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Re-imagining Africa: Creative Crossings

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Simon Gikandi and Jane Wilkinson

Re-imagining Africa: Outside Africanism / Creative Crossings – An Introduction

Outside Africanism

The works collected in this volume of *Anglistica* represent an ongoing attempt to liberate the idea and image of Africa from what has come to be known as Africanism and to restore African subjects to the center of their narratives. Even readers who are not familiar with the scholarly definition of Africanism encounter it almost every day in the headlines of the major metropolitan newspapers in Europe and North America. Whether reporting on political crisis in Central Africa or natural disasters in the Horn of Africa, journalists prefer to report the continent through the lens of what Denis-Constant Martin has described as a "double unity": Africa is considered to be a uniform place that is nevertheless unique.[1] The uniformity of Africa is evident in the terms of its description – it is one geographic and cultural mass in which local distinctions are subsumed under the whole. The uniqueness of Africa is evident in the assumption that its problems are different from other places in the world. In both cases, the unity or unanimity of Africa is generated by what Martin calls "the generalizing temptation to infer general facts from the imperfect knowledge of local phenomena, then this presence appears as an imprisonment, an isolation."[2] Subsequently, African knowledge is enclosed in a prison house of radical difference and negativity; African voices are repressed or displaced and the kind of crossing that scholars and artists aspire for is foreclosed.

But the prison house of Africanism is not just a response to what appears to be the unending crisis of African society, or the persistent conception of the African as the unmodern subject; it has a long history and is rooted in the very epistemological frameworks that have made modern, western, knowledge possible. As V.Y. Mudimbe has shown, African societies, cultures, and subjects enter the western episteme as "signs of something else" – the primitive, the savage, the other.[3] The sign of Africa as the other has been entrenched as an idea, an image, and a narrative all unified by the power of negativity. Organized and classified according to "the grid of Western thought and imagination," African alterity functions as "a negative category of the same."[4] In this economy of representation, the African has become "not only the Other who is everyone else except me, but rather the key which, in its abnormal differences, specifies the identity of the Same."[5]

If the goal of African art and literature at the moment is to reject the logic of "abnormal differences" and to assert the identity of the African as a human subject, then an understanding of the long history of Africanism constitutes an important space clearing gesture. This clearing gesture must begin by noting that Africanism has never been about Africa. Although it may appear to be obsessed with African

[1] Denis-Constant Martin, "Out of Africanism! Should We Be Done with Africanism?", in V.Y. Mudimbe, ed., *The Surreptitious speech: Présence Africaine and the Politics of Otherness, 1947-1987* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 45. An extended discussion of Africanism can be found in Christopher L. Miller, *Blank Darkness: Africanist Discourse in French* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

[2] Ibid.

[3] V.Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), ix. See also *The Idea of Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press; London: J. Currey, 1994).

[4] Ibid., 12.

[5] Ibid.

difference, Africanism has been a discourse of European identity that needed the African in order to assert the authority of the same. And if the image or idea of Africa seems to oscillate between aura and demonology it was because these varying images of the continent were needed to service specific European projects of identity. African difference was essential to European self-fashioning.

Nowhere is the idea of Africa as a function of Western anxieties and desires more apparent than in the various transitions that European societies went through beginning in the Renaissance, through the Enlightenment, and culminating with the age of empire in the nineteenth century. As numerous studies have shown, these transitions were directly or indirectly linked to the enslavement of Africans.[6] Slavery was, of course, just one of the many political or economic forces driving the transformation of Europe, but it was responsible for the creation of a whole range of anxieties that pushed modernity into areas that it would otherwise not have considered crucial to its structure or identity. Enslavement diminished the aura of Africans as subjects in the European imagination; it also impoverished the ideals of modernity by calling into question European notions of freedom. In all cases, however, what was at issue was not the character of the African (although this was to become an obsession in modern culture), but the nature of European society in relation to the world of the other, of which the African was an inescapable symbol. Forced to make radical shifts in its perception of blackness by the economics of slavery and imperialism, the idea of Europe came to function under the shadow of African difference.

