Keguro Macharia and Wambui Mwangi

Koroga: Another African Story

Introduction: "Come Out and Play!"

In May 2010, Wambui Mwangi, a political scientist, writer and photographer, sent an email to eight friends, seven of them well-known Kenyan poets, and another photographer, Andrew Njoroge, with the subject line "Come out and Play!" The poets were Nyambura Githongo, Stephen Derwent Partington, Tony Mochama, Sitawa Namwalie, Phyllis Muthoni, Ngwatilo Mawiyoo, and Keguro Macharia. Mwangi proposed a limited-term experiment that would run through the end of September 2010. Poets would respond to photographs provided by the photographers and photographers would respond to poems produced by poets.[1] Poems and photographs would be combined to form "image-texts," a term we take from W.J.T. Mitchell. The collaboration would be public and ongoing: image-texts would be posted publicly on facebook and on participant's blogs, including Mwangi's *DMKW* and Mawiyoo's *Ngwatilo*. As September 2010 drew to a close, over one hundred of these image-texts had been created and made publicly available in various online outlets.

This essay, written by a political scientist and a literary critic, a photographer and a poet, seeks to extend the Koroga collaborative project into new territories. As scholars, we have written on colonialism and postcolonialism; as teachers, we have reflected on the 'gaze' directed toward Africa and on what Chinua Achebe and Valentin Mudimbe termed the "image" and "idea" of Africa; as artists, we have explored new ways of creating and disseminating Africa's image-text; and as Kenyans, we have interrogated with Ngugi wa Thiong'o the potential avenues of "decolonizing the mind". Here, we write as scholars, teachers, artists, and Kenyan citizens, shifting our registers from the anecdotal to the theoretical and from the historical to the contemporary, asking questions as much of psychic landscapes as of the material world.

These critical and tonal shifts allow us to explore "the dialectic of word and image" instantiated in the Koroga project.[2] The Koroga project intervenes into the politics and poetics of what Lauren Berlant terms "stuckness" to posit new and alternative social imaginaries, rich spaces and resources for Kenyans to inhabit and re-think our collective social and political lives and practices.[3] We note that the project is enmeshed in and produced by the globalised flux of a capitalism which displaces bodies from their affective terrains and by the communication technologies which dislocate identities from their corporeal constraints, even as it posits a new understanding of bodies and their relationships and reformulates identifications across distances and in virtual public spaces. We are interested in how a collaborative model of aesthetic production grounded in technological innovation and disseminated virtually engages ongoing transformations in practices and definitions of Kenyan-ness.

[1] In practice, the actual process was more complex. Some photographs and poems preceded the Koroga project and were folded into it. While we all acknowledged that our participation in the project affected our aesthetic processes, it's difficult to provide a coherent narrative of "influence" and "change over time."

[2] W.J.T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 44.

[3] Lauren Berlant, "Starved", *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 106.3 (2007), 433-444.

‘Koroga’: Objects and Verbs

We named the poetry-photography project Koroga and dubbed ourselves the waKorogi (*sing*. Mkorogi). The name of the project also became the name for each individual combination of poem and photograph. In using the name of the individual parts (koroga) to refer to the whole project (Koroga), we wanted to engage the politics of representation, to work with and alongside the metonymic imagination that ‘sees’ Africa in a single glance. Each new koroga re-interpreted its context by changing the character and possible meanings of its predecessors. Our task was to say, “yes, this is Africa, and so is that and that and that.” Complicating the certainties that are too easily and too readily named ‘Africa’, certainties that are even more complicated in Kenya’s tourist-driven economy, we hoped to explore notions of surprise, to register the unexpected. Together with the metonymic imagination would be a more technical process of stitching together a ‘we’ comprised of multiple imaginations. In foregrounding our collaborative labor, we hoped to interrupt the authority of the single image, the singular photographer, the lone poet, and the one image-text.

In Kiswahili, *koroga* means to stir, and the statement introducing the collaborative project invoked this meaning:

To stir up
To stir into
To stir around
To be stirring

The root, *roga*, carries inflections of magic and the workings of the uncanny: of enchantment. Popular usage of this term shades it with intensely negative connotations of witchcraft, understood as the malevolent working of unseen powers. This negative association probably arises from the proselytizing influence of the monotheistic religions and from the colonial-era legislation that made witchcraft illegal. *Ko*roga incorporates and domesticates these connotations of mysterious transformations occurring in the intimate spaces of the familiar.

In Kenya, kitchens are a primary space for reproducing the historically produced social divisions of race, class, and gender. The interweaving of pre-colonial and colonial pasts and post-colonial presents are manifested in Kenyan kitchens in dynamic and evolving culinary forms, in the cultural traces subtending ingredients and methods, preferences and predilections. Kitchens are also sites for the enforcement of gendered labor practices, theatres for the strengthening of affective ties, and pedagogical spaces for the transmission of cultural knowledge. For many women, kitchens are where larger social issues are transmitted, explained, debated, contested and resolved – the hidden locus of ‘the public’ in the intimacy of domestic space. As sites of social and material production, where the processes of cooking, from the complex blending of rich herbs and spices to accidental injuries, anchor and reflect multiple social processes,

kitchens are where we produce, test and confirm our 'taste'. Thus, the Koroga project intended to stir together diverse tastes, views, sights and expressions and transform their mixture into 'a new thing in the world'.

The Strangeness of Home

Early in the process of conceptualizing Koroga, Macharia wrote an email to Mwangi, in which he wondered "about the kinds of abstractions that have material lives." Providing a list of the common Kenyan exclamations, *haiya, ati, aterere, asi,* he asked, "What would photographs of them look like? What spaces might they suggest? What actions, what interactions?". Attaching the four images that launched Koroga's pilot project, "Exclamations in Still Life,"[4] Mwangi responded, "You asked for spaces, actions, interactions of familiar exclamations. My mind returned the stillness of home, the surprises and discoveries of familiar spaces. The astonishment of light, the newness of colours, the unexplored shapes of my life."[5] Thus began an extended reflection on the punctuated strangeness of the familiar spaces we call 'home', as well as on the familiarity of strange sights we do not recognize, but which nevertheless assert themselves as portrayals of our home.

In keeping with the affective language of the kitchen, Koroga was driven by multiple desires and appetites. It was created, in part, by a specular alienation that has been part of our personal and professional histories. Participants in a global modernity still heavily dominated by the global North, we as Koroga artists are constantly bombarded with images of 'Africa' that do not resemble either our memories or our imaginaries. As Africans, our subjective and concrete experiences of 'home' are constantly over-written, always framed by other voices and imaginaries about Africa. Western imaginaries frame Africa with such authority that the visual symbols used by the Kenyan government in its official images are indistinguishable from those deployed by a colonial government insistent on spectacularly empty vistas, 'exotic' wildlife and the picaresque 'authentic' pastoralist peoples.[6] Indeed, Kenyan photographers wishing to participate in the global commerce in spectacle and alert to the unmistakeable characteristics of marketable images of Africa often model their own photographic practices on the undeniably lucrative visual tropes entrenched by the Western imagination.

