English language to carry the weight of Luganda's socio-cultural realities. While conscious of the domineering character of metropolitan language in (East) African literature and the need to preserve Ganda culture and language, Makumbi can be said to have consciously *Gandaised* the English language in order to, first of all, reach her Buganda/Ugandan audience, and also promote the Luganda language in the process. The English used in *Kintu* is *Gandaised* English. It may not reflect in the volume of lexis, structure, syntax, and possibly the disruption of grammar; however, the tone, rhythms, and flavour of the English reflect the spirit of Luganda. This is possible through her re-mythification of Kintu myth and the reprocessing of Buganda verbal arts, enabling her to add local flavour to her narrative and undermine "the authority of English, which is here minorized" (Zabus xvi). Consequently, the believability of her narrative is enhanced, as her (Buganda) African audience feels drawn to their local myths expressed in a domesticated European language. Makumbi succeeds in creating a postcolonial paradigm reversing the centre-margin, major-minor structuration in Europhone African literature, leaving the major *minorised* and the minor *majorised*. In Emily Apter's words, Makumbi "participate[s] in the politics of damaging standard English [...] [and] the spirit of a lost African language gene runs amok in the syntactic corridors of Standard English" (qtd in Cooper 14). As a matter of fact, the novelist's literary sensibility appears to have been compelled by a telepathic consciousness that seeks an African-centred

literature, rather than Euro-centred African literature. This consciousness is nurtured by her desire to bail out African literature from its subaltern and minor status.

Bridging cultural and metonymic gaps in *Kintu*

The literary tool deployed to domesticate the English language in *Kintu* is metonymic gap. Apart from demonstrating how language is metonymic of cultural difference (Ashcroft 52) in the novel, the postcolonial model also provides the theoretical standpoint for Makumbi to designedly interrogate, subvert, subdue, and lower the intellectual and epistemological strengths of the metropolitan language used for the expression of her peculiar African experiences and thoughts. The model enables the novelist to use an imperial language, with all its cosmopolitan character, metonymically without undoing her indigenous cultural heritage (Teke 71). Anthony Chennells explains the moral justification for this trend and condition of reversality intended to turn up the heat on the Supremacist and Universalist literary model by rebelling against Western canons that often pigeonhole African literature and push it to the margins of global politics and literature. Chantal Zabus corroborates Chennells' observation, stating that "When 'the Empire writes back to the centre,' it does this not so much with a vengeance as 'with an accent', by using a language that topples discourse conventions of the so-called 'centre' and by inscribing postcolonial language variants from 'the margin' or 'the periphery' in the text" (xv). While affirming that this may not be a new trend, as the practice has been on for a long time in African literature, Chennells maintains that:

Within my discipline of the study of literature, I note that in the past both British and African critics have seen Anglophone-African texts as inherently inferior to the canonical texts of the British metropole. I also note the multiple ways in which that subordination became insubordinate in African literature and how the normative authority of the metropolitan model was subverted: literatures developed which refused to mimic the productions of the metropole and combined native narrative and poetical traditions with metropolitan models. (III)

Babatunde Ayeleru defines metonymic gap as "the injection of African words into Europhone African literary works [...] to inscribe the cultural identity of both the author and his/her work" (19). Aduke Adebayo reveals that "The new generation of [African] writers, male and female, has become more daring [as] they go beyond a mere sprinkling of the local expressions into the French language to create new forms of adopting several strategies" (qtd in Ayeleru 23). Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin describe the postcolonial model as a "subtle form of abrogation. [...] and cultural gap formed when appropriations of a colonial language insert un glossed words, phrases or passages from a first language, or concepts, allusions or references that may be unknown to the reader" (123). Quoting Ashcroft, Cooper describes metonymic gap as a tool of resistance that allows postcolonial writers to "introduce a different language and knowledge system in the undertow of [the imperial tongues]. This occurs when 'texture, sound, rhythm and words are carried over from the mother tongue to the adopted literary form'" (10). Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin explain how the model works:

Such words become synecdochic of the writer's culture—the part that stands for the whole—rather than representations of the world, as the colonial language might. Thus the inserted language 'stands for' the colonized culture in a metonymic way, and its very resistance to interpretation constructs a 'gap' between the writer's culture and the colonial culture. The local writer is thus able to represent his or her world to the colonizer (and others) in the metropolitan language, and at the same time to signal and emphasize a difference from it. (123)

Makumbi, just like other postcolonial (African) writers, achieves certain aims through the hybridity of Luganda with English in *Kintu*. One, there is an interplay or a (re)enactment of the Manichean dualism in which the binary politics is (re)constructed within the text as various cultural terms or *knowledges* couched in indigenous language(s) struggle with the hegemonic European language. Consequently, the text becomes the locus of linguistic, cultural, and epistemological contentions, as the local jostles with the foreign for space and attention. The second achievement is the creation of texts that trade their monolithic cultural identity for a hybrid or syncretised configuration. Rather than having a completely English-African text, the reader is left with an amalgam or a potpourri of languages, episteme, philosophies, techniques, and multicultural identities. A perfect example of this textual potpourri is Irete Lazo's *The Accidental Santera* (2008) and many other texts produced in Latin America. In Lazo's novel, the protagonist narrates her eventual acceptance of Santeria, her ancestral religion, and the factuality shaping her poly-cultural identity. While the text is dappled with English, Spanish, and Yorùbá, the protagonist reveals that the three languages define her personality, because "I learn in English/I love in Spanish/I

pray in Yoruba” (xi). Africa, just like other colonised spaces, has a number of literary works that may serve as a vitrine displaying confluences of languages or foreign/indigenous *knowledges* in a given literary text. Three, the linguistic strategies employed in Makumbi’s novel help to “install and bridge a cultural gap between African subject and English-speaking reader by replicating the rhythms of oral language in literary English” (Ashcroft 63). Consequently, the novel becomes a transcultural text and a site of negotiation in which the space between Self and Other is blurred (see Ashcroft 53).

Locating African literature in Fanon’s zone of occult instability

With reference to the subversion of Europhonism in *Kintu*, I have resorted to the aforementioned sub-topic to reflect on *English-ation* of African literature and what Obi Wali calls “a clear contradiction, and false proposition” (284) regarding the aptness of having Italian literature in Hausa (284), or possibly having French literature expressed in Yorùbá or Kikuyu. The paradox raises fundamental issues that impugn the originality, creativity, and accuracy of realities or experiences portrayed by Europhone African writers in their texts. By *English-ation* I mean the *English-initiation* or the *initiation* of African literature into the *cultic* corpus of the metropolitan English literary tradition. I construct *English-initiation* as a hypothesis, a cultural domain or location of cultural conquests that signals and ingeminates Franz Fanon’s “zone of occult instability” (183) within the context of us/them, centre/margin, orient/occident binaries. The zone of occult instability, according to Joan Gordon, is “an area of potential for change created by processes of decolonization” (209). It is a spot where “meanings are indeterminate, flexible though still meaningful, sometimes paradoxical. [...] [which] the colonizer can exploit [...] in order to retain control through neocolonial institutions, but this zone is also the site of rebellion against the colonizer” (209). If the concept of initiation reifies admittance of someone into an esoteric group with the accompaniment of rituals and a displacement from one state of awareness to another, I claim metaphorically that African literature ever since its contact with European civilisation has been thrown into this zone. It has progressively undergone paradigm shifts—a sort of metamorphosis from Africanised literary tradition to a foreign literary experience, style, or methods.

The shift is captured by the insertion or absorption of an African literature into the capacious chassis of a major, hegemonic literature with a view to emplacing the binarist schema of master-servant, big-small, North-South, centre-margin dialectics. Doing this ensures the conformity of African literature to the canon of imperial literature. In other words, foreign literary methodology and experience pre-empts African accumulative process of narratology, dramaturgy, poeticisation, and orality. The *initiation* of African literature comes with rites of passage, abnegation, and a mental re-conditioning that inferiorises indigenous African languages and cultural practices, but forces fetishisation of the English language and culture on Anglophone African writers. It similarly projects English literary tradition as normative. English, just like the dominant romance tongues (French and Portuguese), is a “killer language” (Ashcroft 46) that has sounded the death knell for several languages which it attrites insidiously. The killer tendency of English and, by extension, Europhonism probably informs Wali’s assertion that “the whole uncritical acceptance of English and French as the inevitable medium for educated African writing is misdirected, and has no chance of advancing African literature and culture” (282). Most Anglophone African literary writers, especially early writers, have been observed to fetishise anything English to the detriment of their indigenous cultural practices. They are accused of being copycats of foreign literary and cultural traditions due to their excessive valorisation of European credo and failure to provide a counterpoise in their indigenous African cultural traditions. Their “shamanist obscurantism” (Ede 18; Ramakrishnan 67) and Westernism reeks of uppityness, therefore making them complicit in projecting the false image of Africa to the West in their writings.

Though Dubem Okafor considers the emphasis placed on the language of African literature as diversionary, it is imperative to note that the centrality of language to any humanistic discipline helps to provide direction and determines or structures the perception and interpretation of meanings in these fields. It similarly helps in determining how the generated meanings, through a given language, contribute to knowledge; after all, one of the aims of humanities revolves around meaning generation and negotiation. Okafor’s belief that the primary duties of both writers and critics are often side-lined when they exert energy interrogating the appropriateness of language used in realising African literature is problematic. According to him, critics of the literature whom he disparagingly refers to as “comprador elite, the new-fangled bourgeoisie, the counterfeit, opportunistic, and self-serving intellectuals” (3) waste time in calling for the “recuperation, development, and creative deployment of indigenous languages” (4) in African cultural articulation. He believes they should rather create a lingua franca of harmoni-

ous coexistence and inter-ethnic communication that can address Africa's cacophonous linguistic situations, its numerous ethnic clashes, and cultural variability (3). Okafor posits that critics that advance the course of indigenous languages in African literature are doing so hypocritically, "because no serious-minded person really believes that that would facilitate interethnic communication among the many language and dialect groups" (4). While not condemning his position, the views of those who clamour for the indigenisation of the language of African literature cannot be dismissed in view of their Africanist agenda and desire to produce literature that reflects local peculiarities through the use of indigenous tongues and epistemologies.

It is a given that the vacuous usage of English and deliberate mimicking of English literary tradition by some African writers have robbed African literature of the opportunity to assert its individuality, particularity, and authenticity (Tsaaior 3) amidst the pantheon of world literatures. Among African writers and critics, the fetishisation or *English-ation* of African literature has even minorised literatures written in African languages, as Western critics look down on them, regarding them as fringe literatures.⁴ Worse still, this condition has exacerbated the major-minor dichotomy between imperial and African literatures, underplaying the importance, contributions, and voices of writers or critics from elsewhere other than the Global North. Language is a carrier of cultural architectures. When a people decide to embrace foreign tongues to represent local realities or convey their feelings, experiences, and thoughts, they are unconsciously inferiorising their language/literature and possibly calling for its *glottophagy* or *linguicide*. Ngugi wa Thiong'o comments on the foregoing by decrying the mortification of African literature and self-abasement of African writers who, rather than devising ingenious ways of solving the menacing linguistic conundrum that entraps their literary sensibilities, "define themselves in terms of the languages of imperialist imposition" (286). He submits that these Afro-Europhone writers end up with a warped perception of reality, because their tool of self-definition and worldview is under the fetters of Euro-Western linguistic suzerainty. Ngugi's solution to the *glottophagy* of African languages is that African writers "should reconnect themselves to the revolutionary traditions of an organised peasantry and working class in Africa in their struggle to defeat imperialism and [...] communicate the message of revolutionary unity and hope in the languages of the people" (303). Though his solution revalidates his Marxist convictions, Makumbi seems to have adhered to his instruction by challenging and undoing the epistemic violence done to African languages in African literature, hence her creative deployment of Ganda cultural terms and episteme in her Europhone African text.

Conclusion

In this article I have explored the creative imagination of Jennifer Makumbi, submitting that she has become a dominant force in the (East) African literary landscape. It specifically discusses her penchant for tapering the expressive strength of the English language by inserting her native Ganda epistemology into the body of her narration in *Kintu*. She employs translation techniques to indicate the inability of the English language to adequately represent her indigenous philosophy and epistemology in African literature. Makumbi's novel bears conspicuous touchstones of the third generation of African writers whose poetics largely advocates literary decolonisation of African literature, and favours domesticated European languages to express African socio-cultural peculiarities. As a postcolonial writer, she succeeds in setting in motion enabling machineries needed for careful manipulation of the English language so as to depict the realities of multiple worlds and languages (Cooper 1). The approach helps to syncretise indigenous and exogenous languages in a rainbow African cultural space. It also advocates major-minor symmetry in world literature and rejects or reverses the marginal status of minor literatures. Consequently, she has re-echoed in the 21st century those agitations of early African critics who clamoured for the independence of African literature from the literary heteronomy of Western literature and languages. The critics' advocacy is against the Universalist praxis of Western literature and its predilection to dominate literary activities all over the world.

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Notes

1. This edition was edited by Martin De Mello and was published by Crocus in Manchester.
2. For the purpose of this article, I limit my identification of writers belonging to this generation to women. That is not to say that there are no male writers belonging to the tradition or that gender is a factor in determining writers that belong to the generation.
3. Professor Fallou N'Gom of Boston University, USA, disclosed this in his 30 June 2017 public lecture, "Beyond Europhone Sources: African Sources of Knowledge in *Ajami* and Indigenous Scripts", organised by the Faculty of Arts, University of Ibadan, Ibadan.
4. Per Wästberg even believes that "books written in African language have less literary importance than those written in a European language" (137). Wästberg's submission is a misapprehension shared by many critics, and this is possibly responsible for the *erroneous* description of Chinua Achebe as the "father of African literature" (Okafor 3). Though Achebe definitely had a great influence on the literature, the fact remains that some Africans wrote before him. The list includes: Thomas Mofolo who wrote in Sesotho and published *Chaka* in 1925 (1931); the Senegalese Bakari Diallo who published *Force Bonte* in 1926; Ousmane Soce who published *Karim* in 1935; the Beninese Paul Hazoume who published *Doguiçimi* in 1938; Daniel Orowole Fagunwa who wrote in Yorùbá and published *Ògbójú Ode nínú Igbó Irúnmalẹ́* in 1938, which was later republished as *Ògbójú Ode nínú Igbó Olódumarè* in 1949, and, in the same year, published *Ìrèké Onibúdó*; Amos Tutuola, who wrote in what could be described as *Yorubaised English*, published his first book, *The Palm-Wine Drinkard and his Dead Palm-Wine Tapster in the Dead's Town* in 1952. Achebe's canonical text, *Things Fall Apart*, came out much later in 1958. As a matter of fact, Cyprian Ekwensi wrote in English and published before Achebe. His first novel, *When Love Whispers*, was published in 1948. He also published *An African Night's Entertainment* in the same year and the *Leopard's Claw* in 1950. If fatherhood is determined by age or year of publication, Achebe, with due respect, cannot father African literature, because other Africans whose texts equally discuss and validate African cultural ethos published before him, irrespective of the language(s) they chose to express their fictive imagination. Besides, Achebe's description in *Magill's Survey of World Literature* as "The first African writer to win broad critical acclaim in Europe and America, [who] [...] has shaped world understanding of Africa and its literature" (Kellman 7) further validates Ngugi's asseveration that Africa's fate may have often been decided by the Western world (285). Achebe's acceptance in Europe and America in the 1950s and 60s belies the existence of other African writers whose contributions to African literature cannot be neglected, but did not catch the fancy of the West possibly due to the writers' use of indigenous languages to express their thoughts, or because the thrust of their narratives was/is uninteresting to Western readers.

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Speculative fiction and African urban futures: Writing food in Billy Kahora's edited collection

Imagine Africa 500

Doseline Kiguru

Speculative fiction and African urban futures: Writing food in Billy Kahora's edited collection *Imagine Africa 500*

In this article I explore the place of the future African city as presented in contemporary African speculative fiction. I focus on the short stories in the anthology *Imagine Africa 500: Speculative Fiction from Africa* (2015) to look at how the urban space is conceptualised in these narrations of an imagined future Africa, 500 years from the present day. While the discussion looks at the urban space and imagined technological development, it highlights the ecological narratives and the contrast drawn between the city and the rural and the local and the foreign, as imagined for the future by relying on the employment of food imagery in these stories. I look at the use of food in these speculative narratives as a link between the familiar and these strange, imagined futures as presented in the anthology. I aim to provoke a debate on the imaginations of what a future African city may look like as presented through literary works and the significance of these imaginings today within developmental and environmental lenses. I read the future city through use of language, space, images, form, and style to look at how the modern short story is theorising on African futures.

Keywords: speculative fiction, dystopia, post-apocalypse, urban, city, food, nostalgia.


Introduction: Imagining the future collectively

The history of literary publishing in Africa is one of an industry that has had to overcome various obstacles mainly around funding and government support (Bgoya and Jay; Davis). However, there have been various efforts over the years aimed at overcoming some of these obstacles, one of which has been writers forming writers' collectives from where they are able to take part in various forms of literary and cultural production. In this article I focus on the efforts of Story Club Malawi which brought together various writers drawn from all over the continent to work on an anthology of speculative fiction with the theme of imagining the continent's future. The resulting work, *Imagine Africa 500* (2015), brings together a total of 15 short stories by different writers drawn from various African countries. It features several well-known as well as upcoming writers in contemporary African literature and is edited by renowned Kenyan writer and editor Billy Kahora. These stories were curated at a creative writers' workshop focusing on African futures as presented through literature. The workshop was organised by Malawian writer Shadreck Chikoti and was hosted by the Story Club Malawi in 2015. This was preceded by an open call for writers from all over Africa interested in speculative fiction. The selected writers took part in the workshop facilitated by Kahora as well as Uganda's award-winning writers Jackee Budesta Batanda and Beatrice Lamwaka. The workshop was later followed up by mentorship between the more established writers and the upcoming ones, and the result was the anthology.

The call for writers to the writing workshop had the curators' note: "We urge writers from all over the African continent and in diaspora to give us their dreams, their dreads, their hopes, their fictions about the future in Africa in 500 years from now".¹ As a result, the short stories that came out of this initiative can be categorised under speculative fiction. The writers have used the genre as an avenue to explore the possibilities available for Africa, the only limit being the imagination of the author. In the short stories, the authors deliberately blur the

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lines between reality and fantasy and magic and imagined technology in order to make this possible. The narratives demonstrate how future technology has advanced to the level of allowing a merger between the real and the fantastical in order to explore the ghosts of Africa's past, present, and future.

In defining the term 'speculative fiction', Gray Wolfe notes that this genre is usually used interchangeably with science fiction but can be generally defined as a genre where "established facts' are extrapolated to produce a new situation" (122). In defining the same term, Marek Oziewicz argues that "[w]hile distinctions are the lifeblood of literary criticism, the appeal of the term 'speculative fiction' lies in its inclusiveness and open-ended porousness" (8). In this context, I use the term speculative fiction as an overall genre to refer to narratives with elements that do not exist in the real and the contemporary world; narratives that challenge the generally accepted reality by mainly exploring the trope of "what if?". Some of these stories fall under the genre of science fiction, others under magical realism, and others under fantasy. However, they all present a "what if?" scenario and the major focus in this article is the question of: "what if the current expansion of cities continues and in 500 years there is no more land to expand cities horizontally, ending up with just vertical city expansions?" From the curatorial level of these stories, they chose to employ speculative fiction as a genre in order to offer social and political critique of society today. Indeed, Belén Martín-Lucas notes that, increasingly, "this genre has often been considered a most apt mode of narrativizing the present times of ultra-rapid changes in science and technology as well as social structuring" (69).

In all the short stories in the collection, the setting is in a post-apocalyptic time period and a critical look demonstrates the bleakness of the imagined futures as presented through the fictional lenses in this anthology. The first story, "One Wit' This Place" by Muthi Nhlema, opens with a lonely character looking forward to reuniting with her lover who went out to war "to save the old world" (15). Most of the land is under water or fire because the ocean has taken over from one side, while the desert has consumed most of the remaining land. In other stories such as "Necessary and Sufficient Conditions" by Wole Talabi, "A is a Four-Letter Word" by Hannah Onoguwe, and "Women Are From Venus" by Tiseke Chilima, the setting is after technological mishaps that have led to genetic modifications resulting in a society divided between the humans and the non-human genetically modified others. However, in other stories such as "Transit" by Derek Lubangakene, "Tiny Dots" by Tuntufye Simwimba, and "When We Had Faith" by Lauri Kubuitsile, the apocalypse has been caused by disease. While each story is different, they all present a dystopian future for the African continent. However, as Martín-Lucas notes:

In its classic subgenre of dystopia, narratives display catastrophic futures in the wake of nuclear disaster, ecological ruin, global economic crises, totalitarian regimes, or more often a combination of all these. Although dystopia is usually considered a pessimistic and depressive mode of writing, this is in fact a genre of hope: after all, there is life beyond the apocalypse and, even more importantly, dystopic fiction's cautionary tales signal the ways to prevent it happening. (69)

Lyman Sargent defines dystopia as "a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as worse than contemporary society" (222). The future imagined for Africa through this anthology is one where the general quality of life has fallen and all forms of human connection, including familial ties, are almost non-existent. The urban space 500 years from now has extended both vertically and horizontally. Concrete and steel buildings have reached out into the sky, transportation litters both ground and air as the human race continues to improve technologies that ease transportation by making it more rapid. Even humans have evolved and merged with robots through genetic modifications and other forms of technology.

"Transit" presents a futuristic society where all the men are impotent, and society regenerates itself through laboratories. The main character, Duncan, however, was able to sire a son who is now considered a cure and must be protected because "he has no shunt in the back of his neck, or IV receptors in his major muscles. He wasn't born in an Amniotik-tank" (131). They live in a city populated by glass and brick walls and the people are constantly affronted by the piercing lights of police vehicles levitating over windows and with light beams that can "scan every inch through the thick walls" (127). In "Tiny Dots" the city is a desolate place and people are dying of skin cancer. But as they await death, they are constantly bombarded by billboards from all angles, even on their balconies. "The Wish Box" by Chinelo Onwualu presents a future city where the gap between the rich and the poor is even wider than it is in the present moment and a magic box that a rich teacher presents as a gift to her poor students shows their future would be no better.

Writing about the genre of speculative fiction, Heather Urbanski notes the role of this genre in social critique and political intervention, acknowledging that “it shows our nightmares and therefore contributes to our efforts to avoid them” (1). As Hoda Zaki explains, “the overt pessimism of a specific dystopia is often belied by the covert utopian hope that readers will change the trajectory of their society” and that such dystopias are then “intimately connected to utopias in offering oblique hope to the reader” (244). In the discussion about the dystopian futures as presented in these short stories, I call for approaching dystopia and utopia not as two opposite ideas but rather as interrelated and interconnected factors that are both as a result of, and aimed to influence, the present society.

The anthology’s focus on Africa is a conscious effort to place the continent at the centre of global imaginations of the future. Drawing from Achille Mbembe’s perspective, the anthology seeks to affirm that “emerging tacit consensus is that *the destiny of our planet will be played out, to a large extent, in Africa*” (96, emphasis in original). In the anthology, the localised experiences of the characters speak to global issues such as climate change and its effects, as well as political and economic power and its effects on human relationships, demonstrating how the genre of speculative fiction can be used to demonstrate the implications of global interconnectedness. Indeed, as Teju Cole notes, while “all futures are specific and local” they are also “simultaneously local and woven into our global realities” (41). In this context, therefore, the dystopian futures presented in the anthology in the context of Africa become a base for reading current global realities and the place of the African creative writer in the wider global narratives on representation today.

Esthie Hugo explores the idea of African creative artists employing the use of dystopia in their works as a comment against afro-pessimism. While analysing the futuristic films by Kenya’s Wanuri Kahiu and Cameroon’s Jean-Pierre Bekolo, Hugo argues that the employment of afro-futurism in the films seeks to “critique the present status quo in order to imagine alternative futures” (210). She adds that afro-futurism in the films presents “an aesthetics of hope, which, by placing African bodies in futuristic landscapes, dismantles a cultural logic—an essentializing afro-pessimism—that sees African countries as existing outside of time, ‘progress,’ and modernity” (210). My analysis of the stories in this anthology acknowledges the positive role of dystopia and argues that the anthology has “envisioned speculative fiction as an enabling genre for social critique and political intervention” (Martín-Lucas 70).

While dystopia is the common trope running through the anthology, one of the major connecting links is the use of food imagery. Food runs as a common theme in different forms, from hunger and consumption to food rituals and practices such as preparation and cooking, food production, and sharing, among others. In one story, there is a world war in search of water where the African continent becomes a superpower because of its access to water while the rest of the world is a desolate wasteland. In other stories, descriptions of food, food cultures, and rituals are used as geographical markers in future cities and countries where former (now current) state borders no longer exist. Furthermore, there is use of food as racial and planetary identity markers where inter-planet wars are rife, as well as use of food as economic class markers where city expansions have meant that the soil for growing food has become a precious commodity, among others. Other writers have employed the image of food to help draw a comparison between the human and the ‘other’. For example, in Hagai Magai’s “Those Without Sin”, a young man, Nduge, comes back home from jail and tries to reintegrate back into society. However, much of his social surroundings have changed and a visit to his local bar demonstrates this. He is served by a robot waiter named BarRob. The story takes place mainly at the bar and uses the image of nicotine absorption to demonstrate the difference between the humans and the robots. Nduge notices the robot waiter smoking a cigarette and wonders “why he had to smoke since he had no lungs, but the way the smoking made BarRob appear more human was a complete answer to his question” (65). A focus on the employment of food imagery and related rituals, therefore, provides an entry point into reading the effectiveness of these stories within the larger global narrative envisioned by the anthology. Writing about Russian literature and the significance of food, Ronald Le Blanc explains that “many of the characters who populate Russian fiction seem intent upon reminding us that—in literature as in culture—food not only nourishes, it also signifies” (246).

In this light, therefore, an analysis of food as a metaphor in these stories also places the discussion within current ecocriticism narratives. Graham Huggan assesses the emerging alliance between postcolonial criticism and ecocriticism and argues that both “are invested [...] in the situated critique of current globalizing practices that use capitalist ideologies of development to justify corporate expansionism and technological managerialism; and both are equally concerned with critically analysing the representational mechanisms that lend legitimacy to these practices, demonstrating the power of culture to (re)shape the word and, through it, the world” (6). The

analysis of the stories in this collection pays attention to Huggan's warnings about ecocriticism "aestheticiz[ing] underdevelopment even as it claims to ease the burden of the oppressed" (6). Drawing from Arundathi Roy's work on environmental activism, Huggan further warns "of the small-'r' romanticization of perceived 'peoples of nature' that has more in keeping with western cosmopolitan conscience-making than with the solidarity of the oppressed" (7). Huggan's work forces a re-evaluation of the ecocritical narratives that idolise the past (present day) through nostalgia in the *Imagine Africa 500* anthology, paying close attention to the character's relationship to the environment, and reading this against the idea of romanticisation and exoticisation of the "peoples of nature".

The imagery of food and longing for a past Africa

Arjun Appadurai adopts the idea of gastro-politics as a tool to explore food as a political character. He argues that "food, in its varied guises, contexts, and functions, can signal rank and rivalry, solidarity and community, identity or exclusion, and intimacy or distance", adding that the human body's daily need for food and the rituals that come with it forces food to become "well suited to bear the load of everyday social discourse" (494). In *Imagine Africa 500*, the centrality of food in the various narrations provides a nuanced way of reading the imaged future societies exploring the effectiveness of the genre in provoking change today for a better future.

Jean Retzinger explores the significance of food and the environment in post-apocalyptic science fiction films and highlights that food in speculative fiction serves as a bridge between the familiar and the unfamiliar. In this anthology, descriptions of food, food rituals, and food scenes are what link the imaged future Africa to the Africa of today in contemporary society. As Retzinger notes, "[s]trange foods help emphasize the strangeness of the future—and serve as a warning of what may be in store for us" (377). He further adds that "because food can speak so vividly to both short-term and long-term human needs and environmental changes, the search for food amidst a world of scarcity is a frequent motif in post-apocalyptic science fiction" (377).

The short story "After Market Life" by Frances Muwonge is set around the concept of food, its production, preparation, and consumption. It is one of the few stories in the anthology that experiments widely with the idea of "strange food". The story is set in a future marketplace in Kampala. It follows the lives of the food vendors, focalising on the lives of Nama, one of the vendors, and Flavia, the market manager. It is Nama's last day selling at the market and she looks forward to life after the market. It is also the day that all the vendors have to vote for new rules for the market and Flavia is pushing to allow the open sale of pills, replacing food in the market that had before then prided itself in focusing on rare, organic food. Organic food is presented as strange and exotic as "[m]ost Ugandans were almost exclusively pill-fed; nutrient rich capsule substitutes to food were affordable and readily embraced by government" (68). Muwonge uses the imagery of food, juxtaposing between the familiar and the alien, and links this to the strangeness of the future humans who occupy this society where most of the people are genetically engineered and there is a raging battle between the 'moderns' and the 'naturals', with the latter being less genetically modified.

The setting in the market—exploring the market chatter, conversations, and arguments—works to juxtapose the strangeness of the bio-engineering effects on the body and on the food with the familiar rituals around food. Through this juxtaposition, the analysis reveals that even centuries into the future, and despite the developments in scientific and technological development, society has not changed much and is still unwelcoming about interracial relationships, there is continued greed for material wealth over human life, and gender inequality still persists, among other vices.

In Musinguzi Robert's "Unexpected Dawn", water is used as a symbol of the greed and hunger for political and economic superiority. In the story, a war rages because of water—or the lack of it. Five hundred years into the future, a united Africa is now the centre of power that has just survived, and won, a ninth World War. In a story that aims to invert the current world economic domination, the continent of Africa is presented as a single nation and has achieved a world superpower status because it possesses the precious commodity—water:

The UAS [United African States] possessed the only clean water in the world. It has been her source of power for centuries now. It was the bargaining chip he [sic] has had over the Westlands and Middlelands. The Arabs were first to realise that the only way to survive was to cede all power to the UAS. The UAS held the only hope of life for billions of the world's inhabitants who depended on Hisa, the earth's sole source of fresh water. Their governments, their armies, their oil and all their other resources were useless without the assured supply of water. Other water sources had long dried up due to adverse climate changes or were too polluted to be drinkable [...] The nuclear holocaust had propelled these lands back almost 100 years not only in population, but also militarily and in terms of food security. They now practically survived on the magnanimity of Africa as their soils could no longer support plant life. Nor could their diseased waters sustain fish life. (116-7)

Robert focuses on the significance of water for the sustenance of life on earth. His story argues that controlling access to water also means controlling access to food, and this is what makes the UAS a superpower. The story plays with current and past historical realities where the continent has been relegated to a third world status because of lack of access to economic resources. In this imagined future society, economic and political power imbalance persists—only this time, the power structures have been inverted to place into the centre regions that had previously been marginalised. The story could be read as a comment on the impossibility of fundamental change in society because even as Africa rises to become a superpower, the world is still divided into centre vs. margins.

In “The Wish Box” the writer draws attention to society's continued stratification on class basis. The story mainly takes place within a school setting. It draws on the ritual of tea breaks at the workplace where the teachers use this setting to catch up and talk about their lives. Abiye, a rich teacher working in a poor slum school in a future Nigeria, is presented as a dedicated but privileged teacher. Over tea break, Abiye introduces her colleagues to the wish box that she gives as a parting gift to her students. The wish box has the power to read futures and, at the end, it exposes the futility of the poor students who are hoping to escape poverty through education. According to the wish box, the poor students who are described as sons and daughters of compost farmers and traders will grow up only to serve the rich classes. The dystopic future is presented as a culmination of the present society's lack of efforts in enforcing fundamental change in the wider society.

“Snake Blood” by Dilman Dila opens at a party in an old, dilapidated bar. According to the constitutive components of the occasion, the availability of food, alcohol, music, and dance is portrayed. The action takes place in a future society rebuilding itself after a war and an unnamed technological disaster. The characters are afraid of the technological advances that had made previous civilisations more comfortable. The lack of advanced technology in various forms makes the story seem more like the description of a pre-modern society as compared to most of the other stories in the anthology. The strangeness of the food consumed at this party is demonstrated as not being because of its technological and scientific production process but rather because of its lack of sophistication. At the party, a group of soldiers, under their leader Adrova, are “jubiling over a carriage of gold that they had stolen earlier in the day, their biggest haul ever” and are celebrating because they “now had enough money to rebuild the town into a fortress, and make it their permanent home” (28). The food available is skewed rabbit on the grill and wine stored in drums and served in gourds. The characters are also dressed in rabbit skins. Through a detailed description of the food and the setting of the party, the future society is curated to look like the past from today's perspective. Retzinger has written about how the ‘future’, sometimes depicted in speculative narratives, “is actually one of clashing pasts: primitive, nomadic hunter-gatherers versus a repressive, patriarchal (and sterile) society” (376). This perspective points to speculative fiction's focus on the past and on history as the source of a solution for the problems and difficulties evident in future societies. It is also one of the main reasons why nostalgia features prominently in these stories, enhanced through the images of food.

Le Blanc uses nostalgia to “indicate a state of mind characterized by wistful regret or a sense of loss over a time and place now long gone, combined with a sentimental longing to escape back to what is remembered as being a much simpler world” (244). By focusing on the nostalgic longing for a past Africa through food, the narratives emphasise the need to return to that mythical place called home. It is a comment on the contemporary world of today presented as a much better world than what the future may present. Although dystopic, the focus on food and nourishment is presented as a form of alternative ways of avoiding a bleak future. For many of the characters in these stories, the post-apocalyptic worlds they are forced to inhabit are unfavourable and their only form of escape from the dystopia that is their reality is through a nostalgic longing for the past (which is the present-day Africa). This longing is portrayed and assuaged through the imagery of food. In “After Market Life”, the unique

feature of the market is not the fact that its patrons are almost all genetically engineered in various ways, that teleporting is the preferred mode of transport, or that the human beings here are categorised according to ‘moderns’ and ‘naturals’, whereby the moderns are genetically modified. This market is significant because it is one of a few of its kind left that sells ‘real’ food grown in ‘real’ soil.

The Kololo air strip, one of two tracts of terra firma land in Kampala, hosted a weekly Saturday market for farmers to sell their goods outside of the conventional instant exchanges. They maintained some traditional goods, most especially those grown from soil that could not be instantly created like other manufactured goods. Not without changing their state at least. (67)

In this society, the humans get their nourishment mainly from pills or canned goods. However, the average lifespan of these humans is quite high, with some characters aged well above 200 years, and with one character aged more than 400 years. With such long lives, the humans can relate with the past through the memory of food. This longing, the nostalgia of nourishment through actual food, brings to light the concrete nature of the urban future. The future of Africa is presented as a concrete and steel jungle which has replaced any green life on earth. The earth, the soil, is inaccessible to many and only the privileged few have access to it—and it shows through the quality of their lives. Consider this narration in Muwonge’s story where Nama’s African identity is challenged by her fellow market women. She retorts: “So because I go to the salon, I’m a different person? For your information I have been lightening my skin at the Kampala Road clinic for years. I grew up in Muyenga you know, on terra firma”, to which the other market woman says, “But you were just the cook’s daughter, you never belonged there” (74).

Nama has a stall at the market where she sells chocolate baked goods. The other vendors have different assorted food items such as jam and chutney, tomatoes, cheese, and eggs that are hatched from ‘real’ chicken, among other food products from the farm. However, even at their stage of urbanisation and technological advancement, there is still no hope of reclaiming the past or maintaining a relationship with the earth, with real soil. As Flavia, argues, “[p]ills are the way of the future. How long do you think this market will last if we only allow real food? How many people do you know who actually eat real food? Next you are going to require it has to be from terra firma” (75). The plot of the story is pegged on the conflict in the market between allowing the sale of pills as replacement for food and continuing to focus on organic food that is ‘familiar’.

This Kampala of the future echoes the city described in “Necessary and Sufficient Conditions”. In this story, the narrator is seeking to avenge the death of his mother. He embarks on a journey out of the city to murder an old professor who lives off the grid. In his journey the reader encounters the sharp contrast between the city and the rural in this fictionalised western African future state:

I looked through my window, took in the sights of untarnished forest and allowed them to sink in. It was only in rare occasions that I got to see nature like this, as yet untamed. It was all so strikingly different from the domestic, subjugated pockets of greenery that dotted the Lagos supercity complex—six solid structures, each one towering seven kilometres into the sky and imposing a ten square kilometre footprint on the ground, like giant fingers insolently poking at the eyes of the gods—in precisely picked parks and conservatories. (97)

The old professor has deliberately chosen to live off the grid away from the supercity. His environment is described as spectacular and different, even as this means that the old man is unable to enjoy the comforts of technology that comes with living in the city such as “a houseboy android or at least a basic domestic drone” (99). It is no wonder that the narrator is surprised by the smell of food when he gets to the old professor’s house: “I stumbled into the living room and noticed the smell of boiling vegetables coming from somewhere in the back of the house. It smelled like bitter leaf” (99). Later, the old man offers to share his food with his visitor, making reference to familiar food: “I was making efo ro and amala, would you like some?” (100). The whole story is driven by memory, starting with the memory of the pain of the narrator’s mother which has driven his desire for revenge. Writing about the place of food in immigrant Indian communities in East Africa, Dan Ojwang has emphasised that “food is used primarily as an instigator of memory and an object of nostalgia” (73). In this short story, as the old man lies dying, he also reveals his memories of the woman he killed, his research partner, for the sake of ensuring that Africa stays ahead in technological development. The contrast between the city and the rural is also provided as a form of old and new memories: the old man’s memories of the past before technology, presented by his green environment and his food, which is then juxtaposed with the city’s concrete jungle in the story’s present memory.

In “When we had Faith”, a woman risks it all just to buy tea leaves. She is killed as she tries to buy tea to satiate her craving. This is a futuristic society in Gaborone after an apocalyptic moment. There has been a deadly illness and the survivors are divided into two groups: one is a violent religious and political group called the Abutite with the sole aim of getting rid of everyone who does not believe in the group’s leader, J. W. Abuti. “Once the diseased infidels are gone, we will be free to repopulate the continent. Abutites, God’s chosen people, will survive and thrive. Amen” (81). The woman and her daughter venture out of their hiding to find tea because her only connection to the past before the apocalypse is the memory of food familiar to her palate. Dressed in Abutite clothing, she goes to the shops where she intends to barter one of her prized possessions with a packet of tea leaves. Her efforts to blend in are not enough and when the crowd finds out that she is trying to impersonate an Abutite, she is killed.

These stories engage with contemporary political, social, economic, and ecological issues and present a fictionalised reality that is possible with certain choices made today. This fictionalised reality is one where there is a degeneration of people, humanity, physical materials, land, climate, and social ties. Everything is dysfunctional, from families, material structures, social networks, to food and nourishment. In general, what these fictionalised images of a future Africa present is one where urbanisation has exposed all the weaknesses of society, making the past look like an ideal that is most sought after. The only redeeming factor provided in the narratives is nostalgia where future generations’ only hope is to cling onto a past identity that is tied to food.

The use of pastoral and gastronomical terms in the stories in this anthology directs attention to the earth, the soil, and the general environment, prompting a discussion on urban development and ecocriticism. Susie O’Brien focuses on how social and environmental issues are interrelated and argues that “ecocriticism is worth investigating as a critical movement that has the potential to contribute to the understanding of the ways in which cultures and environments shape each other—an understanding that becomes particularly urgent in the current period of environmental crisis” (178). In the context of writing food in speculative fiction, Elzette Steenkamp explains that the “apocalyptic element prevalent in many of speculative fiction’s future histories points to an engagement with ecological concerns, particularly the dire threat to the earth’s ecosystem due to the massive impact of global warming, pollution, the human population’s overexploitation of natural resources and ruthless experimentation with weapons of mass destruction” (25).

In these short stories, food is used as a bridge between the alien and the familiar. Food is what links the imagined future Africa to the Africa of today. Retzinger explains that “[w]hen characters eat familiar, contemporary foods in futuristic settings, food typically represents the world that has been lost” (372). In these stories, the authors rely on the image of familiar food to comment on environmental degradation and its effects on future societies. For instance, in “After Market Life”, the story focuses on the scarcity of traditional foods such as eggs, cheese, and tomatoes, among others, sold in this market to warn about future ecological disasters as a result of unchecked urban expansion. Through nostalgia, it echoes a Kampala of the ‘past’ where food is freely available because there is enough land available and accessible for food production. Adam Roberts emphasises that the genre is more focused on the past than the future it seeks to present, noting that “the chief mode of science fiction is not prophecy, but *nostalgia*”, adding that “despite a surface attachment to ‘the future’, it seems clear that SF [science fiction] actually enacts a fascination with the past for which ‘nostalgia’ is the best description” (33–4). Relying on the food images to demonstrate the bleakness of the future, the aim of these stories is to immortalise the past, presenting it as ideal. However, as Retzinger notes, nostalgia “is notoriously unstable” and the past is illusory; “what we long for may never have existed” (372). Therefore, as argued in the beginning of this analysis, dystopia and utopia functions here not as two opposite ideas but as interrelated and interconnected factors that help to shine more light on the present. While the anthology’s focus is on the future that features in most of the stories as dystopic, the nostalgia for the past (present day) helps to expose the dysfunctions in today’s society.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the stories in the *Imagine Africa 500* anthology have heavily relied on the imagery of food and nourishment as a metaphor to engage the reader in a discussion about the future and present of the continent in regard to rapid urbanisation and climate change. Most of the stories feature first person narratives—the ‘I’ narrator. The effect of this narrative voice is that it plays a big role in capturing the immediacy of the moment. The reader becomes one of the characters in the story and is transported into the future urban city that maintains a link with the present through the food imagery. The reader imagines themselves as part of that bleak future society, a story

technique that's useful for immediacy and for urging action. This narrative technique is especially significant in situating the genre within current ecological and environmental debates. Speculative fiction not only presents a "what if?" scenario, it also acts as an important voice in sounding warnings regarding the future. Speculative fiction writer Margaret Atwood writes: "We want wisdom. We want hope. We want to be good. Therefore, we sometimes tell ourselves warning stories that deal with the darker side of some of our other wants". The African continent is currently experiencing the world's most rapid urban growth. Compared to other continents, the continent is the least urbanised today with about less than half of its population currently living in urban areas. The stories in this speculative fiction anthology could, therefore, be read as a literature warning about the future, not only of the African continent but of the world, if the obsession with urban expansion persists. Borrowing from the work of Martín-Lucas in analysing urban dystopias, these short stories "constitute powerful destabilizing ideological tools that may be instrumental in the construction of alternative social spaces and practises in global cities" (70). The future societies presented in the short stories in this collection therefore serve to allow for contemporary social and political critique, immersing themselves in current debates on ecocriticism.

Notes

1. Available online at <https://www.worldpulse.com/community/resources/library/36057>.

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Churchill Show: Transgressing language codes and upsetting stereotypes **Patrick Chesi Lumasia**

Churchill Show: Transgressing language codes and upsetting stereotypes

Cultural productions on television and/or online platforms are immensely prolific at expressing the peoples' every day and the historical. They provide platforms on which actors express themselves on their own terms, in their own language codes and styles with little censure. With the proliferation of digital technologies and the advent of the internet and attendant new media, the production, circulation, and consumption of cultural texts on the (Eastern) African scene has radically shifted and continues to grow in ways unimagined before. In Kenya specifically, with an exponential growth of television channels, numerous local cultural productions continue to burgeon, carrying with them a constellation of voices that are representative of the country's socio-cultural and linguistic diversity. These productions not only entertain, but also explore critical issues in Kenyan society and beyond. Among them is *Churchill Show*, which through an aesthetics of escapism, (re)narrates quotidian events and recuperates and (re)interprets the country's historical trajectory. Moreover, the show oftentimes embodies a political aesthetics cloaked in postmodern humour that serves to recalibrate common/sensical perceptions as well as the regimented practices and ways of knowing. Thus, the show transgresses language codes and upsets socio-psychological stereotypes, for which it is often condemned, to shape a new notion of 'Kenyaness'. **Keywords:** Churchill Show, aesthetics of escapism, transglossia, political aesthetics, postmodern humour, 'Kenyaness'.