For a long time, the encounter between Europe and sub-Saharan Africa was mediated through myths, images, and ideas. Although this part of Africa had certainly been part of the western imagination since antiquity, it presented a different set of problems to the project of European self-making than the other continents in the expanded geography of human culture. For one, there is no evidence of an intricate process of cultural exchange between Europe and sub-Saharan Africa of the kind we witness in the former's relation with the Middle East and China. The circulation of objects and other curiosities that was part of the European project of collecting other people's cultural treasures did not extend to sub-Saharan Africa in substantive ways until the nineteenth century.[7] In contrast to Asia, one scholar has noted, "Africa offered little challenge to reconsider the nature of Europeanness."[8] In contrast to the Americas, whose discovery was to shake the European map of humankind, Africans do not seem to have functioned as a significant site of contradiction, one with the capacity to reshape the terms of European identity. While the discovery of the Americas triggered major debates and disputes about the human subject and natural law, the African presence in Europe tended to operate in a thin context.

But the absence of a thick context for describing the African in the European imaginary and the paucity of traffic in goods and peoples does not mean that Africa was absent from the European imagination. Indeed, the very distance of Africa from the daily lives of early modern Europeans made its mythological

[6] For a discussion of the relationship between economies of slavery and the making of European identity see Simon Gikandi, *Slavery and the Culture of Taste* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

[7] See the essays collected in John Elsner and Roger Cardinal, eds., *The Culture of Collecting* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

[8] John Hale, *The Civilization of Europe in the Renaissance* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 43.

character even more compelling. As Eldred Jones has shown, the representation of the African in Elizabethan England continued to rely heavily on classical images and geographies. As Europeans slowly made their way down the West African coast in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, there was noticeable interest in the customs and beliefs of Africans and the increasing number of black figures on the Elizabethan stage functioned in an increasingly thickening context of cultural encounter; but there is no evidence to suggest that encounters with real Africans were effective in displacing inherited mythologies about blackness.[9] In spite of the increasing presence of Africans in the early modern world, "the words Renaissance and sub-Saharan Africa appear to have no obvious connection; indeed, it would be argued that they stand in almost complete opposition to each other."[10]

Still, the opposition between the culture of the Renaissance and the idea of Africa can be read as another sign of European anxieties about a modern identity. Let us recall that when European intellectuals in the sixteenth century reinvented themselves as cultured subjects, they tended to do so by conjuring the image of a Middle Ages that they thought they had superseded. The culture of the Renaissance was invented against the background of an uncivilized Middle Ages, which was embodied in the Turkish Sultanate across the Bosporus. But when a later generation of Europeans came to narrate the story of the early modern period and to imagine the "barbarism" against which this age had emerged, they could not single out the Turkish Sultanate as the depository of the barbarism of the Middle Ages. It was to Africa that they would turn for the tropes and images of what was considered to be the medieval. The conception of Africa as the unmodern place, and the vocabularies that came to describe this state had, however, taken root way before the Swiss historian Carl Jacob Burckhardt rediscovered the Renaissance and celebrated it in *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1878).[11] By the end of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth, the terms that Burckhardt would later come to associate with the "barbarism" of the Middle Ages – superstition, childishness, despotism, and the Gothic – had already been circulating freely among trade European agents on the West African coast. For William Bosman, who was the Dutch trade agent on the Gold Coast at the beginning of the eighteenth century, Africans were characterized by degeneracy. The people of the coast of Guinea, Bosman wrote around 1701 were "Crafty, Villainous, and Fraudulent"; their "degenerate vices" accompanied by sloth and idleness; like beasts, "they sleep perfectly undisturbed by any Melancholy Reflections."[12]

One common theme in European discourses on Africa in the eighteenth and nineteenth century was that all systems of government on the continent were despotic and that this despotism was underwritten by superstition. Writing on Dahomey in 1793, the Scottish surgeon, Archibald Dalzell, described the religion of the country as "a jumble of superstition and nonsense" and its government as a "perfect despotism."[13] Courtly processions and rituals at Kumasi, the capital of the Ashanti Kingdom, appeared to Thomas Bowdich to be scenes of "a horror and barbarism" out of the dark ages – "a splendid pantomime after a Gothic

[9] Eldred D. Jones, *The Elizabethan Image of Africa* (Washington, DC: Folger Books, June 1971), 11-17.