In the early days of Koroga experimentation with the possibilities of destabilizing some of these tropes, therefore, *Ati* became a potted plant, at once invoking familiar tourist tropes about the beautiful tropics filled with exotic plants while, simultaneously, drawing attention to the fabrication of that image: its construction by the forces of imagination and technology and to the origins and workings of aesthetic traditions.

Ati wedded the 'naturalness' of Africa to its Afro-modern manifestations – the plant is "potted," suggesting the taming of nature central to the colonial project.

However, *Ati* refuses colonialism's taxonomic project, naming neither a plant nor an easily recognizable affect, be that Conrad's horror or tourist awe. The koroga engages the proliferating meanings of the term *ati*, which is used to begin

[4] Keguro Macharia and Wambui Mwangi, " 'Exclamations in Still Life', Koroga: A Kenyan Collaboration (small, small)", in *DMKW*, *Diary of a Mad Kenyan Woman: a refuge for disorderly and disobedient thoughts* (hereafter referred to as *DMKW*), <http://madkenyanwoman.blogspot.com/>, 15 May 2010.

[5] Koroga archives, email correspondence Keguro Macharia and Wambui Mwangi, 14-15 May 2010.

[6] For a political history of such images, see Wambui Mwangi, "The Lion, the Native and the Coffee Plant: Political Imagery and the Ambiguous Art of Currency Design in Colonial Kenya", *Geopolitics*, 7.1 (2002), 31-62.

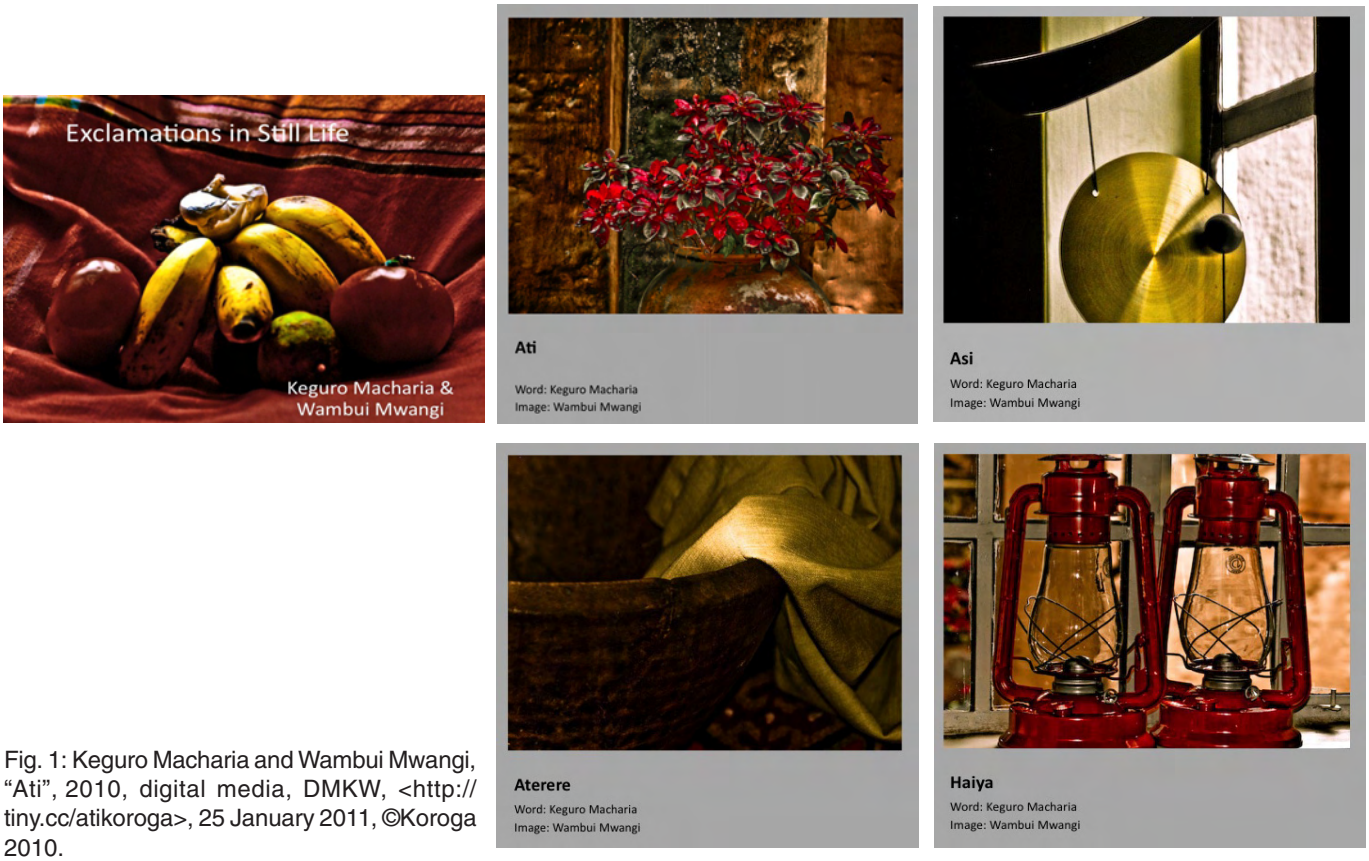


Fig. 1: Keguro Macharia and Wambui Mwangi, "Ati", 2010, digital media, DMKW, <http://tiny.cc/atikoroga>, 25 January 2011, ©Koroga 2010.

conversations ("*ati*, we were going somewhere"), or, on its own, to register disbelief ("*ati*?"). In beginning with interpretations of interjections, this first set of image-texts complicated the 'realism' that so often attaches to images of Africa – sunsets, wildlife, vast landscapes. While these concrete images also inhabit Koroga's archive, the first set of korogas insisted that the project was about creating new imaginative possibilities, even renaming the familiar in surprising ways.

The tension and, at times, disjunction between image and word is central to the Koroga project. Each koroga has an internal aporia; what is *photographed* is also what is *written*. However, because of the ineffably unpredictable ways in which images and texts come together, what is shown can never be what is spoken or vice versa: the two can never be the same, or even analogous, save by the willed interlacing of imaginations. This foundational impossibility arises out of a variety of factors, some of them common to all image-texts, but also others which include the choices and selections of individual Koroga artists, and which are emphasized by the generative and fractal "apart-ness" of each Mkorogi to her work as well as to everybody else and *their* work.

Each koroga thus necessarily engaged not only a concatenation of senses and sensibilities, but also cacophonies of dissonance and difference. These were dissolved by Power Point and by the waKorogis' affective will into an assemblage sporting a recently-acquired but very real new identity insistently claiming its position

as an instance of original Kenyan art. For each koroga to be at once so clearly itself, and as clearly to announce its antecedents as two separate things from two separate minds is the perfect metaphor for a collective identity especially because it emphasizes the visibility of the "seams" between images and texts. This marked difference-in-uniformity serves not only to loosen the boundaries of meaning around each koroga, as well as internal to it, but also simultaneously to legitimate the finished hybrid precisely as a result of being surrounded by an expanded and intensified, if also more ambiguous, nimbus of meaning.