Introduction

In this article I argue that the Kenyan stand-up comedy programme *Churchill Show*, besides entertaining its audiences, addresses serious issues in Kenyan society through an aesthetics of escapism. I opine that the comedy show continues to free constellations of youthful voices that are expressive of the peoples' quotidian and the historical in a hypermediate manner. By employing transglossic language practices, *Churchill* comedians transgress language codes and upset stereotypes via a political aesthetics of postmodern humour. After situating the show in an aesthetics of escapism using "*Churchill Show: Moi Day edition*", I analyse three more routines: one by employing a transglossic framework; two to demonstrate how *Churchill* upsets stereotypes to fashion a new Kenyan spirit of 'we-ness' among the ordinary peoples.


Churchill Show and an aesthetics of escapism

Churchill is a general exhibition stand-up comedy that premiered in September 2008 as *Churchill Live*, rebranding into *Churchill Show* and *Churchill Raw* in 2012. The former features established comedians; the latter upcoming talent. It is hosted by Daniel Ndambuki ('Churchill') in Nairobi and tours the country twice a month.¹ Produced by Laugh Industry Ltd., *Churchill* is broadcast every Sunday between 8:00 and 9:00 pm East African Time on Kenya's Nation Television (NTV) and uploaded on YouTube by either NTV or "Churchill Show". The show begins with a theme song: "Bringing Kenyans back together [...] *Jamii zote pamoja*" (all communities [back] together), which is significant owing to the fact that the show was founded in 2008, the year Kenya experienced the worst post-election violence in its recent history following the disputed 2007 presidential election. The song therefore marks the show as saliently political.

Subsequently, the show is branded as 'more than just comedy', implying that it aims at more than just exciting amusement and laughter from the Kenyan people. I contend that to effectively address socio-economic and

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political issues without courting state censure, *Churchill* employs an aesthetics of escapism. William Paul explores this aesthetics in romantic comedies “as something other than pleasant diversions from serious concerns” (274). To this end, Paul attempts to disinvest the term ‘escapism’ of its negative connotation of being antithetical to ‘realism’ by suggesting that as a narrative mode, “escapism of necessity inscribes a reality” (276). He argues that for us to understand ‘escapism’, we must know what it is we are escaping from and to. In my case, answers to these questions provide access to the fantastical world of *Churchill* in that the specifics of the escapism, as Paul writes in his context, “are a product of its time, and in these specifics we can locate the reality the escapism references, the social order that its comic utopia seeks to counter” (276). *Churchill* is hence aesthetically escapist in so far as referencing the country’s quotidian and historical trajectory. In “*Churchill Show: Moi Day* edition”, for instance, *Churchill* transmogrifies its stereotypical self, dispensing with its perceived raw material of socio-psychological stereotypes about ethnicities to (re)interpret the Moi epoch (Laugh Industry, “*Churchill Show: Moi* edition”). The show takes place in an archetypal ‘Moi day’ sitting room, embellished with crochets, which only dressed the furniture on special occasions such as Christmas and visitations from long lost relatives, and a ‘Great wall’ television set, which was exclusively operated by *mzee* (Kiswahili for family patriarch). Anyone else operated the set under his strict instructions; otherwise, they received a terrible beating.

The terror referenced is truly reflective of the nature of fathers of the Moi era—1978 to 2002. Captain Otoyoo, a comedian on the show, underscores how parents were bizarrely ‘disciplinarian’. Children were to be seen and seldom heard; just as the overall Kenyan subjectivities were under Daniel Moi, Kenya’s second president who was accorded the respectful Swahili honorific of *Mzee* (among several others). *Mzee*’s word, however illogical, was law to which everyone submitted. This does not necessarily mean that only Moi was dictatorial. Jomo Kenyatta (Kenya’s founding president) was too, as Shilaho (51) notes; only, the said edition specifically references the Moi epoch. *Churchill* establishes a nostalgic mood of the time by leading the audience in singing “*Uvivu ni adui mkubwa kwa ujenzi wa taifa*” (Laziness is the greatest enemy to nation-building), a popular song by a section of Kenya’s military, the Maroon Commandos, that played on the country’s state and sole broadcaster, the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC), every morning at six, immediately after the national anthem. It urged everyone—from the farmer through the clerical officer to the school-going child—into hard work in the nation-building project.

After an interlude of musical entertainment interspersed with commercial advertisements, the 7:00 pm newscast followed. *Churchill* reads this in present time while impersonating Leonard Mambo Mbotela, a legendary Kenyan broadcast media personality, intimating that all news segments—main, business, sports, and even the weather forecast—revolve(d) around the president. In other words, His Excellency the president was virtually the news; the news presented him as the omnipresent ‘patriarch of the nation’. The *Kenya Times* newspaper, owned by the Kenya African National Union (KANU), Kenya’s sole political party then, was the Paper and the ultimate bearer of Truth. KANU was then described as *chama ya baba na mama* (father and mother’s party), a description spearheaded by the president himself as the party leader. Every voter was obligated to enlist as a member at an annual subscription fee and pledge their loyalty to KANU. As Charles Hornsby argues, Kenya was a party state (398). The country’s loyalty pledge to the president and the republic was accordingly amended to include Moi’s *Nyayo* philosophy of peace, love, and unity, which signalled his attempt to “build a legitimating ideology” based on Christian principles that he passionately defended (348). Moi never missed a church service, a ritual that always found its way into the news as a first item every Sunday. The 1980s witnessed widespread political repression in Kenya, with fundamental freedoms, rights, and liberties suppressed and denied as Moi tightened his grip on power after the 1982 failed coup attempt (9–10). Opposition parties were banned and Kenya became a *de jure* single party state in 1982. “Opposition to the government was treated as subversion, and the sole criterion for political success became loyalty to the president” (398), which buttressed the “Big Man” syndrome and its attendant personality cult culture: the evils that seem to stalk the country to-date (Shilaho 75).

Churchill juxtaposes the historical with the quotidian by introducing a platoon of ‘slay queens’ (and ‘slay kings’) to the president. Their clarion call is “No finance, no romance”. Attendant, too, are socialites led by Vera Sidika and Huddah Monroe. “Slay queen” is colloquial for a ‘good time girl’ who engages in compensatory and transactional relationships with elderly well-to-do men, or ‘sponsors’, for their money for flashy lifestyles in a consumerist society. Her male counterpart is the slay king, who resonates with the South African phenomenon of Ben 10 (Ligaga, *Women, visibility and morality in Kenyan Popular Media* 100). Dina Ligaga reads Sidika and Monroe as “hypervisible” Kenyan celebrities/socialites who represent “difficult women” with regard to their body “exhibitionist performances and self-representations online” in defiance of “heteropatriarchal norms of morality” (126).

Indeed, Churchill claims that the two and their kind are famed for disregard for clothing and for their artificial beauty, largely frowned at by the 'patriarchal police'. Prevalent among university female students, the slay queen phenomenon is not without its downside in regard to sometimes exposing young women to violent death as happened to Sharon Otieno, whom Otoy mentions just as Ligaga acknowledges (*Women* 113). Ligaga argues that these kinds of women "use their [feminine] vulnerability as a location of strength" (122), further contending that these women's behaviour embodies "transgressive femininity". Much as such reading speaks to new Kenyan femininities, the "cautionary tales" attached to the lifestyle paint it as dangerous and undesirous.

Comedian MCA Tricky comments on how slay queens live carefree lives ostensibly intended to trap 'sponsors' with pregnancies aimed at opening cash taps in the form of child support. The wily old men then turn to gruesome murders to eliminate them and the unborn babies as apparently happened with Otieno. In other words, slay queens are not so astute; they are just as gullible as they were as children when Moi used to fool them with milk to attend school. MCA Tricky extends the metaphor to belittle them, an element he shrewdly turns around to address contemporary political developments in the country. Another comedian, Johnny Boy, further draws out the metaphor to opine that if the devil's seat fell vacant, Kenyan politicians would contest for it. He seems to suggest that the Kenyan politician typifies the devil at whose mercy the citizenry finds itself. Thus, *Churchill* is the ordinary peoples' political programme that implicitly counters the divisive and exploitative narratives propagated by the state and/or the political class. In other words, whereas the show remains comedic, its routines are interspersed with (re)interpretations of the quotidian and the historical that speak to the salience of alternative histories as conceived by the ordinary people themselves; hence fashioning a new notion of 'Kenyness'. As Kimani Gecau argues, such histories and memories can only be channelled through the popular arts that chronicle and "mediate popular experience and constitute a very important element in the circulation of ideas and formation of opinion outside the official and mainstream media and channels" (29). Therefore, *Churchill* offers an alternative and prolific avenue, where a galaxy of comedians recuperates repressed histories and memories to (re)construct a sense of themselves that is cognisant of the ordinary peoples' shared past, common present, and a projected fruitful future devoid of biological/'tribal' essentialisms.

It must be remembered that Churchill was a member of the defunct make-belief comedy troupe of *Reddykulass* of the late 1990s that Grace Musila acknowledges "contributed towards the unmasking of state power, fracturing of the culture of fear and ultimately popularized a culture of critique of the workings of state power" (295). With his stage mantra, which speaks to an ostensibly worn people, Churchill seems to be continuing the work of *Reddykulass* with the aim of attempting to heal a people divided by statist machinations that have roots in the colonial experience and are propagated through 'tribal' politics often based on stereotypes that portray some communities as hardworking and fit to lead and others as lazy and unfit (Atieno-Odhiambo 243; Ligaga, "Ethnic stereotypes and the ideological manifestations of ethnicity in Kenyan cyber communities" 82). Thus, *Churchill* (re)narrates and (re)interprets daily and historical events on a weekly basis through an aesthetics of escapism with the aim of rebuilding an otherwise politically fractured nation.

The transglossic language of *Churchill Show*

As stand-up comedy, *Churchill's* ultimate objective is to elicit laughter. Consequently, it manipulates language by employing devices characteristic of verbal play such as punning, intonation, and metathesis and ethnic and/or other accents, often accompanied by non-verbal reinforcements such as gestures and mime. Satire, irony, sarcasm, contrast, and hyperbole help comedians caricature and parody those in authority and dexterously address serious societal concerns. Importantly, *Churchill* comedians ingeniously draw on the country's linguistic ecology of polyglotism in a manner that executes an implicit political aesthetics that transgresses linguistic codes through transglossia.

According to Ofelia García, transglossia refers to "the fluid, yet stable, language practices of bilingual and multilingual societies that question traditional descriptions built on national ideologies". The notion, the sociolinguist argues, "has the potential to release ways of speaking of subaltern groups that have been previously fixed within static language identities and hierarchical language arrangements that are constrained by the modern/colonial world system" (108). As they are under no illusions of being policed by Kenya's postcolonial language policy makers, the youthful comedians largely sidelined by the state not only imitate speech patterns from various locations and cultures, but also execute them as they are practised in everyday life and, in a way,

translocate the language of the 'streets' onto the comedic stage, thereby circumventing official 'censorship' to carve out a peculiar notion of 'Kenyaness'.

Taking cue from García, Sender Dovchin, Alastair Pennycook, and Shaila Sultana prefer 'transglossia' to Mikhail Bakhtin's 'heteroglossia'. The sociolinguists argue that transglossia makes possible the combination of "heteroglossic and transanalytic approaches and [...] draws attention to the transgressive ways in which voices operate" (104). They justify their preference with reference to recent translingual research in applied linguistics, which "indicates that language is ecologically embedded and interconnected with diverse semiotic resources" (94) that "occur across and within languages" (93). In other words, with the advent of globalisation and the complexities that characterise language acquisition in bilingual and multilingual societies such as Kenya, it is impractical to look at languages as autonomous systems because cultural contact and language interactions result in "multiple modes of semiotic diffusion", which cannot be adequately analysed under the auspices of code-switching/mixing and hybridity (93).

Sultana and Dovchin further vouch for transglossia because the variation in voices warrants both translocalisation and transculturation which, respectively, entail "drawing on linguistic and cultural resources from multiple locations [and] on multiple cultural resources" (70). With this concept, they contend, speakers "unravel the transgression in voices not so much in linguistic features, but in translocalization, transculturation, and transtextualization (deploying a range of meaning-making practices across languages)" (70). Accordingly then, transglossia "underscores the importance of mixing and blending and the way they engender new meanings" (67), which I argue is precisely the case in *Churchill*.

Simply put, the comedians eclectically employ language by adopting various voices from multiple socio-cultural and geographic locations while drawing from a wide range of linguistic and cultural resources within and without Kenya's borders. This engenders a linguistic synthesis beyond code-mixing/switching and hybridity in which languages and language practices are mixed and meshed by way of quoted and recycled speech, mimicry, and parody and employed to fashion a new notion of Kenyaness—a liberal Kenyan speech community on their own terms as opposed to that advocated by the state. Such language practices can only be effectively deciphered through a transglossic framework, which "leads to in-depth understanding of contextual (physical location and participants), pretextual (historical trajectory of texts), subtextual (ideologies mobilized by the texts), intertextual (meanings that occur across texts), and posttextual interpretations of the data (the ways texts are read, interpreted, resisted, and appropriated)" (72).

I employ this framework to validate this section's claim. From the "All white edition" I quote David's routine (and those further on) at length for context and the attendant analytical reference. This particular episode is so named because of the colour of dress of both the comedians and the audience. Churchill sets its transglossic tone by blending myriad voices in English and Kiswahili to show the differences in speech patterns of Kenya's social classes, reggae fans, and visitors from Seattle in the US. He also employs 'Indian'-accented English to welcome the Indians present, to whom he refers as "our friends" while assuring them that they will get the jokes as some will be made in "Indian". However, the show proceeds in Kiswahili/English predominantly, with an occasional dose of Sheng, leaving the Indians to their own devices.

Routine 1:

Font guide to languages: Kiswahili (bold), English (regular font), Sheng (italics), mixture/meshed (italics bold)

Lupita is the only Kenyan lady with natural hair. Kuna wenye wako na natural hair hapa? For real? [...] Lupita *alikam*, akaenda mbaka Kisumu. Na akiwa Kisumu ***mahawker*** walienda naye huko. ***Mahawker*** tu hawa wetu wa Muthurwa. Hawkers that sell nothing. Wako hapo: Oscars 150. You see, Oscars 150. Oscars 150. ***Namaanicha*** avocado na ***kashubari***. You know, Lupita is nurtured. What do I mean by 'Nurtured'? 'Nurtured' ni mtoto mwenye anaeza argue na budake. For example, Lupita *aliambia budake*, "I wanna be an actor". And the father was saying like, "Ok, I don't know. You wanna be an actor. It's ok; it's fine. We gonna argue about that". Watoi wa Westlands huwa ***wana-argue*** na buda zao [...] ***wana-argue!*** Kayole huwezi argue. ***Unaweza-argue*** na budako? Ati, "*Eh mmzae, maez joh, mimi naona tusikule cabbage, tukule sukuma coz ya heartburn*". Immediately, *mzae* anakwambia, "***Unargue*** na mimi? ***Yaaah!*** Unajaribu kunioneshaa, unaeza handle landlord, si ndiyo? Ni uhome. *Shika keja yako. Kila mtu na maisha yake*". Budaangu ***hunge-argue*** na yeye! For example, babangu alikuwa ***anasupport*** Manchester. Sisi wote tulikuwa Manchester *damu*. You know mpaka (ok Mii ni wa Arsenal) Manchester ikifunga, tulikua [...] We are forced to celebrate: goaaa! Because he's watching. Kuna siku Arsenal ishawahi funga na kitu ikanidanganya niruke nayo: goal! Nilimpata ameningoja hivi. "Irianza rini? Hiyo pepo ya Arsenal". ***Akaturnia*** mama yangu, "Sinasemanga mimi ni Manchester *damu*. Hii *damu* ni ya nani?"

Are there any Kenyan ladies with natural hair? [...] Lupita came and went up to Kisumu. Muthurwa hawkers followed her there to sell nothing but Oscars for 150 shillings. I mean, avocado and onion and tomato salad! Lupita is nurtured. A nurtured child is the type that can argue with the father. Lupita told the father, “I wanna be an actor”. Westlands children argue with their fathers. They argue! In Kayole, you cannot argue. Can you argue with your father? “Eh, old man, I think we should eat cabbage and not kales to avoid heartburn”. Immediately, the old man tells you, “Are you arguing with me? Yeah, you’re trying to show me that you can handle the landlord, right? You have to move out. Go rent your place. Everyone on their own”. You couldn’t argue with my father. For example, my father used to support Manchester [United]. We were all compelled to become Manchester United diehard fans [to conform]. I’m an Arsenal fan, but whenever Manchester United scored, we were forced to celebrate: goal! Because he’s watching. There’s a day Arsenal scored and something lied to me to jump up in celebration: goal! On coming down, I found him waiting for me like this (gesticulates how). “How did it start? That Arsenal evil spirit”. He turned to my mother, “I have always insisted I’m Manchester by blood. Whose blood is this?” (Laugh Industry, “Churchill Show—All white Edition”, my translation)

The pre-textual reference is made to Lupita, the daughter of the current Kisumu county governor, Anyang Nyong’o. She won an Oscar for her supporting role in Steve McQueen’s *12 Years a Slave* and was named *People* magazine’s most beautiful woman in 2014 (Jordan and Antoinette n. p.). David’s exaltation of her as the only Kenyan lady with natural hair is laced with both sub- and post-textual references, which he invokes to chastise Kenyan ladies for wearing synthetic hair. He demonstrates this contextually by pointing to unnatural hair in the audience and quickly ‘takes’ Lupita to her home county of Kisumu. Post-textually, the question David seems to be posing is: Why would Kenyan ladies struggle to sport natural hair while one of their own is doing exceedingly well in the United States with her natural hair? Contextually, the hawkers exploit the euphoria the Oscars occasioned, turning it into a buzz word that references a post-textual castigation of cosmetic beauty and unnatural hair, which he means should be disposed of.

David moves to the social class gulf existent in the country, which is quintessentially sub-textual. Lupita belongs to the higher stratum of society by parentage. She is ‘nurtured’, David intimates; she can argue with the father about her choices in life. The manner of her speech and career choice are revelatory. The language is American English-accented, the career a not-so-conventional one. The language is shared by the father, who is accommodating of her rather ‘odd’ career choice. Her peers in Kayole, a low-class settlement in Nairobi, have no such luxury. They cannot even escape the pains of heartburn by making a choice between eating cabbage and kale. The ‘authoritarian’ fathers have the exclusive say in the regimented lives of the Kayole youths, who have not the luxury of even basic life choices such as food. Just for raising the suggestion of the choice of what to eat, the youth of a Kayole parent is taken to be questioning the authority of the father, and is harshly advised to move out as he is assumed to be qualified to afford to pay his own rent. The Kayole family’s choices are not only limited in so far as food (and shelter); their language does not stretch beyond Sheng. Whereas Sheng is largely conceived of as a language of the youth, in Kayole the father and youth speak it indiscriminately to each other. This construction has obvious subtextual connotations. Like the Kenyan Asians (and Caucasians) in this episode, the mothers in these two instances are conveniently erased. They have no say in the family decisions, which paints Kenyan society not just as predominantly black African, but also patriarchal.

David, an Arsenal fan, and the whole household had no choice but to follow the father’s choices. No choice dramatizes this absurdity better than the father’s team choice: Manchester United, an English team. David could have used Gor Mahia and AFC Leopards, Kenya’s foremost football giants with a rivalry stretching back to their founding in the 1960s. Notwithstanding, his choices for his father and himself seem to speak to Kenyans’ passion for the English Premier League, and particularly these two teams, whose rivalry is similar to Gor Mahia and AFC Leopards’, only longer. David’s support of Arsenal is significant enough to make the father question his paternity. The mother is under attack for the son’s pastime choices. It is worth noting that David quickly slips from Sheng into Gikuyu-inflected Kiswahili for his family set-up, such that even the ‘ch’ in Manchester comes out just as inflected: ‘sh’. These are subtextual references locating him as a fluid subjectivity.

This is revelatory of the language of *Churchill* on the whole. Much as it is heteroglossic to the extent of capturing the variety of speech patterns explored in the respective voices, it is transgressive in that it does not use languages as autonomous systems in their standard forms. Because of the bilingual nature of Kenya’s public space, English and Kiswahili are often mixed and switched between in conversations. The youthful demographic spices up the mixture with Sheng: “a mixed code based on Kiswahili, English and local languages” (Wanjala 81). With its origins in Nairobi’s Eastlands area, Sheng is fast spreading to whole parts of the country. Thus, much as comedians quote, recycle, and reproduce speech patterns and voices of various personalities and speech communities,

they not only draw extensively on the country's translinguistic and transcultural ecology, but also mimic and parody the English, Kiswahili, Sheng, and vernacular codes in a transgressive fashion, which speaks to a different speech community than that regimented by the state and its language gatekeepers. These language practices are meant to elicit laughter. However, when critically examined, the transglossic language practices manifest a desire to break free from the regimentation of the post-colonial state and its agencies in order to fashion and entrench an alternative, 'freer' linguistic and cultural sensibility. Sheng thus establishes group identity and empowers its speakers, marking them out from other groups (see Wanjala 86).

Since Sheng cannot be ascribed to any given ethnicity, its use on *Churchill* attests to the comedy's attempts to resist narrow ethnic ascriptions as well as the constricting hegemonies of English and Kiswahili. Therefore, as Joyce Nyairo and James Ogude contend, Sheng marks its users as a generation in search of home and belonging, keen to borrow and blur ethnic identities and boundaries while fusing them with cosmopolitan discourses. And if indeed Sheng "best carries the weight of quotidian existence [and] longings for better tomorrows" (396), then it is definitive of "Kenya's Transnation", as Wanjala (88) argues, that connotes our notion of a new Kenyanness. In other words, Sheng constitutes a fluid Kenyan subjectivity (or *ethne*) that oscillates between the nation's geographies, cultures, ethnicities, and concepts while resisting grounding in any one of these categories. It could be one viable escape from the country's 'tribalism' woes that are steeped in exclusionary indigenous languages that English and Kiswahili have failed to stem.

Upsetting stereotypes: The political aesthetics of *Churchill Show*

Postmodernity is saturated with media technologies that are disruptive to age-old epistemes, perceptions, and the commonsensical. Humour of the kind that is prevalent on *Churchill* is consonant to such a conjuncture and can be termed as postmodern because it is amenable to the sensibilities of postmodernism. According to Nicholas Holm, postmodernism is an "often ill-defined and frequently overburdened" critical term that can nonetheless "do particularly pertinent theoretical work in terms of the political aesthetics of contemporary humour as a site of openness, imprecision and reflexivity in relation to formal conventions" (195). The humour thus questions totalising grand narratives and stretches boundaries between the real and the aesthetic to the extent of collapsing them (195). In other words, such humour not only makes it difficult to differentiate between the real and the referents thereto, but also holds them in a tension hard to resolve. As such, the humour makes us encounter the world as we might a text, and a text as we might the world; leading to confusion, anxiety, and even reactionary politics (196).

To belabour the point, the humour nearly collapses the distance between the material and the artistic worlds, making them appear conterminous and co-extensive in a tense relationship that the audience is arguably hard put to navigate. That is to mean that much as the humour derives from real experiences and/or perceptions, it is constructed in a manner that blurs the boundary between the 'real' and the construction obtaining therefrom such that the audience is simultaneously in the real and the aesthetic worlds. With the burden of resolution thus heavily weighing on them, the audience has to defer to "extra-textual codes of social judgement" in which it is implicated (115). The funniness of the humour then depends on how much each member is caught up in the content. Therefore, although (some) members may laugh, the laughter is inflected with a searing doubt as to whether they are laughing at the real (and, therefore, themselves) or the comical as jumbled up in the text since the incongruous and the butt(s) are not clearly differentiated.

This is significant because *Churchill* is often accused of entrenching ethnic stereotypes, which supposedly jeopardise ethnic relations in the country. Some critics go so far as recommending that the audience be made aware that the stereotypes are for comical purposes—as if this is not obvious already—and are not to be taken seriously (Ndonye, Bartoo and Khaemba 605). Intriguingly, some even call for governmental regulation for their use and complete abandonment (Ndonye, Yieke and Onyango 58). Such critics seem not to realise that the stereotypes are relayed through inoffensive humour, often forging group solidarity (Githatu and Chai 566), indexing 'Kenyanness' and diffusing inter-ethnic tensions (Michieka and Muaka 559). It might help if the critics saw the play on them as executed in mock-signification in order to draw the attention of the political elite to Kenya's socio-cultural and political predicament.²

Be that as it may, the humour is saturated with doubt because competing frames of reference overlap with each other, with none emerging as the dominant or standard against which a deviation is to be made. The referents of the text and the epistemes that structure them are thus destabilised. Consequently, the taken for granted perceptions imbedded in stereotypes are upset and so is the logic that engendered them because it is subjected

to scrutiny amidst mirth. What materialises in a sustained manner beyond the laughter is ambivalence. As Holm argues, “it is this unsettling of categories that emerges as the political meaning of the aesthetic logic of contemporary humour, and which therefore renders it a political aesthetic form, regardless of what occurs at the level of content” (194). In other words, the form of the humour supersedes the content, which is often assumed to be nothing but stereotypes.

The critics might need to call on the postpositivist realist theory of identity to make sense of the pastiche accruing from the blurring of boundaries between the real and the aesthetic. The theory neither essentialises nor dismisses identities, but believes that they can be both real and constructed, and that understanding them is paramount so that they are not reified but transformed and, if needs be, dismantled. The point is, as comedians enact their own/representative experiences and prevalent perceptions/conceptions, they (un)consciously assume or choose (for targets) between real and constructed identities for “complex subjective reasons that can be objectively evaluated” for progressive politics (Moya 9). The politics might not be radically transformative as the humour is not a priori determined as political, but it nonetheless unsettles common perceptions and understandings of the world by subjecting them to relentless interrogation geared towards contesting and renegotiating power relations (Holm 12).

In simple terms, humorous texts do the political work of unsettling our prevailing sensual, commonsensical, and epistemic perceptions, (re)defining and (re)distributing them anew. Thus, the political nature of the humour can only be unveiled upon examination of specific and contextual humour texts because the humour springs from the material world and, therefore, addresses real issues and real people and their real and constructed categories—race, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexuality, region, and class—into which they fall, by ascription or otherwise. These categories have ramifications on the distribution of goods and resources and the relationships individuals forge with their fellow human beings because these are embedded in societal structures of power responsible for social liberation and/or oppression (Moya 8).

This point is pertinent particularly to Kenya, where ethnicity is not only “a factor in political competition and in the allocation of national resources” (Shilaho 2), but also a determinant in public affairs, where something as basic as the spelling of one’s name could easily decide their fate since ethnic identity seems to trump all other identities. With the belief that “subjectivity or particularity is not antithetical to objective knowledge but constitutive of it”, postrealists affirm that “identities are not something to transcend or subvert but something we need to engage with and attend to” (Moya 17). Therefore, it sounds myopic to advocate for governmental regulation of socio-cultural stereotypes—the fodder of comedy—and naive to call for their abandonment altogether. The following routines suffice to make my point. For limitations of space, I only give my own English translation.

Routine 2:

If we (Somalis) try dancing in public, people start warning each other of imminent danger. I wonder what wrong we committed against you guys. People just have a negative mentality towards Somalis; that Somalis are dangerous. But it is true! We are those bad ones. That’s why I keep telling you, if you happen to sit next to a Somali on a *matatu*, just start a conversation with them. Ask them about the weather, if they think it will rain tomorrow’. Emphasise “tomorrow”. Their response should determine your next move. If they tell you that it can rain [...] just ensure you have an umbrella. Know you are safe. However, if they tell you, “It can rain now, perhaps at night, it can rain anytime, but who tells you, you’ll see tomorrow?”, alight immediately! It’s not safe. [...] We’re good people, but this mentality has limited us on the things we can say in public. For instance, as a comedian, you crack the best of jokes at which the audience cracks up. You exit, excited, saying, “I killed it!, I have killed”. Recently, after giving my best at a show, I went out and made a call: “I’ve finished KICC! I’ve killed. People are being collected from under the seats! There is even one fellow who was crying, pleading with me not to continue. But who am I? I killed that one, mercilessly”. Imagine, I didn’t complete that call. A G4S guard apprehended me and took me to Central police station to finish my story from there. (Laugh Industry, “Churchill Show S7EP30 KICC”)

Nasra Yusuf, Kenya’s only Somali comedienne on *Churchill*, problematises the material and the aesthetic. Somalis are seldom seen dancing in public. She couples this reality with the stereotype that Somalis are dangerous, which she ‘validates’ in her first punchline: “*Ni ukweli; sisi ni wale wabaya!*” (It is true, we are those bad ones!) Note that the ‘validation’ does not use the word “dangerous”, but “bad”, infusing it with ambivalence. Moreover, it is not “*sisi ni wabaya*” (we are bad), but “we are those bad ones”. This line is simultaneously confirmatory and dissociative of the said Somali dangerousness as it is ‘those’ as opposed to ‘these/we’. In Kenya, when someone or a group of people is described as ‘that bad’, especially by the youthful demographic, it connotes to being ‘extremely good’. That is,

they are extremely good at whatever they do. That explains why Nasra goes ahead to concretise her point in the conversational rain anecdote and brings it to a conclusion in her second punchline: “But who tells you, you’ll see tomorrow?”

Nasra means, and immediately declares, that Somalis are good people, with the insinuation they are good at whatever they do—including (if you will) wreaking havoc because ‘Kenyan’s have labelled and othered them so. Even in her comic frame, she alienates herself and ‘her people’ from the audience: they are Kenyans; she (and her people), Somali, their presence in the audience notwithstanding. The words ‘kill’ and ‘finish’ are simultaneously denotative of murderous terror and connotative of superb performance. This humour is shocking as it amounts to avowing a debilitating stereotype by the very stereotyped. To the Somalis in the audience, on whom the camera zooms on, it is particularly disconcerting. Some seem to hesitantly join in the laughter because everyone around them is laughing. This is certainly ‘uncomfortable humour’: “a mode of humour that holds particular powers to discomfort even sympathetic viewers”, and bears “an orientation towards the real” (Holm 89). In other words, the Somalis in the audience are uncomfortably implicated in the humour, with the resolution of guilt or innocence heavily weighing on them.

At ‘I killed that one, so mercilessly’, all the inhibitions of the discomfited seem gone. They appear to have found a vent in the laughter to expel the “pent-up nervous energy” that had been rapidly accumulating since Nasra began her gag. The text is, therefore, only humorous because it has caused them “feelings of anxiety, horror [and/or] expectation which [have led] to a build-up of psychic stress that [could] not find a proper outlet” (Holm 113). It is still discomfiting because it implicates the audience through persistent reference to reality. As Holm (114) argues elsewhere, this “constantly-referenced reality of the text [...] directly prevents closure; intensifying the stakes of social deviance by assuring the viewers that these are not merely hypothetical or fictional breaches, but actually occurring deviations, while also undercutting any easy sense of detachment that one might feel watching slapstick or a cartoon”.

In other words, the comical frame does not exonerate Somalis from their stereotypical inclination to terror. The relationship between the material and the aesthetic is complicated further as the incongruity is neither clear nor resolved. Even the butt is not clearly marked out: is it the Somalis, the Somali in the rain anecdote, the Kenyan who is supposed to alight immediately, the Somali-stigmatising Kenyans, Nasra ‘killing it’, the G4S guard, or Kenyans in general? The tension is prolonged and deferred to “the extra-textual world as the final arbiters of interpretation” (Holm 114). That is, the interpretation is left to the text-implicated audience. Even so, no one is sure as to how the audience will go about it because, implicated as they are, they are not homogenous. What is clear, however, is that Nasra has infused the stereotype with doubt, and thereby intensified the politics surrounding the treatment of the Somalis by Kenyans and their alleged terror inclination. This is where the political salience of identity lies. It is incumbent upon Kenyans to rethink the stigmatisation by engaging the Somalis or to carry on with it and leave the Somalis to excel at whatever they supposedly do. Somalis are also asked to interrogate themselves. In the meantime, Nasra is proof that Somalis excel at whatever they do, leaving the audience as she does in stitches with an elephant in the room.

Nasra’s aesthetic ingenuity allows her to construct her people through her theory-mediated experience and knowledge, a construction that does not in any way make her people and the prejudice they endure fictional. A credible knowledge of the perceptions of Kenyans about Somalis comes through, as Moya would say, in “a more dialectical causal theory of reference in which linguistic structures both shape perceptions of and refer (in more or less partial and accurate ways) to causal features of a real world” (12). The Somalia-based Islamist Al-Shabaab terror group with links to the Al-Qaeda and ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) networks has occasioned untold suffering within Kenyan borders and abroad. Among the perpetrators of these heinous acts—which include suicide bombings and random shootings in targeted buildings at innocent civilians, with Christians bearing the greater brunt—are people of Somali ethnicity.

Subsequently, Kenyans see Somalis, who are predominantly Muslim, as ‘innately’ prone to terror. It is this stereotype that Nasra confronts head on, with the hilarity that goes with stand-up comedy. Nasra’s experience or its construction can be read, in the words of Linda Martin Alcoff, as being acutely aware of how “group identities obscure internal heterogeneity”, thereby alerting Kenyans to the fact that no experience is “transparent, [or] theory-neutral” (315), much as the final interpretation and/or resolution of the humour heavily falls on the audience. As such, although Nasra’s aesthetic construction does not absolve her people from the stereotyping, she seems to be raising awareness that not all Somalis are dangerous. Moreover, there is need for the people of Kenya to try to

engage them, thereby placing themselves in a position to pick out the dangerous ones in order to take appropriate action.

The Somali condition in the country is both stereotypical and historical. Tabea Scharrer writes that Somalis have been characterised as “ambiguous citizens” since Kenya’s independence because of their lack of integration and their marginalisation within Kenyan society (495). Their ambiguity is aggravated by their confinement to the least developed northern part of the republic that borders Somalia and Nairobi’s Eastleigh area, where they are treated with suspicion as refugees taking away commercial opportunities from Kenyans. The rise of their members into high echelons of government and business, coupled with a rising population—which has enhanced their visibility—has worsened matters (502). Over the years, they have been subjected to security checks because they are associated with insecurity and terrorism (497). Worse, they are treated as racially and culturally ill-fitting within the republic, and “are seen as not really wanting to belong [...], as being an economic and political threat, and as not bound enough to Kenya due to their cross-border ties” (506). Nasra has been a victim of discriminatory searches on account of her ‘Somaliness’ (Irungu). Thus, her ethnicity affords her epistemic privilege, validating her knowledge that she uses to invigorate the politics surrounding the Somali community’s situation in Kenya, thereby unsettling the stereotype by disavowing it.

Routine 3:

Baba met Kenya One [...]. In this country we’re not tribal. It is only politicians who remind us of our tribes when they are vote-hunting. There’s no one in Kenya who wakes up in the morning and wishes that they were not their tribe. “Eh, Jehovah, God, Your Majesty, I thank you that I’m a Luo because God, you’ve really saved my time because I don’t have time to bargain”. Nobody! Nobody here in Kiambu wakes up and thanks God that they’re not Luhya. They never say, “Thank you God, for creating me a Kikuyu. You opened my eyes, made me a survivor. Jehovah, I’m the kind of person that can sell air to someone. I don’t take that lightly. And you deprived me of the desire for earthly things, and gave me the desire for the earth itself: land. Thank you God, you directed me to Kamakis in 1998, where I bought a piece of land for 30 thousand. Jehovah, the likes of Njuguna mocked me for the imprudence. In 2002, you gave us Kibaki, who struck it with the bypass. Its value shot to 2.8 million. Jehovah, there’s a plot I’ve bought in Isiolo. Open Jubilee’s eyes to open LAPSSET.” (Laugh Industry, “Churchill Show S07 Ep29 Thika Road Edition”)³

The episode bearing this routine was recorded on 9 March 2018 when President Uhuru Kenyatta and the people’s president Raila Odinga shook hands.⁴ Exploiting the event, David (whose surname remains unrevealed) casts doubt on ethnicity, the construct that has occasioned devastating divisions in Kenya every presidential election-eering period, where the winner seemingly takes it all, usually after whipping ‘tribal emotions’ across the country through assembling ‘tribal’ chiefs, who horse trade their people to him. David contends that ‘tribal’ affiliation/belonging is never a problem until politicians weaponise it for votes. Simply put, no Kenyan is ashamed of their ethnicity. David demonstrates this by wearing a Luo persona, Odinga’s ethnicity. ‘Baba’ is his famed nickname, connoting to the father of the Luo and/or the whole nation and multi-party democracy. David observes that no Kenyan thanks God for their ethnic extraction. Employing the Kikuyu category, to which he himself and Kenyatta (‘Kenya One’) belong, David politically sets Kenyatta and Odinga apart as did the politics that led to the ‘handshake’ moment. His diction is pertinently subtextual, implicating him in the gag too.

Nonetheless, David dramatizes ‘his people’s’ stereotype: they are cunning in their obsessive pursuit for money and land. However, for all these ‘debilitating’ attributes, none thanks God for creating them Kikuyu and not Luhya, for instance. They contingently found themselves among the Kikuyu, who supposedly behave as stereotyped. David’s ostensible appreciation of Kikuyu cunningness cloaks the stereotype in ambivalence. It is hard to discern his position in relation to the stereotype. Yet, it is not him in the stereotype, but an aesthetic persona. Still, the persona is simultaneously him and not him. The persona’s 1998 ‘imprudence’ hugely paid off to the shame of his fellow Kikuyu detractors. Although he does not thank God for his ‘Kikuyuness’, he is grateful for Kibaki, who turned his rocky parcel into gold, literally. Perhaps had Kibaki not been Kikuyu, the said persona would not have struck the gold. That is why he hopes God makes the Jubilee duo of Uhuru Kenyatta and William Ruto, Kibaki’s anointed successor, just as ‘wise’.

Without invalidating the said Kikuyu stereotype, David authenticates the pervasive narrative that it is God who anoints leaders, a perception that politicians often fraudulently appropriate to paint themselves as God-chosen among masses brainwashed with Pentecostal prophetism (David and Katola 54). Nevertheless, David does not explicitly insert himself into the anecdote. Rather than identify with the Kikuyu nation, he holds it at an aes-

thetic distance, thereby infusing the stereotype with doubt and allotting the burden of resolution to the audience just as Nasra does. He, however, affirms the stereotype that Kikuyus are obsessed with the pursuit of wealth, whichever the manner, and not as a group, but as individuals. This shreds the blanket of group homogeneity, highlighting intra-group heterogeneity. Every ethnicity has people who exploit opportunities. Thus, David simultaneously unsettles and (re)settles the stereotype through a political aesthetics.

Conclusion

In this article I have tried to show that *Churchill* offers a platform on which the ordinary people's quotidian and the historical are explored away from the state's officially sanctioned histories. Through an aesthetics of escapism that cloaks the show in a 'just for laughs' mould, critical issues affecting Kenyan society are addressed in mock signification. Further, I have attempted to demonstrate that transglossic language practices help engender new meanings by executing a transgressive politics that recalibrates the country's language practices. Such a politics is embodied in the show's postmodern humour aesthetic that upsets stereotypes by infusing them with ambivalence in order to fashion a new notion of Kenyanness constitutive of a spirit of 'we-ness'.

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Notes

1. To distinguish between *Churchill*, the show, and Churchill, the founder/host, I use italics for the former and regular font for the latter.
2. Anthony Ilona defines mock signification as "the deliberate, performed process of making derisive meaning". Drawing on the mock drama staged by Hamlet, Ilona argues that the process "is evaluative in its effect [and] as Hamlet himself is noted to say, '[t]he play's the thing wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King'" (48).
3. The Lamu Port and Lamu-Southern Sudan-Ethiopia Transport corridor meant to link Kenya, Southern Sudan, and Ethiopia by ports, pipelines, roads, and railways.
4. Following the hotly contested 2017 election that was nullified by the Supreme Court, Uhuru Kenyatta was sworn in in an elaborate state function on 28 November 2017 at Kasarani Stadium following the repeat election in which he ran against himself garnering 98% of the vote while Raila Odinga was sworn in 'by the people' on 30 January 2018 at Uhuru Park.

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Imagining the Kenyan Canaan dream journey in cyber space

Kimingichi Wabende

Imagining the Kenyan Canaan dream journey in cyber space


With technological advances made in contemporary times, new literary genres have emerged in digital space, with an attendant rise in the performance of rhetorical discourse on social media platforms. In the run up to Kenyan elections on 8 August 2017, the opposition leader Raila Odinga, whose father Jaramogi Oginga Odinga wrote a book titled *Not Yet Uhuru*, packaged himself as the biblical Joshua with a quest to liberate Kenyans and take them to the Promised Land, Canaan. This biblical analogy depicted in Odinga's speeches propelled Kenyans to engage in creative descriptions of the Canaan journey using social media. This play on imaginings of a Canaan journey, as displayed in cyber space, became a performance of biblical analogies, dreams, and expectations by rival characters in an ensuing online drama. In this article I examine the digital orality in the emergent texts found on Kenyan social media platforms as a form of online liveness. It focuses on social media exchanges that are inspired by Odinga's quest (as captured in his speeches) to take Kenyans to Canaan. Placed within the framework of online liveness studies, it analyses how, using digital media, spatially dispersed Kenyans shared creative memes, messages, and tweets that allowed them to vicariously undertake the Canaan journey online. I utilise Carl Jung's theory of archetypes and collective unconscious to explore the journey motif, framed within an analogy of the Israelites' journey from captivity, with Odinga portrayed as a hero who pursues the political quest of delivering Kenyans to the land of Canaan. **Keywords:** cyberspace, journey motif, emerging genres, online liveness, digital orality.

Introduction

Orality in the digital age is now a preoccupation of oral literature scholars alongside the earlier debates on oral literature *vis-à-vis* written literature. Over time, boundaries between written literature and oral literature have been blurred as new media bridges the divide between the two dichotomies. More so, African writers have appropriated oral literature material in their works integrating the two dichotomies. This led scholars like Ruth Finnegan to ask the question, "How oral is oral literature?" In response to her own question, she argues that oral literature can exist in conditions marked by marginal or even full literacy and some coexistence, or even interaction with, written literature is in practice the most common form as far as the corpus of collected or collectable material goes (59). She sets out the criteria upon which a text can qualify as oral, namely mode of composition, mode of transmission, actualisation in performance, and sources of the material. Thus, by weighing against the criteria, one can decide on the orality of a literary piece. However, such arguments were mostly based on traditional genres that are easily identifiable across many African communities but with limited assessment of the emerging genres among the technologically driven generation. In the contemporary world, more and more interactions are mediated by technology. Orality, which before could only be achieved through face-to-face interaction and within the same physical space, can be mediated through technology, allowing people dispersed all over the world to have an oral conversation. Kaschula argues that "the boundaries have been merged and what has emerged is perhaps a post primary, post-secondary culture that cultivates literacy, but also cultivates orality" ("Exploring the oral-written interface with particular reference to Xhosa oral poetry" 173). He notes that, despite oral and written literatures having a certain level of autonomy, they emanate from "the same culture and society and perform the same function of commenting on the society and the world in general" (174). With the general trend of the world moving towards the use of technology, Kaschula proposes the term 'technauriture' "as the attempt to capture the mo-

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dalities associated with the three-way dialectic between primary orality, literacy and technology [...] it includes technology that can be brought to bear on issues of orality, oral history [...] an attempt that human culture has evolved to be aware of the implications of technological advances” (“Technauriture as a Platform to Create an Inclusive Environment for the Sharing of Research” 47).