[10] Kate Lowe, "Introduction: The Black African Presence in Renaissance Europe", in T. F. Earle and K.J.P. Lowe, eds., *Black Africans in Renaissance Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 2.

[11] Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, trans. by S.G.C. Middlemore (London: Penguin Books, 1990 [1860]).

[12] William Bosman, *A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1967 [1704]), 117, 118.

[13] Archibald Dalzell, *The History of Dahomey* (London: Frank Cass, 1967 [1793]), vi, vii.

tragedy."[14] This idea of despotism came to constitute the idiom which intellectuals of Europe would adopt in their differentiation of European high civilization from what they considered to be lower forms of culture and consciousness. "I never felt so grateful for being born in a civilized country" – those were Bowdich's words as he sought to separate himself from the scenes of "medieval barbarism" that he had encountered in Ashanti.[15]

It is important to note that the language used to described African "barbarism" would remain unchanged from 1701 (Bosman) to 1819 (Bowdich), a sign that the image and idea of Africa had come to be fixed in time and space. In fact, most European discourses on Africa were unoriginal, copies or duplicates of each other. European trade agents on the West African coast all claimed to produce exact and original accounts, but in reality they quoted, recited, and recycled each other's work. Significantly, this plagiarized discourse of Africanism could make its way from the journals of slave traders and adventurers to the highest echelons of European culture, even providing leading intellectuals with a vocabulary for describing radical difference. The most prominent example of this form of cultural importation can be found in Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*. Here, Hegel characterized Africans as "magical," operating outside the domain of reflection in a world of passion, and imprisoned by "a wild sense," one that foreclosed self-consciousness and rationality. In Hegel's scheme, the African was locked in perpetual childhood, unable to achieve universal rationality and hence to apprehend or account for causal relationships.[16] Hegel's evidence, as Robert Bernasconi has shown, was drawn from the speculative and often unoriginal discourse of missionaries, travelers, and adventurers.[17]

But it was in his discourse on history that Hegel was to affirm the logic of Africanism. As is well known, Hegel's goal in the preface to the *Lectures on World History* was to exclude Africa from the movement and consciousness of history; nevertheless, he spent more time and space writing on the continent more than on any other. In fact he devoted over two thirds of his preface not to the place where the movement of history ostensibly began (Asia) or where it reached its apex (Europe), but to the continent where history is "out of the question."[18] What appears on the surface to have been an act of negation – the evacuation of Africa from the narrative of world history – would turn out to be a form of disavowal. Africa would be defined as ahistorical, yet function as the threshold of modern time. Why did an ahistorical Africa need to be inscribed and deleted at the same time? And why did Hegel spend so much time and energy denying the possibility of a historical understanding of Africa?

One can begin to find answers to these questions by noting how Hegel's account of Africa and Africans was saturated by a grammar of negations:

> The characteristic feature of the negroes is that their consciousness has not yet reached an awareness of any substantial objectivity – for example, of God or the law – in which the will of man could participate and in which he could become

[14] T. Edward Bowdich, *Mission from Cape Coast to Ashantee* (London: Frank Cass, 1966 [1819]), 285.

[15] Ibid., 227

[16] G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. by Peter C. Hodgson, trans. by R. F. Brown et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 233.

[17] Robert Bernasconi, "Hegel at the Court of the Ashanti", in Stuart Barnett, ed., *Hegel after Derrida* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 41-63.