Desire, 'Seducation' and Enchantment

Notwithstanding the above, the waKorogi artists were also influenced by the consideration that too often works by African artists are framed through discourses and practices of resistance that overlook the function of pleasure. African artists are always presumed to be working against something, be that neo-colonialism, corruption, hunger, or poverty, always laboring for a cause. While Koroga is deeply engaged in the politics and poetics of images, engaged in the persistent problem of what it means to see Africa and to be seen as African, it is also deeply invested in foregrounding the quotidian roles of play and pleasure that subtend our collaborative project. As Okwui Enwezor states, the work of developing "positive" ideas about Africa is "the job of an advertising and marketing campaign. The role of intellectuals and artists is another matter."[7] The invitation to join the Koroga artistic collective heavily emphasized the notion of "play" – of enjoyment, and fun, of absurdity, and even of frivolity.

We wanted to explore what Jane Bennett terms enchantment, a concept that articulates beautifully with the Kiswahili term *roga*.[8] As our founding document reads,

> Koroga is another African story, a story of what we see and how we see, of meetings and transformations, of looking and seeing, of seeing and writing, of speaking into being the worlds we know, and those we are always imagining. Koroga is photographs inflaming poetry, poetry inciting photographs. Koroga is what happens when we see the world on our own terms, in our own languages, in their accents and dances, their hidden smiles and come hither *seducations, seducations* because we teach the world our pleasures.[9]

Seducation was a misspelling of "seduction"; we chose to keep it as a neologism that captured our sense of experimentation, our willingness to take chances and get it wrong. We were open to the opportunities provided by 'improper' objects – photographs and syntax that were not technically perfect. Accidents could become openings to enchantment: "Enchantment is something that we encounter, that hits us, but it is also a comportment that can be fostered through deliberate strategies. One of those strategies might be to give greater expression to the sense of play, another to hone receptivity to the marvelous specificity of things."[10] Months into

[7] Okwui Enezor, *Snap Judgments: New Positions in Contemporary African Photography* (Steidl: International Center of Photography, 2006), 12.

[8] Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

[9] Keguro Macharia, "Koroga: A Kenyan Collaboration (small, small)", *DMKW*.

[10] Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, 4.

the Koroga project, Sitawa Namwalie remarked that she had started being alert to "the marvelous specificity of things". She spoke for all of us, as we began to register the aesthetic and ethical potential of the worlds we inhabited.

Repeatedly, the waKorogi kept discovering sites of enchantment, finding new ways to re-think the genre of Africa, especially the image of women in Africa. In an early koroga, Nyambura Githongo focused on an image by Wambui Mwangi that invoked longstanding tropes of woman as fertile, woman as land, woman as site and source of desire:

Fig. 2: Nyambura Githongo and Wambui Mwangi, "Untitled", 2010, digital media, *DMKW*, <http://tiny.cc/spicekoroga>, 25 January 2011, ©Koroga 2010.

The juxtaposition of "spice" and "need" infuse this picture of domestic labor with multiple desires, transforming the body that works to produce food into a body that cultivates fleshly appetites. Refusing to shy away from the idea of African women as desiring subjects, this picture particularizes and proliferates this desire, portraying it less as a single thing, that is, a desire for food or for goods or for sex. Instead, the koroga foregrounds the circulation of desire – the fleshly appetites satisfied by food and by sex and also the appetites created and inhabited by the poet and photographer who identify with the subject of the photograph. This koroga registers the powerful circulating economies of desire that subtend even the most domestic of tasks.

As we muse on the relationship between the body that works and the body that desires, we are also compelled to meditate on the photographer and poet who provide us access to this figure, to ask what it means for African women to look at other African women. For, if this koroga registers the photographed subject's circulating desires, it also captures the photographer's and poet's desires. The words in the poem "All the spice I could need" are unattributed, allowing them to circulate as jointly owned by the subject in the photograph, the photographer, and the poet. Appetite, hunger, and desire become shared grounds for creating powerful affiliations, moments of embodied longing and pleasure. Away from the

impoverished NGO imagination that revels in images of Africa as lack, this koroga captures an abundance of desire and a satisfaction of "need".

This attention to the photographer's eye in illuminating the enchantment of women is the subject of Partington and Mwangi's "Papa Razzle Didn't Shoot Her":

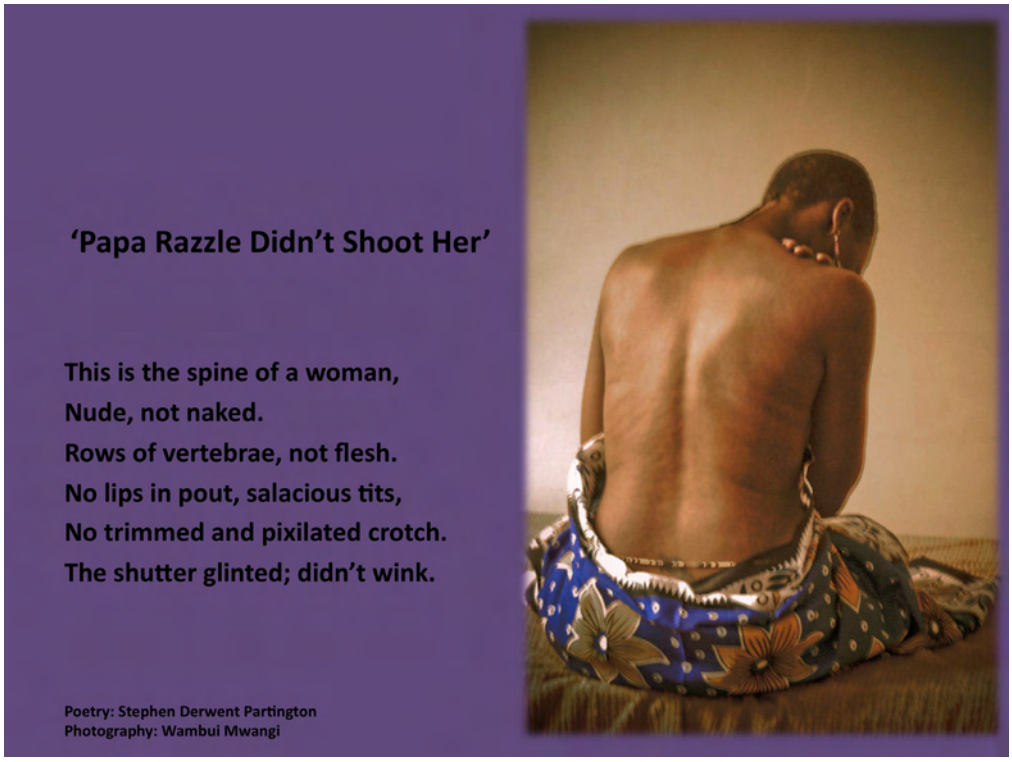


Fig. 3: Stephen Derwent Partington and Wambui Mwangi, "Papa Razzle Didn't Shoot Her", 2010, digital media, *DMKW*, <http://tiny.cc/paparazkoroga>, 25 January 2011, ©Koroga 2010.