This article is set within online liveness studies and engages with mediatised performances on internet-based platforms. Auslander views a mediatised performance as “a performance that is circulated on television, as audio or video recordings, and on other forms based on technologies of reproduction” (4). In preparation for 2017 Kenyan general election, there arose two political groupings: the National Super Alliance (NASA) led by Raila Odinga and the Jubilee alliance led by Uhuru Kenyatta. The two formations were the main contenders for the political leadership of the country. My article focuses on the mediatised portrayal of the leader of one of the political formations, Odinga, and how he formulated and described a “Canaan journey” through his rhetoric while addressing ‘live’ audiences in public rallies, and the subsequent debates generated by his online audiences in various internet-based forums. As Kim argues, “In the age of social media, a recorded live theatre or film clip can facilitate online sharing and enable a broad wave of ongoing participation from spectators, rendering the time lapse between production and consumption meaningless” (10). In line with Kim, I analyse how the online Canaan debates led to the creation of two solid online political groupings: NASArtes (those subscribing to a Canaan journey as members of the National Super Alliance, NASA) and Jubilants (those belonging to the Jubilee party and opposed to the Canaan journey). The groups developed a form of online discourse pursuant to their goals. I examine the discourse of these online participants as an illustration of increased significance of cyber space as a performance arena in technologically dependent economies.

In this article I further employ the Jungian theory of archetype and collective unconscious to explore the journey motif couched in biblical analogy of the Israelite’s escape from captivity in Egypt to Canaan. I view the Kenyan quest for journeys and movements as a form of Jungian archetype (motif) in the context of what Jung regards as “an irreprehensible, unconscious, pre-existent form that seems to be part of the inherited structure of the psyche and can therefore manifest itself spontaneously anywhere, anytime [...] again and again” (23). A desire for freedom, both personal and political, has run through the veins of Kenyans and their psyche since the period of struggle for independence from colonialism. I assess the journey motif in line with Odinga’s quest and how the imagining of a journey pushes Kenyans who join in the dream through participating in online discussions on the subject causes them to reflect on possibilities of transformation both at an individual and national level. Underlying my argument, as I explore how Odinga communicates the idea of the Canaan journey, is the notion of representation as espoused by Stuart Hall. Representation, Hall argues, “is an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture. It does involve the use of language, of signs and images which stand for or represent things” (1). I thus explore what Odinga says in his Canaan journey speeches and how the online audience interprets what the speeches represent.

Locating Kenyan political history through the biblical journey to Canaan

In his quest to marshal Kenyans to his side during his political journey to the presidency as the opposition leader, Odinga sought to use biblical allusion in his speeches. He equated what Kenyans were experiencing in their lives to what the Israelites in the Bible underwent at the hands of the Egyptians before God sent Moses to rescue them. With Kenyans regarding the fight for the independence of the country as the first liberation, the second liberation is seen as the actualisation of personal freedoms and the attainment of human rights. The fight against colonialism (the first liberation), and the push for political space and personal freedom (the second liberation) both signify a major milestone in the Kenyan journey to nationhood. Naming them as the first and second liberations indicates a movement, which is the hallmark of any journey, whether in a literary sense or a physical sense. As Mortimer argues, “the voyager holds a promise of transformation, of broader horizon and a deeper knowledge” (169). In their journeys, Kenyans seek the opening of spaces for freedom in political, social, and economic spheres. This idea seems to recur in every generation as a movement. As Jung argues, “archetypes reflect human experiences” and they “can only be explained by assuming them to be deposits of constantly recurrent impressions made by subjective reaction” (23). Every decade in Kenyan history has represented a fight, a movement, or a struggle in their journey to achieve freedom and justice in the country. Having drawn a parallel between the second liberation movement in Kenya with the Israelites’ journey to the Promised Land, Odinga took cognisance of the efforts of those who came before him in the struggle, like his father, Jaramogi Oginga Odinga, and the first president,

Jomo Kenyatta. Kenyatta, Jaramogi Odinga, Daniel arap Moi, Masinde Muliro, and other Kenyan freedom fighters represent those who started the journey of liberation, which in this article I refer to as the first liberation.

This article draws a parallel between the biblical journey of the Israelites from Egypt to Canaan and the symbolic journey initiated by Odinga to take Kenyans to the dream of Canaan in his political endeavour. In the Bible it is said: “And the Lord said, I have seen the affliction of my people which are in Egypt, and I have heard their cry by reason of the taskmaster, for I know their sorrows; [...] Now behold, the cry of children of Israel is come unto me; and I have also seen the oppression where the Egyptians oppress them” (Exodus 3:7–9).

The suffering alluded to in this verse triggers the long journey of the Israelites from bondage in Egypt. The Kenyan people, for whom Odinga draws the analogy, suffered under British colonial rule. A statement released by the African Elected Members Organisation (AEMO) paints the state of the Kenyan people under colonialism, which Odinga’s father described as a: “system which serves as a device to secure for certain people permanent political and economic domination of other sections of a community. [...] [W]e shall fight to build a government and society in which all enjoy equal rights and opportunities, and no one enjoys privileges or a privileged position” (J. Odinga 150).

However, echoing people of his time, Jaramogi Odinga felt that Kenyatta was the real Moses and his own role at that time was to step into the vacuum created by the state of emergency when the spokesmen of the people had been imprisoned so “that Kenyatta and leaders with him in restriction could lead Kenya to independence, and that there would be no independence as long as the leaders of the people were locked up” (155). Jaramogi Odinga thus refused to take up the leadership mantle until Kenyatta was released. With the eventual release of Kenyatta, Jaramogi Odinga, together with the leading liberation movement leaders, led Kenya to its independence in 1963. This marked the first liberation, which was mainly a political liberation with the country remaining in many ways under the economic yoke of its former colonialists. The colonial administrative structures were inherited with only a change in guard, thus most of the restrictive and oppressive laws were retained, leading Jaramogi Odinga to write *Not Yet Uhuru*. These are the circumstances that called for the second liberation movement. It came at a time when the first liberators had handed over the mantle to second generation liberators. The Bible, in the book of Joshua, says: “Now after the death of Moses the servant of the lord it came to pass, that the lord spoke unto Joshua the son of Nun, Moses’ minister saying: Moses my servant is dead; now therefore arise, go over this Jordan, thou, and all these people, unto the land which I do give to them, even to the children of Israel” (Joshua 1:1–2).

At the time of his quest for presidency, the opposition leader Raila Odinga thus portrayed himself as the Joshua—who took over from Moses—in his quest to lead Kenyans to the Promised Land of Canaan, described by the founders of the nation as a society in which all enjoy equal rights and opportunities. Thus, Odinga cultivated a narrative that demonstrated that his father and other opposition leaders in the earlier period of Kenyan history were representative of the struggle for the first liberation, just like the biblical Moses. This justified his role as Joshua whose responsibility it was to complete the second liberation journey.

The mobilisation of the so-called Canaanites, or NASarites as they were commonly referred to, cut across different categories of people, social status, and identities. Jung notes that “when a situation occurs which corresponds to a given archetype, that archetype becomes activated and a compulsiveness appears, which, like an instinctual drive gains its way against all reason and will” (102). In this case the journey towards freedom was activated and it ignited the imagination of Kenya towards symbolically travelling to Canaan. Heroes in the journey motif, as Mortimer points out, need a form of intercession to succeed, given the level of obstacles they encounter. This is further emphasised by Lawson, quoting Campbell, when he points out that “the hero must rely on the assistance of others encountered in the journey in order to overcome the challenges” (135).

Basing his journey on a religious doctrine, Odinga seeks mediation from religious institutions and thus attends church services. Within the audiences that he addresses, there are those who understand the Canaan journey as simply a biblical story and those who view the story through the religious significance it carries. To Christians, it demonstrates God’s fulfilment of the promise made to the Israelites that he would save them from the cruelty of the Egyptians. Taking cognisance of how different audiences interpret his speeches in the context of the Christian faith, there is therefore a difference in how Odinga treats this biblical analogy while addressing public rallies and when he is in church.

While addressing public rallies, Odinga is safe to make direct reference, without fear of being questioned by his supporters, that their journey has a spiritual significance and the endorsement of God. He colours his role as both a religious and political quest by situating himself in the Bible and employing biblical images and characters.

He spells out that role clearly during a rally at Uhuru Park on 5 August 2017, one of the public spaces used for political and social events in Nairobi.

I will be a president who only takes you across river Jordan because the Israelites are already out of Egypt and on the shores of Shama, through the jungle of Sinai and now they are on the banks of Jordan. I will be the Joshua to take them across river Jordan to Canaan. Once you get to Canaan, my task will be over.

Uhuru park is the symbol of Kenyan's independence as denoted by the meaning of the Swahili word "*uhuru*", meaning freedom (coincidentally the name of his nemesis who was born at independence). While addressing people within a space that signifies freedom and exemplifies what they seek in their Canaan journey, he defines his role as that of a transitional political leader. The Joshua in the Bible is only meant to complete the journey for Moses and he, Odinga, has a very specific task as a transitional and transformative leader to take Kenyans to Canaan. The Israelite Joshua undertakes his journey through physical travel over a long distance, while the Kenyan Joshua seeks to fulfil his promise through symbolic travel over a five-year presidential term by transforming his country into a Canaan. The idea of the journey and its different facets has taken on different interpretations since independence. I take note of Ferdinand Saussure's idea as quoted by Hall that "the relationship between the signifier and the signified, which is fixed by our cultural codes, is not permanently fixed. The concepts (signifieds) to which they refer also change, historically and every shift alters the conceptual map of the culture, leading different culture, at different historical moments, to classify and think about the world differently" (17). In Kenyan history and to different audiences that Odinga implores to join the Canaan journey, it signifies and represents different ideas in the minds of his listeners.

Conversely, while in church, Odinga pays closer attention to the details of the biblical story. He is careful to portray himself as a devoted Christian seeking intercession from the church without pricking on sensibilities of the congregation by equating himself to biblical figures. He therefore distances himself from the biblical story, only drawing a parallel between the two journeys. In church he says:

We are sure in our journey we will get to our destination. Didn't you say that the Canaan one was not easy, that Pharaoh had refused to release you from Egypt, he even sent soldiers after you when you left [...] They suffered in the jungle for many years [...] but Moses said they should not abandon the journey and many of those who left Egypt did not get to Canaan but the remaining ones led by Joshua and Caleb got to Canaan. (R. Odinga, "NASA leader Raila Odinga is confident of reaching Canaan")

Like a typical church sermon, Odinga's speech uses the biblical citation to illustrate an earthly example. In the above quote, he does not refer to himself directly as Joshua but allows the audience to infer that this historical moment could be equated to the biblical journey of the Israelites. He accommodates the congregation as fellow journeymen to win their sympathies by demonstrating that he is sympathetic with their situation. Odinga's use of religious analogies to woo Kenyans echoes Jung's argument of the power of archetypes in human life when he says:

Can we not see how a whole nation is reviving an archaic symbol, yes, even archaic religious forms, and how this mass emotion is influencing and revolutionizing life of an individual in a catastrophic manner But if we consider the tremendous powers that lie hidden in the mythological and religious sphere in man, the aetiological significance of the archetype appears less fantastic [...] Can we not see how a whole nation is reviving an archaic symbol, yes, even archaic religious forms, and how this mass emotion is influencing and revolutionizing the life of the individual in a catastrophic manner? (101).

Though the Canaan journey is not driven towards a negative end, I see a correlation with how the religious narrative is used as tool for mobilisation and the igniting of a Kenyan psyche. It is evident therefore that Odinga navigates through his different audiences' and followers' tastes by appropriately manipulating the same religious story to fit different contexts and thus firmly situates himself as a Kenyan Joshua pursuing a quest comparable to that of the biblical Joshua.

Digital orality and online liveness

While examining Odinga as a hero engaged in a quest and using his speeches as a foundation upon which the Canaan journey is premised, I also examine how audiences (NASArtes and Jubilants) that watch the online videos engage with each other in Canaan online journey contestations. The audiences are akin to what Couldry views as

a ritualistic collectivity of liveness, noting “1. that we gain access through liveliness to something broader, central, significant, which is worth accessing now, not later; 2. that we who can gain live access is not random, but a representative social group; 3. that the media [...] is the privileged means for obtaining that access” (356). Despite the groups not physically meeting and existing in different geographical spaces, they interact and exchange virtual verbal vibes and jibes through technologically supported internet orality and coalesce together as people with a common goal.

In his analysis of Swahili online orature, Mnenuka further advances the above argument, noting that “in the contemporary context, literary compositions and their presentations are not restricted to verbal and written modes only, because with advent and advancement in technology, there has emerged innovative modes that are well implicated in the presentation and dissemination of literary composition” (275). Technology has introduced new forms of media through which literary works are expressed and conveyed in addition to conventional forms. These media bring with them different ways of accessing and partaking of artistic works, including how the audiences interact and how the discourse is used in virtual performance spaces.

Arguing against the notion of the need for an audience to be physically present in an event or performance, Kim points out that “co-presence is not simply a matter of being in the same time and space; more crucially, it is a matter of social interaction brought about by the changes in media technology” (3). Dixon further proposes that “presence should be seen as a way to rethink liveness with a particular emphasis placed on the degree to which spectators pay attention to the events unfolding in front of their eyes, whether it be events involving the presence of live bodies or media image” (21). This equally implies that the audience’s reaction shifts from verbal to written and is permanently captured, unlike the live performance which, as an event, is temporal. The current nature of life and place is profoundly digital and internet-based, using portable gadgets ranging from laptops to mobile phones that allow communication among people who are not in spatial co-presence. In this context, the online audience is afforded a chance to watch Odinga’s performance, with him as a performer that also has a live audience at a political rally. The performers, Odinga and his audience in the live spatial co-presence performance, thus become a singular spectacle to be watched by the online audience. The online audience views the whole rally as a staged performance in which the live audience existing in spatial co-presence displays their abilities and prowess.

The Canaan online journey motif

In this section I examine how Odinga’s quest to take Kenyans to Canaan inspires an online symbolic physical journey to the Promised Land. Mortimer notes that “the physical voyage represents an intellectual and emotional initiation to maturity, the voyager’s goal is to acquire the knowledge and/or power that will allow him or her to re-join the community and enjoy the heightened status in it” (171). In undertaking this important symbolic physical journey, Odinga hopes that it will culminate in his ascendance to the presidency, a position of power that would allow him to initiate and implement reforms that would benefit Kenyans. According to the Bible, the people of Israel undertook a physical journey travelling over deserts, land, and seas to get to Canaan. In Exodus, the Bible says: “And the children of Israel journeyed from Ramser to Succoth, about six hundred thousand on foot that were then besides children. [...] God led the people about, through the way of the wilderness of the Red sea; the children of Israel went up harnessed out of the land of Egypt” (Exodus 12:36; 13:38).

The Kenyan journey is both symbolic and physical. The physical journey is, to a certain extent, seen in the act of the political campaign itself. Odinga undertakes a physical journey around the country urging his supporters to undertake the Canaan journey. His act, though physical, is an act in mobilising and gathering supporters to join him in a symbolic journey to Canaan.

I locate Odinga as a hero who inspires Kenyans through biblical allusion, giving his message a spiritual and religious context. Equating his quest to take Kenyans to the symbolic Canaan to the journey the Israelites undertook from Egypt—land of suffering and pain—to Canaan—Promised Land of milk and honey—he portrays himself as a Joshua leading that journey. Lawson, quoting Campbell, points out that:

The hero’s journey is set in motion by means of a supernatural event that casts the innocent into a strange and unfamiliar arena [...] Those who choose to accept the call begin the journey from the known to the unknown. [...] Once the journey is underway, the hero faces many tests standing between him/her and the ultimate goal. [...] Those who can pass the tests of the journey demonstrate, through the journey itself, that they already possessed brains, courage and heart. (134–5).

Odinga designates his role as godly ordained by invoking biblical verses and enlisting Christians and fellow politicians in the pursuit of the Canaan dream. Kenyans, like Israelites, find themselves at a historic moment—choosing a leader through voting for the person who will liberate them from the ills that bedevil their country.

In turn, both Odinga's supporters and those who oppose his ideals play out the same journey on the internet using messages disseminated through tweets and WhatsApp messages. The interpretation of Odinga's message, though based on a biblical story known to many, varies. As Hall points out, "meaning depends on the relationship between things in the world—people, objects, events real or fictional—and the conceptual system, which can operate as mental representation of them" (4). Each camp therefore interprets the biblical analogy from the perspective of their religious or political affiliation. In explaining how archetypes are realised, Jung argues that they may come out through dreams, or what he refers to as "active imagination, that is, a sequence of fantasies produced by deliberate concentration" (102). Thus, Kenyans engage in this online active imagination of their Canaan dream journey through memes and texts. I use the word dream in the sense of aspirations as opposed to the Jungian dream.

Different means of transport that enable Kenyans to move within their country are envisioned as pathways that will allow NASArtes or the Kenyan people in general to travel and enter Canaan. The means of transport imagined for this journey include walking, using public transport, train, taxis, and flying. The tweets come in both pictorial form and in words. One of the memes captures Odinga leading a large crowd. In his hand, he carries a stick like that of Moses in the Bible leading his flock to the land of Canaan. In another picture he looks like a Roman soldier with a sword, spear, and a shield—with his newfound name Joshua Rao—leading a multitude to Canaan (@VictorKipronoKI). In the two memes, the NASArtes are seen to be undertaking the journey like the Israelites, on foot, led by their leader Odinga. He is presented as a leader who carries symbols of authority as interpreted from the Bible in the form of a sword or a walking stick. Therefore, the journey is not seen as an easy walk to freedom, but hazardous, whereby the followers must endure pain and suffering. The memes show a large crowd to portray the large following that their leader is assumed to command. This journey where they trek, despite it being the most basic and rudimentary, exemplifies solidarity in numbers as pictorially captured. It portrays the journey as a popular and inspired undertaking by the people of Kenya. Despite other means of transport being popular, this form shows a popular movement buoyed by people's enthusiasm to undertake the journey despite challenges as opposed to individualistic and class-based segregation in the choice of taxis or airplanes. It equally has a basis in the biblical argument that path that leads to heaven is full of thorns.

The journeying multitude is comprised of people with varied attitudes and degrees of patience. Those who lead the journey, like Moses, must endure accusations whenever they are out of sight of those they lead. To pray and consult God, Moses had to leave the Israelites behind. In the memes, Odinga, too, makes a temporary exit. His absence from the country was always punctuated with, "Baba while you were away". This phrase was a running popular tweet while Odinga took a three-week tour of the USA. Known for his barbs against the government, many Kenyans felt the government took advantage of his absence to undertake unpopular actions. There was a rallying call for his return, where Kenyans on Twitter gave accounts of what he needed to know and deal with on his return. However, Odinga's opponents, the Jubilants, interpreted all Odinga's absences as an escape from responsibility. In a meme appearing in a tweet, a crowd carrying umbrellas is captured stranded at a big river with the caption, "NASArtes stranded at river Jordan. *Na JOSHUA amezima simu*" (and Joshua has switched his phone off) (The Standard). Instead of Joshua being there to help the NASArtes to cross the river, he has disappeared. The Jubilants also see the journey as a long trek but, rather than give it a positive interpretation, they present Odinga as a leader who will abandon his flock. They seek to show the opposition leader as untrustworthy and not worthy of being elected. The meme captures both the old and the new: while the biblical Moses overstayed in the mountains and therefore could not be accessed physically by Israelites, Odinga (Joshua) switches off his phone so that he cannot be reached by his followers electronically. Odinga's opponents seem to recognise the idea of a Canaan journey and the need for it, but do not aver to the choice of leader. It is a mixture of intertextuality and biblical allusions embracing items of modern technology that are relevant to a contemporary audience but still retaining the connotations of the biblical analogy.

Matatus (shared taxis), the most popular mode of transport in Kenya, feature in the Canaan journey as an option in terms of the means of transport that will take people to the dream of Canaan. Though typically Kenyan, they are also associated with unruliness, chaos, and disorder in urban centres. Most participants, unless portraying negativity against the opponent, seem to avoid the imagined use of matatu as a means of transport in

the journey to Canaan. The matatus represent a bad past that the Canaan quest is escaping. Incidences that were considered as curtailing or providing obstacles in relation to entry into Canaan are equated to a matatu's failure to arrive at its destination. There were indeed various discussions between the NASA and Jubilee supporters on whether the journey had hit a snag whenever there was an obstacle. When it was declared that NASA had lost the elections on 8 August 2017, there was a meme of a matatu with the caption, "Trip to Canaan cut short by NTSA at Bondo. Journey to Canaan, *chang'aa* Drunk Driver arrested" (Tuko news). The image of the matatu in the meme had a designated route of Nairobi-Bondo-Canaan emblazoned on its side. Bondo is the home village of NASA leader Odinga (Joshua). The meme shows his supporters, not only using a means of transport long discarded by Kenyans (an old Peugeot 504 pick-up) but also illustrates that it is overloaded, and it is driven by a driver who is drunk from an illicit brew (*chang'aa*). The depicted vehicle is not suitable for such a long-distance journey, and thus the image demonstrates that it was foolhardy for NASA supporters to use a vehicle intended for short distance travel in undertaking a journey to foreign lands, which thus led to their arrest by the National Transport and Safety Authority (NTSA).

Some Kenyans had envisioned undertaking the Canaan journey using private taxis that are portrayed to be more prestigious. This was a form of thinking that ran across many supporters. They indicated that, since they had suffered for a long time, such an important journey required a comfortable ride. They envisaged Canaan as a place that would provide Kenyans with rides of a better quality than what they were experiencing in present circumstances. As one of the memes, purported to be posted by Taxify (an app-based taxi) demonstrates: "KES 156129211233. Prices may vary due to traffic, weather and other factors. Estimates does not include discounts" (@ingrid_donnet).

In interviews published in *The Pulse Kenya*, an online magazine, Kenyans on Nairobi's streets were interviewed about their impending Canaan journey. These interviews were intended to be humorous. Those interviewed ruled out walking as a means of going to Canaan. Notable was one lady who sarcastically laughed at the thought of a trip to Canaan being undertaken on foot or by matatu. Most of them imagined themselves taking a flight to Canaan. Even though most of them had never flown, they said they could not journey to their dream world on foot. The alternative to flying was using the newly-launched trains on a Standard Gauge Railway. This shows how different people visualised Canaan vicariously through a choice of their ideal means of transport, time taken, and where Canaan was situated. There were those who thought of it as a faraway land that you had to fly to and others who thought it was within Kenya but had to be accessed by special means.

Like the journey undertaken by the Israelites that was full of hurdles and took them through the desert and the sea over a long period of time, the Kenyan Canaan journey was not without obstacles. Odinga seemed to prepare his supporters for such an eventuality through his speeches: "Our journey is full of trials and tribulations, there are snakes and crocodiles in river Jordan, but this will not stop NASA from going to Canaan. We will be followed by soldiers of Pharaoh" (R. Odinga, "Confident of reaching Canaan").

This belief formed the basis upon which the online groups galvanised their supporters to overcome the obstacles that came their way. The idea of obstacles is part and parcel of the journey motif and Mortimer notes that "the very notion of travel calls for a series of binary opposition for journeys are desired or feared, successful or thwarted, individual or collective" (169). Referring to the Bible, when the Israelites were on the verge of being taken back by Egyptians as the sea of Shama lay before them. Odinga says: "When they got to the sea of Shama, and Pharaoh's soldiers were on their backs, Moses was really perturbed seeing Pharaoh's soldiers and a mass of water a head of him [...] They suffered in Sinai desert for many years until some of them almost gave up and stated blaming Moses for taking them out of Egypt" (R. Odinga, "Confident of reaching Canaan"). Odinga said this in order to prepare his supporters for the obstacles ahead, a call that was picked up by his online supporters.

Most of the obstacles encountered in the Kenyan journey were given a biblical interpretation and situated within the expected and already laid out path of the trip to Canaan. After the defeat at the ballot in an election that was purported to be rigged, NASA went to court. The filing of the court case was viewed as a pre-determined biblical process that Kenyans had to follow too. Joshua (Odinga), as the person leading the people, is temporally halted in his pursuit and the judges (in Kenyan courts) take over the temporal reign. One of the tweets reads, "After the book of Joshua comes judges then the book of Kings, we are in Jerusalem, Canaan we can see you" (@ntvkenya). In the natural progression of the journey, as laid out in the Bible, there is the book of Joshua, followed by Judges then finally Kings. Therefore, the culmination of their journey is the coronation of their King. While the court case was ongoing, the police kept vigil and could not allow people to access the courts or even the

court compound. There was a feeling of disenfranchisement among people as expressed on many social networks. However, on the day when the many Jubilee supporters, whom the NASA supporters felt were being favourably treated by the police were at the courts, the bees attacked them. This led to a tweet being posted based on a biblical verse that implied it was God's effort to support the Canaan journey. In Exodus 23:28, posted as a tweet, God says, "And I will send the bees ahead of you to drive your enemy out of your way" (@Ochako_D). The NASArtes argued that God saw how they had been abandoned and harassed by the police and, in their defence, sent the bees. As a rejoinder, quoting the same verse, one of the Jubilee supporters noted that the enemies referred to in the verse were Hivites, Canaanites, and Hittites. The NASArtes referred to themselves as Canaanites and the bees were meant to attack the Canaanites. Each online group sent messages that backed their side of the narrative, pushing for a psychological victory in the online performances. The whole Canaan debate brought out the conversation about people's dreams and yearnings in their physical journey that was symbolically played out on the internet.

Those who endeavoured to undertake the physical journey saw it as a milestone that would better their lives and that, despite the varied means of transport, they were all travelling, as a group, to the Promised Land, underscoring the purpose of a journey and the role of literature in general as seeking the ideal. Mortimer (169) argues that journeys "involve experiences of discovery and/or experiences of spiritual growth and renewal". There was an underlying movement of different forms in the online interactions and speeches given at political rallies. There is a movement from first liberation to second liberation. These different phases signify a movement which those who support the changes see as a positive progression towards a better life. The interplay between NASArtes and Jubilants was meant to either show positive movement or the lack of it. The expectations were in line with the motivation for the biblical journey for the Israelites that is premised on the allures of Canaan. In the book of Exodus, God promises the Israelites a broad land flowing with milk and honey, after freeing them from the yoke of Pharaoh, a life of slavery: "I have come to deliver them out of the land of Egyptians, and to bring them out of that land to a good, and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey". It is the hope and the allures of Canaan that drive the Israelites' motivated journey to the Promised Land.

Whereas the leaders had promises based on what they hoped to achieve once they won the election, their supporters had all kinds of imaginings about their Canaan dream journey. The Canaan dream seems to draw a sense of agreement in how it is visualised as a desired place among participants. As Hall avers, "we are able to communicate because we share broadly the same conceptual maps thus make sense of or interpret the world in a roughly similar ways [...] we are able to build up a shared culture of meanings and thus construct a social world which we inhabit together" (4). Similarly, Jung notes that "There exists a second psychic system of a collective, universal, and impersonal nature which is identical in all individuals. This collective unconscious does not develop individually but is inherited. It consists of pre-existing forms, the archetypes, which can only become conscious secondarily and which give definite form to certain contents" (99). Thus, I see Kenyans united in the dream of travel despite their affiliation pointing to the common archetype across a political divide.

The online exchanges were spiced with humour that purged negative emotions. Kenyans were able to poke fun at those on the opposing side of the political divide with minimal emotional injury. Because mainstream media is controlled by the political classes and government machinery, the internet became a safe space, owing to anonymity through use of pseudonyms, for the ordinary people to emotionally express themselves. There were various thoughts on this dream but with a clear understanding that, wherever Canaan is, it was not an abandonment of the physical boundary of Kenya as a country and as an idea. The variation in thoughts echo Hall's view that "there is a constant sliding of meaning in all interpretation, a margin—something in excess of what we intend to say—in which other meanings overshadow the statement or the text, where other associations are awakened to life, giving what we say a different twist" (18). Despite variants of interpretation given relative to inherent biases of the audiences, Kenyans saw a future rooted in Canaan online despite party and tribal affiliation.

Conclusion

In this article, I have examined how social media, as a platform that allows the play of emerging genres, was used to bring Kenyans together and allow the participants to dream the ideal future of the nation as the Promised Land of Canaan. I explored how Raila Odinga, through his mediated online speeches, portrayed himself as the hero with a quest to take Kenyans to Canaan. Through his speeches as captured online, he gave inspirational biblical analogies that set Kenyans on a symbolic Canaan dream journey played out on internet platforms. I revealed a journey motif that was brought out on online platforms by Kenyans that were bound together not just by political

affiliation but also through social media in an attempt to undertake a journey to an imaginary symbolic Canaan. In this article I demonstrated that Kenyans imagined the journey to Canaan online as a symbolic physical journey that employs different means of transport ranging from walking, taking a taxi, to flying. Yet, as they take these forms of transport, they visualise Canaan as a land without and within Kenyan borders to which one must undergo a journey of transformation to belong to. On arrival in Canaan, I further illustrated, Kenyans will be transformed socially, economically, and politically, though depending on the political divide, this change would either be positive or negative. I have demonstrated how cyber space as a performance arena affords the online performers a degree of anonymity that allows for creative expression and imaginings in a technologically-oriented world and allows for the performance of emerging genres.

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Metatextualities in the Kenyan Swahili novel: A case study reading of Kyallo Wamitila's

Dharau ya Ini

Lutz Diegner

Metatextualities in the Kenyan Swahili novel: A case study reading of Kyallo Wamitila's *Dharau ya Ini*


Contemporary Swahili novels transgress the boundaries of the novel text itself. They employ metatextualities of different categories in order to fulfil a variety of functions. In this article, I explore metatextualities in the Kenyan Swahili novel, and provide a case study reading of one of the novels by the prolific and award-winning writer Kyallo Wadi Wamitila. My reading of Wamitila's novel *Dharau ya Ini* (2007) concentrates on metanarration and metareference. I analyse how narration, especially point of view, is used and how it is discussed and reflected upon by the text and in the text itself (metanarration). I also focus on instances of metareference, especially on references to oral literature and to the literary genres of drama and poetry, as part of a work of prose. These analyses are done through a close reading informed by current research on metatextualities, and, in one of the examples, by phonostylistics. This study is led by the following overall objectives: first, it aims to show how Swahili novel writing as an instance of literature in African languages participates in global discourses on, and practices in, literature and the arts. Secondly, in a perspective of East(ern) African literature, it argues that Swahili literature and literary studies provide stimuli to literary theory and practice otherwise still dominated by its Anglophone counterpart in the region (and, of course, beyond). Thirdly, as regards the domain of Swahili literature, it reflects the crucial impact of Kenyan writing since about the turn of the millennium, in a sphere hitherto dominated by writers from Tanzania. **Keywords:** metatextuality, metanarration, metareference, Kenyan literature, Swahili novel, Kyallo Wadi Wamitila.

Introduction

In the field of Swahili literature, the impact of novels by Kenyan writers has increasingly engaged critics since about the beginning of the 2000s (see Bertoncini-Zúbková, "A Friend in Need is a Friend Indeed: Ken Walibora's Novel *Kufa Kuzikana*"; Wamitila, *Misingi ya Uchanganuzi wa Fasihi*; Bertoncini-Zúbková *et al.*; Mwangi; Diegner, "The Kenyan Challenge (?): Dis/Continuities in Swahili Novel Writing 50 Years after Independence"; Tchokothe, "Globalectical Swahili literature", "Kiswahili Literature in Crisis"; Wafula; Gromov, "Visions of the Future in the 'New' Swahili Novel", "Regional or Local? On 'Literary Trajectories' in Recent Swahili Writing", "'New' Novel, New Names, New Dimensions"). Once perceived as a "terra incognita" (Wamitila, "Reading the Kenyan Swahili Prose Works: A 'Terra Incognita' in Swahili Literature"), writers like John Habwe, Mwenda Mbatiah, Clara Momanzi, Kyallo Wamitila, Tom Olali, and the late Ken Walibora have led the way in changing this notion by writing novels which served as an incentive to fellow writers and other actors in the field of Swahili-language fictional writing in Kenya. To date, ten Swahili-language novels by Wamitila have been published in a rather short span of fifteen years, from 1999 to 2014. Among them, the postrealist/postmodernist landmark text *Bina-Adamu!* received both praise and criticism for deliberately tying in with the epochal novels *Nagona* and *Mzingile* authored by the late Tanzanian writer Euphrase Kezilahabi. So far, *Bina-Adamu!* is the text which has received the broadest attention by critics, compared to Wamitila's other texts (see Bertoncini-Zúbková, "Global Village or Global Pillage? K. W. Wamitila's Novel *Bina-Adamu!*"; Gromov, "Post-Modernistic Elements in Recent Swahili Novels"; Khamis; Rettová; Diegner, "Answers to 'Glocalisation' in Swahili Fiction"; Mwangi; Bertoncini-Zúbková *et al.*; Tchokothe, "Globalectical"; Bulaya and Mkumbwa; Mulokozi; Wambui).

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In this article, I will focus on Wamitila's fifth novel *Dharau ya Ini* (Contempt of the Liver; Know Thyself!) which was published in 2007.¹ Written in the context of Wamitila's return to realism and labelled a political novel, I concur with Mikhail Gromov that the novel "goes beyond this definition" (Bertoncini-Zúbková *et al.* 74). He concludes his encyclopaedic review by saying: "The novel proves again the author's innovative approach and might well serve as [a] further 'cornerstone' in the building of Kenyan Swahili writing in the 21st century" (74).

Despite this accomplished summary, my impression is that this text has been under-researched, and I argue that it deserves more critical attention due to its innovative nature. Among other features, this innovative nature lies in the novel's playful use and experimentation on narration, its comments and reasoning about it (meta-narration), as well as in its references to questions of literary genre—on the one hand, to oral literature and the still-postulated dichotomy of the oral versus the written, and on the other hand, to genres other than prose, especially drama and poetry (metareference). Some of the major questions to be tackled in this article are: in which way does the novel play and experiment on narration? To what end does it expose passages of, and references to, genres other than prose, namely drama and poetry? How does the novel deal with the tenaciously antagonist notions of the oral and the written? And what does that mean for a reading of the eponymous metaphor "*Dharau ya Ini*"?

Methodologically, I will rely on "reading closely" (Veit-Wild and Vierke ix, xiv), in this case understood as a close reading with an emphasis on making time for a rather meticulous analysis of a number of direct quotes from the novel. These quotes will be analysed against the backdrop of recent research in literary and cultural studies on metatextuality, especially metanarration and metareference, and, in one selected example, by applying phonostylistics, a microstylistic approach at the interface of literary studies and linguistics.

Before I lay out the conceptual framework of metatextualities and its main tenets in the next section, I would like to start by quoting the first lines of the novel.

Ngoma ya mtindo mwingine—A dance in another style

The novel begins with an elaborate direct address to the reader. While this feature might first and foremost remind the reader of, and definitely is, a device which refers to, and draws upon, the style of oral narratives, it becomes clear that it serves a variety of metatextual functions.

Uanzayo kuisoma sasa ni lele ya ngoma ya Dharau ya Ini; ngoma inayochezwa kwa mdundo wa riwaya nyingine ya K. W. Wamitila. Na hii msomaji nakwambia, ni ngoma ya mtindo mwingine. [...] Jiandae. Tulia. Tamakani. Ni ngoma ambayo inakusihi uyatupilie mbali mawazo yote ambayo umekuwa nayo kuihusu riwaya ya Kiswahili popote ulipoyaokoteza mawazo hayo! Mtindo wake. Sura yake. Usimulizi wake. Na uhalisi wa matukio yake.²

What you start reading now is the prelude to the dance *Dharau ya Ini*, a dance which is performed in the rhythm of [yet] another novel by K. W. Wamitila. And this one, reader, I tell you, is a dance in another style. [...] Get ready. Relax. Settle down. It is a dance which begs you to discard all the ideas you had before relating to the Swahili novel, wherever you may have picked up these ideas from! Its style. Its form. Its narration. And the authenticity [reality, credibility] of its events. (*Dharau ya Ini* 1, emphasis in original, all translations are mine)³

In technical narrative terms, this passage serves as an exposition to the whole novel which can be seen as a representation of a real-life setting when a narrator starts a session of oral storytelling. Beyond this observation, this passage also has several metatextual implications. First and foremost, by talking to the reader in this way, it addresses the expectations of the readers even before they have started reading these very first lines of the novel—and while they are reading it. It does so by providing a kind of suggestive, slightly procacious, prescriptive, agenda-like comment on the text which has only just begun to be read; its nature; and its relation to these expectations of the readers by stressing its unconventional and innovative nature. While some readers might react by thinking "Ngoja kwanza nianze kuisoma hiyo matini (Wait first, so that I may start to read this text), and do not tell me what to think about this text before I have read it", others might be intrigued by this grandiose setting of an agenda, and/or they might simply be curious about what to expect from this text.

Yet what is the agenda contained in this direct address to the reader all about? According to the text, it is nothing more and nothing less than presenting a novel which breaks away from the conventional expectations towards the genre of the novel, concerning "[i]ts style. Its form. Its narration. And the authenticity [reality, credibility] of its events" (*Dharau* 1). Whether this comment and suggestive analysis of the text—by the text itself—

will prove to be adequate or not, is not a major point in my analysis of metatextualities in *Dharau ya Ini*. However, by discussing a variety of examples of metatextualities in the novel, I will convey that it provides the readers with food for thought concerning the paradigms of reading—in both senses of consuming, enjoying, and of interpreting, criticising—Swahili literature.

Metatextualities: Terminology and usage

As a conceptual and terminological framework, I rely on a broad understanding of metatextualities as an umbrella term for metafiction (see Wolf, “Metafiktion”; “Metatext und Metatextualität”), metanarration (see Neumann and Nünning), and metareference (see Wolf, “Metareference across Media”).⁴ I will concentrate on the latter two, mainly because the theoretical reasoning behind them is more recent and, therefore, they have not been focused upon as much as the more common and rather heterogeneous category of metafiction.⁵

Metanarration, or metanarrative commentary, is defined as “the narrator’s reflections on the act or process of narrating” (Neumann and Nünning 1). Using metanarration, writers can highlight playfulness, self-explanation, or irony. In this article, rather than engaging in an in-depth discussion of different types and functions of metanarration, as suggested by Monika Fludernik and Ansgar Nünning (see Fludernik; Nünning), I will specifically deal with metanarrative commentaries on point of view, and on questions of genre. As regards the latter, metanarrative commentaries tend to overlap with metareference.

The category of metareference denotes references to broader subjects, other disciplines, and/or other media; it looks at instances of “self-reference produced by signs or sign configurations which are (felt to be) [sic] located on a logically higher level, a ‘metalevel,’ within an artefact or performance” (Wolf, “Metareference” 31). In this study, I concentrate on metareferences to literature itself, and in particular, to oral literature, and to genres other than prose. How are these categories used, and to what end? How do they contribute to the overall agenda of the novel?

Playful reference and reverence to *fasihi simulizi*

*Jiandae vyovyote iwavyo vyema kwako. Mezani. Darasani. Garini. Maktabani. Au ofisini, kama unayo. Popote. [...] Umemaliza kujiweka sawa? Ngoma imeanza. Paukwa ...*⁶

Prepare yourself in whatever way is pleasant for you. At the table. In class. In the car. In the library. Or in the office, if you have one. Wherever [you are]. [...] Are you done with setting yourself well? The dance has started. Paukwa ... (*Dharau* 2)

Instead of simply using narrative devices from *fasihi simulizi* (oral literature), the text provides reference and pays reverence to this tradition in a playful manner. By doing so, the text does corroborate the common understanding of postmodern literature as, among many other features, consciously dwelling upon oral literature but adopting, adapting, and transforming it in a playful act of experimentation. The agenda does not consist in emancipation from oral literature, in the sense of a sharp demarcation from supposedly outdated modes of art—even though such a misconception, or at least partial expectation, seems to persist in the traditional way of “thinking literature” along demarcated lines. It is the sheer opposite: it pays reverence to oral literature, pleads for a re-assessment of its aesthetics, and strives to make it part and parcel of the stylistic inventory of complex and appealing contemporary writing.

And in which way are narrative devices of *fasihi simulizi* used? A closer examination of this passage reveals several instances of the use of the second person, in personal and possessive pronouns, to directly address the reader. The colloquial and casual tone in which this is done heightens the intimacy of the address. Its directness is further enhanced by the use of the optative form which serves as an imperative, *jiandae* (prepare yourself).⁷ The last instance is the personal pronoun ‘u’ (you) in “*Umemaliza kujiweka sawa?*” (Are you done with setting yourself well?). Its sentence-initial position and the use of the whole phrase without the particle “*je*”, commonly used for questions in written Swahili, serve as a stylistic device emphasising the oral character of this enunciation, and highlighting its intimate immediacy. All this culminates in “*Paukwa ...*”, which is the first half of the conventional formula “*Paukwa ...? Pakawa ...*” used at the beginning of story-telling in the Swahili literary tradition.⁸ “*Paukwa*” is usually uttered by the narrator, and the audience is supposed to answer “*Pakawa*”. By giving only half of the formula here, and providing the dots, the narrative voice provokes a direct answer by, in this case, the reader of the novel.

This reference and reverence to *fasihi simulizi* serves as a read thread through the novel, with quite a number of hints and allusions (also in chapters 10, 46, and 65), and then culminating in the elaborate epilogue of the novel which is presented as part of the last chapter (*Dharau* 270–8), which I will come back to in the section preceding the conclusion.

Another striking example of inserting *fasihi simulizi* into the text, both explicitly as a term and explicitly as a text passage, is to be found in chapter 35. The readers are told that cadres of the ruling party—the setting of the novel is a country resembling Kenya—argue with a party dissident. This argument manifests itself in a kind of literary battle. The cadres employ verse to which the dissident replies using an oral tale:

Viongozi wa Chama na Serikali wakayakanusha maneno ya mwanasiasa huyo kwa mihemko hasa. Wakatumia hata fasihi simulizi kuusisitiza ujumbe wao.

Ni sungura aliyekosa zabibu, kasema chungu.

[...]

Ni komba aliaye kwa sauti usiku msituni, bila ya nzuri sababu.

Naye kajibu.

Kajibu kwa hiyo hiyo fasihi simulizi.

Hapo zamani za kale paliondokea fisi ambaye kwa tamaa kala asali sana [...]

The cadres of the party and the government denied the words of that politician with veritable passion. They even made use of oral literature to stress their message.

It is the hare that failed to get the grapes who claimed they were sour.

[...]

It is the bush baby that cries in the forest at night, without a reason, a good one.

And then he answered.

Answered by using oral literature in the very same way.

Once upon a time there was a hyena who greedily ate a lot of honey [...] (*Dharau* 131)

The song-like verse alludes to the genre of *methali* (proverbs), whereas the answer is given as a *ngano* (oral tale). In this way, the text makes reference and pays reverence to several classical genres of oral literature: song, verse, proverbs, tales. The chapter is named after the protagonist in the first line of the verse, “the hare that failed to get the grapes”. “*Fasihi simulizi*” is explicitly mentioned twice in this text passage. This may first and foremost give the whole passage a didactic ring. However, in the second instance, the deliberate syntactic brevity and combination with an anadiplosis adds laconic irony to it: “And then he answered. Answered by using oral literature in the very same way.”

Another notable feature here is the constellation of the literary ‘battle’, which clearly alludes to the Swahili-literature-specific genre and practice of *Kujibizana*—a competition of “Poetry in Dialogue”, to quote the title of Kimani Njogu’s seminal study (Njogu; Biersteker). Apart from the conscious reverence to the heritage of *fasihi simulizi*, this text passage exposes generic hybridity and playful experimentation, a general feature of postmodern writing. Here, the text advocates a kind of meta-genre and/or cross-genre style, and exercises this style in an explicit and thorough manner.