[18] Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History: Introduction, Reason in History*, trans. from the German edition of Johannes Hoffmeister by H. B. Nisbet, with an introduction by Duncan Forbes (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 176. Further references to this edition will be inserted in the text as *LP*.

> aware of his own being. The African, in his undifferentiated and concentrated unity, has not yet succeeded in making this distinction between himself as an individual and his essential universality, so that he knows nothing of an absolute being which is other and higher than his own self is. Thus, man as we find him in Africa has not progressed beyond his immediate existence. (*LP,* 177)

As we have already noted, the "undifferentiated and concentrated unity" that Hegel refers to here was operative in the language of Africanism. Hegel's goal, however, was to endow this undifferentiated mass – this thing called Africa – with the power of fact. He recognized that most stories about Africa circulating in Europe appeared incredulous and provided readers more with "a collection of fearful details than with a determinate image or principle" (*LP,* 176). His goal was to counter these unsubstantiated stories with an exact account of Africa from which a set of principles or generalities could be drawn. Out of these generalities, the philosopher would sketch out a definition of "the universal spirit and form of the African character in the light of the particular traits which such accounts enumerate" (*LP,* 176). At the same time, however, Hegel's goal was to position Africa as the quintessential figure of difference. Here, the African character was difficult to comprehend "because it is so totally different from our own culture, and so remote and alien in relation to our own mode of consciousness" (*LP,* 176). To understand Africa, Hegel contended, analysts had to forget "all the categories which are fundamental to our own spiritual life, i.e. the forms under which we normally subsume the data which confront us; the difficulty here is that our customary preconceptions will still inevitably intrude in all our deliberations" (*LP,* 176).

If Africa had "no historical interest of its own" why had Hegel decided to locate it at the beginning of a discourse on world history? Hegel's contention was that Africa had to be explored "because it can well be taken as antecedent to our main inquiry" (*LP,* 174) and because anyone "who wishes to study the most terrible manifestations of human nature will find them in Africa" (*LP,* 190). At this point Hegel would affirm African barbarism as the essential condition for understanding European civilization:

> It is now generally accepted that man, as a human being, is free; but where this is not the case, man has value only in one or other of his particular capacities: for example, partners in marriage, relatives, neighbours, and fellow citizens are of value to one another. Among the negroes, however, even these values are scarcely present; their moral sentiments are extremely weak, or, to be more precise, they are altogether deficient. The first ethical relationship of all, that of the family, is a matter of total indifference to the negroes. Men sell their wives, parents sell their children, and children sell their parents whenever they have it in their power to do so. Since slavery is so prevalent, all those bonds of moral esteem which we cherish towards one another have disappeared, and it never occurs to the negroes to expect of others what we are entitled to demand of our fellows. (*LP,* 184)

Freedom only has substantive meaning when we recognize it in its absence. Similarly, the teleology of history could not be understood unless one was able to represent

another place, a place outside history, as its counterpoint. To initiate modern history, Hegel had to part from Africa:

> We shall therefore leave Africa at this point, and it need not be mentioned again. For it is an unhistorical continent, with no movement or development of its own. And such events as have occurred in it – i.e. in its northern region – belong to the Asiatic and European worlds. Carthage, while it lasted, represented an important phase; but as a Phoenician colony, it belongs to Asia. Egypt will be considered as a stage in the movement of the human spirit from east to west, but it has no part in the spirit of Africa. What we understand as Africa proper is that unhistorical and undeveloped land which is still enmeshed in the natural spirit, and which had to be mentioned here before we cross the threshold of world history itself. (*LP,* 190)

But like all partings, this is also a form of connection, a copula as it were. Hegel's use of the word "threshold" is pertinent here, for the term has a dual meaning: on one hand, a threshold is the point of beginning; on the other hand, it is a limit, the arch that must be reached in order for a certain effect to be achieved. Was Africa, then, a beginning or a limit?