An earlier version of the poem was more explicit about its intervention into the politics of the gaze, contrasting a male pornographic imagination against the enchantment offered by Mwangi. The draft ended with the lines, "Is it significant, the paparazzo's sex?" In the poem's final version, Partington hints at the difference Mwangi's eye makes. Instead of a nakedness that promises authenticity and titillation – the pre-modern African woman or the African woman revealed by the careful investigator – Mwangi's subject assumes a classical pose, one anchored in a history of aesthetics, becoming "nude", not "naked". The "nude", as John Berger remarks, has traditionally been gendered as woman.[11] African women, however, have often figured as "naked", lascivious rather than seductive. In making explicit the aesthetic codes that frame her subject – the slightly blurry image that challenges the camera's objectivity by revealing the eye, the hand, and the process behind making images, and the classic model's pose – Mwangi compels us to attend to the process of 'making' African women.

The scientific detachment of Partington's poem, as it identifies "vertebrae, not flesh", is echoed in Phyllis Muthoni's "Hippocrates," a second poem on the image that constructs the body as bones and joints, refusing, in the process, the logic that understands human bodies – and the medical system that looks after them – as convenient ways to accrue profit. Partington's attention to the pornographic body

[11] John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 1972), 47. Also see Lisa E. Farrington, "Reinventing Herself: The Black Female Nude", *Woman's Art Journal*, 24.2 (2003-2004), 15-23.

as money-making spectacle and Muthoni's to the medicalized body as money-making object, suture two discourses key to understanding the production of African women in colonial and postcolonial imaginations.[12] We need only think of South African Sara Baartman, who, after being exhibited as an ethno-pornographic spectacle in Europe was finally dissected by the French anatomist George Cuvier.

Against the routinized spectacle of African women, whether in ethno-pornographic or ethno-scientific terms, korogas by Mwangi, Muthoni, and Partington alert us to the enchantment, the magic, the still unseen of African women. These image-texts engage in a risky metonymic strategy: the problem of representation continues to haunt African women, where one woman ostensibly stands for all of them. In using an anonymous model, one who remains unnamed and whose face is turned away from viewers, Mwangi engages the possibilities of metonymy to present complexity rather than simplification. The visual complexity is complemented by the verbal density of the poems, the rich extra-textual suggestions that draw on histories of ethno-pornography, contemporary paparazzi practices, histories of scientific racism, and contemporary medical practices. Refusing the routinization that turns bodies to 'flesh', breasts to 'tits', and converts human illness into profit, Mwangi, Partington, and Muthoni compel us to register the mystery and surprise of a "human" who is, as Muthoni writes, "greater than the sum of her parts."

[12] More broadly, we are interested in the production of racialized and gendered bodies within capitalism's long histories. See, for instance, Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book", *Diacritics*, 17.2 (1987), 64-81.

Digital Publics, Speculative Citizenships

If bodies, their places and movements, their meanings and languages were important to the waKorogi, as artists, the Koroga project itself was based on the seeming anti-thesis to materiality: the virtual world. The playful and often irreverent character of Koroga is partly explained because the project was necessarily a virtual project. 'Virtual' in that its dual lack of funding and regulation rendered it an almost-project, but also 'virtual' in that it took place in the digital world of the internet. The internet allowed explorations (and failures) of form, of aesthetic expression and even of meaning without making determinative claims either as to art or even as to the implicit question of "being Kenyan" that Koroga inevitably raises. This section examines the possible significance of these exigencies of production and of the implications of the space-time flexibilities by which the internet allows various kinds of escapes: freeing bodies from unachievable proximities, creative spaces from physical congruencies and collective schedules from the co-ordination of simultaneity.[13]

At the basic and practical level of consideration, it is significant that the nine waKorogi have complex lives and practice diverse professions: one of the poets lives abroad and another at a prohibitive distance from Nairobi. Even the Nairobi dwellers rarely meet, as they do not normally traverse the same pathways through the city, although these may unpredictably intersect at specific social nodes. Yet Koroga-as-practice demanded constant and iterative consultations, contestations

[13] Elizabeth Grosz, *Space, Time and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 1-2. As the authors live on different continents, we note that even the present collaborative reflection is largely conditional on the availability of the Internet.

over details, and erasures and over-writings of multiple drafts to produce the palimpsest result. This process was hardly optional, as it was also necessarily the legitimation and authorisation of each koroga for public display.

The simple possibility of a meeting space that requires no actual meetings and a mode of communication that accommodated multiple and punctuated locutions, as proffered by the internet, was thus not merely a matter of convenience or even efficiency in the exploration of Kenyan subjectivities and sensibilities, but more strongly, a space of identification that served to form these social positions and individual placements.

The question would be a matter of theoretical nuance only were it not that the concrete conditions of Kenyan lives are increasingly being mediated through digital means supported by various push-pull factors in the private and public spheres. Even so, the waKorogi artists were acutely aware that this increased access to digital means of communication depends inextricably on class and financial positions of privilege, locations in urban centers, and the luxuries of time in which to reflect and create. As in Namwalie and Mwangi's "It balances but do not ask me how", these are acute considerations for those who cannot expect "magic to come from cyberspace / Land on your laps / [and] Cure your maladies."

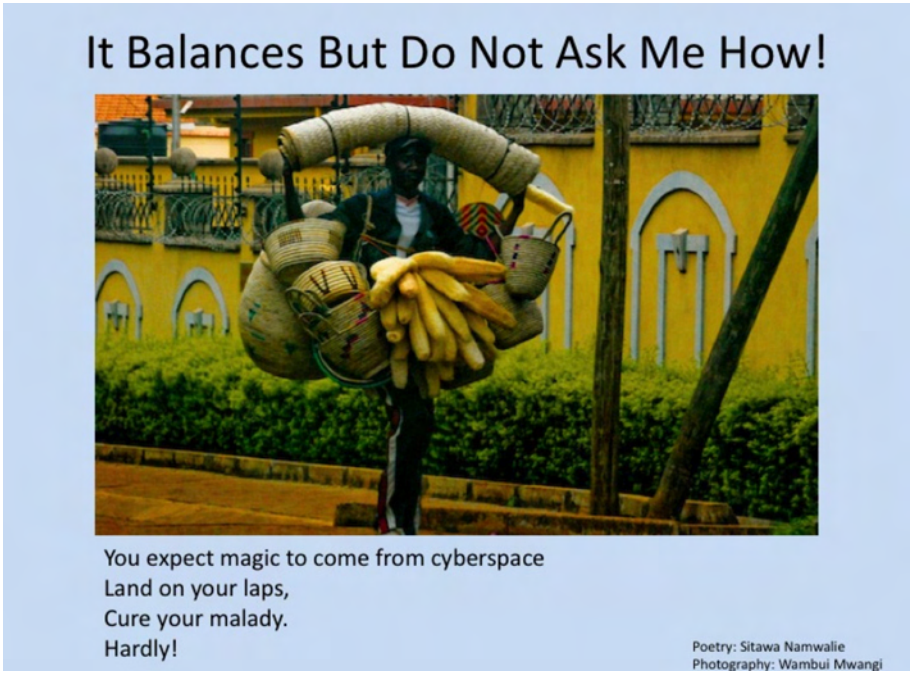


Fig. 4: Sitawa Namwalie and Wambui Mwangi, "It balances but do not ask me how!", 2010, digital media, DMKW, <http://tiny.cc/balancekoroga>, 25 January 2011, ©Koroga 2010.