Metanarration: Shall ‘I’ or will ‘you’?

Apart from the metatextual commentaries on oral literature, and the relationship between oral literature and contemporary written prose fiction, there are a number of instances in the novel where we can find metanarration, i.e., comments on the narration in the narration—and *simultaneous* to the narration, or in other words, in, or during, the very moment of narration.

Haikuwa mara ya mwanzo kuliona igo hili ingawa mara nyingi hunijia katika ndoto sio mchana peupe kama ilivyokuwa leo. Nilishangaa ni kwa nini mara hii ndoto hiyo imeamua kuuvuka ulimwengu wa usimulizi; ulimwengu wa ‘ni’ na kuingia ulimwengu wa ‘u’.

It was not my first time to see this spectacle although it often comes up to me in dreams not in broad daylight as it happened today. I wondered why this time the dream had decided to cross the world of narration; the world of ‘I’ and to enter the world of ‘you’. (*Dharau* 8)

This passage explicitly talks about the different points of view a narrator may opt for. Moreover, it sets the narrative agenda for the whole novel where the narrator experiments with the interchange of first, second, and third person perspectives.

In most parts, the novel switches between the perspectives of the main protagonist Lila and the antagonist Munene. Lila is a young journalist who pairs with her colleague Derby in investigating cases of political corruption. Apart from her professional life, she is in search of answers to the mysterious circumstances surrounding her father's death. Munene is an archetypical patriarch and corrupt businessman with political ambitions who turns out to be the murderer of Lila's father, and is eventually caught up by his guilty conscience. Whereas Lila is a homodiegetic narrator using the first person point of view, the passages focalising on Munene are told in a heterodiegetic manner using the third person point of view. Apart from this interchange of perspectives which takes place on the level of the short chapters, and sometimes inside of chapters, there are several instances of a switch into the second person point of view—apart from the expositional direct address to the reader which was discussed at the beginning of this article.

In chapter one, when Lila's tribulations oscillating between a daylight hallucination and a traumatic nightmare are described—she is haunted by a mysterious menacing man—, she confesses that she cannot go on narrating herself because it is too burdensome and overwhelming:

Nilitulia tutwe kama sanamu. Hata sijui kama naweza kueleza kilichokuwa kikionekana kwenye jukwaa ambako mimi mwenyewe nilikuwa mhusika. Siwezi ...

Ehh naweza kuelewa kwa nini huwezi. [...] Wasiwasi mkubwa ukakuvingia. Macho huku na kule. Jasho. [...] Moyo wako ukakupiga kwa kasi ya ajabu, ni kama unataka kupasua kifua na kutoka nje. Macho yako yalikuwa yamekutoka pima, na macho yako, si unayajua, ni makubwa kwa hiyo unaweza kufikiria mtazamo wenyewe. Mwili wako ukachezacheza kama tete za majini [...]

I turned into a pillar of salt. I even don't know whether I can convey what was visible on the stage on which I myself was a character. I can't ...

Yees, I can understand why you can't do that. [...] Great anxiety befell you. A stare here, a stare there. Sweat. [...] Your heart beats you [sic] with wondrous speed, it is as if it wants to break through your chest and get out. Your eyes wide open, and your eyes, you know them, don't you, they are big, so you can imagine the stare. Your body was trembling like ripples in the water [...] (Dharau 6–7, emphasis in original)

When the homodiegetic narrative voice is overwhelmed by the course of events, it admits that it has to stop narrating. Instead of the well-known category of unreliable narration, this instance can be called a case of 'overwhelmed narration'—before it becomes too difficult or impossible, and thus unreliable, to go on with the narration, the narrative voice gives up, and it shares this frankly with the reader. Admitting this kind of (supposed) 'weakness' on the part of the narrative voice serves to enhance both suspense and also empathy on the part of the reader.

Before climaxing in the elliptic and ruptured "Siwezi ..." (I cannot ...), the narrative voice admits '(self-) unsure narration'—"sijui kama naweza" (I do not know whether I can)—and thus questions its own capacity. Furthermore, the use of the literary *termini technici* "jukwaa" (stage) and "mhusika" deserves attention. *Jukwaa* provides a metareference to the genre of drama, and visualises what is happening on the level of the narrative process during the moment of narration. It can be read as the narrative voice being overwhelmed by what happens, in the sense that it can still see what is happening, but realises that it gradually loses its capability to say, to narrate, what is happening. Whereas the *visual* sense of the narrative voice is still intact, its *narrative* capacity vanishes. In this sense, the use of *jukwaa* also contributes to a sensualisation of narration and it can be read as a metanarrative comment on the sensual aspect of narration. As a term used for literary texts of different genres, "mhusika" (character, protagonist) is not limited to drama, and therefore serves as a metareference to literature in general, in the sense of making explicit that this text is a *literary* text. At the same time, it serves as a metanarrative comment as it identifies the narrative voice as what it is, in a narratological sense: a character in the novel. As regards one of the main functions of metatextualities, i.e. enhancing distance versus reducing distance to the reader (Nünning 38), I read this passage as gauging distance in both directions of this bipolar category: while "jukwaa" and "mhusika" enhance distance, as explicit markers of the text as a literary and thus constructed artefact, "sijui" and "siwezi ..." reduce the distance by inviting the reader to sense the dilemma the narrative voice experiences, to identify with these intensive emotions about losing one's capacity to cope with a situation, at least by being able to continue to give an account of it.

Last but not least, this passage contains some sort of peculiar humour when it says “[...] *na macho yako, si unayajua, ni makubwa kwa hiyo unaweza kufikiria mtazamo wenyewe*” (Dharau 7). Of course, one usually knows how one’s eyes look like, but the newly ‘appointed’ narrative voice furnishes its comment with the rhetoric question “*si unayajua?*” (you know them, don’t you?). By doing so, the comment asks the character, also in its capacity of the (former) narrative voice, to distance herself from herself, and then imagine herself according to her experience. The laconic way of reminding the character of her big eyes, and what stare they produce, creates an ironic distance. Finally, the use of “*mtazamo*” here, in my reading, is not a coincidence. Whereas it translates as “stare” here, it also means “perspective”, and it is the *terminus technicus* in Swahili-language literary studies for “point of view”, as Wamitila himself, in his capacity as a scholar, has listed in his seminal dictionary of literary terms and theory *Kamusi ya Fasih: Istilahi na Nadharia* (144–5, 369). Read along these lines, “*mtazamo*” only seems to merely serve a casual description of the situation the character finds themselves in; the use of this word also serves as a metanarrative comment of one of the main points of the aesthetic agenda of the whole novel: to experiment on narration by using different points of view in one and the same novel.

In another instance, the *tempus*/time of narration and its conventions are discussed when one protagonist says:

[...] *husimulia kwa wakati uliopo na kuvunja kaida zote tulizofundishwa chuoni za usimulizi wa matukio yaliyopita. Labda maisha yetu, ngano yetu si ya jana bali ni ya leo; labda tunapaswa kuangalia wakati upya.*

[...] he is used to narrate in the present tense and to violate all the rules of narrating events in the past we have been taught in college. Perhaps our life, our storytelling is not one of yesterday, but of today; perhaps we should perceive time in a new manner. (Dharau 104)

This metanarrational comment implicitly calls for a ‘liberalisation’ of conventional narratological rules, but it does not stop there. In the second sentence, it passes over into reasoning about the concept of time. It questions conventional linear concepts of time and thus touches on the philosophical notion of time. And at the same time, it relates this reasoning to the question of genre, advocating a re-assessment and re-evaluation of oral literature, in line with the overall agenda of the novel.

Metareferences to prose, drama, and poetry

As has been shown above, metareferences to oral literature are a frequent feature of this novel, and serve the overall agenda of the novel to re-valorise oral literature, and to perceive it anew. Apart from the agenda of questioning not only the dividing line between the oral and the written, but also the conventional value judgment that goes along with it, the novel also makes reference to the genres of poetry, drama, and prose. A reference to drama was already evident in one of the examples above, where *jukwaa* (stage) was used by the narrative voice-cum-character to describe what happened to it/her (Dharau 6). In chapter 57, *pazia la igo la tanzia* (the curtain of a tragic performance/tragedy) and *onyesho* (scene) are used to describe how Munene’s second wife Katumbi hopes to cut off all relations with him, in vain, after they have split up (Dharau 197).

Apart from inserting key terms from the genre of drama here and there, one instance of radical formal inter-genre use—which also has its metatextual implications—is to be found in chapter 26 when one of Munene’s nightmarish dreams is narrated. This dream is narrated with a focalisation on Munene, but when a mysterious giant ‘S’ (which may allude to the biblical giant Samson, and stand for ‘*sauti*’, [inner] voice) appears, they start an almost *Waiting for Godot*-like dialogue. This dialogue is rendered following the conventions of a play:

M: [...] weve ni nani?
 S: Shujaa anashindwaje kunielewa mimi?
 M: Wewe ni yule mzee anayeniandama kila siku?
 S: Mimi ni mzee?
 M: Ehhh ...!
 S: Ehhh ... ehhh ... ehhh (kicheko kiliendelea kwa muda kisha) ... unajijua wewe?
 M: Ehh!
 S: Basi mimi ni wewe ... mimi ni KIVULI chako!⁹

M: [...] who are you?
 S: A hero [like you] fails to recognise me?
 M: Are you that old man who runs after me every day?
 S: Am I an old man?
 M: Oh yes ...!
 S: Oh yes ... Oh yes ... Oh yes (ongoing laughter for a while, then) ... do you know thyself?
 M: Yes!
 S: Well then, I am you ... I am your SHADOW! (Dharau 102)

The insertion of a dialogue presented in this way serves as a metareference to the genre of drama. The implicit metanarrational character of such a dialogue is to emphasise that the conversation at hand is best represented through a change of genre, from prose to drama, which increases its scenographical effect, makes the text livelier, and at the same time gives it a comical ring. In line with the characteristics of postmodern writing, it exposes generic hybridity and (celebratory) playfulness.

This kind of insertion of drama texts into the generic frame of prose narration is a feature which is also used in Wamitila's subsequent novel *Unaitwa Nani?* (2008) when in the first two of three frame stories unnamed patients, unable to speak themselves, wake up in a hospital bed and have to listen to the mocking conversation of doctors and nurses about them (Wamitila, *Unaitwa Nani?* 2–38, 118–44).¹⁰

More frequent than using and presenting dialogues in the way it is done in the genre of drama are insertions of poetry into the prose which constitute the frame and the matrix of the text. Apart from a variety of other examples (Dharau 186, 218, 229, 259), the following one has been chosen for analysis for the way it is embedded into the prose and the structure of the respective chapter on the one hand, and for its phonostylistics on the other. The context is the feud between Munene and his brother Keli. Even after murdering Keli—something which is unambiguously revealed only at the end of the novel—Munene leaves no stone unturned to make the life of his late brother's family miserable. In chapter 52, Keli's widow Mumbé finds out that her entire harvest has been burnt by unknown bandits.

Moyoni hakuhitaji kuelezwa aliyehusika; aliweza kuhisi na hata katika akili yake aliweza kumsawiri akilipanga hili: Munene. Lakini kwa nini? Alishangaa ni kwa nini
kiangazi cha dhiki
na dhiki za mkikimkiki
mwili wake zinauhiliki,
na kuufyonza utomvu uliobaki ...
 Kwa nini? Kwa nini? Kwa nini?

In her heart, she did not need to be explained who was the one involved; she could sense it and in her mind she could also imagine him and compose a word: Munene. *But why?* She was astonished why [this]
 dry season of distress
 distress and pressure
 her body they destroy
 and suck the sap left over ...
Why? Why? Why? (Dharau 184, emphasis in original)

The conventional prose narration with the interference of the italicised *Kwa nini?* (Why?) switches into a short poem while the sentence seems to be continued, and the switch is marked by a new and indented paragraph. The poem is marked by the end rhyme '-ki', and its phonostylistics feature further repetitions of the 'ki' sound

and combinations of consonants (C) with ‘i’, following the ‘C-i-C-i’ and the ‘C-i-C-i-C-i-C-i’ sound patterns. These sounds are inspired by the key word and concept of *dhiki* (distress). The repetitive ‘i’ sound can be read as a representation of the painful monotony of distress, whereas the voiceless, ‘hard’ ‘k’ sound can be read as a representation of the hardship of distress. As a climax—to the short poem, and to the whole chapter—these very same sounds ‘i’ and ‘k’ also feature in the question *Kwa nini?* (Why?), which is repeated thrice and taken up from the italicised insertion into the preceding prose passage. A few lines earlier in the text, Mumbe’s agony, her “dry season of distress”, had already led her to say:

Jamani tumewakosa binadamu nini? Kwa nini? Kwa ... K ...?
Kimya. Pumzi ndefu.

My goodness, what have we done wrong to them? Why? Wh ... W...?
 Silence. A deep breath. (*Dharau* 184)

The question *Kwa nini?* serves as a heading to the whole passage and is therefore repeated at the end of the poem and the chapter. The way the voiceless ‘k’ sound is represented in the quest for a reason may be also read as the hardship, or the impossibility, of finding an answer—the “K ...” seems to be stuck in Mumbe’s throat—an answer to why Munene continues his inexorable cruelty against his brother’s family even after murdering him.

The way this poem is embedded into the text, and how it represents the dire straits that the character finds herself in, can be read as a metareference to the peculiar and unique potential of the genre of poetry. The text suggests that a prose narration which aims at gauging its potential to enhance emotional intimacy and immediacy has no choice other than switching the genre and practicing this other genre in a sophisticated manner, in this case by exploring the potential of phonostylistics in a poem.

Another remarkable example to be mentioned in this section is the insertion of a drama text combined with a poem in the form of a song in chapter 66 (244–5), which cannot be discussed here in the interest of space.

And the *ngoma* ends ...

The elaborate epilogue of the novel is presented as part of the last chapter (*Dharau* 270–8). It starts with a direct address to the reader:

Hukukata tamaa ya kuendelea kusoma? Umesoma mpaka ukafika huku? Ahh, vizuri sana. Hongera hata!

You didn’t give up on reading? You’ve continued to read until you got here? Ahh, very good. Congrats, even! (*Dharau* 270)

In what follows, the narrative voice—which calls itself ‘I’—addresses the reader and states that it likes to counteract the valid reproach that it did not tell a story which it had promised to tell earlier on. In a ten-line address, it calls upon the reader to get ready for what is going to be told, in a way well familiar from the exposition or prologue of the novel.

Hii labda ni njia nzuri ya kumalizia riwaya hii. Kaa tayari. Hii ni ngoma muhimu ambayo inapaswa kuiacha mirindimo yake katika masikio yako; [...]

Uko tayari? Jiandae vyovyote iwayo vizuri kwako. Kitini. Darasani. Usishangae. Haya.

*Hadithi ... Hadithi ... Hadithi njoo!*¹¹

This is perhaps a good way of ending this novel. Get ready. This is a significant dance that should leave its thundering sounds in your ears; [...]

Are you ready? Prepare yourself in any way that may be well for you. On a chair. In class. Don’t marvel. Ok, fine.

Hadithi ... Hadithi ... Hadithi njoo! (*Dharau* 271)

The second passage recalls, in parts word-for-word, the direct address to the reader in the prologue of the novel (*Dharau* 2), starting with the (polite) imperative of *jiandae* (prepare yourself), followed by where the reader might perhaps find himself while reading this. The places where this novel might have been read are reduced from four to two. The fact that *darasani* (in class) is the only reiterated ‘*locus legendi*’ can be read as a self-conscious meta-textual comment which indicates that this novel, due to its complexity—and also, by that time, rather unusual length—is most likely to be read *in class*. Apart from this self-location of the novel text as regards (the limits, the

nature of) its readership, this remark can also be read as an ironic sigh, commenting on the fact that complex novels have to cope with these limitations (though perhaps, they might deserve broader readership).

The ironic ring of this exposition to the epilogue becomes more obvious in the first passage when the narrative voice incredulously asks, “you didn’t give up on reading?” and even congratulates the reader for their assiduity. As explicated before, the text metatextually comments on its length and complexity, and demonstrates that it is well aware of how laborious the reading of such a text can be.

Coming back to the parallelism with the prologue, the second passage, instead of *Paukwa*, culminates in the formula “*Hadithi ... Hadithi ... Hadithi njoo!*” (literally, “Tale ... Tale ... Tale, come [to be told]!”) again in reference and reverence to the art of oral storytelling. And the narrative voice is true to its word: the tale follows as promised. It tells the story of colonial and postcolonial Kenya in an allegorical manner, and plays on the onomastics and onomastic connotations of the word ‘Kenya’ between ‘self-sufficiency’ (*kinaa*), ‘disgust’ (*kinyaa*), and ‘to smile’ (*-kenyaa*). Another metareference to literature and, in this case literary terms, is that the word ‘*kinaya*’, in its understanding as a variant of ‘*kinaa*’, also means ‘irony’ as a literary device.¹² In this sense, the ‘irony’ of Kenya’s history could be its long journey from ‘self-sufficiency’ over ‘disgust’ into the longed-for future as a land of ‘smile’.

Finally, in the concluding section of the epilogue, the narrative voice openly takes the role of an elder providing his grandchildren with his *nasaha*, advice and teachings:

*Wajukuu zangu hii ni ngano ambayo mnapaswa kuipokezana [sic] kama chambi. [...] Chanukeni. Gutukeni.*¹³

My grandchildren, this is a tale which you should pass on to each other like partners in a dance. [...] Thrive. Awaken. (*Dharau* 278)

What follows is a series of juxtaposed *methali* (proverbs) before the epilogue commences its last paragraph by reinforcing and explicating its agenda for a reassessment of *fasihi simulizi* (oral literature):

*Fasihi simulizi ndiyo yenye uhai; ndiyo tunayoishi; hiyo nyingine yenu imekufa au labda inaweza kuhuishwa na hii iliyo hai, na kama mgonjwa aliyeishiwa na damu, ikapewa uhai mwingine!*¹⁴

Oral literature is the one which is lively; it is what we are experiencing; that other one of yours is dead, or perhaps can be revived by the lively one, and, like a patient who has run out of blood, be given a new life! (*Dharau* 278)

This passage declares that conventional written literature “is dead”, and emphatically reiterates the plea for oral literature as a key to give new impulses to contemporary written literature. On yet another level of metatextual commentary, it highlights the potential of oral literature as an integral part of experimentalism. With this plea for the breaching of genre boundaries and playfulness, it stresses the role of oral literature in postmodernist literature, on the one hand. On the other hand, it shows that contemporary writing which consciously makes use of, and plays on, the richness of oral literature can serve to question global-northern-centred notions of what postmodernism in literature is.

In the end, this agenda leads the text into unveiling a reading of its central metaphor *dharau ya ini* which is contained in the proverb “*Mdharau ini humsonga kooni*” (Who despises the liver will have it stuck in their throat). Besides explicitly referring to Prometheus’s fate of being punished by helplessly witnessing how an eagle comes every day and devours parts of his liver while he is tied to a giant rock (*Dharau* 2) in an instance of classical intertextuality, this metaphor deserves attention beyond its reference to Greek mythology.

‘*Ini*’ (the liver)—a slick and slippery organ which is not easy to take and keep hold of, an inner organ found in human beings, hidden, unrecognised, undervalued, despised—becomes a metaphor of cultural and literary identity. “Don’t despise your inner self, your culture(s), your literature(s), and its rich stock in oral literature, for what it can contribute to world literature”, the text suggests, which has led me to propose to shunt the literal translation of this central metaphor and title of the whole novel in favour of “Know Thyself!”. In my reading, the implicit call “*usidharau ini*” (don’t condemn/despise the liver) calls for the creation of an awareness of the richness and possibilities contained in the ‘heritage’—and contemporaneity—of oral literature. In this line of thought, we can also refer back to the ‘qualities’ of the liver illustrated by Prometheus’s fate: though being eaten each and every day by the eagle, it regenerates itself each and every night, time and time again. Even when oral literature is under threat, it is regenerating itself every day, it is vital, it cannot be overcome, it is endless, timeless. Creating such an awareness may enable writers, readers, critics, and all other agents in the literary field/s, to ponder their perception of the

oral and the written, and of contemporary Swahili literature and its ambitious process of negotiating its trends and tendencies between the poles of conventional(ised) writing and innovative experimentation.

Conclusion

This reading of Wamitila's fifth novel *Dharau ya Ini* has shown that metatextualities are a major feature of this text. A closer analysis of these metatextualities with a focus on metanarration and metareference has disclosed that the novel's main agenda is twofold. The first is experimentation. It experiments on different aspects of narration, in particular on narrative point of view, and it experiments on the insertion of genres other than prose. By combining different points of view, it experiments on narration in a playful manner hitherto unwitnessed in contemporary Swahili literature. However, the text does not content itself with experimentation alone; it also *comments on* it and even seems to *discuss* it, as an integral part of the text. This is where *metanarration* comes in.

In my reading, the text is a conscious invitation to the readers to *reflect upon* narration, and especially on point of view, in this case. Furthermore, the text experiments on questions of genre. With remarkable ease, and again, in a playful manner, it inserts drama and poetry parts into the flow of the matrix text which is prose. Apart from its nature of applying generic intertextuality to the text, I argue to also read this kind of experimentation on a *metalevel* for it seems to gauge which genre is suitable to convey which moment, which situation, which sentiment during the process of narration. Though implicitly, this makes it also part of metanarration. At the same time, I read it as a metareference to these genres other than prose which goes beyond the more immediate aspects of narration, of the narrative process in this very moment. As a metareference, it serves to reassess the potential of drama and poetry elements in prose, and questions the conventional boundaries between these genres.

This questioning of genre boundaries goes hand-in-hand with what I read as the second agenda of the novel: its elaborate plea for a fundamental reassessment of oral literature. The novel text suggests that the reassessment that has already taken place, by acknowledging the significant role oral literature plays in contemporary writing—be it as part of magical realism, or as part of postmodernist writing—is not sufficient. It argues that conventional contemporary writing has reached an impasse, and that oral literature is key to renew it, to provide major incentives to it in order to keep it thriving. In a sense, it seems to turn the stigmatised perception of oral literature upside down, or to turn it around: instead of (only, or mainly) asking for more respect and acknowledgement of its merits in the past—and by means of interrogating linear concepts of time—the text holds that oral literature is past, present, and future of ambitious contemporary writing.

But what does this reasoning mean for Swahili literature, in concrete terms? Here, the reading of the eponymous metaphor "*dharau ya ini*" comes in. In my reading and transposition, "Know Thyself!" is both a call for decolonising one's (literary) mind, and a call for a self-conscious and self-confident use of (Eastern) African oral literature. Be it in the form of adoption, adaptation, and/or transformation, oral literature is conceived of as being key to any current trends in ambitious contemporary Swahili writing. While advocating this approach contained in a metaphor, concerning its structure, the text itself is quite clear in commenting on itself as a whole, and thus locating itself in the context of this agenda when it says: "*ukakumbuka vile visa vya fasihi simulizi; vyenye muundo sawa tu na riwaya hii*" (then you remembered those stories from oral literature; having the very same structure as this novel) (*Dharau* 7).¹⁵

To conclude, this "reading closely" of *Dharau ya Ini* with a focus on metanarration and metareference holds that the novel has a twofold agenda which consists of experimentation on narration on the one hand, and a re-assessment of oral literature on the other. In my view, the study at hand corroborates Gromov's dictum of *Dharau ya Ini* being a "cornerstone" (qtd in Bertoncini-Zúbková *et al.* 74), if not a milestone, of Kenyan Swahili novel writing.

Notes

1. The novel has not been translated yet. "Contempt of the Liver" as a translation of the title has been proposed by Gromov (see Bertoncini-Zúbková *et al.* 74). My reading and transposition of the title to "Know Thyself!" will be explicated in the section preceding the conclusion.
2. The italics here and elsewhere distinguishes the Swahili text from English. Though it cannot be shown here, the original passage is printed in italics indeed, which distinguishes it from the main parts of the text.
3. A note on translation: I deliberately apply an approach to literary translation which is open to more unconventional wordings, word order, sounds, and further features which may arise. My aim is to create a literary translation which sometimes deliberately deviates from the conventional expectations in the English language in order to convey the specific aesthetics of the Swahili-language original text.

4. This goes beyond Gérard Genette's notion of metatextuality as one subcategory of transtextuality, which denotes direct and indirect forms of commenting on a text in a text, "the *critical* relationship par excellence" (Genette 4). The Swahili-language terms I have settled on as a suggestion are "umatinia" (metatextuality), "usimulizia" (metanarration), and "urejeleleo" (metareference).
5. In Anglophone literary studies, metafiction seems to frequently serve as an umbrella term for what I call metatextualities (see Wolf, "Metafiktion"). This corresponds to Swahilophone literary studies, where the terms *bunilizipiku/metabunilizi* have been introduced to denote "metafiction" as an umbrella term (Wamitila, *Kamusi* 120, 358; *Uchanganuzi* 412–3).
6. Original italicised.
7. Though *jiandae* has a polite ring resembling the form of the 'polite imperative' (*ujiandae*), it is the only imperative form to be constructed due to the reflexive pronoun it contains. Therefore, it 'sounds' more polite, but is actually as 'direct' as an imperative form with a reflexive verb can be.
8. It is most commonly translated as "Once upon a time ...", but it actually corresponds to something like "Wasn't there something?" "(Once upon a time) there was ..."/"There was something!"
9. Original italicised.
10. For a discussion of these passages see Diegner ("Leaving Parched Gardens and Discussing Narration with the Reader. Metatextualities in the Contemporary Swahili Novel" 34–7) and Diegner ("Postrealist, Postmodernist, Postnation? The Swahili Novel 1987–2010" 129–31).
11. Original italicised.
12. The onomastic reasoning suggested in the text deserves some more attention. The verb '-kenyaa' is constructed as a variant of '-kenua' which is explained as a synonym to '-tabasamu'. However, '-kenua' is more commonly lexicalised as 'to show one's teeth', and/in the sense of 'to smile/look at someone, contemptuously' (see KKK 411; KKF 151; KKS 205; KKKiing 213; Mohamed 299 which give both meanings; for the codes of the consulted *kamusi* (dictionaries), like for instance KKS, see the works cited section). The words 'kinaa' and 'kinaya' are not given as variants to each other in several sources. Apart from '(literary) irony', 'kinaya' means "arrogance, pride"; "satiation"; "joke, mockery"; "match, equivalent"; and "pattern, model" (Mohamed 333; KKKiing 229).
13. Original italicised.
14. Original italicised.
15. Original italicised.

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(East) African postcolonial ecocriticism: Revisiting Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Prisoner* Alex Nelungo Wanjala

(East) African postcolonial ecocriticism: Revisiting Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Prisoner*

This article celebrates Okot p'Bitek's contribution to East African literature in general and the song school of East Africa in particular, by revisiting one of his less-known works, *Song of Prisoner* on the fiftieth anniversary of its publication. I subject the text to a close reading in order to demonstrate how p'Bitek uses imagery that is drawn from East Africa's natural environment in a way that evokes issues that are an assault on the prevailing social and political order in East Africa at the time, in a nuanced manner. With the benefit of hindsight, the paper establishes that p'Bitek's attempt to preserve his natural environment (that of East Africa) through writing it into his poetry, was a precursor for texts that would later be examined within the framework of the contemporary critical theory of postcolonial ecocriticism, and that using the text, one can narrow the scope further in a manner that takes into account the specificities of (East) African environmental literature. In so doing, the paper establishes that p'Bitek indeed highlights social realities through his poetry, in order to launch his attack on the existing neo-colonial capitalistic order prevailing at the historical moment of his writing, thus confirming that he displays a social vision that strives for decolonisation without the exploitative aftermath encapsulating modernity. The paper thus demonstrates how this poem is still relevant as a study to the student of East African literature reading it in the 21st century. **Keywords:** Song School, East African poetry, Okot P'Bitek, postcolonial ecocriticism.

Introduction

In a 1965 symposium on "East Africa's Cultural Heritage" held in Nairobi, Okot p'Bitek made the following observation "The first step in vernacular literature is not a step. The first step is to open ears. Listen to the birds' songs and the talk of the monkeys" ("Future of the Vernacular Literature" 24). p'Bitek—who had by that time already published two novels in the Acoli language and had been working on the manuscript of his Acoli song *Wer pa Lawino* (1969), whose translated version *Song of Lawino* (1966) would be published the year following this symposium—thus highlighted the importance of a writer's being attuned to their natural environment, as one of the key ingredients of vernacular literature from East Africa. Another speaker at the same symposium, Gerald Moore expressed similar sentiments, albeit in regard to literature in English expression coming out of East Africa at the time, by observing that writers such as Jomo Kenyatta, James Ngugi (Ngugi wa Thiong'o), Joe Mutiga, and Jonathan Kariara depicted a feeling of total harmony with their environment in their writing, thus identifying a love of landscape and nature as a hallmark of East African literature.

When one reads p'Bitek's later poetry in English expression, one observes the fact that he carries over his philosophy in regard to the writing of 'vernacular' literature over into those texts, more or less to a discernible degree. Indeed, all critics of p'Bitek's poetry agree that his composition borrows heavily from Acoli orature, thus replicating forms of authentic African poetry in written texts. Nevertheless, scant attention has been paid to how he represents the natural environment through his poetry (the exception being Caminero-Santangelo's study of *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol*). This may be seen as a blind spot in terms of the study of his oeuvre. A quest to examine the manner in which the natural environment is depicted through p'Bitek's writing thus serves as my entry point in regard to revisiting his poem *Song of Prisoner* fifty years after its publication.

The poem is one of two songs published by p'Bitek in an anthology titled *Two Songs* (1971), the other being *Song of Malaya*. Both poems provide a commentary on East African society a decade after independence and dwell

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on issues related to the situation of the urbanite in the early 1970s. Indeed, Okot p'Bitek is well placed to be seen as a regional commentator having moved from Uganda, the country of his birth, to Kenya, in the mid-sixties, and thus incorporating social and political issues from both countries into the writing of his poetry. Thus, *Malaya* presents the reader with issues related to religion, morality, and prostitution in the developing milieu of East African urban society, while *Prisoner* highlights social issues in a manner that attacks the existing neo-colonial capitalist social order that was emergent in East Africa at the time.

In a 1981 interview with Lee Nichols for Voice of America, p'Bitek explained how he was once incarcerated in a jail cell after causing a disturbance while on a train ride from Nairobi to Kisumu. With the incident fresh on his mind a week later, he received news about the assassination of a Kenyan cabinet minister, Tom Mboya, whom he regarded as a friend. He was thus inspired to write the poem *Song of Prisoner* (Nichols 249). Indeed, the assassination of Tom Mboya and the forced silences around the event, marked a turning point in Kenyan history that has been variously described in literature by other writers like Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye and Yvonne Owuor. The fact that thematically, the poem engages in representing the social and political realities of East Africa in the historical period roughly a decade after the independence of East African countries, makes it belong to what Phyllis Taoua describes as part of the growing body of literature in the period immediately after independence, which conveyed a sense of disillusionment with the fact that the dreams of independence had been betrayed, and that the colonial authorities still somehow influenced the corrupt and autocratic regimes that were in place. Thus, in order to take this factor into consideration, the second focal point in my evaluation of the poem will be to subject it to a postcolonial critique, which will demonstrate how p'Bitek uses imagery that is drawn from East Africa's natural environment in a way that evokes thematic issues that are an assault on the prevailing social order in East Africa.

From the foregoing, it becomes evident that in order to take into consideration a presentation of the environment in literature, as well as undertaking a postcolonial critique of the poem under evaluation, my argument would have to be accommodated within the framework of postcolonial ecocriticism. A brief examination of the history of the concept as well as how it should apply to my study is therefore necessary at this point.

As was highlighted at the 1965 symposium mentioned above, a love for nature and the environment has always been part of East Africa's cultural heritage and this was depicted in the literary texts that emerged from the region even in pre-independence times and has been addressed in critical studies of African literature, in one way or the other since then. Concurrently, over the years, and especially since the 1970s, various paradigms of environmental literary criticism have been developed in the Global North that do not really reflect the approaches used by writers from the Global South in their critical evaluation of nature writing from their regions.

These Western approaches are multi-disciplinary since they incorporate the scientific aspect of ecology in literary criticism. They have also privileged the presentation of nature at the expense of a presentation of a history of the impact of modernity on indigenous people and their cultures, as is argued by Caminero-Santangelo and Garth A. Mayers. They also fail to take into account what has been described by Rob Nixon as a "slow violence" which is the invisible aftermath of environmental crises as a result of human activities such as war, and how these crises affect ecosystems, the poor in society, and the world in general.

Therefore, such Western approaches, which eventually crystallised into what was defined by William Rueckert as ecocriticism, were seen to be counterproductive when applied to the analysis of literature from the Global South and indeed to the literature of the minorities in the Global North, because of the fact that they suppressed the histories of the impact of modernity on the indigenous peoples and their cultures in the quest to accommodate ecology within the theoretical paradigm of ecocriticism.

The situation thus led to a counter-reaction by literary critics who desired "to make ecocriticism more responsive to historical relationships of power, to colonial history and its effects and to cultural difference" (Caminero-Santangelo 5). This aspiration to question the historicity of ecology and to address the different cultural understandings of nature within "global imperial contexts" (6) led to the development of postcolonial ecocriticism, which "often emphasizes the similarities between [ecocriticism and postcolonial cultural studies] in terms of a sense of political commitment, interdisciplinarity and the interrogation of capitalist development and progress" (3).

The quest to avoid Euro-American essentialism in the study of ecocriticism by postcolonial critics has led to several book length publications in the contemporary period: a foundational text on postcolonial ecocriticism (Huggan and Tiffin); one that focuses on the nexus between the environment, nature, and history in the Carib-

bean (Deloughrey, Gosson, and Handley); one that focuses on the environmentalism of the poor in the Global South (Nixon); others focusing specifically on the depiction of the environment in African literature (Moolla); and animal studies in African literature from a posthuman ethics perspective (Mwangi), just to name a few that this article relies upon in its analysis of p'Bitek's poetry.

There are also some seminal articles that focus specifically on African postcolonial ecocriticism. One that will be instrumental to my analysis is Chengyi Coral Wu's "Towards an Ecocriticism in Africa: Literary Aesthetics in African Environmental Literature", which not only echoes Rob Nixon's approach to an environmentalism of the poor, in the South, but also narrows the scope of methods of postcolonial ecocriticism to focus specifically on African studies. She argues that African writers respond to local rather than global issues in their writing of environmental literature by addressing concerns such as "environmentalism for the poor" and issues of "environmental decadence" (147, 148). Wu thus suggests a critical methodology in regard to ecocriticism that focuses upon highlighting the complicated nature of environmental issues in African literature, with a focus on environmental justice, as well as a focus on the aesthetics of African environmental literature in a manner that "[pays] attention to African environmental imaginations, as revealed in African literary productions [in order to] recognize indigenous African environmentalisms and avoid misconceptions or oversimplifications that ignore the possibility of resistance or the existence of an agency, or a local-based environmentalism" (159).

Such an approach allows for accommodating the idiosyncrasies arising from historical, social, and ethical issues directly related to a specific locality or region. It also allows the critic to focus on a specific text's aesthetic merit. Indeed, such peculiarity is recommended by Elleke Boehmer, who in her call for rerouting postcolonial studies advocates a "postcolonial aesthetic" that links the postcolonial and historical elements in a work of art with the language of postcolonial writing. My paper will thus focus on a critical evaluation of the form of p'Bitek's writing, without however losing sight of the ideology in his writing. My approach entails examining p'Bitek's work using a universal framework of literary analysis, that however leads to an interpretation which is culturally specific and also related to a specific ideology in regard to the historical period in which the work is composed. My approach to postcolonial ecocriticism will thus oscillate between the examination of form and content in an analysis of *Song of Prisoner*.

Content and aesthetics in *Song of Prisoner*

The organisation of *Song of Prisoner* is straightforward. It is divided into fifteen sections, each with a heading that symbolically represents the theme that will be addressed within that particular section. Some examples of these titles as such as "dung of chicken", "soft grass", and "oasis". Therefore, in a manner of speaking, one could argue that the poem uses imagery even from the titles of these sections in a way that would guide the reader in regard to what to expect as they move along with their reading of the song. Another significant element of the titles is that they are all drawn from images that are related to a pre-colonial, natural, and rural ecosystem, which are shown to have been undisturbed by modernity and conserved in a kind of pristine state.

This is in sharp contrast with the setting of the poem which is in one of the harshest settings one could come across: an urban prison, one that is located in one of East Africa's capital cities, given the crimes that the prisoners are charged with. The use of contrast leads the reader to identify the text as being on that is located at the edge of two ecosystems: that of the natural rural habitat displaying a pristine past, and that of the man-made urban jail, an unnatural and uncomfortable habitat which relates to the present. The dialectics in the use of contrast in the poem thus depicts an ecotone, through a display of the tension between urban and rural ecosystems within the text. This display of formal resistance in the composition of the poem, indicates a kind of yearning for change within the established social order, a yearning that is expressed not only through the content, but the aesthetics of the poem.

Imagery through metaphor thus serves as a key ingredient to the understanding of the meaning of the poem. Adrian Roscoe's observation on p'Bitek's writing in regard to *Lawino*, still holds true if applied to a reading of *Prisoner*: "Okot [...] flies straight to the home scene for his imagery without stopovers in Europe, as he must do if his

work is to be authentic and persuasive to a local audience” (44). This becomes evident when one examines how p’Bitek uses metaphors in *Prisoner*. Beverly Mack states in regard to her study of Hausa poetry:

Metaphor has been recognized since the time of Aristotle as a supreme form of figurative speech. It is the most effective means of imbuing a poem with meaning. Terminology for the elements of a metaphor distinguishes between the bearer of the image, or “vehicle”, and the implied image, the “tenor” [...]. The vehicle is the set of words that creates an image, while the tenor is its implied meaning. (44)

I intend to use the above definition of metaphor in my study in order to signal the vehicle and tenor in relation to the nature imagery used in *Prisoner* as a means of explaining and illuminating the meaning of the poem. As Stuart C. Brown explains in regard to the use of metaphor and rhetoric as an instrument used in understanding meaning, “Awareness of the tenor/vehicle interaction, comparison and context are the key elements in using this instrument. They provide the composition or grounds for the meaning-making potential of the metaphor” (227). It is with this in mind that my analysis will endeavour to provide context to the meaning derived from the nature imagery used in the poem, drawing from intratextual and extratextual references.

Anthony Vital puts the same into practice through an appreciation of the social and historical dimensions of discourse in his reading of J. M. Coetzee’s *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983). Vital comments on how the significance of nature in Coetzee’s novel does not arise from an ecological perspective, but rather from interrogating the novel’s textuality. He highlights the interplay between the realist and metafictional planes of the novel, which when juxtaposed with the natural world as is written into the narrative, reveals how the social and political conditions in a specific period of South Africa’s history respond to a modernity rooted in colonialism and its attendant flows of power. According to Vital in his analysis of the novel, “the novel’s writing of nature is subordinate to its profound suspicion of modernity, and [...] as a result its assigning of value to nature reproduces the terms of a broadly conceived ‘romantic’ discourse” (96). Vital thus advocates and applies a postcolonial ecocriticism that is suited to local conditions in Southern Africa.

My article draws from his analysis as applies to East Africa, in order to demonstrate how nature imagery is used in the poem to obfuscate a realistic presentation of the social and political situation of East Africa in the late sixties, and that the imagery, when juxtaposed with the extratextual elements of the text, reveals the implied meaning of the text, which relates to p’Bitek’s condemnation of modernity through his presentation of the effects of neo-colonialism and his attendant desire for a revolution that would rid East African society of those adverse effects.

Finally, over the years since its publication, the analysis of *Song of Prisoner* has always been subsumed under that of p’Bitek’s other poems, where it is examined alongside one or the other, and very briefly at that. This has led to a certain confusion in regard to the meaning of the poem and also in regard to some of its basic features such as the number of persona(e) depicted in the poem. My revisiting of the poem intends to undertake a sustained reading of the same, and through this close reading demonstrate how this text is still relevant to East African society in the 21st Century.

The vagrant and the slow violence of environmental degradation in East Africa

The poem opens with a section titled “dung of chicken”. The terminology used symbolically represents something that is worthless, as chicken dung has no practical use within the East African rural environment, and is normally simply swept away and discarded, unlike, say cow dung which would be used to smear the floor of a house, seal baskets that will be used to store grains and flour, and other such practical purposes. The imagery used in the title thus guides the reader to an awareness of the fact that the content of the section will address the characteristics

of worthlessness in society. This indeed becomes evident as we read through the section. It begins with a description of the environment in which the persona finds himself at the present moment. The scene is described thus:

The stone floor
Lifts her powerful arms
In cold embrace
To welcome me
As I sit on her navel
My head rests
On her flat
Whitewashed breasts
She kisses
My bosom
My neck
My bellybutton
My back
My buttocks
And shoots freezing bullets
Through my bones. (11, 12)

The prison floor is personified as a woman who has invited the prisoner into her cold embrace. The poet gives a detailed description of the discomfort felt by the prisoner in the cell, through describing all the body parts affected by the cold. This emphasises the hostility of the prisoner's immediate environment, an urban prison. The prison here could be said to be a symbol of modernity as it is part of the institutions that were introduced in Africa as part of the Western penal system. The prisoner's incarceration in this environment is painful and foreign to him and the helplessness he feels is demonstrated when he is asked to take his plea:

Do you plead
Guilty
Or
Not guilty?
I plead drunkenness,
I am intoxicated
With anger
My fury
Is white hot
My brain is melting
My throat is on fire
I am dizzy
With frustration
I am drowning
In the deep Lake
Of hatred
My heart is riddled
With the arrows
Of despair
My head is bursting
Oh! (12, 13)

The use of nature imagery through the use of conceit in reference to the "deep lake of hatred" in which the prisoner is drowning, emphasises the fact that the prisoner is frustrated by the system that has led to his incarceration. Other metaphors are also used to describe the emotions that he is undergoing due to the seemingly unjust treatment he is receiving.

The frustration of the present moment is contrasted with the past. Through the use of rhetorical questions, the prisoner indicates how in the past he was useful to society, unlike in his present circumstances. He describes

how he participated in several sporting activities such as football, boxing, wrestling, running, and hunting. The prisoner reminisces about this as he wonders why his gaolers are now inflicting wounds on his body.

Look at the laughing wound
In my head
Its cracked negro lips
Painted with dirty brown ochre
Do you see
The beads of blood
On my nose and feet?
My nose
Is a broken dam
Youthful blood leaps
Like a cheetah
After a duiker
Two fingers
The width of the new gap
In my teeth ... (14)

The metaphors used to describe the wounds inflicted on the prisoner through overt violence in the jail cell, are paradoxically delivered through a description of capture of rural landscapes that are presented to the reader using vivid colours and a description of the natural resources found within that ecosystem such as dams. The poet then juxtaposes the illustration with zoomorphic imagery that presents activities that would take place within a Savannah grasslands ecosystem.

The meaning of the verse could thus be captured through an understanding of the irony evident in these images, in that what should be a beautiful scene is actually fraught with danger. The animals pictured are engaged in a hunt, while the dam described has broken its banks. Through detecting the use of irony, the reader establishes the dialectics between the past and the present at play, and thus arrives at understanding how imagery functions to give meaning in the verse. What at face value is a portrait of a beautiful scene in nature, actually describes a present scenario in which the prisoner's face is injured, and he is bleeding profusely.