Simon Gikandi

Creative Crossings

1. *Intersections*

Behind this issue's re-imaginings of Africa is the long history of the "idea" or ideas of Africa: the Africanisms Simon Gikandi engages with in the first part of this introduction.

What interested us in planning the issue was to see how Africa is re-imagined today through our contributors' crossings of verbal, visual, performative and digital creativity with criticism; how its many articulations in recent cultural productions, counterpoint and complicate the mediatic images of Africa that dominate the contemporary scene. It was evident, from the start, that the re-imaginings of Africa would intersect with and produce re-imaginings of other locations, including Italy and especially Naples, the geographical "home" of *Anglistica*. Crossing geopolitical and cultural borders, images, texts and sounds of diverse origin, the alternative mappings and counter-geographies that would emerge would also self-reflexively interrogate the positioning and perspective of their creators.

Fig. 1: William Kentridge, *Regali Decreti (Regali Decreti Titoli Del Codice Napoleone)*, 2009, watercolour and pastel on original document pages, 42,4 x 130,8 cm, photo John Hodgkiss, courtesy of Lia Rumma Gallery, Milan/Naples.

At about the time the first call for papers was drawn up, an exhibition by William Kentridge was on at the Capodimonte museum in Naples.[19] It was one of a series of exhibitions in which Kentridge creatively crosses areas of the globe, showing dark, silhouetted figures of migrants, nomads or refugees – "porters", indistinguishable from their burdens as they trek across maps of different countries and regions in a state of perpetual transit. Lacking any indication as to their race, age or gender, they can be located anywhere, yet the specificity – temporal and spatial – of the maps they are projected onto cast them as actors in the complicated stories and histories of their temporary homes. In *Streets of the City*, the artist was re-imagining Naples, superimposing his characteristic torn construction-paper or watercolour and pastel images of porters and horses onto 18th and 19th century maps of the city and onto copies of royal decrees and treaties from the Napoleonic era.

[19] William Kentridge, *Streets of the City (and other tapestries)/ Strade della città (e altri arazzi)*, Napoli, Museo di Capodimonte, 14 novembre – 20 gennaio, 2010 (Milano: Mondadori Electa, 2009).

Fig. 2: *Chorographia Campaniae Felicis*, 2009, construction paper, tape and pins on original etching, 38x30 cm, photo John Hodgkiss, courtesy of Lia Rumma Gallery, Milan/Naples.

Fig. 3: *Pianta della Città di Napoli*, 2008, mohair silk and embroidery, 352x462 cm, edition of 6, courtesy of Lia Rumma Gallery, Milan/ Naples.

Kentridge's images, transformed into tapestries in South Africa and transported to Italy, were hung in the site normally occupied by a series of immense sixteenth century Flemish tapestries celebrating the imperial forces' victory over Francis I at the battle of Pavia (1525), which established Spanish supremacy over Italy. Haunted, for Neapolitan viewers, by these previous representations of empire, the artist's remappings of Naples were shown alongside some of his maps of other areas, notably southern Europe, Egypt and Palestine, telling of Biblical and other dispersions and diasporas.

Considered against this backdrop, the images of shaky, overloaded vessels in difficulty on the Mediterranean that were already flooding television screens and newspapers acquire different, vaster dimensions, complicating the Afropessimism

that tended and tends to dominate the media. Kentridge's tapestries point to a global, transhistorical linkage, suggesting the transnational, planetary reach of what is frequently seen in Europe and particularly and paradoxically in Italy, despite its own long history of migration, as a local political problem whose solution depends on increasingly severe legislation and police control.