Despite these necessary cautions as to the class privileges that govern this access, many Kenyans increasingly rely on technological means both as a means of managing daily life and as the occasion for expressing opinions on public questions ranging from the frivolous to the serious. Kenyan-ness is being re-envisioned through this relationship between bodies and the devices that allow the former to extend their functions in space and time. Television and radio shows in Kenya frequently solicit

opinions and comments by SMS from their audience; marketing campaigns seductively hold out rewards for participating in cell-phone based promotions; and the integrity of the Constitutional Referendum of August 2010 was asserted, inter alia, by the technological basis of its data storage and transmission, and by the associated characteristics of transparency and accountability of the data – members of the Kenyan press were allowed access to the servers on which this data was stored.

Digital technologies are not the first or the only ones to serve this prosthetic function, nor are they more "un-natural" than prior technological forms, for as Deleuze and Guattari have argued, bodies can themselves be conceptualized as machines and bodies integrate and impart humanity to machines just as much as machines incorporate humanity.[14] Embodiment in this context becomes at once more elusive and more expansive than would be suggested by corporeal constraints, as bodies contain and also excrete an excess of incorporeality, while machines produce specificities of affect and effect that are not reducible to the discrete mechanical elements of their construction.[15] Kenyan lives are 'virtual' in their most intimate family connections and individual daily negotiations, individually and in the co-ordination of collective efforts. All of us are always-already cyborgs now, in Donna Harraway's sense, but in Kenya these hybrid forms of existence are increasingly and specifically tied to digital technologies and virtual landscapes of belonging.[16]

Official government figures from the Communications Commission of Kenya suggest that about half the estimated Kenyan population, or close to 20 million Kenyans, are cell phone subscribers, while according to a recent PEW study, internet usage in Kenya has grown from 11% in 2007 to 24% in 2010.[17] Both of these upwards trends are expected to continue and, indeed, to accelerate as expected improvements in the infrastructure for the digital economy and competition between digital information and communications services providers combine to increase access and lower costs.[18] The Kenyan government recently announced plans to move all its online services into mobile phone platforms, potentially increasing its e-government reach to all current twenty million mobile phone subscribers. The M-Pesa revolution in Kenya, which expanded access to electronic money transfers to Safaricom's vast networks of subscribers, is used by ordinary Kenyans to manage their daily lives in a variety of ways, from transferring money to relatives in distant locations to purchasing commodities in participating retailers, to paying their utility bills and now, and significantly, to paying their children's school fees.[19] Kenyan churches have been swift on the uptake, using cell phones to mobilize their membership and disseminate their messages. Anglican Bishop Charles Gaita has said, "It is as if cell phones have come to revolutionize everything, even Christianity."[20]

The viral Kenyan internet sensation that was *Makmende*, with its irreverent and hybrid references to global culture, seventies Kenyan kitsch and super-hero mythologies was only a particularly assertive manifestation of these dynamics of

[14] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Gauttari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1983).

[15] Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

[16] Donna Harraway, *Simians Cyborgs and Women: The Re-invention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

[17] Communications Commission of Kenya, "Mobile Phone Subscribers Inch Closer to 20 Million", 30 March 2010, <http://www.cck.go.ke/news/2010/news_30mar10.html>; Pew Global Attitudes Project, "Global Publics Embrace Social Networking", 15 December 2010, <http://pewglobal.org/2010/12/15/global-publics-embrace-social-networking>, 10 January 2011.

[18] Okuttah Mark, "Kenya Embarks on Building Alternative Fibre Optic Cable Route", *Business Daily*, Nation Media Group, 4 February 2010, <http://www.businessdailyafrica.com>, 10 January 2011; Jevans Nyabiage, "Telcos Expected to Witness Fall in Revenues Due to Tariff Wars", *Saturday Nation*. Nation Media Group, 31December 2010, <http://www.nationmedia.com/>, 10 January 2011.

[19] "You Can Now Use M-pesa to Pay School Fees", *Daily Nation*, Nation Media Group, 6 January 2011, <http://www.nation.co.ke/ 10>, 10 January 2011.

[20] Frederick Nzwili, "African Churches use cell phones to Ring up Growth in Members", AllAfrica Global Media, 22 February 2010, <http://*allAfrica.com*>, 10 January 2011.

'glocalised' identity formation and re-articulation.[21] In this respect, the global success of Ushahidi, a social crowdsourcing platform originally developed to enable Kenyan citizen-journalists to report on and map the violent aftermath of the contested 2007 presidential elections, gestures to the possibilities of technologically-enabled modes of citizen action, and to the transmission circuits of new forms of global knowledge.[22] After its introduction in Kenya, Ushahidi was employed in efforts to help the victims of the Haiti earthquake, to map the disastrous reach of the BP Gulf Oil Spill, and even to enable communications with people trapped in the recent blizzards in the United States.

Poll data suggest that the majority of Kenyan internet activity is social networking: as of December 2010, there were over one million Kenyans on facebook, with the rate of increase of these numbers expected to rise before the next Kenyan presidential elections in 2012.[23] Suggestively, the bulk of this population (68%) is drawn from the politically-critical demographic between the ages of 18 and 44. Combined with the evident vigor of the Kenyan blogosphere, these dynamics indicate that digital platforms are emerging not only as a robust space of public discourse but also as the context and generative condition under which the Kenyan state and the Kenyan public, Kenyan commercial interests and their consumer bases, and individual and collective Kenyan subjectivities encounter, interact, and contest with each other and thus cumulatively form, through these fragmented and rapidly-morphing engagements, the contours and contents of 'Kenyan-ness'.[24]

It is within this rapidly transforming technological context and virtual terrain that Koroga's suggestively recombinant processes and products are most usefully considered. The Koroga project was realized with no funding apart from the time and labor of the participating artists; indeed, there was no budget at all. The waKorogi did not have a firm vision of the eventual product, or even a definitive plan for producing it, nor was there anything as sensible as a production schedule, apart from an arbitrarily suggested end-date. Depending on one's perspective, the Koroga project is remarkable for the organic nature of its evolution, or, differently articulated, for the indifference to advance planning exhibited by its participants.

Rules were largely devised as issues came up, aesthetic norms accumulated from a case-by-case approach; themes and images were a matter of the serendipitous forces and pairing of whimsical browsings and provocations. None were as surprised as the waKorogi themselves when the totality of all the korogas was eventually revealed. Even over the course of its unfolding, the particular combination of text and image for any given koroga were unknown even to the artists implicated in, or responsible for, their production – any image might inspire as-yet-unthought-text, as might any text find as-yet-unseen images, and no-one could predict the interactive decisions that resulted in the final version.

In these complex dynamics of imperceptibly-connected accretions, modifications enabled by internet's inexorable collation and archiving tendencies, as noted above, the addition of each koroga in real-time posting served as both a subservient addition to as well as a radical interruption of the Koroga whole. Thus, if the waKorogi

[21] Just a Band, "Makmende Returns", <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_mG1vIeETHc>, 10 January 2011.

[22] <http://www.ushahidi.com/about-us>, 10 March 2010.

[23] Socialbakers: Heart of social Media Statistics, <http://www.socialbakers.com/facebook-statistics/kenya/last-3-months#chart-intervals>, 10 January 2011.