The images of nature as used also present the idea of the nostalgia that the prisoner has for the wide-open spaces which he describes, while in captivity. The contrast between them and the present surroundings of the prisoner reinforces the fact that the past was more pristine than the present moment. The rural area as contrasted with the urban area, reveals the beauty of the former as compared to the desolation of the latter, demonstrating how the writer displays a certain attachment to the rural environment which by extension reveals that the past was better than the present. This pastoral quality is a motif that is indeed employed throughout the poem. The meaning of the title of the section "dung of chicken" has by now become evident. It indicates that the prisoner feels that his present circumstances have rendered him useless, and that this is due to his poverty and social position. He describes this using imagery.

A young tree
Burnt out
By the fierce wild fire
of Uhuru. (15)

The image presented above is that of a young tree that had the potential for a bright future were it allowed to grow tall. It however had its growth cut short by a wildfire, as often happens in forests during the dry season. This wildfire is likened to the economic situation faced by a large number of people after the independence of East African countries. At independence, the youth found themselves in a situation in which they lacked employment or business opportunities. This extended metaphor thus uses nature imagery to bring out the idea that the young man finds himself alienated from society in the post-independence period. Whereas there are people around him that may have benefitted from Uhuru (a Swahili word meaning "freedom"), or independence, he feels like he is one of those that have no place in the new society, and is being punished simply for his existence, hence his fury. p'Bitek through this image is indicating the feeling of dispossession by a large section of the populace in East Af-

rica represented by this prisoner, who is thus depicted as belonging to the economically disadvantaged category of people in that society.

The image of the destruction of nature through calamities like wildfires is an ecological referent that reveals what Rob Nixon has described as “slow violence”: “a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time a space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (2). The ecological effects of a fierce fire that burns out a tree, or a forest for that matter, would not be immediate, but gradual, as the destruction of trees leads to calamities that are linked to deforestation such as reduced rainfall and food scarcity for communities that depend on adequate rainfall for their food security as is the case for a large section of East Africa. Through the use of nature imagery, p’Bitek is therefore indicating the slow violence that a large section of the youth in East Africa were subjected to during the decolonisation and subsequent period in regard to their economic development, leading to an increase in poverty in the post-colonial period.

Indeed, Frank Girling describes how there is geological evidence that the larger area in which Acoliland is situated started out as what was probably a semi-arid area, but with adequate rainfall became more favourable for habitation, leading to large groups of Nilotic speakers moving into the region, including the Acoli. Over time, however, the environment suffered from pressure due to the numbers of pastoralists depending on the vegetation from the area, hunting methods engaged in by the Acoli which involved burning of grass, clearing of the forests for building materials, the decimation of Acoli cattle herds by Sudanese slave traders, and the establishment of British rule in the area, all contributing to the fact that by 1950’s when Girling conducted his research in the area of the Northern Province mountains in which Acoliland is situated, the area was deforested and more or less deserted (80–4).

The prisoner questions his gaolers on the reasons for his arrest through posing some rhetorical questions. He mentions a few crimes that probably would have justified the fury of the prison guards against him, had he committed them. These are such as being a night runner caught dancing outside one’s house, a man who has been caught in bed with another man’s wife, or one who has raped another man’s mother. Such crimes that would evidently drive the victims to anger and brutality, are compared with the actual crime that has led to the prisoner’s incarceration and the subsequent physical violence of which he is a victim. By using satire to contrast the imagined crimes with the actual crime, the author reveals to the reader just how unjustly this prisoner feels he is being treated, and by extension gives a commentary on the nature of the present-day justice system and how unfair it is to the citizenry, especially the poor, through revealing that the prisoner has been arrested for vagrancy.

Why should I not
Sleep with the green grass
In the City Park
While I nurse
My hunger?
Why do they call me
A vagrant
A loiterer? (15,16)

The image of the green grass in the city park illustrates a haven of peace and comfort in an otherwise hostile urban setting, that would provide some form of relaxation and relief to all residents within the city. However, the prisoner who was forced by colonial violence to move to the city, is subjected to further trauma when he loses his personal freedom by being arrested for vagrancy while trying to forget his problems by relaxing in the city park. p’Bitek, through the vagrant, highlights issues of environmental and social justice in East African society during his time. While describing urban landscapes without focusing on spaces such as sprawling slums in urban areas, as has been done by various authors addressing the question of poverty in East Africa, p’Bitek uses his spatial imagination in a manner that describes the experience of loss felt by the masses due to capitalism and neo-colonialism. He depicts a situation that has emerged in East Africa in which a large section of the populace that lives in urban areas lacks access to public utilities and resources due to their economic and social status.

The partitioning of urban green spaces in a manner that locks out the poor, is another instance of the slow violence that the masses are facing even during the postcolonial period. This environmental segregation belies the dreams of equality envisaged during the struggle for independence, as the vagrancy act, as is described by

Akutekha was indeed applied selectively by law enforcement officers to arbitrarily arrest citizens in East African cities such as Nairobi. p'Bitek's focus on how the poor have historically been denied access to such public spaces within the urban environment is a harbinger of other calls for environmental justice by activists such as Wangari Maathai who would win the Nobel Peace Prize for her efforts.

Slow violence is also in evidence through the mental anguish that the prisoner experiences due to poverty. This is highlighted when the vagrant reflects on how his children are suffering from hunger and malnutrition.

Have you seen
The mosquito legs
Of my children?
A witch has sprayed yellow paint
On their heads,
Their infant pregnancies
Are years overdue (22)

The mosquito, though a tiny insect, has been the cause of pain and suffering to Africans through the diseases it causes. The tiny legs of mosquitoes, when likened to those of the children of the prisoner, illustrate the extent to which the children are at a point that is close to starvation due to poverty. Yellow paint in this case symbolises the physical manifestation of the disease of Kwashiorkor which is a result of malnourishment. The children's hair has changed colour from black to yellow. The same relates to their distended bellies as a result of the disease. They are referred to as infant pregnancies. The fact that the prisoner and his family are suffering from malnutrition in the post-independence period indicates that the promises given at Uhuru such as the complete eradication of poverty, ignorance, and disease have not been fulfilled ten years after independence.

The vagrant recollects how he left his wife and children waiting by an empty pot for ingredients he had promised to bring back in order for a meal to be prepared, knowing full well that he had nothing to provide. This is why he left for the city park where he was arrested. He recalls how they could not even fall asleep even though they were tired, due to their hunger.

He contrasts his own family's situation with that of the Chief's family
Listen to the Chief's dog
Barking like a volcano
Listen to the echoes
Playing on the hillsides
How many pounds
Of meat
Does this dog eat
In a day?
How much milk? (22)

By using a simile that likens the barking of the chief's dog to the sound of a volcano's eruption, p'Bitek exploits hyperbole through the use of nature imagery to describe the powerful and energetic sound produced by the dog. When contrasted with the previous images of the weak and malnourished children, it paints a picture of an imbalanced society, whereby domestic animals belonging to the rich are well-fed whereas the masses have children that are suffering from hunger.

The use of anthropomorphic imagery in the verse could be interpreted using Evan Mwangi's prescription on the application of an African posthumanism related to Ubuntu, whereby "shared experiences of various marginalized groups [are presented] in ways that empower humans as well as animals" (31). Therefore, the illustration could read as expressing a desire for equity among both humankind and the domestic animals. This is further emphasised through the rhetorical question in which the plenitude of the dog's diet is contrasted with the scarcity in terms of nutritional calories that is manifested on the bodies of the vagrant's children. p'Bitek highlights class differences in independent East African society and places the responsibility for the prevailing situation at the door of leaders such as the Chief, who is depicted to be engaging in excessive consumption, whereas the masses lack access to basic nutrition.

The mental anguish the prisoner experiences is also captured in in section 5, which is titled "sacred rock". In this section, the prisoner, while still suffering from his physical injuries, is drawn to imagine that while he is

incarcerated, a political leader has driven to his home in a Mercedes Benz, and taking advantage of his absence, is now making love to his wife.

Big chief
Is dancing my wife
And cracking
My sacred rock! (44)

This image of a sacred rock is part of the yonic imagery that is found within p'Bitek's poetry that may be derived from Acoli culture. Indeed, the word rock is also used as a euphemism for a woman's private parts in *Song of Lawino* (119). The sacred nature of the rock highlights the extent of the transgression being engaged upon by the political leader thus indicating the extent of the prisoner's frustrations with the actions of those in power against the helpless in society.

In the third section of the poem p'Bitek gives a historical background to the present predicament experienced by the vagrant. His present conditions are shown to be linked to a military takeover in which the vagrant's entire community was subjugated by repressive state authorities.

A stone wall
Of guns
Surrounds our village,
Steel rhinoceroses
Ruin the crops
In the fields
And sneeze molten lead
Into the grass thatched huts
Roaring kites
Split the sky
And excrete deadly dungs
On the heads
Of the people
Pots and Skulls
Crack ...” (32)

The use of metaphor in the above stanzas amplifies the dialectical construct that runs throughout the poem in terms of describing the present vis-à-vis the past. The new-fangled weapons that are used to take over the prisoner's village by state authorities such as guns, military tanks, and planes are defamiliarised through the point of view of a persona who cannot find adequate words in their own language to name them, and thus can only attempt to give them a description using nature imagery. Thus, guns are collectively seen as a concrete fortress just like the urban prison walls, and tanks are seen as steel animals which overrun the village farms and destroy produce. Jet fighters are seen as birds whose droppings as they fly overhead, kill people.

Through the use of this illustration, p'Bitek is giving the reader a description of the immediate effects of war on the environment. However, when contrasted with the current predicament of the prisoner, it becomes evident that the war that was carried out earlier continues to have an impact of slow violence to the prisoner and his community. The farms that the community relied on were destroyed during this war of occupation, which led to the vagrant and his family abandoning his village for the urban area.

This ties in with the illustration on Acoliland by Girling as mentioned above, and explains the vagrant's nostalgia for rural landscapes, as his migration was a result of displacement. The destruction of his immediate environment has led to his and his community's gradual impoverishment. Thus, from the above allegory, it is evident that the brutality that the prisoner is experiencing currently is as a result of a long and drawn-out historical

process, affecting not only him as an individual, but his entire community. It thus explains his feelings of despair and helplessness as is demonstrated in his lament while taking a plea:

I plead fear
I plead helplessness
I plead hopelessness
I am an insect
Trapped between the toes
Of a bull elephant,
I am an earthworm,
I grovel in the mud,
I am the wet dung
Of a chicken
On the floor! (34)

By describing himself as an “insect / trapped between the toes of a bull elephant”, an earthworm grovelling in the mud, and the wet dung of chicken on the floor, the vagrant uses zoomorphic imagery to demonstrate his helplessness and unworthiness in the face of his mighty adversaries. A bull elephant would hardly notice or feel an insect trapped in its toes, an earthworm is helpless when trapped in mud, and wet dung of chicken on the floor is something that is indeed worthless.

The existential anguish felt by the prisoner and as expressed in the illustrations of his feeling of despair and helplessness in the face of might and power of the post-colonial state, is reason enough for a desire for revolution by the section of the population that feels that they are not provided with social security simply because they belong to a certain class or ethnic community. These long-term effects of such slow violence would concretise into what Nixon has described as structural violence in regard to the widening gap between the rich and the poor, and the creation of classes in society, primarily based on ease of access to State resources. In the case of East Africa, this is manifested through tribalism, clannism, and nepotism, a carryover from precolonial times into modernity that continues to affect East Africa to date.

The above is highlighted in section 4 and section 6, in which the vagrant castigates the clans of his father and his mother respectively for contributing to his current predicament. Ofuani (“The Traditional and Modern Influences in Okot p’Bitek’s Poetry”) highlights some of the influences in p’Bitek’s poetry: “p’Bitek’s language and imagery are drawn from a whole range of Acoli song. The sources of influence include the satirical songs of the beer party, the victory songs of the *bwola* dance, the war songs, and the praise songs” (91, emphasis in original). The fact that the performance by the prisoner would not fit snugly into any of the categories of song described by Ofuani above, but instead stylistically and in terms of its function cuts across several types could be explained using an observation by Charles Okumu: “The oral literary features that Okot borrowed from Acoli traditional culture gave his poetry the distinctive song character that sets it apart from other written poetry. Nevertheless, Okot’s songs can neither be sung nor fitted into the thematic classification of Acoli oral songs” (55).

It is clear that in these two sections in which the vagrant is condemning his parents, p’Bitek is borrowing from a cross-section of traditions, because there is evidence of the use of satire in the beer party songs, where by blaming his parents for his present condition, the vagrant is commenting on social evils in contemporary society, and by castigating his parents’ respective clans, he is also using the *bwola* dance to condemn, rather than to praise leadership. Indeed, as is explained by p’Bitek, commoner clans that were not happy with their leadership under a chief traditionally had the right to leave and join another chiefdom (“Vernacular” 28), a desire the vagrant displays through his performance.

The vagrant thus castigates his father as follows:
You should have known
The Clan
In which the most Intelligent
Hardworking,
Thrifty
Ruthless
And most successful Chiefs
Are born and bred ... ! (36)

The vagrant expresses his desire to make a bonfire of the bones of his father and grandfather once he leaves prison in order to avenge for their mistakes. His anger illustrates the situation in East Africa where people are prisoners of their ethnicity and their individual successes and failures are pegged on ethnic origins, which may provide access to state power, or otherwise. Merit is not considered.

The same argument is extended further in section 6, through an illustration of what happens in nature.

A bird's song
Breaks through the high ceiling
It is the ladybird
Collecting nectar
From the banana blossom
And flying back
To her nest
The chicks
Chip their thanks
In unison ... (49)

The bird identified as being the ladybird (a different connotation from the word's normal usage in English to refer to a specific type of insect), is captured in the activity of collecting nectar which it feeds to its nestlings. The environmental imagery is familiar to East Africans as pictures of the banana trees and the nectar collected therein by the ladybird are used. This illustration demonstrates to the reader how it is expected that parents will provide for their offspring, just like the bird takes care of its fledglings.

The vagrant proceeds in the section to castigate his mother for not having chosen a man from the "right" clan. He decries the fact that due to his birth, neither he nor his family will ever amount to anything

They describe my clansmen
As fools and weaklings,
Can you hear them saying
That my Clan
Will never rise to Power,
And I will die in deep poverty
And my children
Will become thieves? (53)

By describing the situation of this family, p'Bitek is highlighting the social evil of tribalism in East African society, which leads to the impoverishment of large sections of the population who are denied access to political and economic opportunities with ethnic identity predetermining social mobility.

Political violence by the state, on the other hand, is practiced at a more overt level, as is demonstrated in the poem. It is manifest on the site of the body, which directly receives the impact of this violence. This is demonstrated through the incarceration of the vagrant for frivolous reasons, and the physical violence meted out on him by state officials

Ten uniformed Stones
Break into my tiny hell,
Elephants trumpet
Rhinos scream
For blood
And charge,
The earth shakes her belly,
The walls jump
And dance
The stone floor
Urinate
Orgasm ... (30)

We once again see an interplay between traditional and modern spaces, in which the modern period is represented by a harsh environment associated with concrete structures. In this case the prison guards are referred to metaphorically as uniformed stones, indicating the structural violence of State machinery in modern times. The physical violence the ten guards mete out on the prisoner is foreign to his world view and cannot be named directly, with the prisoner thus using animals such as Elephants and Rhinos to illustrate the severity of the beating that he receives from the prison guards.

In reading the nature imagery as presented in the first six sections of the poem, one establishes a history of the impact of modernity and the effects of the same on the vagrant's immediate environment. Colonial invasions are depicted to have led to environmental degradation and the displacement of people from the rural areas to urban areas. This in turn led to increased poverty and suffering during the post-colonial period, as is highlighted through the situation of the vagrant and his family.

The assassin as a symbol of ethnic nationalism in East Africa

The fact that section 7 introduces a new persona is evident through a change in the tone of the speaker. Whereas in the previous sections, the persona's tone indicated anger and helplessness due to poverty, in section 7, we come across a persona who is boisterous and titled, with an aggressive tone. Unlike the previous persona who felt helpless about the situation of the family he had left outside the prison walls, this prisoner seems to be confident that his family will see better days ahead.

Section 7 of the poem introduces us to this prisoner through a vignette.

The tiny Lagut bird
Carries a leaf of grass
To the olango thorn bush
To erect a hut
For her children
Who knock loudly
At the gate
And scream
To be let out (57, emphasis in original)

One can here identify Acoli names for fauna and flora through the species such as the Lagut bird and the Olango bush. The writer in using the Acoli words to identify plants and animals, domesticates the English language through poetry, and is a clear example of preserving the natural environment in discourse. This is in line with the suggestions by Gerald Moore cited above in regard to environmental literature. The illustration uses a scene taken from a familiar landscape, and an activity, whose nuanced meaning would be easily interpreted by East African readers.

In this vignette, we are presented with a bird that is working hard to fortify its nest so as to protect its fledglings from danger. The young ones, however, are in their innocence oblivious to the dangers that exist outside their confines and are thus always struggling to get out. Through this vignette, the prisoner is trying to tell the reader that some things are done for a people's own good, but through their ignorance or naivete, people generally fail to appreciate that fact. He is thus suggesting that whatever act he committed and led to his imprisonment had a utilitarian purpose that is yet to be appreciated by its beneficiaries.

The prisoner then follows this statement with a confident plea to his wife not to worry when she hears the news of his arrest. He is confident that he will access the best defence team, and that the African judges and those who hired him will ensure his release. The confidence the prisoner displays the concept of ethnicity in that the prisoner expects to receive a biased judgement simply because he comes from the same ethnic group with high

authorities, within the judicial system. This also emphasises an idea of structural violence. The prisoner employs zoomorphic imagery in a quest to explain his action.

A python enters
Into a dead termite mound
And swallows the edible rat
And all its young
An ostrich races
Across the dry plain
To cover her eggs
As the storm threatens (59)

In this vignette, the image is given of a powerful animal (python) preying on a weaker species (edible rat) and consuming its entire family. This is contrasted with the image of a different species of animal (ostrich) dashing a long distance in order to defend its family from the dangers of rain. In this case, the poet is using images of the quest for survival in nature. Through this vignette, the persona is trying to explain that in nature, animals higher in the food chain are expected to prey on other, and also that instinctively, an animal will go to great lengths to protect their own. In essence, he seems to be defending violence as a way of attaining or preserving power, which is seen as naturally belonging to a certain group of people whose 'others' become mere victims. This illustration indicates how the kind of violence that is observed in postcolonial society is more as a result of ethnic nationalism which arises through a desire to attain or perpetuate access to state resources by a small number of people.

The prisoner then goes on to imagine the future prospects for his family. Unlike the vagrant, who was poor and hopeless, this new prisoner has just acquired a large farm and a better house than the one they currently live in which is a thatched hut. Unlike the vagrant before him, who when thinking of his wife was deeply concerned that his incarceration would lead to her exploitation by the big Chief, the present prisoner displays optimism in that he expects his own wife's new bed to be as soft as the voice of a dove (title of the section).

In section 8 we are provided with a background as to the reason for the arrest of the prisoner. The section titled "distant echoes" opens with a vignette that describes another situation of conflict in nature:

The lek lizard
Wields his deadly tongue
And smashes a mosquito
To death...
There are tears of joy
In his eyes! (65, emphasis in original)

The vignette gives a portrait of a situation in which a lizard captures an insect, and the satisfaction that it derived from the action. The action of the lizard shooting out its tongue to capture the insect could be likened to that of a bullet flying out of a gun and hitting its target. Both events happen extremely fast, within the blink of an eye. Once again, the Acoli word for the particular species of lizard is used in order to preserve African nature even in poetry written in English. Through this vignette the reader is informed that the prisoner is an assassin. The fact

that he relishes the fact that he killed a fellow human being, is also an aspect of this prisoner's character that is highlighted through the imagery used. The prisoner indicates that his victim was one of the country's leaders.

I hear
The triumphant song
Of the hero of Uhuru,
Listen to him
Shout his praise name,
Hear his footsteps
As he prances
The mock-fight
Of victory

[...]

And then he proudly confesses to his action
Yes
I did it
And,
My God,
What a beautiful
Shot! (66)

The tone of satisfaction by the prisoner as he describes the murder of a leader who had led his country to independence demonstrates his arrogance. He tries to argue that he did it for his country, and not for money, which contradicts the situation described in the previous section, where the prisoner was gladly announcing to his wife that they would have a better life thanks to the things he had bought his family with the money he had been paid for the assassination.

He heaps all manner of evil on the leader he assassinated in order to justify his actions.

He was a traitor
A dictator
A murderer
A racist
A tribalist
A clannist
A brotherist ...
He was corrupt
A reactionary
A revisionist
A fat black capitalist
An extortioner
An exploiter ... (67, 68)

Having given reasons for the actions he took, which he deems heroic, the prisoner expresses his surprise that the prison warders are subjecting him to beatings instead of showering him with accolades, which reveals treachery and betrayal, even among the ruling classes.

In section 9, the political assassin explains his actions to the assassinated leader's widow, saying the dead leader had also created several widows in his turn, who were suffering just like she is. He asks her to instead be thankful to him for liberating the land from an oppressor and also for making her famous. An important aspect in regard to African ecocriticism to mention at this point is how elements such as conscience, health, and sanity are deemed as part of the external environment that would impinge on the self from outside in the African worldview, unlike in the Western worldview which would see them as being part of one's own consciousness. This is a point that is argued out by p'Bitek in "The Self in African Imagery", which was published in *Africa's Cultural Revolution*. p'Bitek likens this idea to the Christian belief that the transformation of a person's character through salvation

comes from an external source other than the self. This observation goes a long way in illustrating Wu's explanation on African ecocriticism using Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958):

An emphasis on the environmental perspective of Achebe's novel reminds us that the challenge of locating environmental issues in African literature lies in the fact that they may not look like environmental issues, as addressed or represented in Anglo-American environmental literature. In the case of Achebe's novel, the environment refers to the Igbo land as a *whole*—composed of the inhabitants, the gods and ancestral spirits they worship, the village compounds, as well as the forests surrounding the community (142, emphasis in original).

The same idea emerges in section 10. The section is titled “killer mark”, indicating how the act of killing a fellow human being has gradually started weighing upon the prisoner's conscience. By this time, the political assassin's tone seems to be changing. He is now desperate to be let out of prison. He is pleading with his gaolers to release him so that he may go out and till his land, and plant millet. He expresses a desire to go to church to confess his sins, and then visit the village in order to be ritually cleansed from the act of murder.

The political assassin expresses a desire to be rid of his sin through the Christian church, in order to assuage his guilty conscience. At the same time, he would like to visit the village in order to engage in sacrifices and rituals that would cleanse him from attack by external forces in the environment such as the vengeful ghost of the person that he killed. By placing the procedures of these separate actions side by side in the verse, p'Bitek illustrates how the killer mark is seen to be coming from two sources: the assassin's conscience in the Western (Christian) view, and external environment in the African traditional view. The fact that this prisoner has incorporated both the traditional and Western outlook in terms of religion, demonstrates that he belongs to a new emerging class of Africans who express a duality in terms of their medico-religious activities.

The duality in the political assassin's world view could also be interpreted as a sign of his unstable nature. He is depicted as being an opportunist with no real political convictions. Indeed, as Ojaide observes of this prisoner: “[He] does not deserve the cloak of heroism he fantasizes as rightly belonging to him” (381). The fact that he practices the same, or even worse social evils that he blames the leader whom he assassinated of undertaking is quite telling. He was corrupted by being paid to kill a political leader, he relies upon ethnicity to get acquitted for actions that are against the law, and he arrogantly demands respect from the prison warders whom he now views as belonging to a lower social class than he does, due to what he imagines to be his new social status.

Through examining nature imagery in sections 7 through to section 10, it is evident that p'Bitek exploits images of conflict and survival in the animal world to present us with the history of a prisoner who is an assassin. Through his depiction of the assassin, p'Bitek indicates his suspicion of the nationalism practiced in the modern States in East Africa, where coups and counter coups were staged and political assassinations carried out, ostensibly to ensure a better life for all, but in reality, as a design to perpetuate the same narrow interests of an elite that pursues structural violence. This is made quite evident through the fact the assassin is abandoned by those who hired him, and he ends up expressing the fear that he may be hanged.

The minister and the nature of corruption in East Africa

The third persona that we come across in the poem. Is introduced in section 11. Once again, the reader experiences a change in tone when they come across this new persona. The arrogance and then incremental fear of the previous persona have now been replaced by a tone that exudes confidence and relative calm. This tone is complemented by the illustrations presented through zoomorphic imagery.

Shhhhhh!
Listen,
Listen to the millipede
Whispering a lullaby
To her newly hatched
baby,
Do not make noises,
Do not disturb
The sleeping one! (81).

The portrayal of a millepede taking care of her newly hatched baby is a regal image derived from the natural environment. According to Acoli indigenous knowledge, the millipede or Kolok, is one of the macro-organisms whose

presence, when observed, is an indication that land is suitable for farming (Nuwategeka 105). Also, the millipedes as presented are neither in conflict, nor are they struggling for survival. Instead, they are depicted in the process of regeneration. The introduction of this type of image as well as the change in tone provides a sharp contrast to the earlier images of tension between species that were evident in the previous sections in which the persona of the assassin was depicted.

The reason for the change in the type of imagery used becomes evident in the lines that follow

Stop it.

Stop it.

I am a Minister,

Do you not know me? (82)

It is thus revealed that the persona is indeed a state minister. He is shocked that despite his having appeared on television, his voice being recognisable from news broadcasts and his pictures featuring prominently in newspapers, the prison warders are still subjecting him to beatings and ignoring his command. The reasons for his incarceration are revealed through a vignette that presents the reader with a scene derived from the use of nature imagery.

The yellow acacia thorn tree

Lifts up her arms,

Her clean fingers

Speak soft invitations

To the yellow birds,

One hundred of them

Are gathered ...

Listen to the bitter chorus

The protests and curses,

I see them

Shake their heads

And spit with contempt ...

A young man hurls a stone,

The yellow birds

Scatter in all directions

Leaving one struggling

Uselessly for life,

Listen to the anger

In the song

Of their wings (84)

The yellow acacia thorn tree is used symbolically to represent an assembly where politicians meet. This could either be a parliament, or a cabinet of ministers. The yellow birds are the politicians who are gathered in the assembly. These politicians are all birds of a feather, and thus flock together. While unanimous in their actions, only one falls victim to the metaphoric stone, which could be interpreted as an action taken against these politicians to expose either corruption or any other element of abuse of office practiced in most East African governments that are responsible for underdevelopment and the impoverishment of the masses in the post-colonial period. Although the rest go scot free, they are neither innocent nor remorseful as is indicated through the anger displayed as the birds take flight.

It becomes clear how the minister ended up in prison. He was unfortunate enough to be singled out in a scandal that is most likely linked to corruption. He then tries to resort to ethnicity in a bid to get help from powerful members of his community such as the chief of the army and his brothers in the army and the police, to help him in his quest to be released from jail, just like was the case with the assassin before him. This further illustrates the aspect of structural violence within the state apparatus that promises a soft landing to criminals who belong to certain sections of society.

Unlike the other prisoners before him, the minister is so rich that rather than worry about the well-being of the family that he has left outside the prison walls, he wants to write letters and send money to his children and

his parents. His only worry is that they might find out that he has been incarcerated. He does not suffer the existential anguish felt by the vagrant who was worried about the plight of the children he had left behind. Indeed, this prisoner's situation seems to be but a temporary setback, indicating how whereas the poor in East Africa suffer for no reason, the wealthy and those in power easily get away with more serious crimes. With the exposition of the third prisoner and his situation, p'Bitek exhausts his depiction of issues pertaining to the past and present in society as is presented through *Song of Prisoner*.

In sections 11 and 12 the poem reveals issues of class differences and corruption in modern day society through the persona of the minister.

The composite prisoner and a vision for a future East African society

In *Uhuru's Fire*, Roscoe writes about the subtleties of time in relation to *Song of Lawino*. Quoting John Mbiti, he indicates that in the traditional African worldview, the concept of time is seen through a long past, a present, and hardly any future (41). Roscoe uses this to argue that *Lawino* is more interested in the past and present than in the future. In *Prisoner*, however, p'Bitek does bring in the idea of a future. Having illustrated Africa's pristine past through the use of nature imagery and contrasting it with a desolate present through the depiction of the urban jail, p'Bitek then goes on to imagine a future in which the prisoners dream about the kind of society that they would like to live in. This is evident in the poem from section 12 through to section 15. There is dancing and singing in the poem at this point, which is reminiscent of the Heias in Aimé Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (1939).

In order to depict this yearning for a brighter future, p'Bitek now resorts to the use of a composite prisoner. This prisoner takes stock of the situation he finds himself in and realises that the failure of the dreams of Uhuru were an actual form of imprisonment that exists in East Africa even outside the physical prison walls. In other words, East African society is under the arrest of a multitude of social vices that have imprisoned the dreams of Uhuru. In section 12, therefore, we see how the prisoner yearns for youthful fresh air. The prisoner wishes to commune with people from all classes and all walks of life. This is expressed through his yearning to visit all the different geographical locations of his country. He wants to indiscriminately taste all the alcoholic beverages on offer in the world, and commune with people from all races and tribes. This could be seen as a wish for a future without the structural and political violence of the State and the slow violence of environmental degradation, that has imprisoned East Africa, and a yearning for equality all over the world. This utopian dream is also expressed in Section 14, with the prisoner wishing that the steel gates that imprison him would be opened, so that he could join in all the dances in the world. He wants to dance so that he forgets that his children will remain poor even in this independent society. The poem closes in section 15, with the prisoner still expressing his wish to commune with the entire world through their dances as a way to forget his present predicament.

Atieno-Odhiambo *et al.* misread the dancing and drinking described in the poem as a sign of hopelessness. They are in fact a sign of hope for a future East African society that could be interpreted as a call for unity in order for society to pull away from the chains of ethnic and class divisions. This indeed is the desire of the composite prisoner. p'Bitek through this prisoner, indicates to East Africans reading the poem, that even without the physical walls around them, they too are prisoners of their own proclivities which have led them to commit social evils, and that the only way to a better future for the entire society, is through liberating oneself, and having individuals seeing themselves as part of a unified whole, and together, as part of the global community.

Indeed, this yearning for equality for all and communing with all including nature, as the aspiration of the composite prisoner could be read as a prescription by p'Bitek for the kind of ethical position needed in East African society if it were to escape from the clutches of modernity and neo-colonialism. His ethical position could then be said to fit in with the kind of posthumanism prescribed by Evan Mwangi, which "includes the human, nonhuman, nonhuman animals, and the planet as a whole" (19).

My reading has revealed three personae in the present moment, and a composite prisoner drawn from the three personae in the sections that indicate the desire for a future East Africa. Past readings have indicated some confusion in this regard, with different critics interpreting various numbers of persona(e) (Atieno-Odhiambo *et al.*; Ofuani, "Digression as Discourse Strategy in Okot p'Bitek's Dramatic Monologue Texts"), others suggesting the existence either of a composite prisoner (Wanambisi; Mweseli) or a choral of prisoners (Heywood) or a soliloquy by a schizophrenic prisoner (Ogunyemi). It was therefore important that I revisit this aspect of the poem and

provide evidence through the use of nature imagery to arrive at the meaning of the poem in a manner that clarifies the number of personae involved in the poem.

Conclusion

Writing in the wake of independence, Okot p'Bitek uses his poem *Song of Prisoner* to point out the pitfalls in society that have led to the death of the dreams of Uhuru which were the eradication of poverty, disease, and ignorance. Having pointed out these pitfalls of modernity, he prescribes a way for East Africans to move forward by liberating themselves from these social evils. His text is thus still relevant today as the evils he pointed out fifty years ago are still prevalent in East African society today. We could therefore establish that Okot p'Bitek portrays a revolutionary affirmative consciousness in his writing of the poem *Song of Prisoner*.

In signalling the vehicle and the tenor of the metaphors identified through the use of nature imagery in *Song of Prisoner*, this article has exploited an African approach to ecocriticism not only to demonstrate how p'Bitek preserves East Africa's natural environment in *Song of Prisoner*, but also to show how p'Bitek provides a commentary on his society and the intricate relationships between people in this society. The paper also demonstrates how Okot p'Bitek suggests that the existing political and economic problems could be solved through the abolition of social ills such as tribalism and corruption.

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Tribute

Christopher Lukorito Wanjala (1944–2018)

Peter Amuka

One of Professor Chris Wanjala's wishes for me that I never fulfilled was to publish a book in my own name. It wasn't good enough for him that I habitually "hid" my name among other authors in collections of essays and stories. He and the late historian William Ochieng' chided me many times for being an "intellectual coward" who dreaded standing and facing the world on my own feet. A few years before he passed on, he invited me to co-edit an anthology of short stories titled *Memories We Lost and other Stories* (2016). I did not join him owing to distractions related to my administrative duties at Moi University. My name would have come first as was his wish, but I missed the privilege. I failed him and he told me as much.

I have deliberately started off this tribute by evoking Wanjala's wishes for me because his mantra was that a good teacher must always dream for more from his favourite students. When he taught me modern English poetry in 1973, I found myself becoming a fan of T. S. Eliot, and imagining I would one day become a Nobel laureate like the great poet. I tried to write poetry, which I shared with Wanjala, but it wasn't publishable. I was sorely disappointed to learn through him that Eliot had been a bank clerk and that being a literature student would not necessarily turn me into a creative writer.

There was, however, no harm in aspiring to be like my literary idol. With his encouragement, I wrote a novella titled *Two Shillings*. He read it and cautioned me to research before undertaking the "hazards" of creative writing. In retrospect, I must say that I benefited from his brutal frankness as a literary critic. (Against his advice, I did not revise the novella, nor do I know where it is today!) A good critic, he said, should be honest and truthful enough to the creative writer and help him/her produce quality rather than quantity. He should necessarily collaborate with the poet, novelist, essayist, and playwright in order to read deep between the lines but may unearth nuances the creative person does not see. Thus, the critic is, more often than not, intellectually superior to the bard or storyteller/writer: he does not only retell the poem, play, or story, but also offers insights the artist may not grasp. Wanjala's other way of putting it is that an efficient literary critic is an arbiter/judge who weighs the pros and cons of a work of art and arrives at a fair and reasonable evaluation of its form, content, and social worth—which leads to the issue of reading a literary text beyond itself. As is virtually the case with everybody else, some of his opinions and standpoints were riddled with contradictions. That is (was) typical of most, if not all, intellectual environments and need not detain us here. In a newspaper commentary article, he once accused the historian E. S. Atieno Odhiambo of refusing to recognise the difference between fact and fiction and therefore mixing them up when analysing and critiquing literary texts. Yet he himself was not one of those puritanical conservative voices within the literati who consciously shunned history.

In an informal conversation I had with him in 2018, he cited Karanja, a character in Ngugi wa Thiongo's *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), arguing that he was a representative of many types to be found in Kenya, even in contemporary times. He made fiction sound like fact: he referred to compatriots who, to date, are dying to speak and write English as if they were British. They argue and believe that great literature can only be traced to Shakespeare and Tolstoy; they are "stuck like leeches" to literary theories and ideas bequeathed to Kenya by the British coloniser and refuse to view the country—not as a post-colony—but as an entity whose decolonisation was a horrendous mistake. Thus, like Karanja, they persist in believing and arguing that Kenya cannot be a normal nation-state without British culture and habits of thought couched in nothing short of the Queen's English.

Recalling Wanjala's remarks in regard to the "made-in-England" critics reminds me of his being an Africanist and also a postcolonial critic who ironically never tired of being sceptical of what postcolonial theorists really

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stood for. I told him, and personally believe, that one may be practicing and illustrating a theory in his scholarship totally unaware one is doing so. Chris, as he was fondly called, was one such scholar. I can vouch for his sensitivity to history by citing many more examples worth a whole book.

One such case is the much-debated controversial issue of the Mau Mau liberation war in Kenya during the 1950s. While some of his colleagues thought he underrated and belittled the freedom fighters, Wanjala argued he was merely critiquing portraits of the imaginary heroes as represented in creative works. He argued that the history of the Mau Mau struggle was *constructed* or *created* by writers as a figment of their literary imaginations. At a seminar at the University of Nairobi in the late 1970s or mid-eighties, he told his audience that the production of knowledge in the Humanities, including creative literature, called for and subsisted on debate rather than ideologically slanted intellectual dictatorship and grandstanding. I was there and remember two very vocal detractors present at the talk who literally turned the academic activity into a political rally.

As for the tensions between the left and the right at the University of Nairobi in general, and its Department of Literature in particular, Wanjala argued that those who mouthed ideologies uncritically and refused to accommodate opposing views were injecting scholarship with sterility by peddling “youthful dogma”. He was right because such behaviour persists in the 21st century in Nairobi and beyond.

As already implied, Wanjala had positive wishes for his juniors in scholarship. I conclude by stressing that I was, and still am, one of those juniors. We often chatted, via the phone, about literary scholarship almost every other late night or every early morning until his death. Debate and oppositionality were the stuff he said literary study was made of and he carried this across into the mass media with relish when necessary through his newspaper articles. In his later years, when Professor Egara Kabaji, a younger colleague, accused him of slackening and virtually disappearing from the world of literary activity, he readily admitted “intellectual menopause” but remained productive all the same. In truth, Professor died with a youthful, active mind that listened, tolerated, and interacted with Modern and Postmodern ideas and brains in equal measure and without the vain and empty condescension of some of his peers.

Fare thee well, my teacher!

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Tribute

Euphrase Kezilahabi (1944–2020)

Iribe Mwangi

In a research dissertation, Habwe describes Euphrase Kezilahabi as an author who has lost hope in life. This is ostensibly because desperation forms the motif in most of his literary works such that all his main characters end up dying after leading a hopeless life. This is the case, for example, with Rosa and Kazimoto as respectively depicted in his early works of fiction, *Rosa Mistika* and *Kichwamaji*. However, what Habwe depicts as loss of hope could be interpreted through the prism of existentialism as Kezilahabi's philosophy goes beyond despair.

Kezilahabi's philosophy as depicted through his literary works may be explained through an interrogation of his background. Born in April 1944 in the village of Namagondo in Ukerewe, Tanzania, Kezilahabi received his early education in that rural setting before joining a Catholic Seminary where he studied for close to a decade. His training at this point in time was thus geared towards him spending his life as a priest. This was not to be, however, because instead of proceeding to higher levels in the seminary, in order to work towards his ordination, Kezilahabi decided to join the University of Dar es Salaam for undergraduate studies. After his graduation, he was posted to a secondary school as a teacher. This marked the beginning of his life-long dedication to the career of teaching, which he undertook to the highest possible level. In 1971, Kezilahabi went back to the University of Dar es Salaam for his second degree in which he specialised in literature. It is around that time that his first creative work, *Rosa Mistika*, was published.


The novel set the tone for all his future writing. In the text, he questions the essence of life, no doubt reflecting a struggle in his personal life in regard to whether to remain steadfast to the vocation of serving God as a priest or choosing to lead a secular life. As a writer, Kezilahabi thus espoused and pioneered an engagement with existentialist philosophical thought in Kiswahili fictional writing. The basic questions that sum up his writing are: "Who am I? Where do I come from? Why am I here? Where am I going or what is my here-after?" His became a writing full of despair and anxiety. The answer to the question "Why am I here?" is aptly answered in his 1975 publication *Dunia Uwanja wa Fujo* in which he depicts how the world is a stage for chaos wherein each individual plays his part in causing chaos before exiting the stage.

As is suggested earlier, the only exit from a tumultuous life as depicted by Kezilahabi is through death. This is evident in his short story "Wasubiri Kifo" (Mbonde) where the characters depicted in the story are so miserable as a result of the poverty that they suffer from, that they spend their time simply awaiting death. In another short story, "Mayai Waziri wa Maradhi" (Wamitila), the writer depicts the state of despair in a country whose Minister for Health had the sole mission of spreading epidemics among the populace. Ranne observes how, in Kezilahabi's works, dying is part of living, not the opposite of life. On the other hand, the dead are not completely dead, but rather are still "alive", albeit in a different form. The same kind of approach is evident in poems such as "Mahojiano na Kifo" written by Kezilahabi through which the author depicts a persona who is conducting an interview with death.

Other than his approach to representing life through his writing, Kezilahabi is also famed for dismantling the old order of writing Kiswahili poetry by writing in free verse, as is evident in all his poems that are collected in his anthologies *Kichomi*, *Karibu Ndani*, and *Dhifa*. Together with his contemporaries such as Ebrahim Husein, Kuliyo-kela Kahigi, and Mogybuso Mulokozi, he started a poetic movement in the 1970s that favoured content over style in regard to composition, much to the chagrin of the orthodox poets at the time who were more inclined towards the use of fixed forms in regard to structural and sound devices in poetry.

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As a person, Professor Kezilahabi had a quiet demeanour that belied his extensive knowledge of Western and African world views. His life growing up in Ukerewe never ceased to influence his thinking, writing, and philosophy. He combined this with elements from his schooling, both at home in Tanzania and in the Western world, having studied for a PhD at the University of Wisconsin, and also with the benefits of being widely travelled. Almost everyone who interacted with him readily admits that Kezilahabi was quite humorous. Kezilahabi worked as a lecturer, first at the University of Dar es Salaam, and later in his life sharing his expertise in Swahili language and culture further afield by teaching at the University of Botswana. He spent his last two years at his Dar es Salaam home battling an illness and passed away on 9 January 2020.

Kezilahabi leaves behind a great legacy. This legacy includes his established philosophy on how existence precedes essence, that death starts at birth, that life is absurd and it is nothing but death. He also leaves us with the concept of choice—that we live how we choose to because we have the freedom to make choices. In terms of creativity, Kezilahabi was prolific in all genres as is evident through his publication of six novels, three anthologies of poems, a play, and numerous short stories.¹ He also contributed greatly to scholarship through his academic publications and conference presentations where he expounded upon the philosophical thought depicted through his writing. He was not only a great Kiswahili scholar but a great scholar of literature and philosophy, too.

Fare thee well, Prof. Kezilahabi. Since “dying is part of living”, we believe that you hear us. You explored death a lot but got no breakthrough. In fact, in the interview with Death, Death never answered a single question. It was silent—dead silent! Because of that, we ask no question but say Kwaheri, Kezi!

Notes

1. Using length to classify his work, *Rosa Mistika*, *Nagona*, and *Mzingile* may be classified as novellas. However, in this analysis I use the parameters of temporal space, character development, completeness of themes, and the complexity of plot to classify the three as novels.

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Distinguishing between ontology and ‘decolonisation as praxis’

Siseko H. Kumalo

Distinguishing between ontology and ‘decolonisation as praxis’

In this review article I closely read the recently published book *African Philosophical and Literary Possibilities: Re-reading the Canon* (2020), edited by Aretha Phiri. I suggest two ways of reading the text. The first levels a critique at some of the conflation we find in the text and the second showcases the useful takeaways that the reader gleans from the book. These takeaways are not—themselves—without criticisms, however. Such criticism is generative in that it shores up the work that still remains to be addressed by those working in the decolonial tradition, both here at home (i.e., in the South Africa academe) and further afield. In sum, I demonstrate that the objectives of decolonisation are clearly discernible when we apply ourselves to scholarship developed in the Indigenous languages of South Africa. **Keywords:** indigenous languages, decolonisation, literature, philosophy, ontological recognition.


Introduction

African Philosophical and Literary Possibilities: Re-reading the Canon (2020), edited by Aretha Phiri, is framed around the consideration of the decolonial question as it relates to these two disciplines, i.e., philosophy and literature (understood in the broader sense of literary theory). The editor suggests that in locating these two disciplines in conversation there is the possibility that the decolonial question might be illumined, a matter framed in the following ways: “[t]his [agential ability of philosophy as discipline to unpack the cumulative parts that give us African literature as a whole] demonstrates not just the limits of approaching African literature with a ‘philosophical intent,’ but also works to unsettle epistemological assumptions of Africa and African subjectivity” (Phiri xv). The treatment of decoloniality is infused in the implicit work of unsettling “epistemological assumptions of Africa and African subjectivity”, which is what gives the reader a central focus of ontology as it is treated in the book; a matter to which I will apply myself momentarily.