The theme of "porterage" and migrancy is a thread that intersects a number of the articles, interviews and examples of creative writing published in this issue, but although the difficulties of migrants are alluded to in several contributions (see in particular the stories and poems by Chika Unigwe, Warsan Shire and Igiaba Scego), the focus here is rather on the creative openings and crossings stemming from migration. As the grandmother insists in Gabriella Ghermandi's story, "in the terrible things that happen there is always some piece of the cloth, some fold in the fabric, that we will want to hold on to." And although she is speaking in Ethiopia, to a family that has not yet migrated, her words apply also to the experiences and culture of migrants. Counterpointing the nostalgia, loneliness and disrupted lives of some of Shire's immigrants and exiles is the grandparents' tender body-mapping in the "dark rooms" of her first poem, "Grandfather's hands". As she kisses the brown knuckles of her husband's hands, the grandmother "circled an island into his palm/ and told him which parts they would share,/ which part they would leave alone", before wetting her finger "to draw where the ocean would be/ on his wrist, kissed him there,/ named the ocean after herself." Dispossessed of their homeland, they explore new territories, using their fingers to find "places to own –/ under the tongue, collarbone, bottom lip,/ arch of foot" and claiming "whole countries/ with their mouths."

Another artistic projection of the migrant condition – inserted, like those of Kentridge, among the images that alternate on our cover and integrate its contents – is offered by Teju Cole's photograph of African traders in Rome as they flee up the Spanish Steps. The origin of the image is explained in Cole's "Angels in Winter" essay in the first volume of the *African Cities Reader*:

> At the Spanish Steps, where even in winter, tourists swarm, there were lithe African men doing a brisk trade in Prada and Gucci bags. The men were young, personable as was required for sales, but at other moments suffused with melancholy. The bags were arranged on white cloths, not at all far from the luxury shops which sold the same goods for ten or twenty times more. It was late afternoon. …
>
> There was a sudden commotion: with a great whoosh the African brothers raced up the steps, their white cloths now caught at the corners and converted into bulging sacks on their backs. One after the other, then in pairs, they fled upwards, fleet of foot, past where I stood. Tourists shrank out of their way. I spun around and pressed the shutter. Far below, cars carrying *carabinieri*, the military police, arrived, but by then (all this was the action of less than half a minute) the brothers had gone.
>
> Later, I looked at the image on my camera: the last of the angels vanishing up the long flight of steps, *a hurry through which known and strange things pass*, their white wings flashing in the setting sun.[20]

[20] Teju Cole, "Angels in Winter", *African Cities Reader 01* (Cape Town: African Centre for Cities and Chimurenga, 2009), 208-9.

Fig. 4: Teju Cole, "Angels in Winter", courtesy of the artist.

2. "A hurry through which known and strange things pass"

Cole's description of the passage of known and strange through the movement of fleeing or moving subjects may be used as a key to open up and link together the different contributions. In "Koroga: Another African Story", the article with which this issue opens, Keguro Macharia and Wambui Mwangi reflect on both "the punctuated strangeness of the familiar spaces we call 'home'," and on "the familiarity of strange sights we do not recognize, but which nevertheless assert themselves as portrayals of our home." Set up as a reaction against the stereotypical images and stories of Africa that continue to circulate, the aim of the Koroga project was to explore "new ways of creating and disseminating Africa's image-text", juxtaposing poems and images 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". From the start, the project was collective, involving a group of Kenyan artists and writers – the waKorogi – and working through and on the web. Playfully stirring together a variety of ingredients, they created mixtures that would interrupt "the authority of the single image, the singular photographer, the lone poet, and the one image-text", enabling their viewers to see with "compound eyes" and discover sites not so much of loss as of enchantment. Constantly multiplying frames, images and texts, the waKorogi work and rework their creations, taking full advantage of the flexibilities and spaces of creative identification made possible by digital technology as they "imagine and re-imagine pasts, presents and futures", disrupting the relationship between space and time. As a virtual project, Koroga is part of the "fragmented and rapidly-morphing engagements" that form, today, "the contours and contents of 'Kenyan-ness'". Behind it is the enormous popularity of web culture in their country, as evidenced by its vigorous blogosphere, the popularity of social networking and of products such as the "viral Kenyan internet sensation that was *Makmende*,[21] with its irreverent and hybrid references to global culture, seventies Kenyan kitsch and super-hero mythologies."