[24] Frankline Sunday, "Kenya Has Third Highest Number of Blogs", AllAfrica Global Media, 29 July 2010, <http://all.Africa.com>, 10 January 2011.

sought to explore the limits and possibilities of the amorphously evolving condition of 'being Kenyan', its virtual medium not only imparted a corresponding fluidity and mutability to the forms and articulations of such identities, but also, and paradoxically, enabled the sensible – the perceptible, appreciable – manifestation of their expression. As Rancière suggests, the distribution of the sensible is the manifestation of a political idea.[25]

[25] Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 12-19.

Image, Affect, and Temporality

Adapting W.E.B. Du Bois's famous dictum that "the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line," Mitchell argues that "the problem of the twenty-first century is the problem of the image."[26] If we place Africa at the heart of the image problematic, we can complicate Mitchell's temporal and racial schema. For, while the number of images emerging about Africa have exploded with access to new(er) technologies and means of dissemination, they remain startlingly similar to those verbal descriptions provided by early travel writers and novelists. The image of Africa seems locked in time, occupying what Johannes Fabian terms "allochronic" time.[27] Fabian uses "allochronic" time to describe the temporal strategies used by early ethnographers who wrote about their subjects using a temporal scheme distinct from the one occupied by the ethnographer: ethnographic subjects were out of sync with the ethnographer, representing an earlier time in history or a modernity that lagged behind ostensibly progressive Euro-modernities.

[26] W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 2.

[27] Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 32.

In the twenty-first century, images of Africa remain stubbornly anachronistic, testifying if not to the complete absence of modernity, then to an always-attenuated one that has not yet caught up with an idealized western modernity. A side-by-side comparison of images from the late nineteenth century and the early twenty-first too frequently suggests that while photographic techniques might have improved, the subjects profiled remain stuck in time. This disavowal of the present, and its associated imprisoning of the past and constriction of the future relies precisely on the uniformity and persistence of the few tropes that the West deploys in its description of Africa, which, by disputing the existence of contradictory possibilities, seek to pre-emptively deny emergent forms of African authority (in the global arena), African self-fashioning (in the Diaspora) and critically, new combinations of the African public (domestically).

Repeatedly, the waKorogi engaged the problem of temporality, not simply by insisting on an African modernity "comparable" to Euro-American modernity or even by foregrounding an unchanging temporality, but by proliferating the scenes, sites, and settings of Afro-modernity, understanding temporality as strategic rather than merely given. While some korogas invoked nostalgia (Partington/Mwangi "Borderlands", Mochama/Mwangi "Maputo Mnemonics", Mawiyoo/Mwangi "Aging"), others wedded memory to history (Muthoni/Njoroge "Acacia Surprise", Macharia/Njoroge "Half-Life"), while others insisted on their urban modernities (Mawiyoo/Njoroge "Feeling Good", Muthoni/Njoroge "Morph", Muthoni/Mwangi "Stardom"). "Running", by Muthoni and Mwangi, foregrounded spatio-temporal mobility:

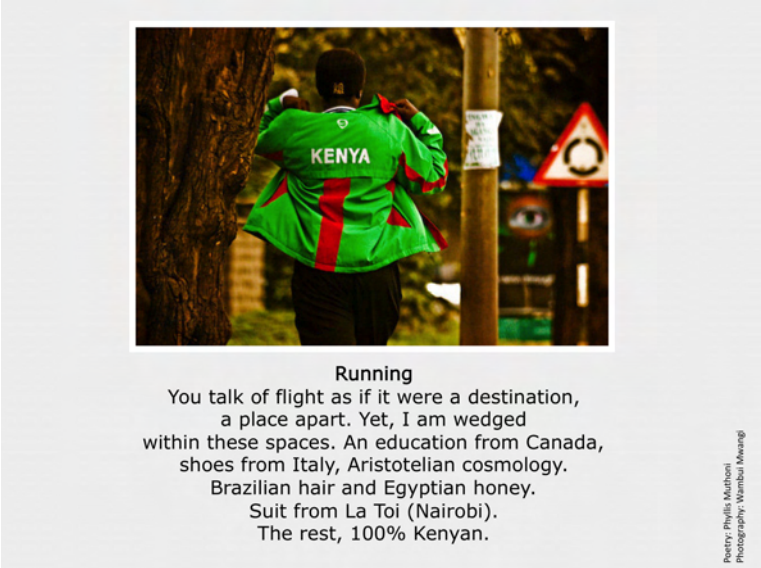


Fig. 5: Phyllis Muthoni and Wambui Mwangi, "Running", 2010, digital media, DMKW, <http://tiny.cc/runkoroga>, 25 January 2010, ©Koroga 2010.

Complicating nativist and autochthonous accounts of African women that frame them as static guardians of pre-colonial tradition and authentic African-ness, "Running" embeds its anonymous subject within global mobility. And while the poem seems to suggest that the subject's outer vestments can be peeled away to reveal the "100% Kenyan", this fantasy of wholeness is framed as "The rest", a Derridean supplement that completes and complicates completion. In framing an African woman, still too often considered a metonym for African-ness, as authentically "The rest", Muthoni re-imagines the African woman as incarnating Afro-modern mobility, moving through time as well as in space. Indeed, the figure in the image runs "ahead" of time: we can only see her back as she leaves us behind.

Similarly, Namwalie and Njoroge's "Purple in My Rear View Mirror" re-imagines African modernity. The koroga features a rear view mirror that displays fallen Jacaranda flowers; here, the natural landscape associated with Africa is captured through the doubled lens of the photographer's camera and the car mirror:

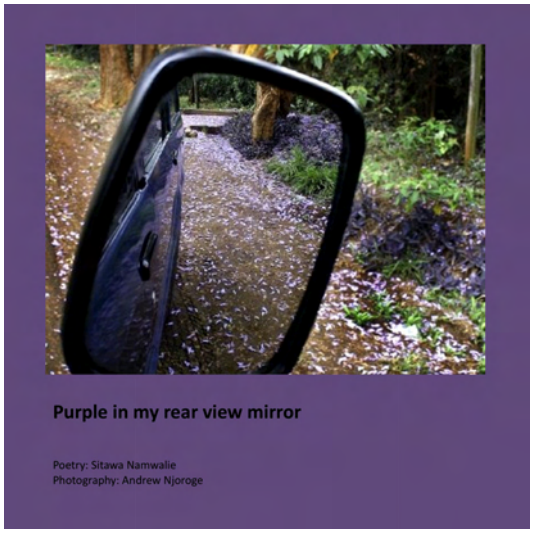


Fig. 6: Sitawa Namwalie and Andrew Njoroge, "Purple in My Rear View Mirror", 2010, digital media, DMKW, <http://tiny.cc/purplekoroga>, 25 January 2011, ©Koroga, 2010.