The volume attempts to highlight the decolonial component, by way of considering the historicity of what has defined the debate on African literature(s). This consideration is done by way of treating, as example, “the efficacy of African literature written in English” (xii). Once more, the reader is directed to the implicit treatment of some of the decolonial questions, with one of these being the role and function of language. To frame language thusly is rooted in the thinking of Mazisi Kunene (30), when he maintains that “[...] the idea of language imposition as a strategy of power and political control must be kept in mind as a crucial political and social question”. He further argues that “[in] short, writers who write in a foreign language are already part of foreign institutions; to one extent or another, they have adopted foreign values and philosophical attitudes, and they variously seek to be a member of that culture” (32). The most poignant observation when it comes to language as a constitutive part of decolonial praxis is found when Kunene (32) asserts, ruminating on the instructions of his grandmother, that “[t] his language [English] is responsible for the death of many of your Ancestors” (emphasis added). Phiri does not apply herself to this very complex function of language, whether it be in literature and literary theory or in the philosophical domain. I am pressing for said application, not in the substantive chapter, chapter seven—which the editor contributes as part of the collective set of essays—but rather in the opening and framing text, the introduction, which should have addressed these questions systematically, specifically when the editor and the authors undertake such an enormous task of locating two disciplines in conversation with each other.

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The reader does, however, get a slight—again implicit—consideration of the matter (that is language as an inherent component of ontology) in the work of George Hull in chapter three. There is a glaring objection that can be levelled against Hull’s analysis, however, on the premise of ontological misrecognition(s). I will attend to this matter shortly when I take up the role and function of ontology in the decolonial mission that is constitutive of complex facets whose aims are clearly definable and discernible, if only the student of decolonial theory and decoloniality (understood doubly as the actual student in the lecture theatre and the intellectual who is engaged in the task of doing, teaching, and conducting research from and through a decolonial approach) were to disabuse themselves of the epistemic and intellectual arrogance that prevails in the South African academe, and learn any of the Indigenous languages of the region. What I am suggesting here is that the claim that decoloniality is indefinable, obscure, and elusive is nonsensical and works to maintain an epistemic hegemony predicated on a white supremacist logic in the knowledge economy of South Africa. I will not recycle the thinking of J. M. Coetzee here, as any self-respecting intellectual of Letters should apply themselves to his seminal treatise in an effort to understand the dangers inherent in and constitutive of the erasures that make up modes of *White Writing*. Put differently, the reader of this collection is privy to these denials in the claim that asserts that the meaning of decoloniality and decolonisation is indiscernible in our context. This claim is not put in such direct format in the introduction, but is rather concealed cleverly when the editor takes up the question of Africanisation: a consideration that is itself concerning in the confluences and reductionist ways in which it reads the decolonial project in South Africa and on the continent, more generally.

Conceptual confluences—Africanisation, transformation, and decolonisation

While the book suggests that it applies itself to the decolonial question, its constitutive methodology is silent—in the most part—on questions that concern decoloniality. What I intend by the notion of ‘constitutive methodology’ is the ways in which the book has been brought together and the kinds of questions it considers in the constitutive chapters that make up the collection. Simply, through a systematic engagement with the book, I am not convinced that it applies itself sufficiently to decolonial questions. This concern aims to address a grave limitation of the book, but said limitation should not be seen as undermining the collective efforts of the book as there are some useful takeaways that assist the student of philosophy and literature (and/or literary theory) who is considering decolonial questions. My qualm lies in the obfuscating claim we find, ever so repeated, in the South African academe—this being the elusive nature of decolonisation and its meanings. In the case of *African Philosophical and Literary Possibilities*, this indefinability is seen as the lack of clarity vis-à-vis Africanisation.

The editor sums this up as follows: “[w]hat precisely constitutes pedagogical, curriculum [Africanisation] remains unclear” (Phiri xiii). To interrupt myself and my critique, it might be useful to note that the editor does not say that decolonisation remains unclear—rather it is suggested that “[w]hat precisely constitutes pedagogical, curriculum [Africanisation] remains unclear” (xiii, emphasis added). My critique, as detailed (even cursorily) above, might be misplaced, as I take issue with the obfuscation of decolonisation which is the sum-total of the movements we’ve witnessed in the country to date. What I am possibly pressing the editor for is an acknowledgement of the distinctions that accrue to this sum-total that is decolonisation. Simply, while I acknowledge that my critique might be misplaced—an acknowledgement that is only extended to the extent that the editor should have anticipated this objection—were the objectives of the volume a serious and not merely a fashionable, and thus superficial, engagement with decoloniality, it would seem to me that the editor has conflated decolonisation with Africanisation. This conflation also elides the nuances of the decolonial tradition as developed by scholars of the Latin American school of thought, whose work has been immeasurably useful in the thinking of those situated in Africa who are treating similar questions and concerns.

My request is that there be a clear distinction drawn by anyone who applies themselves to decolonisation, with respect to its historical course and its permutations. Such a distinction would recognise that the call for decolonisation in South Africa—which is a context that the editor and the contributors focus their attentions on, owing to the unprecedented student movements of 2015–2017—began in the years leading up to the democratic dispensation as a charge for the recognition of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS; read ‘Africanisation’). Put simply, the first iteration was a call for Africanisation in the desire to include IKS as part of curricula and the process of reimagining the university in South Africa at the dawn of democracy. This first iteration was constitutive of voices such as Mabogo More, whom the editor cites in her introduction, Mogobe Ramose, Kunene, and many others. The second iterative moment was the call for transformation, a matter that was systematically treated by

Lis Lange when she considered “Rethinking Transformation and its Knowledge(s)”. These two preceding moments gave us the rupture that was led by the student movements and became known as the demand for decolonisation. Thus, to conflate Africanisation and decolonisation flattens the topography—while rendering the nuance that is constitutive of this area of scholarship mute—that makes up the oeuvre of Black/Indigenous intellectuals who have applied themselves (even in the English language, in recent years) to this question. To therefore claim that the meaning—or less pretentiously what is intended by the charge for decolonisation—is elusive, unclear, and undefined, smacks of curious arrogance(s) that are denotative of symbolic violence in the continued erasure of the writings of Black/Indigenous thinkers. It is useful to note, however, that this fact of recognition (a recognition of what I have termed ‘ontological legitimacy’) is taken up by Marzia Milazzo in chapter eight of the book.

As a way of summing up the first entry point into the book, that is the ways in which the editor conceals and obfuscates their treatment of decolonisation by way of conflating it with Africanisation (a flattening of the topography, as it were), we do get a generative take away from this blunder that is derivative of fashionable engagements with decolonisation. A superficial, yet positive take away, is the popularisation of decolonisation as a thematic area of engagement. The shortcomings with this approach, however, are a rendering of the movement—both in its theoretical and praxis-based analyses—as a vapid and empty signifier that continues the project of colonial violence, which was predicated on the erasure of native (Black/Indigenous) subjectivity. Such popularisations are what allow for the claim that ‘we don’t know what is intended by decolonisation’ not only to go unchallenged but to derive its substantiations in such concealments and ways of writing that continue the *Culture of Letters in South Africa* (as in the subtitle of Coetzee’s *White Writing*), a culture that was analysed and critiqued by Coetzee systematically for its part in the sustained infantilisation of Black/Indigenous subjectivity by white superiorist thinking. It is unclear to me whether this is an honest oversight or a very insidious and directed project at the systematic burial (concealment) of the knowledge produced by Black/Indigenous intellectuals of South Africa. More dangerously, however, is the derivative result that is the miseducation of the majority in the country. This is a continuance of colonial violence that is predicated in the claim that “knowledge is *valid* only insofar as it is developed by white scholars” (Kumalo, “Curriculating from the Black Archive—Marginality as Novelty” III) and, more importantly, only insofar as it is developed in the English language. So, while the reader unperceptively sees value in the popularisation of decoloniality as discourse through fleeting engagements, the more attentive reader will flag a series of challenges that we get from the ways in which Phiri has chosen to frame her introduction to the text as a collective.

It seems apt here to quote a poem by Lebo Mashile, performed on 20 March 2021 in Newtown in Solidarity with the protesters who had been staging a sit in, led by Sibongile Mngoma:

Things that go unnamed,
Wander through the world
not knowing where to look,
or where to go!
In Africa, Names are asked for,
Prayed for,
Blood is spilt in the name of NAMING!
Warm red liquid
Seeping into dust
Fills the dead with life.
Our names are the dead speaking!

Ontological analyses as augmenting decolonial theory development

I now elect to take up, as promised, the consideration of ontology in a systematic and sustained manner, as it is engaged and treated in the collection. The more substantive and useful take away from the text is a sustained engagement with ontology which infuses the entire text and gives an impression of what was possibly intended in the book by the idea of a treatment of decolonial questions. This is to say that, in engaging the ways in which African literature(s) has treated African subjectivity, the book does indeed challenge the prevailing epistemological fads that are the invention of white supremacist thinking. In chapter one, and in considering the idea of philosophical method as inherently defined by disagreement, Oritsegbubemi Oyowe (3) suggests that the philosopher ought to be attentive to their immediate surroundings when he writes: “[the] above objection [the idea that

a philosopher betrays their disciplinary allegiance when they take up a position and defend that position while allowing room for disagreement] seems to me to originate from a rather poor grasp of what African philosophy is about and what African philosophers have been and are doing". In this respect, Oyowe (5) takes the position that has been developed by a series of decolonial thinkers who contest the falsehoods of western philosophical traditions that ascribe to themselves the august function of considering universal questions when he writes, "[as] it turns out, the charge that doing philosophy with an African conscience will lead to the tribalization of philosophy is best levelled at Euro-American philosophers who fail to recognize other traditions of thought".

This framework as developed by Oyowe seeks to suggest that there is an inherent value in paying attention to the ways in which African philosophers treat the harsh phenomenological realities that define the lives of Africans and that this attention should not be viewed as some parochial application in how it functions to dislodge the centrality of Eurocentric considerations in an African context. In demonstrating the usefulness of paying attention to how Africans have treated continuing questions that define the human condition, in chapter three Hull pays attention to three fictional texts developed by Africans. Two of these are done by Black/Indigenous intellectuals/literati: S. E. K. Mqhayi's *Ityala Lamawele* (1914) and A. C. Jordan's *The Wrath of the Ancestors* (1940) respectively, with the third text being J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999). The idea is that these two disciplines (i.e., philosophy and literary studies) are generatively compatible, specifically when we assume the position that "value conflict is an area where philosophical theory and creative fiction can helpfully inform one another" (Hull 33).

The ontological focus here, as per my own reading, is highlighted when we consider the historical factuality of colonialism (read colonisation), which is a matter that Blackness/Indigeneity had to confront; and by 'confront' I mean a reality with which we had to contend as a matter of survival. In confronting this violence there was and continues to be the reality of competing modes of life, the first of which is predicated on Black/Indigenous ontology and our ways of understanding the world, and another being this imposition that is critiqued by Oyowe. What Hull showcases for the reader by conducting his analysis using the works of Mqhayi and Jordan—as the first two conceptual moves in developing his argument—is that Blackness/Indigeneity applied itself to these competing ways of life (a matter that is still the case to this very day, seen in the very fact of language that I discussed as my entry point into this review article). To demonstrate the historicity of this application, I invite the reader to consider the composition we find in William Wellington Gqoba's (148) sustained treatment of the role and function of education in his epic poem "*Ingxoxo Enkulu nge Mfundo*" (A Great Debate on Education: A Parable). He writes:

*Tina oko ib'isiti,
U Laulo lusenati,
Bezingeke ez'ikiti,
Ezi tola, nezi pasi.
Sabayeka, sabamkela,
Bagawula, bakusara
Komihlaba babelima,
Amadlelo babenawo,
Lawo nati sasinawo.*

When we were independent,
responsible for our governance,
there were no pounds for stray stock,
there were no tolls, no passes.
We left them alone, we welcomed them,
they cut down trees, cursing you,
they tilled and worked their land,
possessed pastures of their own
and we for our part had ours. (Gqoba 149)

I draw the reader's attention to this matter as a way of demonstrating that there has always been a sustained consideration of the effects of colonialism and coloniality, which focuses the matter of constant compromise that Hull writes about. Pointedly, the aim lies in demonstrating that, owing to colonial violence and as a matter of securing our survival (as Black/Indigenous people), the matter of compromise has been considered by and is a constitutive part of Black ontology for at least 200 years now. At a secondary level, my demonstration here seeks

to undergird Oyowe's critique of the totalising effects of western philosophical traditions that assumed centre stage and styled (even to this day) themselves as the intellectual traditions that are most worthy of study. This demonstration underscores the usefulness in locating the two disciplines (philosophy and African literary study) in conversation with each other.

While Hull's chapter is integral to shoring up the decolonial understanding (which is informed by the two recent treatises of decolonisation as intellectual tradition, i.e., Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni's *Epistemic Freedom in Africa* and the collection *Decolonisation as Democratisation* edited by myself) in the text, he commits a grave ontological misrecognition in his translation of the names of Mqhayi's characters in *Ityala Lamawele*. The reader might inquire as to why I stake such a strong claim. My objection is predicated on the function of naming, in what can be understood as Black ontology (but what we can zero in on, as Xhosa ways of naming, in the case of *Ityala Lamawele*). This is to say that names are sacred and central, and their meaning ought not to be translated but can possibly be interpreted. To demonstrate the point, I draw the reader's attention to Kunene once again when he writes, "[yet], it was always with a certain sense of seriousness that my father discussed with me the genealogy of our Royal Clan, the histories of past wars, and the general truths of our African philosophy and values" (28). Kunene does not come to attach these three components (i.e., the genealogy of the Royal Clan, histories of past wars, and the general truths of African philosophy and values) without unjustified understanding. It is for this reason that I use his work to elaborate on the point. The function of the genealogy of the Royal Clan demonstrates the point raised by Coetzee in his observation of an 'Adamic language' (9), "in which Africa will naturally express itself, that is to say, a language in which there is no split between signifier and signified, and things are their names". An Adamic language is subsequently evinced in Kumalo's ("Defining an African Vocabulary for the Exploration of Possibilities in Higher Education") analysis of the role of names and their functionality in the context of *kwaBulawayo* in Zimbabwe wherein *kwaBulawayo* becomes 'the place of death' (in the literal translation), owing to the actions of Mzilikazi in his establishment of the Ndebele royal house in Zimbabwe and in the erection of *isizwe sika Mthwakazi*. In this example, the reader is privy to the challenge of translating names, specifically in a case where a name, as rigid designator, is derived from the clan names of the named subject. A translation in such a context misses the nuances of history as attached to that name—and the subsequent significance of that name within the broader "genealogy of the Royal Clan" as Kunene indicates.

As example, consider this phrase, "Wele's complaint has already been heard in the court of his local headman, *Lucangwana* (meaning 'small door')" (Hull 35, emphasis added). The reasons behind an objection of the translation of our names are manifold but I will pay attention to only two as a way of demonstrating the point. In the first instance, our names might be derived from our clan name's praise poetry (which is a mode of encoding history by way of inflecting historical events with the names of those whose actions are worthy of being remembered). In this case, the name "Lucangwana" might have been given to the character as a way of recognising or informing his moral character within the broader scheme of his lineage and ancestry. To translate the name as "small door" (35) misreads and ontologically obliterates the context in which said name is given, while side-stepping the complexity that is engineered by Mqhayi in his composition and writing of the dramatic novel. Moreover, it undermines the philosophical nuance that is embedded in the meaning-making processes through naming, a process that is bound-up with how we (Blackness/Indigeneity) understand being as it relates to the world; an understanding that is mediated by our names and how they inform our moral character as named beings.

The second matter is to say that the name (*Lucangwana*) might be given as a way of remembering an historical event that is synonymous with the birth of the person—in this case, the character as developed by Mqhayi. The objection holds again, as per the explanation given above, which is to say that in translating the name the translator not only disrespects but completely erases the very being of the person whose name is translated, as said translation (as Hull does in chapter three) does not adequately account for these possibilities that are only accessible if the reader is conversant with the linguistic textile that informs Mqhayi's composition. It is for this reason that Kunene gives language such a central focus, exclaiming—even—that this language has been the cause of the death of our ancestors. It is useful to note that said deaths are not only physical but are connotative of these forms of death that are inscribed through ontological misrecognitions.

The salvaging chapter—salvaging in the sense of an adequate engagement with Black ontology—to the extent that the treatment is deferentially sustained, is Milazzo's chapter eight, which is also the final chapter in the book. Analysing Miriam Tlali's *Between Two Worlds* (originally published as *Muriel at the Metropolitan*, 1975), Milazzo demonstrates and traces the historicity of the continued disregard of writing developed by Black/Indigenous

intellectuals in our context. This dismissal is framed most starkly in these ways by Milazzo (133): “one would be hard-pressed to find Tlali’s work taught in philosophy courses, despite the fact that Black South African fiction provides invaluable lenses through which students can grapple with pressing social and ethical issues”. This assertion serves two functions, which is possibly another reason why I frame the chapter as a salvaging chapter in the book. The first function is to overtly state the aims of decolonisation as it pertains to the higher education sector of South Africa, which the editor sets out to engage, but the book functions as an inadequate treatment of—at least, explicitly. This decolonial engagement is found in chapter eight in the way Milazzo (133) confronts the project of curriculum revision, which remains unattained owing to how “[white] supremacy [...] continues to be a collective affair and operate[s] in ways that testify to the significance of Biko and Tlali’s works for grappling with the current racial moment”. Additionally, “[despite] a growing proliferation of criticism on South African writing, Black South African literature across genres and time periods remains chronically understudied” (134). This observation underscores the question I posed with my inquiry into the possibility of whether said concealment is a directed effort at the continued relegation of scholarship developed by Black/Indigenous intellectuals in our context. From the argument we find in Milazzo’s chapter, the answer to my question might be in agreement with the latter position, that this is indeed an insidious and directed affront that aims at the orchestrated concealment of Black/Indigenous thought. In this way, the book lives up to a very ambitious promise—at least one of them—as set out by the editor, which is an analysis that attempts to explore the possibilities of locating literature and philosophy in conversation.

The fulfilment of this promise is seen in how, through such an act of locating the two disciplines in conversation, we unearth persistent challenges that necessitate the decolonial project in our context. While the book could have done more to overtly indicate how it is addressing decolonial questions so as to not render itself the target of such criticism(s)—a matter that possibly might have required more tactful editorial curation—it does nonetheless shore up the areas that still require our collective attentions as a way of adequately responding to the fundamental request that was staked by the students of #MustFall movements who were begging to be seen in a system that ought to, in principle, serve them in their context and not some myopic agenda that continues to valorise Eurocentric notions of what it means to read at a university.

The instruction in this respect, that is to say how we create an African university that is responsive to African problems, is gleaned in the advisory analysis we get from chapter five as penned by Pier Paolo Frassinelli and Lisa Treffry-Goatley. In an argument that adequately eschews the rigid conception of the Digital Humanities in Africa (or the African Digital Humanities), Frassinelli and Treffry-Goatley demonstrate how the democratisation of access to knowledge (a democratisation that happens by way of the younger generation engaging with literature in a mixed media format on their smart devices) can be seen as a subversive move that works towards decolonial ends. Again, this is an implicit connection that the reader is forced to make of their own volition, a connection that the reader comes to make as a result of being conversant with decolonial struggles and debates. Overall, the reader must come to *African Philosophical and Literary Possibilities* as an informed student of decoloniality and decolonial theory as the collective tapestry—in the form of most of the chapters that make up the book—does not apply itself to treating, with sufficient attention, the requisite conceptual connecting dots that show us how this book contributes to decolonial debates as they have been developed in the South African university.

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Rethinking Literature: My Personal Essays on a Troubled Discipline.

Henry Indangasi.

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ISBN 9789966653123.

Henry Indangasi's *Rethinking Literature: My Personal Essays on a Troubled Discipline* (2018) underscores his penchant for intellectual controversies, marking him as a resolute gadfly in East Africa's literary scholarship. Domiciled in the Department of Literature at the University of Nairobi from the 1970s, a department renowned for postcolonial activism, Indangasi's stance against postcolonial thought is troubling. The 1970s decolonial luminaries at the department, Henry Owuor Anyumba, Taban lo Liyong and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o championed for the delinking of the study of literature from the nationalist history of England, as was the case in the largely white professoriate department in 1968. By advocating for the centring of African letters and thought in the curricular, the troika was charting a different way of visualising the world—from the perspectives of the minoritised people. This was a departure from the dominant perspective entrenched through literary and cultural productions of the Global North. But in *Rethinking Literature*, Indangasi provocatively challenges his readers to think beyond the postcolonial box that has gained traction among African literary scholars.

Unlike Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka and other scholars who revise their lectures before publishing them as books, Indangasi did not incorporate the conversations his essays stimulated when they first appeared in Kenyan dailies, an exercise that would have exploited hindsight and further enriched the essays. The essay that stood out for me in the book is "Fifty Years of Reading Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Weep Not, Child*" (16–26). In this essay, Indangasi narrates his experiences in Kenya in relation to the ideas germane to *Weep Not, Child*. He argues that creation myths "are not innocent, harmless compositions. They sanctify the mistaken view that we are exceptional; they buttress our ethnic jingoism" (26). Readings of Ngũgĩ usually take for granted the use of Gĩkũyũ myths of creation and Mau Mau oaths in his works. Yet, there are Kenyans who have witnessed deadly consequences of the myths: "people were made to actualize a fabricated creation myth to the detriment of their fellow human

beings" (24) in 1969 when Mau Mau War methods were employed to ensure political power is restricted to the 'chosen' community, the Gĩkũyũ. It is on this account that Indangasi's contention against nationalist literatures is unleashed: "And yet I believe, and I will go to my grave believing, that as an institution literature affirms our humane values; literature speaks to our common humanity" (26).

There is no doubt that Indangasi's *Rethinking Literature* carves, with regards to the idea of writing differently, an alternative way of writing where scholars humanise research by producing knowledge imaginatively, inspirationally, and emotionally. This style, which resonates through the sharing of everyday experiences, shatters the normalised domains of objective, restrictive, impersonal academic writing. Here, Indangasi explores the self; immerses himself in memories as he uniquely makes research personal. He refers to his approach as public writing. He is present on the pages—the same unpretentious, controversial Indangasi. Instead of heavily relying on what other scholars have written on Achebe, for instance, to augment his writing, he centralises his personal experiences with Achebe. Even when it comes to his idol William Shakespeare, Indangasi treats readers to his journey to Shakespeare's hometown, Shakespeare's wife's cottage, Shakespeare's grave—what most postcolonial enthusiasts can interpret as the nostalgic hallmarks of colonial tutelage.

Indeed, *Rethinking Literature* underscores Indangasi's reverence for William Shakespeare who, it appears, epitomises the profundity of thought as well as the aesthetics of literature. For instance, in his polemical essay ("Saturday Nation on 2 Dec 2017"), Indangasi asserts that to postmodernists and postcolonialists, "Shakespeare's *Hamlet* can be bracketed together with some cheap script at the Kenya National Drama Festival" (n. p.). Also, in reflections on his schooling at Friends School Kamusinga in the mid-1960s, Indangasi remarks that Shakespeare was taught by Quakers missionaries in "more or less the same way they talked about Jesus—that he had come to save us all" (57–8); that he was a "writer who belonged to all humanity" (57). This would appear a critique of colonial knowledge impartation to the African child, except that Indangasi affirms similar problematic ideas as the book

progresses. He endorses Stephen Marche's argument that Shakespeare's larger-than-life Black hero Othello significantly contributed to Barrack Obama's rise to the presidency of the United States of America. Yet Othello ends calamitously, albeit by the evil machinations of Iago, a white villain. Othello appears the embodiment of the exoticisation of Black men who strongly appeal to vulnerable white women such as Desdemona but end tragically due to Black men's presumed lack of insight. It is also notable that, a century later, slavery and the slave trade flourished among those readers of Shakespeare. Further, it is completely lost on Indangasi that readers of Shakespeare unleashed colonial horrors on minoritised people in Africa, India, and Australia. The point here is that Shakespeare offered no salvation to the subaltern—the subaltern had to strike the freedom blow themselves!

Above all, a Marxist reading of Shakespeare reveals his unreserved complicity to and advocacy for monarchical rule. In *King Lear*, for instance, Edmund is depicted as an imposter to nobility and is eventually supplanted by 'true nobles'. Indangasi recalls that when postcolonial literary gurus had expelled Shakespeare from Kenyan schools, the British Foreign Minister urged President Daniel Moi (Kenya's president from 1978 to 2002) to recall Shakespeare: "Moi talks about it publicly and decrees that the British playwright be brought back into our curriculum" (61). Indangasi doesn't question why neo-colonial forces are bent on having Shakespeare in the curriculum, rather, he rejoices at the prospects of the celebrated playwright's return. Why are dictators safe with ideas that impostors to power, fake nobilities, will always fail? Notably, African writers who were condemning neocolonialism in East Africa and West Africa and imperial oppression in Southern Africa were being incarcerated. Thus, Britain's insistence that Shakespeare occupies the central place in the education of the African child raises fundamental issues that writers like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o have highlighted in *Penpoints, Gunpoints and Dreams*, lucidly demonstrating the postcolonial state's anxieties against the decolonial and subversive nature of the arts produced by/for the oppressed. Thus, Shakespeare's artistic prowess would not be entertained at the expense of ideologies that cement complicity to oppressive powers of the world.

The Queen's language also played a significant role in colonialism. In a tribute to dramatist Waigwa Wachira, Indangasi courts trouble as he unnecessarily glorifies English: "Waigwa Wachira spoke idiomatic English, fluently and effortlessly. In a country where bad pronunciations have proliferated, our late friend

and colleague was in a class of his own" (64). In an essay on Chinua Achebe, Indangasi expresses similar views when he recalls Achebe reading from *Anthills of the Savannah* at University of Nairobi's Taifa Hall in 1988: "With a somewhat noticeable Nigerian accent, he wasn't a particularly good reader" (4). Indangasi's views here lack depth as they are enslaved to mimicry. Postcolonial thought contests colonial powers' hierarchisation and control over language, which is part of the endeavour to monopolise 'truth', 'order' and 'reality'. Indangasi must be familiar with Achebe's politics on the English language; assertions that an African writer who uses English should use it in a way that carries "his peculiar experience" ("English and the African Writer" 29). Achebe contends: A lesser writer is "like a man offering a small, nondescript routine sacrifice for which a chick or less will do. A serious writer must look for an animal whose blood can match the power of his offering" (29).

The literati were marking the first anniversary since Achebe's death when Indangasi (8) made the claim: "Achebe wasn't great, but he was the finest writer in Anglophone Africa". Structurally, Indangasi's claim resonates with Bernth Lindfors's (65): Soyinka "may be Africa's greatest playwright but one suspects he could be even greater if he were more nakedly African." It is very tempting to see Lindfors as an exemplar of what Wole Soyinka (27) calls the "neo-Tarzanist" critics hunting for exotic Africa. Yet, while Lindfors provides detailed readings of Soyinka's oeuvre to the point that he almost convinces readers that Soyinka's drama is unnecessarily complex and un-African, Indangasi judges Achebe's 'greatness' in terms of minor encounters, including Achebe's disgruntlement about Soyinka being awarded the 1986 Nobel Prize in Literature. After all, the desire to outdo peers is human. Also, Indangasi's claim that Achebe's *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra* is a "poorly written book" engaging with a "historically tired theme of Biafran secessionism" (7–8) is lamely pegged on Indangasi's wish that Achebe should have written on disability following the writer's car accident in 1989. But Achebe (*Hopes and Impediments* 42) was no stranger to such criticism, he reveals he usually made vague noises "whenever a wise critic comes along to tell me I should have written a different book to the one I wrote". While the 'Great Tradition' is Indangasi's yardstick for measuring postcolonial literatures, seeing his insinuations that Achebe can match neither Leo Tolstoy's nor Joseph Conrad's literary prowess, Simon Gikandi (6) writes that Achebe "invented African literature as an institutional practice" through the

monumentality of his works—the publication of *Things Fall Apart* represents “the inaugural moment of African literary history.”

Through *Rethinking Literature*, Indangasi (60) aspires to salvage literature from what he refers to as ‘literary nationalists’ who have, over time, reduced texts into mere political missiles. The literary nationalists are no different to the ones Soyinka (28) flags: “And the issue is that something is being promoted for which literature, like any other available commodity, provides mere fodder.” While this is a problem that plagues African literary scholarship, literary works speak to myriads of human situations. It is my contestation that Indangasi’s book reveals his refusal to see the power of postcolonial thought and the promiscuous nature of literature as a discipline that is impossible to restrict to disciplinary closets where form reigns supreme. The current generation of literary scholars are stretching the boundaries of literature to speak to emergent global issues. Therefore, Indangasi’s lamentations that the institution of literature in East Africa is troubled largely reveal his discomfort with (Marxist) postcolonialism.

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Nature, Environment, and Activism in Nigerian Literature.

Sule E. Egya.

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Ecocriticism has become a major theoretical handle in the analysis of postcolonial literatures. Drawing from the pioneering scholarship of Cheryll Glotfelty, Lawrence Buell, and Harold Fromm, postcolonial ecocritics have confronted the Euro-American centeredness of ecocriticism. The exclusion of postcolonial realities in early ecocritical theories prompted critics like Graham

Huggan, Helen Tiffin, Elizabeth DeLoughrey, George B. Handley, Rob Nixon, Byron Caminero-Santangelo, Fatima Fiona Moolla, and Cajetan Iheka to intervene in the field by bringing the ideas of postcoloniality to ecocriticism. Sule Egya’s *Nature, Environment, and Activism in Nigerian Literature* contributes to the growing field of postcolonial ecocriticism. Egya’s introduction situates the book within the context of what Caminero-Santangelo (184) describes as “postcolonial regional particularism.” However, Egya moves beyond this and queries the treatment of Africa as a single postcolonial province. He declares that “ecocriticism in Africa needs to go beyond regional particularism to a national one for greater attentiveness to differences within the region” (1).

Egya’s decision to focus on Nigerian literature for his postcolonial ecocritical study is based on his desire to “pay closer and keener attention to local details, thereby presenting a comprehensive ecocritical study on Nigeria, the type that does not exist yet” (3). Notwithstanding numerous ecocritical readings of “Niger Delta literature” and, more generally, comparative studies of ecocritical literature in which Nigerian literature is represented, Egya’s book is the first attempt to study Nigerian literature holistically from an ecocritical perspective. The book is divided into five chapters and apart from the introduction and conclusion, the other three chapters are titled “Natures”, “Environments” and “Activisms”. In these chapters, Egya frames his theoretical and methodological approach, and he interprets texts from all the genres of literature. The book analyses both “canonical and relatively unknown texts” with the aim of showing “the textual depth of Nigerian ecocriticism and [...] to bring the richness of Nigerian eco-writing to the attention of international ecocriticism” (3).

In the second chapter, titled “Natures”, Egya redirects attention from the idea of “environmental justice”, which has been a major focus in Nigerian ecocritical literature, to “show how nature, since precolonial Nigeria, is extra-human in the sense that it is beyond human comprehension and control” (22–3). He positions nature as a pre-modern space where humans and non-humans interact. Nature is not constructed by humans even though humans interact with its seen and unseen elements. Referring to Elechi Amadi’s *The Concubine* (1966) and Femi Osofisan’s *Another Raft* (1988), as well as the poetry of Niyi Osundare and Christian Obotokere, nature is read as a pre-modern site where “humans, despite their seeming agential capabilities, are not necessarily superior to, or more powerful than, nonhumans since, in the final analysis,

human beings might be rendered helpless by spiritual and material forces from the natural world” (26). Nature is conceived in this chapter in terms of both physical and metaphysical dimensions and man, as a product of both dimensions in indigenous ‘Nigerian’ thought, relates with natural and supernatural forces and is sometimes under their control. Egya also focuses on the changing roles of nature in a postcolonial world and how nature’s physical and metaphysical forces insinuate themselves into human affairs. With specific attention to poetry, Egya engages “the bond between individuals and their birthplace nature, something of personal romanticism, non-spiritualised and yet deeply binding” (26) and he positions nature as a focal point in the “aestheticization of birthplace” (57) and “landscape aesthetics” (63) of Nigerian poets.

In the chapter titled “Environments”, Egya differentiates nature from the human built environment. His focus in this chapter is on “The ecological effects of deliberate transformations of the rural and urban Nigerian landscape from the pre-modern to the modern, or postmodern as the case is now” (70). A significant intervention here is Egya’s separation of “environment” as a human construct from the idea of nature, which is beyond human reality. Focusing on how modernity, colonialism, and postcolonial realities have created certain conditions which have allowed humans to alter and deform the natural world, Egya reads literary texts that depict built environments such as Toni Kan’s *The Carnivorous City* (2016), Denja Abdullahi’s *Abuja Nunyi* (2008), Kaine Agary’s *Yellow-Yellow* (2006), Helon Habila’s *Oil on Water* (2010), and two short stories by Samuel Okopi and Olufunmilola Olubunmi Adeniran. His analysis focuses on “the environmental problems [that] are mainly caused by humans” (76) such as urban pollution in Lagos, displacement and de-naturalisation in Abuja, human-induced climate change, and the oil industry’s pollution of the Niger Delta. What is interesting about Egya’s analysis here is the scope of his textual selections. Drawing from a wide range of texts from various regions of Nigeria, Egya’s analysis presents a broad picture of environmental issues in Nigeria.

The chapter titled “Activisms” moves beyond the representation of nature and the environment and focuses on “eco-activism”, a term defined by Egya as “the point at which Nigerian literature’s ecological vigilance becomes crystallised, locating itself within the literary instrumentalism that remains both the condition of possibility for, and the avenue for critiquing the aesthetic force of, this literature” (129). In this chapter, Egya is concerned with the place of

writers and their fictive characters/personae as activists in the cause for environmental justice. Deploying the concepts of “protest aesthetics” (122) and “character-focalisers,” (125) Egya discusses Aliyu Kamal’s *Fire in My Backyard* (2004), Greg Mbajiorgu’s *Wake Up Everyone!* (2011), and May Ifeoma Nwoye’s *Oil Cemetery* (2013). His analysis is hinged on the main character(s) and how the authors use them to inscribe their activism against “institutional powers” and “anti-environment sociocultural practices” (125). This chapter succeeds in its identification of activism, or eco-activism, as a category distinct from mere environmental awareness and the depiction of environmental issues.

Egya’s book contributes to scholarship on post-colonial ecocriticism with its focus on Nigerian socio-ecological particularisms. His framework succeeds because of his awareness of the continuities and discontinuities between pre-modern cultural realities and modern/post-modern/postcolonial realities. Egya’s decision to move beyond the “canon” and bring relatively unknown and minoritised writers into critical discourse is an effective strategy that is justified by the interesting findings of his research. His methodological model and the logic of his textual selections are useful for future studies of ecocritical literature and Nigerian literature.

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Frottage: Frictions of Intimacy across the Black Diaspora.

Keguro Macharia.

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How do we imagine what it means to be human in the present day? What is involved in understanding freedom and how it operates in Africa and the Afro-diaspora? How do we think through care and pleasure within diverse historical moments characterised by “the obscene labour of how humans are transformed

into objects” (1). What happens when black and queer inhabit the same spaces and even bodies, in Africa or its diaspora? These are some of the core questions that Keguro Macharia grapples with in *Frottage: Frictions of Intimacy across the Black Diaspora* (hereinafter referred to simply as *Frottage*). Guided by the evocative and lingering image of slavery, Macharia sets out to construct a deeply new appreciation of both blackness and queer studies in Africa and the black diaspora. He achieves this by engaging with a rich archive of texts that focuses “on the speculative ways that black diaspora thinkers and artists imagined [...] usable histories and liveable lives” (3). Also, interestingly, the texts that Macharia engages with do not openly represent queer subjectivities or fail to represent them. Given the fact that the texts and archives that Macharia engages with do not openly portray queerness, he attempts to complicate texts that are not normally considered queer. As he explains, “instead of pursuing explicitly queer or trans figures, each chapter mines the resources of the erotic to imagine freedom” (29).

Frottage is composed of four interrelated chapters, which each focus on a specific thinker: Frantz Fanon, René Marin, Jomo Kenyatta and Claude McKay, respectively. This ensures that the range of the archive that Macharia works with is geohistorically diverse. It moves from Fanon’s Martinique and France, to the Central Africa of Maran, Kenyatta’s Kenya and the UK as well as McKay’s Jamaica. As he moves from and across these different geohistories and spaces, Macharia is interested in how the intimate and the sexual are central in imagining and theorising black being, belonging and struggles for freedom. In exceptionally expressive and introspective prose, Macharia proposes frottage as both a theory and a method with and through which to reevaluate and reconsider the Afro-diaspora by converging on “the ways the public pursuit of pleasure can often be uncomfortable and coercive” (5).

Macharia posits that frottage allows for the uncovering of the traces of the past in a way that “offers a richer, queerer account of how diaspora functions as intimacy” (5). Macharia draws on Max Ernst’s artistic method which “consists of layering paper over a surface (a floor or a desk, say), and using charcoal or pencil to rub over the paper to reveal the traces history has left on that surface” (4). As a methodological intervention, frottage enables the rereading, speculation and creation of meaning from traces that become apparent only through reading over and rubbing against narratives, past lives, archives and recorded histories:

Frottage tries to grasp the quotidian experiences of intra-racial experience, the frictions and irritations and translations and mistranslations, the moments when blackness coalesces through pleasure and play and also by resistance to antiblackness. More than simply proximity, it is the active and dynamic ways blackness is produced and contested and celebrated and lamented as a shared object. It is bodies rubbing against and along bodies. Histories rubbing along and against histories. It is the shared moments of black joy and black mourning (7).

The friction between histories, narratives and archives from Africa and its diaspora, simultaneously creates critical irritation and multifold possibilities of pleasure: “ongoing rubbing, leading, at times to pleasure, and, at other times, to irritation, and even possibly to pain” (5). Such an encounter, founded on friction, should not be viewed negatively. Rather, it should be considered as a potentially productive process that gives social legibility to previously marginalised and under/unrepresented ways of being. This idea can be seen in the chapter that examines Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*. Macharia sets out to imagine queer figures which Fanon was unable to envision in this book. Fanon, in Macharia’s argument, “was too homophobic to be considered a foundational theorist of sexuality” (31). Against such thinking, homosexuality is performed as a metonymy. It is performed in Fanon’s world as images of actions, both failed and realised. These actions include attempted rape and attempts at fellatio. In spite of Fanon’s supposed homophobia, his work is important in that queerness cannot be necessarily imagined without the blackness that he stages through *Black Skin, White Masks*.

The introduction of *Frottage* is fascinating for the way in which Macharia lays sophisticated theoretical ground for the compelling readings that he offers in the four main analytical chapters. The introduction grapples with notions of “thinghood”, kinship, hybridity and movement. The most central of notions is what he terms the “genealogical imperative” (8) or “the structure of blood descent” (8). In rubbing against different histories and archives, Macharia is guided by the need to recover kinship and a genealogical imperative which is embodied in a shared vocabulary that transcends geohistorical differences. Even as there is an attempt to find some sort of common ground, the works of the different writers that Macharia works with do not produce a cohesive or harmonious narrative. They produce, rather, cacophonous voices that refuse concord. The only unison that is found in the works composing the archive that Macharia deals

with is how the individual works all broach different ways of striving towards freedom. The desire to uncover and recover ties of kinship requires a critique of normative familial genealogies. Macharia suggests a move away from the heteropatriarchal imagining of the family especially of the heterosexual couple because “focusing on the heterosexual couple misses how African and Afro-diasporic intimate structures and traditions generate their own forms of normativity and queerness” (10). In this line of thinking, queering the family comprises unsettling the genealogical descent which privileges and offers legibility and visibility to reproductive heteronormativity.

Frottage is an important addition to theoretical work that makes it possible to think about black and queer subjectivities in Africa and the African diaspora. The book’s strength lies in the way it applies the method of frottage in making visible and legible subjectivities that have been rendered illegible and also invisible by heteronormativising power structures and sociocultural processes. Through friction, at once irritating and pleasurable, it is possible to imagine the freedom of black and queer bodies. Such imagining of freedom for queer and black bodies in Africa and its diaspora is important in liberating blackness and queerness from their positions of thinghood as they assume new legibilities and visibilities.

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Post-Apartheid Same-Sex Sexualities: Restless Identities in Literary and Visual Culture.

Andy Carolin.

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ISBN 9780367467159.

Andy Carolin’s monograph, *Post-Apartheid Same-Sex Sexualities: Restless Identities in Literary and Visual Culture*, explores a range of literary and visual texts that represent same-sex sexualities in South Africa. Carolin reads these texts in relation to themes of restlessness and transnational cultural flows. The book argues that identities, discourses and histories of same-sex sexualities are “restless” in nature, characterised by ambivalence, contestation and fluidity of meaning.

Carolin notes many transnational exchanges and influences that were central to the sexual rights movement in the country and to ways that South Africans make meaning around same-sex sexualities; for example, exploring how the international gay rights movement influenced (and was influenced by) the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, and how transnational conceptions of race and gender intersect with South African realities. The project is a meticulous study of representations of diverse identities in South Africa—Carolin’s focus on restlessness means that he is careful not to label these identities as ‘gay’, ‘lesbian’ or even ‘queer’ in his analysis, but instead emphasises the multiplicities of meaning in nonnormative desire. The book offers incisive and original insights on the texts discussed, and the theoretical framing of *restlessness* is a useful analytical tool to add to understandings of South African same-sex sexualities.

The opening image of Carolin’s book is particularly powerful in demonstrating this restlessness: he paints the picture of Johannesburg Pride in 2012, and the infamous clash between revellers (mostly white men) and protesters (mostly black women). This incident highlighted the restlessness of identities and the impossibility of flattening understandings of sexual rights and same-sex sexual cultures in South Africa; a vast confluence of histories, identities and transnational interconnections were at play in this moment. Carolin reads these intersections in the texts he explores, asking (among other questions): “How do historical routes of white privilege intersect with contemporary ones, and what does this mean for the ways in which images of gay men are produced and circulated? How does the historical transnational figure of the black female body mobilise new constituencies of affect, and how does her same-sex sexuality reproduce her vulnerability?” (vi).

The book discusses a vast array of texts, including novels by Gerald Kraak, Zukiswa Wanner, Michiel Heyns and Shamim Sarif, films by Oliver Hermanus and John Trengove, and cultural artefacts like magazines, stage plays, and the photography of Zanele Muholi. This range of texts is rich and diverse in modes, influences and points of view, allowing Carolin to broadly demonstrate his analytical lens of restless identities and transnational circuits. Carolin’s book is thus an archival work in as much as it is a work of textual analysis and literary criticism; the book details multiple stories of sexual rights in South Africa and archives diverse lived experiences of same-sex intimacies through visual and literary texts. As Carolin argues, when heteronormative historicising practices

often erase same-sex sexualities, creative works like literature, photography and film can serve as archives, voicing and asserting narratives that are rarely captured in museums or other forms of history-making. While the book is compact, it still sensitively engages with the various texts, and situates them in relation to the histories, identities and layered meanings that they speak to.

The five chapters each explore different frameworks of same-sex sexualities that have shaped public discourses in South Africa. Chapter 1 traces the apartheid-era sexual rights movements, with the important figures of Simon Nkoli and Beverley Ditsie serving as examples of the contestations and transnational flows that shaped the movements during the apartheid and transition periods. In Chapter 2, Carolin discusses the ways that Africa and “authentic” African identities were conceived in relation to same-sex sexualities, exploring topics like Christianity, transnational flows between South Africa and other African countries like Uganda, and the discourse of homosexuality as “unAfrican.” The next three chapters each discuss particular restless identity formations: white gay men as signifiers of “respectability” and “how whiteness is the custodian of the normative in South African public discourse” (88); black female bodies as signifiers of vulnerability and victimhood, and how these bodies and identities are repositioned in images that “articulate a new sexual imaginary that conjoins agency, vulnerability, desire, and inclusive constructions of African identity” (122); and finally, representations of Indian identities that “emphasise historical and contemporary South-South relationalities” (159), including the influence of Islam on transnational conceptions of same-sex sexualities.