[21] Visible at the Just a Band website.

A creative crossing with images from elsewhere is the departure point for Chika Unigwe's story, "Hope", where news of the Haitian earthquake accompanies and interacts with the protagonist's gradual move from the emptiness of her present existence to hope for a fuller future. Inquiring into what lies behind the empty expression of one of the earthquake survivors she sees on television, she recalls the losses she too is both enduring and surviving in her life as a migrant in Belgium.

The process of "getting used to things" entails forgetting much of her previous life, and she begins to realize that "migration had the ability to change people and make them strangers even to those they were most intimate with." At night, as her dreams of Haiti move into dreams of the life she left behind in Nigeria, the scenes of havoc the earthquake has produced trigger memories of the destruction of her family's home in Jos during the religious riots. Dreaming "in a new place" is always an intricate process: the old dreams still remain, interacting with the different fragmented and fragmenting modalities of the new, as Ingrid de Kok suggests at the end of "Shards":

> It is not as if old dreams depart
> like foot soldiers recalled to another front
> while wives knit socks, roll bandages
>
> but new dreams do sunder in a different way,
> break into shards – sliver of moon, arrow, ankle bone,
> stone rattle, whitened horn.

Another "strangeness of home" appears in Serena Guarracino's study of the "dynamics of familiarity and estrangement" in *U-Carmen eKhayelitsha*, where Bizet's opera is sung in Xhosa and its original setting and interplay between different ethnicities and life styles are replaced by scenarios of a South African township. The 'foreign', African sound of Xhosa displaces the non South African audiences from their habitual locations, positioning them in a musical and cultural elsewhere. Bereft of the security afforded by classical music, they are forced into a condition of cultural migrancy by the "postcolonial ear" or "point of hearing" adopted in the film.

U-Carmen's crossings of linguistic, geographical and musical borders in Guarracino's rendering is followed by the visual and performative cross-border movements described in Alessandra De Angelis's study of recent work by the South African artist, Penny Siopis. Japanese erotic wood-block prints, paintings by Claude Monet and John Everett Millais, but also reflections on the fate of "African migrants drowning – thrown overboard by traffickers in their bid to get to Europe",[22] become the starting point for portrayals of scenes of sexual violence and of processes of flux and flow. Through the unpredictable interactions on the artist's canvas of liquid ink and viscous glue, what ensues is "a kind of dance, a perpetual movement across borders, mediums and visions through which choreographies of colors emerge, and virtual, hitherto unknown possibilities are disclosed".

A rather different crossing appears in Siopis' earlier work, "Dora and the Other Woman", discussed in the last part of De Angelis's study. Here Freud's Dora[23] and Sarah Baartman come together to form a meta-artistic portrait of the artist herself, depicting her desire to avoid – but at the same time display and interrogate – her own participation in the "scopic obsession" with the body of the "Other Woman" that constructed and continues to construct Baartman's story.[24]

[22] Penny Siopis, "On a Knife Edge: Penny Siopis in Conversation with Sarah Nuttall", *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, XXV (2009), 100.

[23] Sigmund Freud, *Fragments of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*, Standard Edition, vol.7 (1905 [1901]), 1–122.

[24] As in Abdellatif Khechiche's 2010 film, *Vénus Noire*.