Yet, nature is not merely "left behind" in this techno-future, as Jacaranda flowers, captured by the camera but not by the mirror, carpet the car's forward progress. The relationships among photographer's eye, mirror, and camera multiply the picture's perspectives. What is foreground, ostensibly the flowers in the rear view mirror, is also background – spatially behind the eye, the camera that extends it, and the mirror. The reflection of background as foreground is further complicated by what extends beyond the mirror's frame, the Jacaranda flowers visible to the camera but not to the rear view mirror. Indeed, the frames multiply: the rear view mirror that frames Jacaranda flowers to the rear is framed by the Jacaranda flowers to the side and front, which are, in turn, framed by the camera. This multiplication of frames disturbs the relationship between space and time, capturing a sense of what Foucault describes as a heterotopia: "We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed."[28] Against a model of African modernity as linear or even cyclical, of the change of space through time, a shift from a world full of Jacaranda flowers to one inhabited by vehicles, the koroga registers a simultaneity of spatio-temporalities – technological and natural, framed and framing. This koroga is far from the panopticon gaze that, from the colonial project through contemporary NGO strategies, imagines it can see Africa in one glance. The koroga's gaze registers its partiality, its limited perspective; in so doing, it allows us to see with compound eyes.

[28] Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces", trans. by Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics*, 16.1 (1986), 22. Significantly, Foucault identifies the "mirror" as a heterotopia (24).

Repetitions and Refractions

Without design, several waKorogi chose to write on similar images, producing at least two poems based on a single image (Partington/Mwangi "Absence and Perspective" and Macharia/Mwangi "Erosion"; Githongo/Njoroge "Nairobi Blues" and Partington/Njoroge "Two Evocations on a Monday Morning") and, remarkably, six poems on two images (Namwalie/Mwangi "Abandoned Lives", Githongo/Mwangi "Etched Lines", and Mawiyoo/Mwangi "Oath"; Muthoni/Mwangi "Hippocrates", Partington/Mwangi "Papa Razzle Didn't Shoot Her", Githongo/Mwangi, "Dreaming Reality"). These repetitions "with a difference", as Homi Bhabha might term them, interrupted habituated ways of seeing Africa. "Erosion" sutures two Kenyan discourses: the importance of land for agriculture and the status of cultural values, which are considered to be "eroding". The red soil, devoid of vegetation, and the sole figure in the image, seemingly divorced from a community, capture fears of a dystopic future:

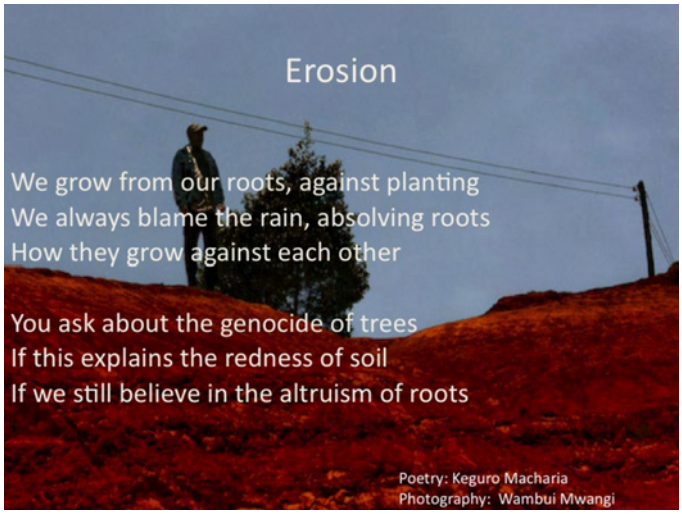


Fig. 7: Keguro Macharia and Wambui Mwangi, "Erosion", 2010, digital media, DMKW <http://tiny.cc/erosionkoroga>, 25 January 2011, ©Koroga 2010.

The red soil evidences "genocide": a war between human subjects that reddens the soil and a war in nature, in which plant roots fight for scarce resources, tropes that attach to "Africa". Similarly meditating on tropes attached to Kenya, "Absence and Perspective" highlights what "viewers" of Africa have been trained to see – a "uniped Moran", "a glorious acacia", a "sunset oozing awe". Instead of these tropes, the koroga depicts a man in "jeans and a baseball cap", signifiers of global modernity. Moreover, the koroga highlights this figure's inscrutability; we can "guess" what he "looks down upon", but we cannot know. Both korogas take clichés about Africa as their point of departure and end on questions of attachment and belonging. "Absence and Perspective" asks where the figure's "heart is", while "Erosion" asks about the significance of "roots". Despite these points of convergence, conditioned by our positions as historical subjects, the korogas diverge in their points of view and their formal arrangements: they multiply interpretive possibilities, fracturing the sense of a single viewing eye that takes the photograph or a singular poetic voice that speaks with ultimate authority.

At once expansive and flexible, Koroga photographers and poets invited others "to play", enriching our process and materializing our ethics of proliferation. Here, we want to note one collaboration between poet Phyllis Muthoni and professional photographer Jerry Riley that captured Koroga's playfulness and irreverence while also multiplying its conceptual and aesthetic richness. "All In a Lifetime" stretches the concept of juxtaposition, layering, folding, and twisting it to produce new modes of engaging the concept of beauty:

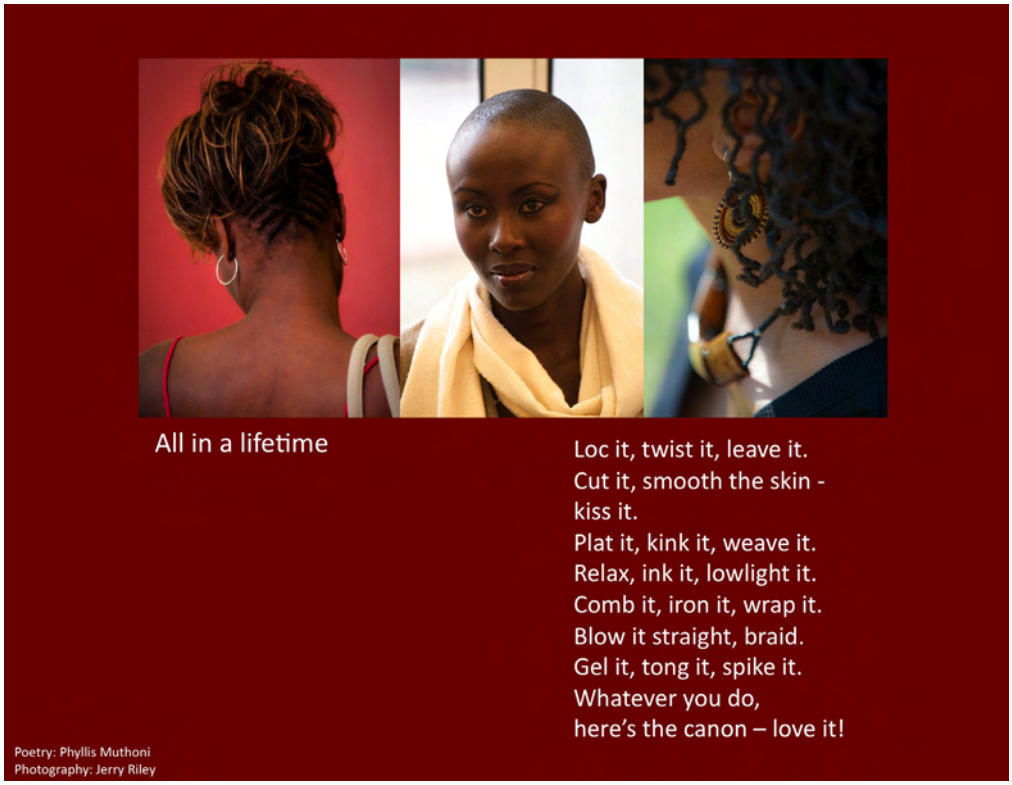


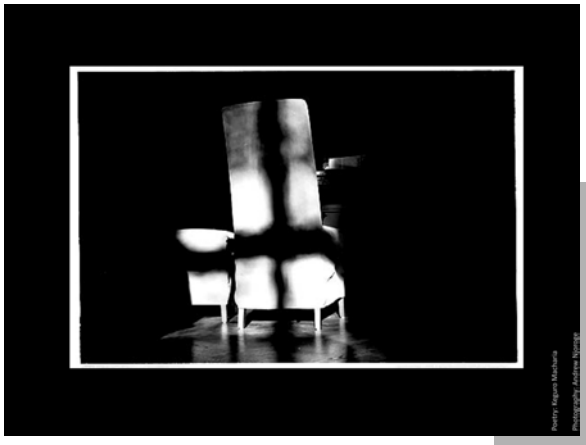
Fig. 8: Phyllis Muthoni and Jerry Riley, "All in a Lifetime", 2010, digital media, DMKW, <http://tiny.cc/lifetimekoroga>, 25 January 2011, ©Koroga 2010.

The tension central to all koroga, that between a single image and a single poem, achieves new heights as three juxtaposed images are framed by a paratactic poem, where the temporal and logical relation between parts is strained. Ostensibly a poem about hairstyles – "Loc it, twist it, leave it" is its opening line – the poem's continued list of instructions to an unspecified individual or group of individuals becomes both more concrete and abstract as it proceeds. Indeed, "it" is hair, but the proliferating "it" and the actions attached to "it" also complicate this narrative. One might "leave" one's hair to recover after having been braided or treated with chemicals, but one might also "leave" a wig or weave, abandon a style or look. To "leave" one's hair may also entail leaving a situation, an event, a history, a place. African descended individuals who go into more formal workplaces are still asked to keep "neat" hairstyles, often codes that dreadlocks and braids are not considered professional. In this poem, "it" becomes a mobile signifier. Similarly, instructions like "kiss it", "ink it", "iron it", "wrap it", "get it", and "love it", while all ostensibly framed by the images of hair, speak to a variety of social and historical situations – the language of hair, as Kobena Mercer might argue, indexes cultural practices and still-unfolding histories.[29] Simultaneously, the rapid directives of the poem compel us to re-think the juxtaposed series of images, which become dynamic rather than static, a range of options, far from the "engraved image" of Africa and African women that circulates as truth.[30]

Along with the pleasures of playfulness and the enchantment of the quotidian, Koroga also sought to provide space for contemplation, to think of how art creates collectivities sutured by awe. Macharia and Njoroge's "Simon's Mother" combined the figure of a cross with an imagined narrative about Simon of Cyrene, a biblical figure compelled to carry Christ's cross:

[29] Kobena Mercer, "Black Hair/Style Politics", *New Formations*, 3 (1987), 33-54.

[30] The term "engraved image" is taken from Phyllis Muthoni, "Face of Africa", *Lilac Uprising: Poems for the City and Other Places* (Nairobi: Aura Books, 2010), 52-3.



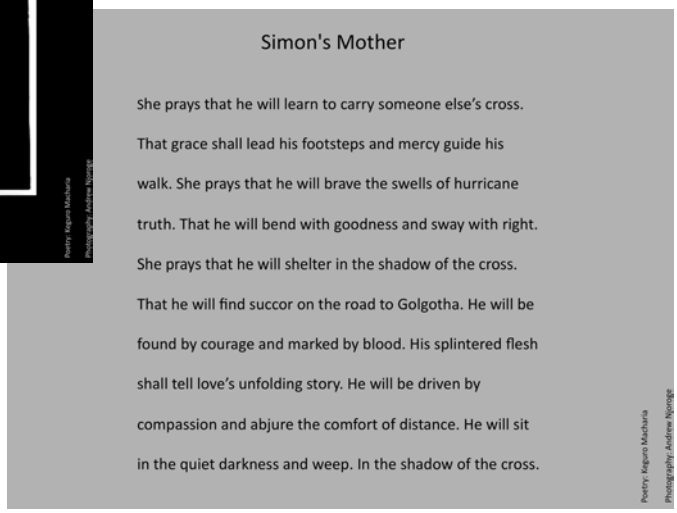


Fig. 9a-9b: Keguro Macharia and Andrew Njoroge, "Simon's Mother", 2010, digital media, DMKW, <http://tiny.cc/simonkoroga> and <http://tiny.cc/simonbkoroga>, 25 January 2011, ©Koroga 2010.

Just as the photograph traces an outline of a cross through its play with light and shadow, enabling the imagination a visual space of fantasy, the poem imagines a narrative emerging from a trace. At the moment Simon of Cyrene encounters Christ, we know nothing about him, nor are the gaps in his life filled out in the gospels. The poem dares to imagine a history for him rooted in a mother's hopes for her son and in the fulfillment of prophecy – she imagines her son as being historically significant because of his grace.

Following a trace to imagine a history, "Simon's Mother", as with "All in a Lifetime", "Absence and Perspective", and "Acacia Surprise", engages Rancière's claim that the aesthetic is "a specific sensory experience that holds the promise of a new world of Art and a new life for individuals and the community."[31] The Koroga project followed traces, photographic, linguistic, popular, public, private, collective, individual, to imagine and re-imagine pasts, presents, and futures. In combining the ephemeral (flowers) and discarded (junked cars) with the popular (Tuskers bottles) and the deeply symbolic (Uhuru Park), and in working collaboratively and virtually, the waKorogi participated in and elaborated on the material processes through which Kenyan-ness is being produced, performed, and transformed.

[31] Jacques Rancière, "The Aesthetic Revolution and its Outcomes", *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, trans. by Steven Corcoran (New York: Continuum, 2010), 115.

The questions we ask in this essay are necessarily tentative and contingent. As the archive of thousands of emails and hundreds of discarded drafts and unfinished ideas attest, the e-published Korogas are only the publicly-visible face of a lengthily-mediated and collective artistic speculation on the conditions of being Kenyan, in the turbulent years of the early twenty-first century. This questioning, a call-and-response artistic meditation on the optics and poetics of the Kenyan ordinary, necessarily also gave rise to questions about the intelligibility of poetry and photography to, and about, each other, as well as to additional questions about the possibilities and limitations of collaborative action in artistic practice. Yet, as often and as obviously as these questions emerged, they were answered only by the proliferation of yet more questions and by the multiplication of further areas of ambiguity – the extent of which already gestures to the limitations of the current reflection. It is clear that, as scholars, we cannot encompass the extensive theoretical territories evoked; as artistic practitioners, we are humbled once more by the gnomic inscrutability of the Muse. Insofar as the Koroga project metonymically expresses the conditions of existence that it also interrogates, it is primarily by adding its trickle of questions to the surrounding and much larger currents immanent in the concrete details of daily Kenyan life.