While the organisation of these five chapters is well thought out and enables a persuasive argument to emerge, the selection of the five themes is a limitation of the monograph, as the book becomes somewhat laser-focused on particular identities without fully engaging with *intra*-national cultural flows. One wonders about rich South African literary and visual cultures that are excluded, such as the Cape Coloured *moffie* culture, including vibrant barbershops and drag performances, the powerful use of poetry and short stories by queer writers, or the emerging modes of transnational visual cultures like vlogs, music videos and social media. The conceptual framework Carolin presents might open avenues to research on these under-explored topics on sexualities in South Africa.

Carolin’s monograph serves as a good introduction to representations of same-sex sexualities in South

Africa for readers who are not familiar with the field, and it presents compelling comparative readings of a range of texts that are valuable for scholars in queer studies. The book’s scope is contained, and it favours detailed readings of the selected texts rather than aiming for a more comprehensive archive. While this might limit the breadth of discussion, Carolin’s skilful engagement with the selected themes and texts makes the book a stimulating, rewarding read.

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Innie Shadows.

Olivia M. Coetzee.

Kaapstad: Modjaji Books, 2019. 144 pp.

ISBN 9781928215929.

Olivia M. Coetzee skep in haar debuutroman, *Innie Shadows*, ’n fiktiewe gemeenskap waar minderheidsgroepe steeds deur die onderdrukkende ideologiese oortuigings van die verlede affekteer word. *Innie Shadows* is die eerste Kaapse Afrikaanse roman wat lig skyn op die lewens van Bruin queermense en hoe hulle gender en seksualiteit oorkruis met ander maatskaplike kwessies. Die roman speel af in ’n gemeenskap—die *Shadows*—wat gekarakteriseer word deur armoede, dwelmmisbruik en geweld. Opsommenderwys is die roman gesentreerd rondom ’n groep vriende wat bekommerd is oor die skielike verdwyning van hul vriend Carl en wat wroeg met die onsekerheid oor sy veiligheid, te midde van nuus oor ’n reeks grusame en geheimsinnige moorde in hulle gemeenskap.

Innie Shadows sluit aan by vorige literêre werke oor die Kaapse Vlakte in die hantering van temas soos armoede, geweld en alkohol- en dwelmmisbruik. Daar kan byvoorbeeld verwys word na kontemporêre tekste soos *Noudat slapende honde* (Ronelda Kamfer), *Chokers en Survivors* (Nathan Trantraal), *Nomme 20 Delphistraat* (Shirmoney Rhode), *Kristalvlakte* (Amy Jephta) en *Kinnes* (Chase Rhys). Anders as in al hierdie werke, voeg Coetzee bykomende tematiese dimensies tot haar verhaal, naamlik geloof, genderidentiteit en seksuele oriëntasie. Op byna ’n kinematiese wyse verken Coetzee die verhouding tussen queerheid en verskeie vorms van

geweld, soos dit soms uitspeel in gemeenskappe wat sukkel met ander maatskaplike kwessies.

In Nathan Trantraal se debuutbundel *Chokers en survivors* (2014) verskyn daar 'n roerende gedig getiteld "bunnies", wat baie queer mense se grootste vrees en ander se daaglikse ervaringe beskryf. Die laaste strofe se eerste drie reëls is veral hier relevant:

[...], wan isse unwritten law
dat as jy 'n bunny oppie veld sien,
dan mag jy hom met klippe gooi. (44)

Die teenwoordigheid en veral die sigbaarheid van die "bunny" ontwig die sosiale norm waarvolgens queerheid en queer lewens tot die skadu's verstoot word. Daarom is die titel van *Innie Shadows* uiters funksioneel, want dit verklaar op 'n veelvoudige vlak die posisionering van minderheidsgroepe.

Elke hoofstuk in die roman fokus hoofsaaklik op een karakter en bied die leser die geleentheid om die Shadows vanuit verskillende perspektiewe waar te neem. In die eerste hoofstuk ontmoet ons vir Veronique 'Nique' Plaatjies, 'n transgender vrou wat onlangs 'n seksheraanpassingsoperasie ondergaan het (4). Deur Nique se perspektief kry die leser reeds insig in die probleme waarmee dié vriendekring sukkel. Daar is Gershwin se stormagtige verhouding met sy gelowige ma en Carl wat vasgevang is in 'n dwelmverslawing. Nique is in 'n verhouding met Balla—'n getroude man en die grootste gangster in die Shadows (2). Sy noem dat sy nooit haar verhouding bespreek nie, maar is ook bewus daarvan dat almal in die Shadows van hulle verhouding weet (25). Hier is daar reeds sprake van queerheid en queer verhoudings wat in die skadu's uitgeleef word. Ander karakters wat ook hul queer verhoudings in die skadu uitleef, sluit in Ley en haar meisie wat skelm saamwoon, Ley se verhouding met Sara en Gershwin se verhouding met 'n belangrike figuur in die gemeenskap.

Alhoewel Balla se aanvaarding van Nique voor én na haar operasie noemenswaardig is, kan dit nie opmaak vir die feit dat hy eintlik 'n seksuele predator is nie. Ondanks Nique se romantisering van hul eerste keer, toon haar beskrywing op seksuele geweld: "Sy het gesê sy moet loop, maa hy wou niks hoo nie. Sy het nie gesê, maa Balla vat wat hy wil hê. [...] Daai dag het sy hom hard probee om hom weg druk, maa soe mee sy probee het, hoe hader het hy haa vasgedruk" (27). Haar beste vriend Carl werk vir Balla en moes

telkemale teen sy wil op sy knieë gaan om vir Balla seksueel te bevredig (50).

Een van die sterkste aspekte van die roman is die menslikheid en egtheid waarmee Coetzee oor die kwessie van dwelmmisbruik skryf. Myns insiens is Carl die mees volronde en komplekse karakter in die roman. As gevolg van sy half-bewustelose toestand tydens sy verdwyning, ervaar die lesers sy gedagtestroom saam met hom. Sodoende leer ken ons vir Carl en hy vertel van sy ma se droom van 'n boonste verdieping-woonstel "om hoër te bly as al haa probleme" (99), sy ingewikkelde verhouding met Nique en hoe hy in die kloue van Tik beland het. Carl vergryp homself aan Tik na die dood van sy ouers: "'n Mens dink mos nooit dat dinge sal gebee soes dit gebee nie. Net soes ôssie geplan het om vi Mammie en Dëddie soe vroeg te veloo nie. Ek hettie geplan om myself te vekoop vi Tikkie (103)." Carl het die eerste keer gerook op die landjie, want dit herinner hom aan sy jonger sorgelose dae. Tog is dit juis sy dwelmmisbruik wat na meer sorg lei.

Met die verloop van die verhaal word die tema van religieuse konserwativiteit meer prominent en ekstreem. Dit word veral gestuur deur Gershwin se ma, Rose. Volgens Rose "probee sy om hom te help, ommie op te eindig soes die vullis waamie hy vrinne issie, ve'al die duiwel wat met Got se hannelêk gemos het" (32), met laasgenoemde wat verwys na Nique en haar operasie. Haar brutale verbale aanvalle op Gershwin en haar obsessie met pastoor Richard, maak haar blind vir die skynheiligheid van die pastoor. Soortgelyk aan werklike huigelaars soos Tom Brock, Albert Odulele en Keith O'Brien (Ogles), is pastoor Richard ook besig om die kat in die donker te knyp. Dit is hiër waar lesers gekonfronteer word met 'n nodige gesprek rondom menslike skynheiligheid, moraliteit en die religieuse selotisme wat in die skadu's van ons gemeenskappe skuil.

Ten spyte van die ietwat lomp slot van die verhaal, skryf Olivia M. Coetzee hier 'n verfrissende roman wat lesers dwing tot introspeksie oor ons rol in die voortbestaan van onderdrukkende ideologiese oortuigings. Soos Sara se pa sê, "soms kry 'n mens 'n boek en daai boek kan mens nie net een kee lies nie, dji lies dit jou hele liewe lank, wan daa is te veel om te vestaan" (16). *Innie Shadows* is só 'n roman wat nog 'n lees verg. Die outentieke dialoog maak vir 'n boeiende en genotvolle leeservaring. Dit is 'n sterk debuut wat my opgewonde maak oor wat nog in haar pen skuil.

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Dol heuning.

S. J. Naudé.

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S. J. Naudé se debuutkortverhaalbundel, *Alfabet van die voëls* (2011), is destyds deur Louise Viljoen (31–47) beskryf as kosmopolities. Dieselfde is waar van sy nuutste versameling kortverhale, *Dol heuning*. Verhale speel af in Suid-Afrika, Namibië, Ysland, Londen, New York, Oostenryk, Frankryk en Japan. In omtrent al hierdie verhale is daar 'n uitbeelding van die etiese aanspraak wat uitgelewerdes maak op karakters wat leef in gemak en weelde. Alhoewel dit spreek tot globale probleme, spreek hierdie tema ook op spesifieke maniere tot Suid-Afrika se uiterstes van armoede en rykdom. In *Dol heuning* word hierdie kwessie (die aanspraak van die weerloses) in verband gebring met ouerskap en ook spesifiek met queerheid, op 'n manier wat ek nog nie voorheen in Afrikaans raakgelees het nie.

Die oorvlueling van hierdie vier eienskappe (die aanspraak van uitgelewerdes, ouerskap, queerheid en die implikasies hiervan vir Suid-Afrika) is veral duidelik in twee verhale wat onderskeidelik in Kaapstad en Johannesburg afspeel: "Fawzi al-Junaidi" en "Die dal van die doodskaduwee". Die eerste verhaal, "Fawzi al-Junaidi", gaan oor Frans en Johannes en hulle vyfjarige seuntjie Sebastian. Eendag vertel hulle huishulp, Patience, vir Frans oor die gewelddadige homofobiese aanvalle waaronder haar seun deurgeloopt het. Hierdie selfde seun was as kind, voordat Frans en Johannes deur die proses van surrogasie gegaan het om hulle eie kind te verwek, "soos hul eie kind" (17). Hierdie bewoording herinner aan Ena Jansen (25) se kritiek op die diskoers waarin huiswerkers as "soos

familie" beskryf word—soos Jansen noem, spreek die "woordjie 'soos' [...] boekdele."

Die worsteling met die besluit om 'n "eie" kind te hê in 'n wêreld wat as onherbergzaam ervaar word, en waarin daar reeds 'n oorvloed behoeftige mense is wat hulp nodig het, is nie nuut nie, en in die konteks van die Afrikaanse literatuur kan daar verwys word na Ingrid Winterbach se novelle *Klaaglied vir Koos* (1984, gepubliseer onder die skrywersnaam Lettie Viljoen). Dié novelle gaan oor die wroeging van 'n verteller wat as enkelmoeder probeer om haar kind groot te maak in die oorweldigende apokaliptiese atmosfeer van Suid-Afrika in die 1980s, terwyl sy gereeld genader word deur hawelose mense en ander uigelewerdes wat aanspraak maak op haar versorging. Die doelbewustheid waarmee 'n homoseksuele egpaar hierdie keuse moet aanpak (en die etiese kwessies waarmee hulle moet worstel in 'n wêreld op die rand van ekologiese apokalips) is wel relatief nuut, en word ook verken in die Vlaamse skrywer Saskia de Coster se roman *Nachtouders* (2019)—'n outobiografiese roman oor lesbiese moederskap wat op soortgelyke wyse as *Dol heuning* soms surrealistiese dimensies aanneem om al die vrese en onsekerhede wat met ouerskap gepaard gaan, uit te beeld. In die verhaal "Warm kosmos" in *Dol heuning* herinner die beskrywing van die vorm wat die karakter se doodgebore kind in 'n droom aanneem, van 'n "gefrommelde swart oorblyfsel van iets soos 'n sambreel. Of 'n dooie kraai. Of 'n pterodaktiel reguit uit die hel. Vere of seil, staalpenne gebreek soos 'n feniksskelet" (165) byvoorbeeld aan die nagmerrieagtige beelde in Amerikaanse regisseur David Lynch se film oor die vrese vir ouerskap, *Eraserhead* (1977).

Benewens vir die feit dat die gay egpaar in "Fawzi al-Junaidi" deur baie spesifieke sielkundige en wetenskaplike prosesse moes gaan om ouers te word, gaan die verhaal ook oor die spesifieke komplikasies van queer ouerskap deurdat die etiese aanspraak wat aan hulle gemaak word deur 'n persoon van buite hulle kerngesin, dié is van 'n gay man, uitgelewer aan die homofobie in sy spesifieke gemeenskap. Binne die queerstudies bestaan daar die konsep van "queer kinship"—die alternatiewe bande wat queer mense smee om die kerngesin, waaruit hulle dikwels verban is, te vervang en te omvorm (sien Weston). Frans se wroeging oor die (queer) kind wat hy opgegee het en aan die wêreld oorgelaat het ter wille van Sebastian kan miskien verstaan word as konflik tussen "queer kinship" en die tipe voorstedelike LGBTQ+-ouerskap wat gemodelleer is op heteroseksuele familieverhoudinge.

Dieselfde dinamika kom voor in "Die dal van doodskaduwee". Alhoewel Laura, die protagonis, 'n

heteroseksuele enkelmoeder is, voel sy haarself ook verskeur tussen haar toewyding tot haar kind en tot Xavier/Juliette, 'n gender-ambivalente jong persoon wat klaarblyklik geen ware tuiste of familie in Johannesburg het nie. In die aanvang van “Daar is mans”, wat in Londen afspeel, vind ons uit dat die hoofkarakter, Jakob, se vrou hom onlangs verlaat het, onder meer oor sy “afsydigheid” (168) teenoor sy eie kinders. Nietemin voel Jakob later in die verhaal 'n toegeneentheid teenoor Cian, 'n jong man wat deur sy ouers verjaag is as gevolg van sy homoseksualiteit. In die meeste verhale in die bundel is daar dus hierdie tipe verkenning van die grens tussen voorstedelike heteronormatieweiteit (en wat die eise daarvan aan 'n verhouding kan doen) en die alternatiewe familiestrukture wat buite dit kan bestaan.

Daar is veral twee verhale wat nie by hierdie temas aansluit nie: “Wonderwerk”, en “Landskap met figure” (laasgenoemde bestaan uit drie onderafdelings: “Berg”, “Vallei” en “Woestyn”). Hierdie verhale kan beskryf word as goties, in hulle uitbeelding van buitestaanders wat reis na vreemde plekke en daar ongewone en gruwelike belewenisse ervaar.

In al die verhale in die bundel, beide hierdie gotiese verhale en dié wat gaan oor ouerskap en familie, is daar 'n klem op die sensoriese en die onverwagte. Die maniere waarop die verhale die leser intrek, verruk en ontstel, beteken dat dit opleef tot die belofte van die bundel se treffende titel en ongewoon mooi voorblad.

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And Wrote My Story Anyway: Black South African Women's Novels as Feminism.

Barbara Boswell.

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ISBN: 978-1-77614-618-5

The driving question behind Barbara Boswell's remarkable book is: what can we learn from Black women's writing about the work of theorisation and praxis towards a just social order? Boswell reads Black South African women's writing as artistic and political projects that pose provocative questions about freedom and the imagining of alternative worlds, by theorising the nation and Black women's place in it. This matters all the more when we remember that in addition to exploiting their re/productive labour, South Africa's colonial-apartheid machinery also excluded women from cultural production. By examining the work of ten Black women writers—Miriam Tlali, Lauretta Ngcobo, Sindiwe Magona, Zoë Wicomb, Agnes Sam, Farida Karodia, Zukiswa Wanner, Yvette Christiansë, Rayda Jacobs and Kagiso Lesego Molepe—Boswell spotlights these writers' “interrogati[on of] the taken-for-granted constitution of the nation-space” at particular historical junctures (3).

Theoretically, Carole Boyce-Davies's (36) notion of Black women's migratory subjectivity—in reference to their constant physical and psychological boundary crossing—is foundational to Boswell's mapping of these women writers' imaginative breaching of perimeters upheld by the collusion between racial capitalism and patriarchy, to limit women's physical and intellectual possibilities. Here then, Boswell reads fiction as a site of theory-making by subjects ordinarily locked out of mainstream platforms of knowledge production.

The book borrows its wonderfully defiant title from award-winning poet, storyteller and playwright Gcina Mhlophe's short story “The Toilet,” which explores Black female creativity and the subversion of apartheid attempts to limit women's access to the physical and psychic space necessary for imaginative world-making. Mhlophe's mapping out of “a psychic space for creative imagining and dreaming” (50) through her work; coupled with Bessie Head's courageous writing that “blazed a trail into the future” (xviii), renders their work foundational for subsequent generations of writers explored in this book. Boswell argues that, like Head and Mhlophe, these women's acts of refusal at different points in South African history—through their writing, disruption of accepted narrative frames, contestations of regimes of truth, retrieval of suppressed histories, and above all, seizure

of authorial authority—models more capacious frames of freedom; while crafting powerful theoretical toolkits for the pursuit of such freedoms.

And Wrote My Story Anyway can be understood as weaving together three strands of concerns: the spectres of unfreedom that stalk South African registers of belonging at different historical junctures; the promise of artistic experimentation in reconfiguring these histories; and the role of narrative in crafting theoretical tools that lend productive insights into social realities, while countering epistemic injustice. These three strands form dazzling patterns across the book, as Boswell offers fine-toothed explorations of different generations of Black women's writing. In chapter one, she pairs Miriam Tlali's *Muriel at Metropolitan* (1975) with Lauretta Ncgobo's *And they Didn't Die* (1990) as rejections of apartheid's 'separate but equal' logics by emphasising Black women's dispossession; while defying state attempts to block their creative agency through censorship, banning, imprisonment and harassment (61). Here, Katherine McKittrick's and Clyde Woods's work on oppositional Black geographies provides a generative framework for exploring Black responses to geographies of exclusion.

Chapter two turns to Farida Karodia's and Agnes Sam's commentary on South African Indian girlhood in *Daughters of the Twilight* (1986) and "Jesus is Indian" (1989) respectively, building on a growing corpus of scholarship on girlhood as a conventionally neglected segment of gendered life cycles, despite its generative capacity as a vantage point from which to examine the development of female subjectivities in landscapes of multiple discursive perimeters. Karodia's and Sam's work is key to understanding the processes of gendering of Indian women subjects at the intersection of colonial, apartheid and patriarchal power structures. Indentured labour, which replaced slavery, was subsequently replaced by migrant labour, as Agnes Sam notes. This observation underscores the bond that ties together the different categories of Black South African subjectivities produced at the crucible of what Cedric Robinson (3) has termed 'racial capitalism'.

Turning to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission as a nation-building project, chapter four reads Sindiwe Magona's *Mother to Mother* (1998) and Zoë Wicomb's *David's Story* (2000)—both set between 1990 and the 1994 elections—by asking: "how did the practices of, and the discourses generated by, the TRC as a nation-building project situate women in this new nation?" (115). Boswell demonstrates how the two novels exemplify a resistant Black feminist critique of the emerging nationalism of democratic South

Africa that "threatened to deny women unqualified citizenship rights by refusing to acknowledge the full range of abuses black women experienced under apartheid" (116). The chapter builds on extensive critiques of the TRC processes' privileging of heroic male narratives of abuse and resistance, reducing women to witnesses of men's suffering. Importantly, women's experiences of sexual violence did not feature in the TRC's definitions of human rights abuses; casting a heavy shroud of silence over women's sexual abuse. Boswell demonstrates how Wicomb's *David's Story* carves out space for the acknowledgement of women MK combatants' experiences of rape and sexual violence by male combatants; effectively fleshing out the highly abbreviated, one-sentence acknowledgement of women's abuses in exile in the TRC report. For its part, Magona's novel counters the production of nationalism centred on the heroic male revolutionary by reconfiguring motherhood to demonstrate how these constructions of nationalism in the new South Africa are built on the silenced wounds borne by Black women's bodies and psyches.

Chapter five pivots on Ashraf Rushdy's theorisation of the neo-slave narrative in the US context to examine Yvette Christiansé's *Unconfessed* (2006) and Rayda Jacobs' *The Slave Book* (1998) as imaginative renderings of histories of slavery in the Cape from Black women's subjectivity, symbolically restoring these figures in South African imaginaries. The two novels confront historiographic silences and denials of "the prominence of slavery as an economic and cultural force that has shaped the present" in South Africa (152). Set in the period between the outlawing of the British oceanic slave trade in 1808 and the enactment of full emancipation in the Cape in 1838, both novels retrieve enslaved people's subjectivities while placing the spotlight on the slavocratic economy's dependence on the extraction and exploitation of Black women's reproductive labour (147). These novels demonstrate the normalisation of rape and sexual violence in slavocratic South African society; a form of violence that persists to date in contemporary South African violence against women.

These toxic masculinities form the focus of chapter six, which turns to Zukiswa Wanner's *Men of the South* (2010) and Kagiso Molope's *This Book Betrays my Brother* (2012) as provocative critiques of the incomplete South African revolution, despite the widely celebrated constitution which enshrines gender equality and LGBTIQ rights. Wanner and Molope's novels grapple with what Pumla Dineo Gqola (64) has termed 'spectacular masculinities' in South Africa,

while pointing to alternate masculinities. In the closing chapter, Boswell establishes that Black South African women's writing deploys fictional imagination to theorise Black women's lives while offering a method for Black feminist critique. Across these women writers' work are repeated motifs of the destruction of families at the altar of capitalist extraction, as well as the abjection of Black female bodies subjected to sexual violence by white and Black men alike across a temporal canvas that covers a century. Effectively, freedom emerges as a repeatedly postponed aspiration across South African history, especially for women, whose lives are haunted by the spectre of sexual and femicidal violence at each historical turn, despite provisional triumphs over oppression. But these women, and by extension, Boswell, reject cynical surrender to hopelessness. Instead, Boswell develops the concept of creative revisioning, in reference to these women writers' deployment of creative agency to analyse historically-specific gendered experiences while also imagining alternative forms of consciousness and counternarratives that renegotiate the boundaries of the possible. In the end, these writers model an intersectional feminist ethic that is attentive to multiple levers of oppression, while retaining a deep conviction that alternative worlds marked by complete justice and freedom are possible. *And Wrote My Story Anyway* is a remarkable addition to not only feminist literary scholarship, but to literary studies at large; beyond South African letters.

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Botswana Women Write.

Maitseo M. M. Bolaane, Mary S. Lederer, Leloba S. Molema and Connie Rapoo (eds.).

Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2019. 541 pp.

ISBN 978 1 86914 4272.

Botswana Women Write is the first anthology of women's writings from Botswana, with contributions from over sixty Botswana women in varying capacities. The anthology accommodates a range of narratives and representations. Through a collection of short stories, poems, novel extracts, traditional songs and poetry, alongside a selection of letters, memoirs, court statements, journalistic works, interviews and speeches; the compilation is thus a fairly inclusive representation of various facets of Tswana life as seen through the eyes of women who are either native Botswana or resided in the country for a time. *Botswana Women Write* subsequently serves to give context to and provide elaboration on a national historical background with limited archival evidence, especially within the country itself or within the institutional and digital realms.

Botswana Women Write is edited by Maitseo M. M. Bolaane, Mary S. Lederer, Leloba S. Molema and Connie Rapoo—all well-established, nationally and internationally acclaimed academics in their respective fields. With writing from prominent figures such as Bessie Head, Unity Dow, Wame Molefhe, Tjawangwa Dema, B. K. Knight, Lilian Ngwenya Khupe, Mabel Kebotsamang and a foreword by Athaliah Molokomme—this anthology is notable, and spectacularly so, for a nation that has yet to propagate an imperishable leftist, radical, or overtly pro-black feminist movement: "Over the years there has been a substantial movement of women activists into and out of government, and yet today women activists consider the government to be less receptive and less responsive than ever" (Bauer 33). The fact that the first comprehensive anthology to be produced by Botswana Women is published outside of the country, in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, over fifty years after the country accomplished independence, could be seen as reflective of larger cultural and institutional issues that result in a failure to preserve a matrilineal credo which at its crux, edifies Botswana's cultural identity.

Embracing documents and narratives that, in their content and reference, span from as early as 1925 to as late as its year of publication—2019—the anthology, in this way, doubly serves as a historical document for a country whose ephemeral, oral culture

is often to the detriment of its written archive. To archive in this apparent and intentional way is not only to acknowledge the harm of a colonial and male-centered legacy, through both act and omission, but is also to purposefully create circumstances that allow for remedy and resolution through re-narration and a repositioning of the historical vantage point. This is crucial for Botswana whose traditionally patriarchally inclined culture has created an environment that systematically quiets and erases women's voices, narratives and experiences.

The incorporation of both fictional and non-fictional works effectuates, in a telling of a generalised narrative, a sensitive subjectivity which one could argue is necessary to comprehensively illustrate the nuances of such a particular positionality. Considering that a vast majority of readily available writing and research on and of Botswana women has been largely in relation to gender-based violence and the still prevalent HI-Virus, this anthology challenges these quantitative analyses by rather making prominent the subtleties behind and beyond measurable data. To mention this is not to discount the importance of that kind of research. Rather, it is to use this juncture to mention that there are more holistic ways of interpreting the lived experiences and experiential spaces that Botswana women inhabit. The inclusion of legal reform documents is a testament to the democratic and social advancements afforded to the country solely through the efforts of the early women's movement—unambiguously through the work of non-profit and non-governmental entities such as Emang Basadi which can be said to have established what we now understand to be the quotidian of gender-equity pedagogy and proselytisation in the context of Botswana.

On the 11th of June 2019, Botswana's high court declared section 164 of its penal code that criminalised homosexual acts unconstitutional and through this change in legislature, various concerns related to marginalised gender identities were brought to the forefront. This can be seen as a highly publicised first step, nationally, towards an acknowledgement of the broad spectrum upon which 'Botswana Women' lie. It is integral to take note of this to acknowledge the strides the country has taken as far as gender reform and transformation which is not overtly evident with regards to this anthology and its titling. It, however, does not dismiss the discrete and distinct experiences of cis-gendered Botswana women and remains invaluable in that regard. The inclusion of more expressive, sublime pieces of writing in the style of short stories, extracts

from novels, traditional and neoteric poems provides a hearty exemplification of the connotations of *bosadi* (womanhood) as experienced and inured by Botswana women. Significantly in this regard, the chapters of the anthology explore the motions and *parti pris* of female education in a 'new nation', love, marriage, child-bearing, widowhood and the metaphysical, as well as the tension between colonial and customary laws and the effect of said experiences on the current reappraisal of womanhood. Worthwhile to mention is the (in)accessibility of the work. Noted by Gretchen Bauer in *Update on the Women's movement: Have the Women stopped talking?* (2011) as one of the primary reasons for the inability of the movement to remain within reach of the majority, was its failure "to broaden its geographic base beyond the capital city and its socioeconomic base beyond educated, professional women" (Bauer 31). So while this anthology is a necessary piece of literature, it does, in way of language, content and ease of access, speak more to the 'educated and professional'.

"The Women's Manifesto: A Summary of Botswana Women's Issues and Demands (1996)" is aptly placed as a pre-conclusion to the book. The manifesto's introduction proclaims women to be a "very important human resource" (519). To expand on this point as one of acute significance; Botswana operates, on a macro-level, as a patriarchal society. Yet, at micro-levels, in terms of influence in decision making at household and societal level—Botswana women epitomise the roles of cultural keepers or curators. While men are seen to control and direct the flow of power—and though their influence in this regard is considerable—their exercise of power cannot be said to be as compelling from an ethnographic standpoint.

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Malibongwe.

Sono Molefe (ed.).

Durban: Uhlanga Press, 2020. 192 pp.

ISBN: 978-0-620-86912-6.

On 9 August 2020 *Malibongwe* was launched in South Africa for the first time. This was an historic occasion for two reasons: the launch was virtual because of the lockdown regulations which made gathering in person impossible and this was the first time that this transnational anthology produced by freedom fighters in exile was launched to a South African audience since it was originally published in 1980 in Sweden.

This multivocal edition of the anthology includes the original preface written by Lindiwe Mabuza (Sono Molefe), a new preface by Uhuru Phalafala, an introduction by Makhosazana Xaba and the original poems. Some of the poems are written by women who now find themselves in political positions in post-apartheid South Africa (such as Baleka Mbete and Lindiwe Mabuza), some have since passed away and others no longer write and have disappeared from the cultural and political imagination. The lives of the freedom fighters whose poetry is featured in this anthology beg the question: who is a poet? Makhosazana Xaba (13) refers to the women featured in the anthology as comrades-cum-poets. The idea that women in MK camps—freedom fighters training for an armed struggle—in exile would have been aspiring writers and poets has not featured in the country's understanding of their lives.

In her preface, Phalafala highlights the significance of this anthology by mapping out its transnational life and the resonance it had globally as it was translated into a myriad of European languages. This is the irony of the collection: it was able to have international reach and yet it has taken 26 years since the political shift from apartheid to democracy for the book to be published in South Africa. While it is fitting to celebrate this collection's new season in South Africa, it is also important to hold the celebration together with questions of erasure and why it has taken so long for this anthology to become part of the South African literary landscape. Phalafala's experience teaching Black Consciousness poetry by men for almost seven years left her uneasy and she was "nagged by the silence and absence of women in that unfolding radical moment" (8). This is the nature of erasure in South Africa's academy: an overwhelming presence of writing by men even while the question 'where are the women' has been consistently posed in order to challenge the erasure of women. This anthology is the answer to

that nagging feeling and the challenge to the erasure of women's writing.

The original foreword written by Sono Molefe (Lindiwe Mabuza) in 1982 begins, "Suddenly there are women poets from South Africa." These words seem to be in conversation with the challenges women had in other literary communities. In 1989 Boitumelo Mofokeng had written a review essay in response to *Staffrider's* commemorative edition of its ten-year existence. In her essay she posed the question "where are the women?" (41), because the edition had left out the work and the names of most of the women who had contributed to *Staffrider* in the ten years of its existence. Both Mofokeng and Molefe echo the concern about the ways in which women's writing can fall through the cracks of history making. And, seemingly, Phalafala is doing the same by resuscitating this anthology in 2020.

Even while the tradition of black women's published poetry stretches as far back as the 1920s with the poetry of Nontsizi Mqgqwetho (and further back if oral poetry by women could be traced) there is still a need for every publication of women's writing to be a historical event because of the ever-present danger of erasure. For Xaba, this anthology is particularly important for younger writers and researchers who fall into the traps of recency. This anthology is especially important in this regard because it "excavates the names of poets whose wrinkled hands contemporary Black women poets need to know about and then acknowledge whichever way they see fit." (12) These poems are not only part of the feminist intellectual history and archive but are also part of the imaginative worlds of women who dreamt about the future we now experience.

The anthology includes incisive protest poetry, which is at times sharp and at times tender and heart-breaking. There are six sections in the anthology: "Africa shall be free", "Birth and genocide", "Spirit of Soweto: the ghetto, massacres, resolve", "Women in struggle", "Our men who fought and died and fight" and "Phases of struggle: resolution, exile, perspective, love, call to justice and arms". Each of the poems find resonance with questions about how to make freedom meaningful; questions that continue to plague South Africa. The poems point to the unfinished work of the liberation movement because the past refuses to leave us alone. Lindiwe Mabuza's "Super-women (Grown by apartheid)" invokes the women who "sing the amen of vigilance" (96). This "amen" reverberates into the present and the future. Even while the past refuses to be forgotten, the future is still a possibility, as Ilva MacKay points to in her poem "Mayibuye": "the sons

and daughters of Africa remained hopeful / one day / some day / our mother will be returned to us” (84).

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Transcendent Kingdom.

Yaa Gyasi.

New York: Knopf, 2020. 416 pp.

ISBN 978-0593215333.

Transcendent Kingdom is unlike Gyasi’s earlier novel, *Homegoing* (2016). It transcends the slavery narrative to depict the present day consequences of slavery and the colonial encounter, migration and the search for the transcendent Other/order. More importantly, it is a shockingly empathetic uncovering of drug addiction and depression, their various facets, the sufferers’ pain as well the suffering of the victims’ loved ones. Yet again, Gyasi shows us her mastery of the tackling of big societal issues. Borrowing from the scientific parlance of Gifty, the protagonist of *Transcendent Kingdom*, depression can be described as occurring “where there is too much restraint in seeking pleasure unlike addiction where there is not enough” (36). It is around the depiction of these issues that other themes are woven into the text. Narrated through Gifty’s eyes, it tells in a back-and-forth manner, the story of her family, born and raised in the southern American state of Alabama. She and her family suffer the consequences of the racially stratified history of the United States as they face racism daily in their social and work lives. This results ultimately in their clinical issues of addiction and depression as well as abandonment and family disintegration: “[...] my mother didn’t know any better. She thought the God of America must be the same as the God of Ghana, that the Jehovah of the white church could not possibly be different than the one of the black church [...]. [T]hat day when she first walked into the sanctuary, she began to lose her children” (145, 146).

Having immigrated to America from Ghana with her little son and eventually her husband, Gifty’s mother is in search of a better life so she can offer “her son the world” (209). The only black family in an all-white southern church, Gifty, her mother, father and brother (Nana), find a place where her mother can hold on to something bigger than herself. In a similar manner Nana, frequently the only black boy on his soccer or basketball team where he faces racial slurs, finds solace in being the best player on the court. The racism is what in due course leads to Gifty’s father, the Chin Chin man’s return to Ghana. This is because in America, he can never be fully expressive without provoking fear and paranoia in the white individuals who he comes across, eliminating his chances of a holding a good job and reducing him to a subordinate role in his family.

The Chin Chin man’s return to Ghana signifies the beginning of the end of the family’s unravelling. Alone and the sole caregiver of her children, Gifty’s mother, The Black Mamba, succumbs to depression when her son, the light of her life and reason for moving to America, overdoses on heroin and dies at a very young age in the parking lot of a Starbucks. Nana’s condition, like The Black Mamba’s depression, is not dealt with head on. The reasons for this are the denial, shame and ignorance surrounding these issues, as well as the failure of basic human compassion and fellowship in the all-white church and the fair-weather Ghanaian circle which Nana’s family associates with.

Through Gifty’s telling of the bewildered pain of her young age and the shame and guilt of her adulthood, the reader comes to care deeply about her family and wish for their redemption. This is not to be, as the slow but steady dismantling of the family continues, leaving her to bear the brunt and cope in any way she knows how. She chooses science as her anchor which is why *Transcendent Kingdom* is also a bildungsroman detailing Gifty’s search for knowledge of the nature of the world, existence and life in a metaphysical manner and then, later, through a scientific, methodical approach.

The novel is loaded with scientific ideas and facts, giving readers insight into the work of neuroscientists as it intertwines with the life of Gifty’s family. Gifty strives to answer questions which have plagued her childhood and shaped her adulthood—“I don’t know why Jesus would raise Lazarus from the dead but I also don’t know why some mice stop pressing the lever and other mice don’t” (169). This seems to be the transcendent equivalent of what ultimately becomes her doctoral research questions—“Can an animal restrain itself from pursuing a reward, especially

when there is risk involved? [...] How does an animal restrain itself from pursuing a reward, especially when there is risk involved?" (138, 140). These questions not only tell of her desire to cure what ails her family but also to reconcile science with her faith in something transcendent which she does not want to see as God: "the more I do this work the more I believe in a kind of holiness in our connection to everything on Earth. Holy is the mouse. Holy is the grain the mouse eats. Holy is the seed. Holy are we." Ultimately, Gyasi's message is that beyond the social issues in society is the interconnectedness of all things.

At the end of the story, the reader is left bereft, hungry for reassurance that Gifty's family survives the onslaught of the clinical conditions overshadowing their lives. However, we have to make do with a sense of loss and dissatisfaction having discovered that Gifty is now the only surviving member of her family in America. This loss is somehow alleviated by the fact that Gifty is able to link her everyday existence with the transcendent by sitting daily in an empty church and by the fact that she marries Han, who understands and accepts her more than her mother ever did. Thus the novel's ending, albeit somewhat rushed, is wholesome and realistic, making *Transcendent Kingdom's* narrative a coalescing of the physical and emotional legacies of the beginning of the African or black presence in America.

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Uit die kroes.

Lynthia Julius.

Kaapstad: Kwela Boeke 2020. 112 pp.

ISBN: 978-0-7957-0953-1.

Lynthia Julius se debuutdigbundel *Uit die kroes*, open met 'n aanhaling uit Karel Schoeman se *Kinders van die Kompanjie* (2006): "n Jong verwesterse Khoi-vrou met die naam Sara wat lank reeds onder die blankes geleef het, [is] opgehang gevind aan die dak van 'n skaapstal." Deur hierdie aanhaling posisioneer Julius haarself vanuit die staanspoor, en maak sy dit duidelik aan presies watter kant van die geskiedenis sy staan. Sy stel die slawe, Sara, Frederik die Hottentot, Halfnaatjie, Amria van Bengale aan ons voor, nog voor sy haarself voorstel. Julius se gedig, "Sara" herinner aan Diana Ferrus se

Sara Baartman-verse uit *Ons komvandaan* (2006) maar Julius se Sara is nie net uit die verlede nie, sy bestaan nou ook, en die tragedie wat afspeel in die vers is broos en astrant. Julius stel ons voor aan die voorouers, sy neem hulle stories terug uit die geskiedenisboeke en navorsingsopstelle van wit akademici en herplant hulle binne haar eie lewe:

haar gees die nag in gesoen
 my liggaam galg toe gevat
 sodat die stilte kon kom
 sodat ek die stilte kon word (7)

Deur Julius se woorde word Sara 'n eie vrou, nie net nog 'n tragiese slavin wie se noodlot voorafbepaal was nie. Hierdie tipe verteller is sterk teenwoordig in Julius se werk. In 'n Facebook Live-onderhoud (2020) beskryf Julius haarself as 'n bevryde vrou: "Ek behoort nie aan my pa of ma nie, ek behoort heeltemal aan myself." 'n Getrouheid aan haarself en die vasbeslotenheid van *agency* is 'n sterk kenmerk van Julius se narratief in *Uit die kroes*. *Uit die kroes* verken 'n wye reeks temas, wat strek van *colourism*, *texturism*, *agency*, vrouheid, verlies en familie. Al hierdie temas stik Julius bymekaar soos 'n groot lappieskombers, met haar unieke idiolek, haar Nama-herkoms en haar identiteit as 'n jong swart vrou in die wêreld.

Zora Neale Hurston (29), skryf in haar outobiografie *Dust Tracks on a Road* (2006), "If it was so honorable and glorious to be black, why was it the yellow-skinned people among us had so much prestige?". In haar gedig "Kroes" (82) omskryf Julius dié gedagte:

Mamma sê ek moet my kop nasien
 (reguit maak; gladder, dunner, witter maak)
 wie nog kroes is is aspris hoor ek
 daar's genoeg Dark and Lovely en Sunsilks
 om die geskiedenis uit jou hare te vee
 om jou te laat vergeet watter voorouers
 by die wortels van jou hare deursingdans

Professor in Sosiologie, Meghan Burke (19), aangehaal in *Color Matters: Skin Tone Bias and the Myth of a Postracial America* (2013) sê, "Colorism is the allocation of privilege and disadvantage according to the lightness or darkness of one's skin". Hierdie tema wat Julius aanraak het baie in gemeen met die swart Amerikaanse narratiewe van skrywers soos Toni Morrison en Zora Neale Hurston. Hierdie skrywers vang al vir jare dié kompleksiteit vas in Amerikaanse letterkunde. Dit is ook 'n tema wat, soos die nagevolge van slawerny, dwarsdeur die hele diaspora reis, soos 'n slaafskip vol gemartelde slawe. Wat dit anders maak in die konteks van *Uit die kroes* is dat bruin Suid-Afrikaners dalk selfs 'n meer komplekse

verhouding het met *colourism* en *texturism* as gevolg van die geskiedenis en die narratief rondom bruin herkoms. Vir dekades word bruin kultuur en herkoms in die geskiedenisboeke beperk tot stories oor Jan van Riebeeck, die Strandlopers, slawe uit Indonesië en Java of die onderdrukking van die inwoners van Distrik Ses. Julius skryf oor hierdie geskiedenis vanuit 'n ander perspektief,

Jy is nie soos jou ma nie;
jy rook nie rooi Pall Mall voor die kas
met die microwave op nie
jy glo nie in kerk of gaan bad voor jy slaap nie
jy relax nie jou kop nie
jy aanbid nie jou pa nie
jy offer nie op en loop met eeltvoete rond nie

Jy is nie soos jou ma nie;
jy rook Marlboro op die stoep
jy glo, maar jy weet nog nie in wat nie
dra jou kroes hare so laat mense kan sien
glad alleen beteken nie mooi nie (44)

Om bruin te wees en 'n ligte vel te hê is nie genoeg vir jou om in die samelewing en binne jou eie gemeenskap voordeel te trek nie. As jy lig van kleur is met meer inheemse Khoi of swart gelaatstrekke is jy steeds te ver van die Westerse skoonheidsideaal. Die maatstaaf vir skoonheid is nie net wit Europese gelaatstrekke nie, maar ook 'ekstotiese' Asiatiese gelaatstrekke. 'Mooi' is om te lyk soos die Europeër, die Indiër, die Maleier, die Javanese in die bloedlyn. Dit is hoekom selfs die kleinste indikasie van self-aanvaarding en verwerping van hierdie tipe mikro-onderdrukking binne die gemeenskap en teenstand teen die norme en standaarde van die samelewing rewolusionêr is. Die obsessie met wat mooi is, is nie net oppervlakkig nie, hierdie tipe merkers word op mense geplaas van baie jongs af.

Na slawerny het dit geëvoleer tot 'n diep sielkundige toestand wat regdeur die diaspora voorkom en ook prevalant is in lande soos Indië, Sjina en in die Wes-Indiese eilande. Julius se verse in *Uit die kroes* is meer as net terugskryf aan die wat voor haar gekom het, sy laat haarself weerloos deur oor diep verliese te skryf met dieselfde deurdagtheid van haar meer tegniese verse. *Uit die kroes* begin in die verlede en breek die hede soos 'n brander teen 'n rots, sodat dit oral val en daar iets is vir almal om aan te raak. Die boek is opgedra aan Ryan wat ons as lesers deur die loop van die bundel ontmoet en verloor:

Dit was ou ses se down
Carl het hom neergesit
ek moes klop
Sisca het van haar Hansa gesluk
Mammie het kom sê man-man moet vir homself opskep

Sisca moes vir Cairo keer wat weer uit die jaart wou
hardloop
ek het Carl se glas om laat val

Die Jirre, die Jirre het vir ou blank gedown
soos afsak in die grond
ons het stil gaan raak
en Ryan, Ryan het sonner ophou geklop (56)

Uit die kroes is 'n sensitiewe debuut vol gedigte wat Julius se wêreld raam.

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Pienk ceramic-hondjies.

Ryan Pedro.

Kaapstad: Kwela, 2020. 72 pp.

ISBN 9780795709869.

Met die verskyning van sy digdebuut, *Chokers en survivors* (2013) het ek vir Nathan Trantraal in 'n onderhoud vir *BY* gevra hoe hy oor die *Groot verseboek* voel. Is dit nodig om kennis van die Afrikaanse kanon te hê om te kan dig in Afrikaans? Trantraal het geantwoord met 'n aanhaling van Dorothy Parker: "It is not a book to be tossed aside lightly. It should be thrown with great force" (Trantraal, aangehaal in Marais 97).

Die openingsgedig van Ryan Pedro se debuut, *Pienk ceramic-hondjies*, doen dít met berekende oorgawe. "Portret van 'n coloured laitie as 'n mixtape" is nie net 'n terloopse, implisiete middelvinger aan Opperman

en Brink se kanon en 'n literêre skop tussen die bene nie—dis ook 'n trefseker, taalgewelddadige inleiding in die tematiek en die konsep van 'n digbundel wat as 'n “mixtape” aangebied word:

maar dis alles in die stiltes
jou breathing tussen tracks,
selfs die lui gesleep van 'n hondeketting
oor die agterjaart as jy kan
want dis in die stiltes
wat hulle jou nooit gaan sien kom nie
daai paar seconds net voor

die beat drop
die bass alles in
sy poes in skop (13)

Die openingsgedig, met sy verwysing na die sentrale hondemetafoer in die bundel, is dus ook 'n aanduiding van ambisie en 'n agting vir vakmanskap, afwerking en sofistiek binne 'n ander konteks as die gebruikelike literêre norme vir deurdigte, vormvaste poësie. Nathan Trantraal, wat die (met 'n Goue Pendoring-bekroonde) omslag ontwerp het, beskryf *Pienk ceramic-hondjies* dan ook op die flapteks as 'n bundel “geskryf mettie craftsmanship vanne violin maker, ennie cool vanne underground hip hop artist”.

Diegene wat vrye praatverse nie met vakmanskap kan versoen en hip hop nie ernstig opneem nie, sal waarskynlik verskil, maar Pedro se debuut getuig inderdaad van fyn afwerking en stembeheer.

Pedro span hip hop-lirieke van, onder andere, Drake, Pharrell, Kendrick Lamar, Ja Rule en Tupac Shakur as die belangrikste en, op enkele uitsonderings na, enigste intertekste in en wys hoe 'n goeie “mixtape” 'n merkwaardige eenheidsbundel rondom temas van bruin identiteit, manlikheid, geweld en klas- en rassspanning kan vorm.

In 'n onderhoud met Mercy Kannemeyer wat op Klyntji.com verskyn het, gee Pedro te kenne dat die gedigte in die “Side A”-afdeling in Kakamas afspeel; “Side B” se verse aan die Weskus (Vredenburg/Saldanha)—die wêreld waarin die digter sy grootwordjare deurgebring het. Daar is ook 'n “Interludes en Leaks”-afdeling in die middel, en 'n “Bonus joint” ten slotte, met skerpsinnig meditasies oor die rolle wat die verbruikerskultuur, Jordan-tekkies en haarstyle as merkers vir identiteit en manlikheid speel. In die slotgedig, “By die barbershop”, word die spreker se heftig gemengde gevoelens oor sy pa, sy herkoms en die simboliese rol van hare en haarstyle seker verwoord.

Pedro sê teenoor Liné Loff in 'n onderhoud op LitNet: “Ek't op universiteit my eerste régte poem geskryf dieselfde dag toe ek Bukowski discover het. En na ek [Nathan Trantraal] se *Chokers en survivors* gelees het, het ek vir die eerste keer gedink ek kan 'n boek skryf wat vir iemand iewers iets gaan beteken.”

Daar is eggo's van beide hierdie digters in Pedro se werk, maar dis veral Trantraal se onsentimentele barskyk op liefde, wanfunksionele families en die Suid-Afrikaanse samelewing waarby hierdie verse aansluiting vind. Pedro is egter geen blote akoliet nie. Hy druk sy eie stempel af en dis veral sy spel met registers wat beïndruk.

Wat die invloedryke Amerikaanse kritikus James Wood (148) oor prosa in *How Fiction Works* skryf, geld ook vir Pedro se debuut: “One way to tell slick genre prose from really interesting writing is to look, in the former case, for the absence of different registers. [...] Rich and daring prose avails itself of harmony and dissonance by being able to move in and out of place.”

Pedro span registerwisseling vaardig in om sowel karakters te teken as atmosfeer te skep en klasseverskille aan te dui. Hy dig nie in Kaaps nie, maar lê fonetiese spelling en streekstaal bewus spesifieke karakters in die mond, byvoorbeeld Mister Williams in “By Mister Williams se huiswinkeltjie”, die pa in die aangrypende “Die dag toe Uncle Fanta vir homself opgestaan het” en “Ôs gaan hystoe”:

as my pa gesê het ôs
het ek altyd oor my skouer gekyk

as my pa gesê het gan
het my bene skielik ophou werk

as my pa gesê het hystoe
het ek nooit geweet van waar

hy praat nie (45).

Ook die gewelddadige familielid Alex kry bloedstollend via sy taalgebruik lewe in die verpletterende “Ons is nie meer mense wat sing nie”.

Pedro se bundel onderstreep Wallace Stevens se woorde oor poësie en die verbeelding as 'n vorm van psigiese selfverdediging: “It is a violence from within that protects us from a violence without. It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality” (aangehaal in Popova). Deur sy fyn deurdagte hantering van registerwisseling wys Pedro egter ook hoe kru taal en verskillende variëteite van Afrikaans net so hard soos poësie skop in en teen klas en die bitter werklikhede van strukturele ekonomiese geweld.

In die uitstaande “Ludacris se feature op Mary J. Blige se ‘grown woman’ as ’n tittle vir die poem en other ironies”, wat draai om die affair van ’n bruin jongman met ’n gesiene boer in die distrik se vrou, word die boer ten slotte in sy eie “suiwer” standaard-Afrikaans gekonfronteer met die skreiende ironieë van die grondkwessie en die vooraanstaande posisie wat hy in ’n vergiftigde samelewing beklee:

beste oom
dankie vir die groen wingerde tussen hier en Alheit
dankie vir vanjaar se groot oes
dankie vir die rugbytruie, toksakke, en die lemoene vir halftyd
dankie vir die werk wat oom skep in die gemeenskap
dankie vir die grawe, die pikke, die vurke in ons hande in ons grond
dankie vir die sterk seuns wat ons ma’s en pa’s
klokslag huis toe ry op sinkplaatpaaie die bloedrooi horison in
dankie vir die tralies agter op die hilux
dankie vir die eensame vrouens wat naai asof dit hulle laaste keer is
dankie vir alles wat oom vir Kakamas doen (35–6).

Die beste verse in die bundel, waaronder laasgenoemde, “Antie Lisbeth” en “Saterdag” tel, getuig van vlymskerp waarneming en treffende metafore wat in konkrete besonderhede geanker is. In die titelgedig is honde sowel vreesaanjaende simbole van apartheid se polisiegeweld as kitch kaggelkak tipies van baie huise wat in die skadu van die vorige regime gebou is.

Die hondemetafoer word ook treffend ontgin in “om vir jou wit tjommies te moet verduidelik hoekom daar ’n hond aan ’n ketting in die backyard vasgemaak staan op ’n manier wat hulle gaan verstaan.” In “portret van ’n coloured laitie en sy wit tjommies as cassius marcellus coolidge se *dogsplayingpoker*” is dié hondebeeld egter nie so geslaagd nie. Die vers maak binne ’n slim konstruksie ’n minder genuanseerde stelling oor kleur, terwyl dit by eersgenoemde voel of die beeld van die hond in die agterplaas uit die lewe geskeur is.

Ryan Pedro se merkwaardige debuut het ’n “bass wat skop / soos ’n blonde kind in die boot” van ’n “gedropte Honda Civic” (17) (“Die keer toe headphones alles beter gemaak het”). Dis ’n roerende grootwoordverhaal wat kil en geregverdigde taalgeweld kombineer met deernis en fyn elegieë vir uitgelewerde mense in ongenaakbare plekke. *Pienk ceramic-hondjies* is ’n bundel wat die leefwêreld en trefwydte van Afrikaanse poësie verbruim.

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Everything is a Deathly Flower.

Maneo Mohale.

Cape Town: uHlanga, 2009. 65 pp.

ISBN: 978-0-06398108-2-9.

Loosely set against the backdrop of Benoni, Maneo Mohale’s debut poetry collection *Everything is a Deathly Flower* boldly tackles the poet’s experience and journey of healing after being sexually assaulted, often using time and language as a tool. It is a piece of work where the pages are dotted with emotional extremes reminiscent of the process of healing, with poems revealing instances of joy and love and then vulnerability, trauma, and anger at the turn of a page. Described in a blurb as “rooted in a contemporary southern African tradition but springing forth in queer and radical new direction”, this well-rounded collection consisting of 31 poems equally explores the topics of race, colonialism, religion, sexuality, and desire.

The first poem in the collection is titled “Letsatsi” and depicts the poet’s life when they were younger and shows off their curiosity regarding words and their meanings, the way they are taught about faith through their mother’s Christian teachings, and them meeting “a man named cecil john” (10). Religion’s warning against their queerness—“You do not know yet, what you are—have not yet had leviticus angled at you” (10)—foreshadows the violence that is yet to erupt from Christianity and the poet’s meeting of “cecil john”.

Initially the collection represents the events of the poet-speaker's life chronologically, and time as linear and straightforward. In these early poems, readers are offered snippets of their life—growing up, moving continents, struggling with their mother tongue, Sesotho, and exploring their faith and sexuality. That is, until the poem “Morapa-Šitšane (*for survivors*)”, dedicated to the survivors, which gently reminds them to breathe, “take a second, now. / breathe” (23).

This is a much-needed cautioning, also to the autobiographical speaker of the collection, as Mohale thereafter painfully recounts their story in the titular poem. “Everything is a Deathly Flower” takes the form of a glosa (a poetic form of Spanish origin) and references the first four lines of Saeed Jones’s “Closet of Red” found in his debut anthology, *Prelude to Bruise* (2014). One of the many examples of the abundance of epigraphs and intertextuality in the collection, this serves as an acknowledgment to those poets, both black and queer, who came before Mohale and paved the way. Mohale reckons with the memory of their sexual assault as “the memory returns to me as a dream” (24), and their inability to use their words—“you read my silence as Permission.” (24). With the lines “I am up to my ankles in petals, the hanged gowns close in ensnaring you and suddenly I am safe” (25, emphasis in original) they continue, while revealing their rage at their violation, expressing their need to feel safe and showcasing their ability to heal while acknowledging all the other survivors with the emotional line “*there’re always more*” (25, emphasis in original). The abuse depicted in this poem marks the disruption in both the poet’s life and their poetry. Time becomes non-linear, language becomes inadequate and/or ineffective, the poems’ forms change and become more experimental, new ways of love and support are offered; a reflection of the idea that healing is not linear.

There is a series of poems, all printed in landscape, in which the poet uses imagery linked to photography, disrupting time, examining and capturing memory while making the reader turn the book 90 degrees in order to read the poems. In turning the book, the reader is forced to look at their words from a different perspective. In some ways it can be seen as the author forcing the reader to tag along and go through the labour of both healing and survival. For the most part, it seems as if Mohale goes through their ordeal alone until “Belief (Five Sunflowers)”, which is dedicated to their chosen family. The poem is fragmented into five memories—in which they memorialise the moments when they choose to tell their loved ones about the trauma that was enacted upon them in “Everything is a

Deathly Flower”. The poet-speaker’s chosen family not only share their support, “*I got you / I got you / I got you*” (39, emphasis in original), their immediate reaction is one that leaves no space for doubt, and the speaker confirms “you believe me” (39). The lines “I pull a pebble out my cheek and tell. you throw your own at me” (39) highlight how prevalent experiences of sexual assault are. In continuing with their move from the personal to the communal, the poet devotes a poem to Karabo Mokoena, who was murdered by her boyfriend in 2017, one of the many Gender-Based Violence (GBV) cases in South Africa. In the poem titled “Sandton Skye”, Mohale shows how even the safety afforded to many through privilege does not actually keep sexual assault at bay, reminding readers of how prevalent violence is, “Unknown to me / uBaba has been watching us both” (55), even in spaces of privilege.

Mohale ends their anthology defiantly with words ever so contested but self-evident: “I / ~~don’t care~~ / if you / believe me” (62). This is the perfect ending to their journey of healing. These words leave the reader with a reminder to always believe survivors of sexual assault.

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Fool’s Gold: Selected Modjaji Short Stories.

Arja Salafranca, ed.

Cape Town: Modjaji Books, 2019. 209 pp.

ISBN 9781928215844.

In the foreword of *Fool’s Gold*, the editor, Arja Salafranca writes that this short story collection “celebrates both the form of the short story and over a decade of publishing short stories” (7) by the South African independent women’s publishing house, Modjaji Books. The book achieves this intention by providing the reader with varied stories, writing styles and stunningly gripping themes. The collection boasts of a variety of creative writers who write compelling stories, some of which have won local and international awards. The editor lastly makes the remark that the form of the short story has the potential to “hold up a mirror to our lives and the place we live in” (11). The reader sees this in the ways the various stories reflect and capture every-day life through different narrative

strategies. The stories in this collection have the capacity to stay with the reader long after the initial reading has taken place.

Featuring seventeen stories that range from realist fiction to magic realism, *Fool's Gold* elicits a myriad of emotions from the reader. "Prayers", a story by Makhosazana Xaba which co-won the SALA Nadine Gordimer Short Story Award in 2014, evocatively comments on the horrific ramifications of AIDS on children who are orphaned by the disease. The story is narrated by Refilwe, a young, orphaned girl aged 13, who is taking care of her younger sister in the village of Bhekilanga in Limpopo. The story is narrated as a letter to an anonymous "you" at the request of Refilwe's teacher, Mistress Maluleke. Refilwe writes this letter as a way of seeking some financial relief and support. It is also a way of "consolidating all [her] prayers" (142) and to give a "full picture of [their precarious] lives" (143). Xaba points out the discrepancies of the current South African government in ensuring the health and safety of AIDS orphans by focusing on children and their experiences. The theme of child-headed households and the resilience of children is skilfully weaved into the narrative through Refilwe's naïve and honest observations of her society and environment. Refilwe engulfs the reader in the poverty her family faces by recounting her family's day-to-day routine as well as larger communal activities that they engage in. Refilwe's experiences awaken the reader to the prejudices of her community towards those living with HIV/AIDS and the blind eye that communities turn to this pertinent issue. As Refilwe reveals her predicament, as well as that of many others like her, it becomes clear that "[their] very own existence is parsimony" (133).

Meg Vandermerwe's "The Red Earth" is thematically linked to Xaba's "Prayers". It shifts the focus from the children orphaned by AIDS to the parents who die and leave their children behind. The narrator in "The Red Earth" is a mother on her hospital deathbed. As she recalls and remembers the past, observes the present and shares fears of the future, she laments that "soon soon, a country of orphans, soon soon" (33). Her situation is implicitly compared to that of orphaned children, as she too feels isolated and orphaned on the hospital bed where doctors speak and write about her and do not talk to her. She bemoans her isolation: "I am an orphan, understand. Apart from everything, everyone" (33).

In addition to being informative and entertaining, each story possesses a variety of rhythmic styles and beautiful imagery. Kubuitsele's "In the Spirit of

McPhineas Lata" is a delightful read that centers on the sexual expertise of the protagonist, McPhineas. The story begins with McPhineas' death. We are told how he has been an envy to the men, as well as a celebrated figure among the married women of Nokanyana village. In his lifetime he had made it his duty to sexually appease willing women in the village. Many called him "talented" while others argued that he "read books" (61) to acquire such prowess. Humorously, he dies "in the act of his more acrobatic performances" (61) leaving the concerned women grieving and spending their days lying on top of his grave. Similarly, in "Heaven (or something like it)" by Sarah Lotz, Adele spiritually returns to her old life and moves back into her flat where she watches TV 24/7. The tenants renting the flat after Adele's death are shocked to feel a "chill" in the flat indicating Adele's presence. None of the tenants stay long, until Carmen moves in. Surprisingly, Adele and Carmen enjoy similar shows and they become friends. They spend their free time watching fashion and reality shows. "[T]his was heaven after all" (105), for both women to find rare friendship somewhere between life and the afterlife.

Several stories allude to the (dis)continuities of human migration and movement. This theme has become popular in the South African literary landscape, especially with writers exploring the frequent outbreaks of xenophobic attacks. In "Stain like a Map", Jayne Bauling focuses on a couple's journey from Mozambique to South Africa. The story uses the metaphor of a mattress as a map or a trajectory that the couple's life has taken over space and time. The stains on the mattress are symbolic of the history of the couple. Not only is the mattress used for sleeping, but also for giving birth to their child and another child of a friend. They carry this mattress with them en route to South Africa by foot and through their displacements in South Africa. As the narrator observes, the stains which look like a map are "of those who had walked into South Africa" (56). In "Vivous Cycle", Reneilwe Malatji explores the issue of absent fathers. Although this is the overarching theme of the story, the concept of home in relation to migration is weaved intelligently into the story. At the start of the story we meet Adichie, a Nigerian academic working and living in South Africa. He outwardly condemns absent fathers by comparing the manifestations of this social phenomenon in Nigeria and South Africa. He tells us "most men here abandon their children. In Nigeria that never happens" (121). Furthermore, "a bird does better than most South African black men" (121). Through these comparisons, Adichie expresses the common duality of identity and

culture that is shared by most migrants; the experience of being neither nor there.

The stories in this book have heavy themes highlighting a variety of people's life experiences. The many voices of characters in these stories reflect the diversity of people's stories as well as the diversity of the short story form.

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Will, the Passenger Delaying Flight

Barbara Adair.

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"Oh fuck, I can't seem to write anything that is not a cliché," (86) exclaims Freddie, one of the characters in Barbara Adair's second novel, *End* (2007). In her latest, *Will, the Passenger Delaying Flight ...*, Adair pushes to the limits not only this preoccupation with predictably overdetermined categories of interpretation and identity, but also the questions of intertextuality and relationality that she began to explore in *End* as well as in her first novel, *In Tangier We Killed the Blue Parrot* (2004).

Volker is a German traveller waiting for his connecting flight to Namibia in Paris's Charles de Gaulle airport, and it is through him and his wanderings in the airport that Adair grounds the onslaught of ironically stereotypical observations about the various people he encounters. Claudine, the transgender flight attendant who had attended to Volker on the plane, for example, is described as "thirty, almost past the sell-by date for an air hostess, or is it flight attendant, but she can probably make it through the next few years, these days it is frowned upon to discriminate against the elderly" (10). Adair further writes that Lufthansa, the airline that Claudine works for, "although it is German and therefore has a suspect past, had put all prejudice and bigotry behind them. They now employ transsexuals, and, of course, Jews" (11). This sense of ambiguity—that is, whether Adair's questioning of political correctness, which for her appears to traffic in the same kind of default, predetermined discourse as

the cliché, verges into the questionable—pervades the entirety of *Will, the Passenger Delaying Flight...*

Other characters that Volker happens upon in the airport include Charles Grayson Smith Jr, a gay professor of economics at Harvard who "has been accused of plagiarism" (5) by a female student; Jim, who works in the airport curio shop and also likes to call himself Peter because of his resemblance to the well-known "American adventurer, hunter and photographer" (63), Peter Beard; Maria and Velda, two women who work as cleaners but also make artistic pornography in the storage room of the airport's bathrooms with Dick, the director who is "slim and always wears clothes that have a very conspicuous label on them" (109); Karl, a "terrorist, a terrorist clown, a terrorist dwarf, a terrorist with dwarfism" who turns out to have "no cause but his own" (79); and Klint du Toit, a paedophile on whose shaven scalp is visible "the outline of a pink tattooed swastika" (88) and who is sexually involved with his 14-year-old "son who is not his son" (88), George.

Throughout the somewhat plotless novel that is *Will, the Passenger Delaying Flight ...*, in which nothing and everything happens, Adair interweaves unattributed quotations, sometimes slightly tweaked, from other (white) writers—such as Oscar Wilde (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*), Samuel Beckett (on James Joyce), Albert Camus (*The Fall*), Ralph Waldo Emerson (the essay on self-reliance) and Italo Calvino (*If On a Winter's Night a Traveller*)—and even her own previous work (a self-published pamphlet ostensibly about a road trip to Namibia, *6h00 In Somewhere, and Many Hours Later Somewhere Else*). Adair makes this intertextuality clear right at the start: "All good writers borrow; all remarkable writers steal. Some of these words and lines are stolen from others" (1). This perhaps-contentious citation practice is something that Adair has engaged with since *In Tangier We Killed the Blue Parrot*, where she writes, in the opening acknowledgements, that "[r]eaders of this book will know these words or sentences or paragraphs or poetry. They will know who wrote them. They will know where the words come from. They will also know why they are placed where they are in my text".

The danger of this play—or stealing—in *Will, the Passenger Delaying Flight ...* is that the reader might not know and thus miss it, and the satire, altogether. Volker muses, for example, that "[b]lack people have much melatonin in their skin, hence their skin is black, dirty, messy, without light, dark and illegal, disastrous and dismal, this is why white people came from Europe and black people, horrible, malignant and grotesque, unhappy and

unlucky, from Africa” (94, emphasis in original). This is obviously eyebrow-raising if the reader is unaware that the italicised text is drawn from well-known South African artist Anton Kannemeyer’s “B is for Black”, a comic-strip style lithograph from *Alphabet of Democracy* that critiques colonial representations of racial difference. In Kannemeyer’s print, a black man is represented with frizzy hair and thick, red lips, underneath which is the supposed dictionary definition of “black”, which reads: “*black* *adj.* opposite of white, dirty, messy, without light, dark, illegal, dim, smuggled, sombre, disastrous, dismal, obscure, sullen, bad-tempered, angry, horrible, grotesque, malignant, unlucky, unhappy, depressed” (8).

This concern with the interconnections between texts and, more critically, between people, is what I think Adair is ultimately exploring in *Will, the Passenger Delaying Flight ...* Throughout the novel, Adair asks again and again, by saturating and pushing identity categories to their extremes, whether it is possible for different people to begin to sincerely understand and relate to one another. The reader comes to know, and perhaps even finally empathise with, the somewhat unbearable Volker, who appears to be leaving Germany as an attempt at escaping the pain of either the break-up of a romantic relationship or the death of a lover. Just as Volker’s lover is the melancholic absent presence of Adair’s novel, so is Africa, the continent to which Volker is travelling, and Adair leaves the reader “wondering what to do with this story” (161), as she has Freddie put it in *End*.

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Aanspreeklikheid.

Jaco Fouché.

Cape Town: Human & Rousseau, 2020. 249 pp.

ISBN 978-0-7981-7833-4.

Aanspreeklikheid, replete with examples of criminality and corruption in South Africa as it is, might have been

titled *We Are All Very Traumatized*. “Nog treinwaens is aan die brand gestee. ’n Vrou se dogter wil skei van haar man wat haar telkens aanrand. Iemand se broer is in ’n motorongeluk dood. Iemand is vermoor. Die dossier is weg. Die polisie is oorwerk. Misdaad, korrupsie seëvier” (187). To be sure, there is some truth here—we *are* all very traumatised—and literature does offer a platform for critical reflection. The problem is that many novels fall into the trap of glamourising our wound culture and so never move beyond parochialism. Fortunately, then, Fouché’s novel does, at least by the end.

Reminiscent in some ways of Tom Wolfe’s *A Man in Full*, the novel explores the spatial, racial and conceptual divides that continue to pervade Cape Town via the lives of men. Moreover, it exposes some mythologies of manhood through its narration of an ageing white man endeavouring, on the surface, to save his literary career, but really attempting to save himself, all the while becoming more exposed and, as the title suggests, more accountable—*answerable*.

When the reader is introduced to the protagonist, Jaco Diehl, he seems a reasonably well-adjusted, albeit reclusive, white middle-aged man residing in Hermanus. The peaceful image of a literary life near the ocean is soon disrupted, however, as a number of unexpected events occur, leading to an assault on Diehl and culminating in the killing of the assailant, Theo, whom the reader is also led to believe recently murdered Diehl’s girlfriend, Soraya. Shortly after, Diehl has a nervous breakdown and finds himself in a mental institution along with the investigator on Soraya’s case, a fellow named Jansen.

Jansen, if not a man in full, reveals himself to be approachable, interested in people, trustworthy and even fallible, which makes him all the more likeable. He is also an investigator—inquisitive and unrelenting—which reveals something about Diehl’s character: he is an unreliable narrator. This is where the novel, like *A Man in Full*, moves to questions of ethicality in its attempts to think about how one gives an account of oneself. Following Judith Butler (19), we might ask: “Does the postulation of a subject who is not self-grounding, that is, whose conditions of emergence can never fully be accounted for, undermine the possibility of responsibility and, in particular, of giving an account of oneself?” Moreover, how do we think about these conditions of emergence when the protagonist is an unreliable narrator? In any case, are we not all unreliable narrators? For we know ourselves incompletely, we know the world incompletely, and we cannot always see how or by what course of events

we have been shaped. How, then, can we define what we ought to do?

Already a weighty question, it becomes even more so when the reader realises there is something about The Talented Mr. Diehl. Something about the happenstance of the first few murders in the novel no longer seem accidental. It is clear: Jaco Diehl is a serial killer hiding in plain sight, a man unanswerable to anyone, yet giving an account of himself. There resides, in his use of language, the very terms and tools by which Diehl gives an account and by which he makes himself intelligible to himself and the reader, something that is not of his making. This ‘something’ about language is “social in character” and it establishes “social norms, a domain of unfreedom and substitutability within which our ‘singular’ stories are told” (Butler 21). Thus, as J. Aaron Simmons (86) argues: “If Butler is right, then the basis for morality is not self-identity, but the exposure to others; not self-recursion, but constitutive incompleteness; not a final subjective narrative, but the continual desire and attempt to not close down the task of narrative itself”.

It is, then, in his exposure to the reader through narration that Diehl implicates the reader in the question of ethics. For although he does not make himself fully accountable to the reader, this ethical failure—“this affirmation of partial transparency”—gives rise to “a possibility for acknowledging a relationality that binds” us “more deeply to language and to” each other than we previously might have thought (Butler 40). In this instance, then, it is in the relationality between narrator and reader that the possibility of an ethical encounter emerges. The narrator (Diehl) calls readers to accountability by asking of them to confront in themselves their own foreignness, their own likeness to Diehl—a sociopath and serial killer. It is really here that the strength of the novel lies, because it is in this confrontation that Diehl effectively functions as the shadow self of readers, calling on them to give an account of themselves. “Vorentoe, terwyl die reën val en die damme vul en lafenis bring, sal daar ander plekke wees: altyd ander plekke, en later weer warm, dorstige dae, tamheid en die bleekgebrande hemel. En daar sal verdere aanspreeklikheid wees, sonder twyfel” (249).

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’n Hart is so groot soos ’n vuus.

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Moet nie dat die aanloklike titel en lieflike voorblad jou flous nie. Pieter Paul Fourie se debuutroman, *’n Hart is so groot soos ’n vuus* (Afrikaanse vertaling deur Marius Swart), is een van daardie romans wat nie as *mooi* beskryf moet word nie. Die verhaal is definitief aangrypend en daar is oomblikke wat werklik as mooi uitgeken kan word, maar dit is aanvanklik moeilik om te bepaal wat presies mooi daaraan is. Ja, die verhaal is mooi op ’n roerende manier, maar een wat jou die boek momenteel laat neersit net sodat jy kan asem skep; sodat jy naam kan gee aan die emosie wat in jou maag krap. Die romanonderwerp bied ook nie ’n maklike leeservaring nie, tog ’n belonende en boeiende een. Ander clichés, soos “*tour de force*” wat gebruik word om romans in resensies te beskryf, deug ook nie, tog voldoen die roman daaraan. Die gebrek aan byvoeglike naamwoorde om die boek te beskryf, lê moontlik in die kwessie van tipering. Die voorblad verklaar duidelik dat ’n roman is, maar dit wil byna voorkom of die verhaalinhoud met tye teen hierdie genre-oriëntering stoei. Die saak word verder gekompliseer deur ’n onderhoud met die skrywer waarin Fourie staaf dat die gebeure in die verhaal waar is. “Alles in sy roman oor sy pa wat probeer het om my ma se kop met ’n metaalpyl te verbrysel, en toe weer en weer en weer probeer het om haar keel met ’n stuk gebreekte glas af te sny”, is waar [...]” (La Vita). Wat is hierdie boek dan?

Nog voor die leser die protagonis, Paul, ontmoet, wys die motto’s voorin daarop dat geheue ’n kernrol gaan speel. Die eerste hiervan verklaar dat “[a]nything processed by memory is fiction (David Shields).” Die tweede is ’n uittreksel uit Julian Barnes se *The Sense*

Of An Ending (2011), waarin—soos in 'n groot gedeelte van Barnes se fiksie-oeuvre—geheue en die beperkinge daarvan lig werp op waarheid betreffende herinnering. Die derde kom uit Salman Rushdie se *Midnight's Children* (1981): “Memory’s truth [...] It selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies, and vilifies also; but in the end it creates its own reality [...]” Hierna suggereer die eerste hoofstuk, “Ek onthou”, poëties dat die “lieflike gebreke” (13) sentraal tot die onthoudaad staan. In kort, is hierdie 'n onthouverhaal waarin die protagonis sy verlede opdiep om sin te maak van 'n lewe vol geweld, verlies en emosionele oorlewing.

Struktureel is die verhaal in twee afdelings opgedeel: “Toe” en “Nou”. Paul se verhaal word in teksfragmente van wisselende lengte en in geen spesifieke volgorde nie, weergegee. Die effek is 'n mosaïekagtige suggestie wat die gefragmenteerde aard van herinneringe naboots. Sommige fragmente is kompleet en ryk in detail, terwyl ander skerwe voorstel. Die benaming van die inhoudsopgawe as 'n “Tesserae” eggo hierdie fragmentering ter wille van nuwe beeldvorming. Die aantal kere wat die ek-verteller herinneringe inlei met “ek onthou” is ook opmerklik, terwyl uitinge van versuim om akkuraat te kan onthou ook gevind word. Hierdie verklarings van herinnering of die probleem van onthou, is interessant omdat dit 'n soort eerlikheid aan die verhaal verleen, wat die leser ook laat wonder of die verteller werklik vertrou kan word. Veral in ag genome die feit dat 'n groot aantal van Paul se herinneringe traumaties is. As kind is Paul vanweë sy pa se gewelddadige uitbarstings en alkoholmisbruik byvoorbeeld altyd op sy senuwees (18) en word 'n gesinslewe beskryf waar hy—die enigste kind—saam met sy ma ten alle tye die vrede wil bewaar, maar met 'n besef dat dit tevergeefs is. “Die hel gaan in elk geval neerdaal. Ons is klaar in die hel” (18). Paul se kinderlewe is een waarin hy selfs God smeek om sy pa dood te maak (19).

In geheel bied die verteller 'n oorsig van sy fisieke lewe, ervaringe en verhoudings sedert sy kinderdae. Hy is 'n volwasse Paul wat terugkyk na dit wat was en dit wat nou is. In die eerste gedeelte van die roman word vele verhoudings bespreek. Die komplekse verhouding tussen hom en sy pa en veral dié van sy ouers gryp die leser om die keel. Temas van maatskaplike geweld, alkohol- en dwelmverslawing en depressie word grootliks deur Paul se pa voorgestel. Ten spyte hiervan, is daar oomblikke van lig en selfs humor, maar Paul bly altyd huiwerig. “Ek weet egter hoe vinnig dit kan verander, dus bly ek bedag, gereed om te keer” (20–1).

Sy behoefte om sy ma te beskerm, skep ook by die leser empatie teenoor Paul. Nie net is hy gereed

om fisiek in te tree nie, maar die verhoudingsband wat tussen hulle ontstaan is veral roerend. Paul onthou byvoorbeeld dat hy as kind op 'n dag 'n geheime kompartement in sy ma se hangkas gevind het en deel hierdie magiese vonds met haar. 'n Skatkis van herinneringe wat ook sy melktande insluit. Met 'n glimlag vertel sy aan hom dat die kompartement “min of meer so groot [is] soos haar hart, en dat dit al die spesiale goedjies bevat wat sy in haar hart wil hou” (98). Agterna dink Paul: “My laaste melktand is in 'n geheime kompartement in my ma se kas, saam met 'n paar ander goedjies. Die kompartement is so groot soos 'n menslike hart, wat ook so groot is soos 'n vuus” (99). Fourie se skryftalent word hier beklemtoon wanneer die metafoorgebruik van 'n hart se tenger grootte, dié van 'n vuus, verbind word met die krag van 'n vuus as simbool van geweld.

Tematies word die aard van die identiteit van die self ook verken, insluitende aspekte soos moraliteit, seksualiteit, liefdesverhoudinge, seks, selfwaarde en aanvaarding. As daar in ag geneem word dat Paul self aan die woord is, word 'n prentjie van manlikheid geskets wat stoei met die holruggeryde manlike beeld van 'die held' wat nie seerkry of uiting aan sy emosies mag gee nie. Moet egter nie die fout maak om te dink dat hierdie soort manlikheid net kwesbaarheid voorstel nie. Paul verteenwoordig eerder oorlewing en groei, waartoe doelgerigte lewenskeuses ter wille van genesing lei tot 'n vasbeslote besef van wie hy is. Hierdie selfaanvaarding is veral te sien in Paul se verhouding met sy halfbroer, Ben, wat in die tweede gedeelte van die verhaal verken word. In hierdie lig kan Paul as teenpool van macho manlikheid geag word, en is die verhaal in voeling met huidige media-rekonstruksies van manlikheid. Dit is skaars om so 'n sensitiewe manlike stem in die Afrikaanse prosa raak te lees.

Beide Paul en sy halfbroer skryf graag, bely hulle aan mekaar. Ben skryf om inwaarts te keer, terwyl Paul se doel is om “uitwaarts te reik, om met iets buite myself in aanraking te kom” (204). Later maak Paul dit bekend dat hy sy ervaringe neerskryf, met die roman as produk daarvan. Die gebruik van 'n metafiksionele narratief ter wille van katarsis is geensins nuut nie, maar hoe Fourie, of altans Paul, dit aanpak, is verfrissend, veral vanweë die manlike perspektief. As sulks is daar elemente van die *Künstlerroman* te vinde omdat die leser die volwassewording van die skrywer ervaar. In wese jukstaponeer die protagonis-skrywer waarheid betreffende ervaarde belewenisse en sy geheue daarvan. “As jy al die skerwe bymekaar sit, sien jy 'n lewe. Elke keer dat jy dit onthou, is dit effens anders” (155).

Die boek is kennelik nie 'n memoir nie, en moet eerder as outofiksie benader word, fiksie wat die doel het om 'n sekere waarheid deur middel van taal te bereik. Die skrywer is nie daarop uit om verdigsels ter wille van sigself te skep nie, maar eerder om so eerlik as moontlik te wees. Memoir vertel vir die leser wat gebeur het, terwyl outofiksie die leser binne die gebeure plaas (Cusset). Vrae omtrent die getrouheid van die vertelinstansie is dus moontlik minder belangrik; die vertelling is *waar* vanuit die perspektief van die verteller se belewing daarvan, asook hoe hy dit onthou. Hierdie is wat gebeur het, vertel Paul, dis hoe ek dit onthou. Deur middel van herinnering skep hy sy eie realiteit, soos Rushdie redeneer in die boek se motto.

Met die verkenning van temas omtrent trauma, geheue en emosionele oorlewing tree Fourie op eie bodem in gesprek met romans soos Dominique Botha se *Valsrivier* (2014) en Elbie Lotter se *Dis Ek, Anna* (2004), terwyl dit in die wêreldletterkunde aan Julian Barnes en aan W. G. Sebald se *Austerlitz* (2002) herinner.

Fourie se ontroerende verhaal is dapper en slaag daarin om moeilike temas met 'n fyn lyn tussen erns en humor te benader, terwyl dit ook, deurslaggewend, sentimentaliteit vryspring. Die stilistiese benadering van die onderwerp sal ook daartoe bydra dat die roman nie sommer verouderd nie, terwyl die ryk beskrywing en nie-chronologiese vertelling 'n filmiese toon daaraan verleen. Die romanverhaal sluit ook verwysings na verskeie kunsmidiums in. Musiek, beeldende kuns en film vorm 'n groot gedeelte van Paul se herinneringe en dra by tot die inherente nostalgie wat herinnering inhou. Die roman het selfs 'n amptelike klankbaan wat deur die uitgewer saamgestel is en onder die Engelse romantitel, *The Heart is the Size of a Fist*, op Spotify beskikbaar is, wat al die liedere saamvat wat in die verhaal genoem word.

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Ek is Hendrik Witbooi.

Conny Braam, vertaal deur Zandra Bezuidenhout.

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ISBN 978-1-4853-1007-5.

Wie herkent de man op het Namibische honderddollarbiljet? Hendrik Witbooi behoort tot de grote vrijheidsstrijders van Afrika, maar zijn verhaal is veel minder bekend dan dat van voorvechters als Nelson Mandela, Jomo Kenyatta, of Julius Nyerere. Het is terecht dat zijn geschiedenis en die van Namibië dankzij Conny Braams roman nu breder bekend worden.

Ek is Hendrik Witbooi begint in 1884, wanneer Witbooi met zijn Nama-volk aan een lange trektocht naar het vruchtbare noorden begint om aan de droge Kalahari-woestijn te ontsnappen. Op hetzelfde moment stapt zo'n 100 kilometer verderop de keizerlijke afgevaardigde dr. Göring aan land om de nieuwe Duitse kolonie Zuidwest-Afrika van bestuur te voorzien. Hoewel de inheemse volkeren en stammen onderling sterk verdeeld zijn, verenigen Hendrik Witbooi en Samuel Maharero hun Nama en Herero voor een strijd op leven en dood tegen de Duitse troepen. Op 29 oktober 1905 wordt de bijna tachtigjarige Witbooi echter in de strijd uit het zadel geschoten, waarmee de opstand van de voor onafhankelijkheid vechtende Afrikanen gebroken is. De Duitse bezetter vervolgt en vermoordt tot 1908 systematisch nog tussen de 24.000 en 100.000 Herero en 10.000 Nama; in 1985 verklaart de Verenigde Naties de eens koloniale grootmacht schuldig aan de eerste volkerenmoord van de 20ste eeuw.

Anders dan de titel doet vermoeden, is *Ek is Hendrik Witbooi* geen autobiografie, maar een historische roman waarin de lezer de tragische levensloop van de Namaleider in alle menselijkheid krijgt voorgelegd. In de Namibische archieven zijn honderden stukken correspondentie bewaard gebleven van hem met de Duitse leiding. Braam heeft daar rijkelijk uit geput, niet alleen voor de ontwikkeling van zijn romanpersonage, maar ook om het verhaal historisch te verankeren. Met veel aandacht voor chronologie neemt ze brieffragmenten op, en ontleent ze alle hoofdstuktitels aan egodocumenten van Hendrik Witbooi. Terwijl Maharero een gedwongen 'vredesverdrag' tekent waarmee hij feitelijk alle rechten op zelfbeschikking voor zijn volk uit handen geeft, ziet de lezer hoe Witbooi zijn brieven aan de Duitse leiders afsluit met formules als "*Ek is u vriend Hendrik Witbooi*", en zo impliciet de deur voor gesprek openhoudt. Het drama van het boek zit hem dan ook niet in de afloop—die is bekend—maar in het geschakeerde beeld dat

ontstaat van een gerespecteerd leider die met zijn volk onaflatend ijvert voor en hoop blijft houden op behoud van de onafhankelijkheid.

Auteur Braam staat als journaliste en mede-oprichtster en voorzitter van de Anti-Apartheidsbeweging Nederland voor een historische roman als deze duidelijk in haar kracht. Haar proza is helder en toegankelijk, haar stijl bij vlagen bijna zakelijk. Dat is prettig, want de lezer krijgt zo alle ruimte om zelf de grens tussen feit en fictie te trekken, en zich een beeld en mening te vormen over de personages en de geschiedenis in kwestie. De lezer die een authentieke verhaalopbouw verwacht, kan echter bedrogen uitkomen: het begin *in medias res*, waarbij de dreigende strijd tussen de Witboois en de Herero als uitgangspunt dient om de historische achtergronden te ontvouwen en de hoofdpersonen voor te stellen, doet wat schrijverschoolachtig aan. Voorts voelt bij het ontvouwen van het verhaal de aandacht voor religie onnodig: de Duitse zendeling Olpp verandert inheemse plaatsnamen in Bijbelse (zoals Gideon), leert de Witboois lezen en schrijven, en brengt ze beschaving bij—“Maar [...] ná 'n paar jaar word dit duidelik dat die Christelike God—hoe hulle ook al bid vir wolke, reën, donderweer en weerlig—net so onbetroubaar is soos hul eie gode” (15). Los van de anachronistische projectie van Verlicht gedachtegoed op Hendrik, krijgt de lezer hier even het gevoel dat de roman verzandt in het aloude discours van Christendom als koloniaal beschavingsideaal, met zijn bekende tegenstellingen. Gelukkig ontvouwt het verhaal zich verder zonder eenvoudige, moraliserende vingerwijzerij, en komt vooral de tragiek van de Witboois in al haar nuance centraal te staan: verjaagd uit de Kaap door de Boeren, trekkend door het land van de Herero, en ontheemd door de Duitsers.

Het boek is oorspronkelijk in het Nederlands geschreven (*Ik ben Hendrik Witbooi*, 2016), en voorzien van een historische kaart van Duits-Zuidwest-Afrika, een lijst van personages, en een nawoord met geschiedkundige feiten, stand van het onderzoek, en summiere bronnenlijst ter beschikking. Die zijn—evensals de aangrijpende portretfoto van Hendrik Witbooi op de kaft—alle overgenomen in de Afrikaanse editie. Dat is niet alleen fijn voor de Afrikaanstalige lezer die een minder bekend stuk geschiedenis tot zich

wil nemen, maar het maakt het boek ook een bijzonder compleet en verzorgd geheel. De vertaling van Zandra Bezuidenhout, die eerder poëzie van Anna Enquist, en de roman *Bonita Avenue* (2010) door Peter Buwalda uit het Nederlands in het Afrikaans vertaalde, is tot slot een getrouwe weergave van de stijl van het origineel, en daarmee dienend aan de wrange geschiedenis die Braam hier voor het voetlicht brengt. Ter vergelijking enkele woorden van de Amerikaanse president Theodore Roosevelt uit diens *The Winning of the West* die een inspiratie vormden voor de Duitse keizer Wilhelm II in Afrika, en die Braam citeert:

De rechtvaardigste van alle oorlogen is de oorlog tegen de primitieve mens. Ofschoon deze altijd gepaard gaan met het meest verschrikkelijke geweld. Amerikaan tegen Indiaan, Boer tegen Zoeloe, Nieuwzeelanders tegen Maori—in al deze oorlogen heeft de overwinnaar uiteindelijk de fundering gelegd voor de grootsheid van een machtig volk. (270)

Bezuidenhout zet ze voor het eerst in evenmin mis te verstaan Afrikaans om:

Die regverdigste van alle oorloë is die oorlog teen die primitiewe mens. Ofskoon dit altyd gepaard gaan met die verskriklikste geweld. Amerikaner teen Indiaan, Boer teen Zoeloe, Nieu-Seelander teen Maori—in al hierdie oorloë het die oorwinnaar uiteindelik die fondament gelê vir die grootsheid van 'n magtige volk. (286)

Roosevelt zou later de Nobelprijs voor de Vrede in ontvangst nemen. *Ek is Hendrik Witbooi* nuanceert de wereldgeschiedenis zoals die boven de evenaar geschreven is, en breekt een lans voor de plek van Namibië daarin. Bovendien geeft het als historische roman in een postkoloniale context opnieuw betekenis aan het eigen verleden, en is het op die manier een waardevolle, identiteitsvormende toevoeging aan Afrikaanse titels als Dan Sleighs *Eilande* (2001) en de films *Krotoa* (2017) en *Poppie Nongena* (2020).

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