While Siopis' pastel foregrounds the ambivalence of the white artist in her self-reflexive reworking of Baartman, Nelisiwe Xaba translates her story "into an autobiographic vision of the black African woman's body today, caught in between invisibility and hypervisibility". New ways of "re-think[ing] the genre of Africa, especially the image of women in Africa" are also examined in the Koroga project: Macharia and Mwangi refer explicitly to Baartman in their discussion of how attention to the "pornographic" and "medicalized" female body in poems by Stephen Derwent Partington and Phyllis Muthoni "suture[s] two discourses key to understanding the production of African women in colonial and postcolonial imaginations". Xaba seeks to go beyond such images. Through her dancing, she "challenges and 'defers' the audience's gaze, whether black or white, European or African, directing it towards other visions and re-visions", as Annalisa Piccirillo observes in her introduction to the interview, carried out at a dance festival in Italy. This was Xaba's first Italian performance of *The Venus*, combining two solo pieces, *They Look at Me and That is All They Think* and *Sarkozy says NoN to the Venus*, commissioned by the Musée du Quai Branly in 2009. More overtly political, *Sarkozy says NoN…* is also "a comment on European immigration laws and policies, which have become increasingly anti-African". Xaba's intention, as she herself explains, was not only to tell Baartman's story, but to use her own history as a performer "who always has to go out and perform in foreign places". What does it mean "to produce a contemporary African dance piece for/on white stages in European festivals", where African dancers and choreographers are located in a special, separate "African contemporary box" as in the *African Crossroads* section of the Dance Umbrella festival? "What is 'contemporary African'", Xaba asks. "Does the color of my skin make my work 'contemporary African'?"

3. *Dialogue debate dissent*

"Dialogue debate dissent" is the section of *Anglistica* reserved for interviews – dialogues between interviewer and interviewee, whether or not they include debate and dissent. In this issue the dialogue extends beyond the interactive space of the interview to include contacts and exchanges between different forms of art. Photography, fiction and architecture come together in Paola Splendore's interview with Ivan Vladislavić about *TJ/Double Negative*, a joint publication that brings together Goldblatt's photographs of Johannesburg and Vladislavić's novel about a young photographer. Poetry speaks to photography in Karen Press's engagement with three of Goldblatt's other images in "Monument to the South African Republic (on some photographs by David Goldblatt)", while the photographs themselves reflect on graveyard monuments and inscriptions. Choreography, dance, theatre, visual art and costumes interrelate in the work and words of Xaba in her interview with Piccirillo, discussed above, while crime fiction, police reports and the dialogues and stories of psychoanalysis are behind the investigations of the New South Africa presented in Agustín Reyes-Torres' interview with the popular Afrikaans writer, Deon Meyer, on *Dead Before Dying*.

All five contributions address the problem of the archive, directly or indirectly engaging with the poetics and politics of the rebuilding of the South African nation expressed in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and in the debate around the therapeutic value of its memory work. But at the same time their reflections reach to a wider horizon of sense. As Press so beautifully expresses it, looking at Goldblatt's portrayal of a "weathered, semi-literate scrap of older time" or "a bare gravel patch" on the ground, "The long dry grass collects our history/ and every few years burns it off/ in a frenzy of memory". A cycle that is perpetually renewed as the grass grows again, "long and soft and ready to catch" a smouldering cigarette stub, beer bottle splinters and the new stories that lie behind them, "and burn fast, and lay itself down as ash over the past."

4. Intersecting Past and Present, Texts and Myths, People and Places

Vladislavić's practice of writing "within the magnetic field of another body of work and trying to create an interesting interplay between the two" resonates with several of the other contributions to this issue, starting with the Koroga project but including also "Door into the Dark", Teju Cole's hitherto unpublished "fictionalized essay". Cole's story-essay opens with a dialogue with – and about – Ryszard Kapuściński's account of his time in Nigeria[25] and the memories and "other African stories" they trigger in his parents and, on a different, self-reflexive level, in his writer-protagonist:

> Even before I brought my parents and Kapuściński together, I had been wondering about the narrator of my novel-in-progress, a young psychiatrist named Julius. How would I bring his grandparents together with my own? I had to decide how permeable to make the boundaries between my fiction and the faraway truths out of which they were growing.[26]

[25] Ryszard Kapuściński, *The Soccer War* (London: Granta and Penguin, 1990).

[26] The novel in progress Cole refers to is his recently published *Open City* (New York: Random House, 2011).

As he listens to his mother's memories, the imaginific language they inspire in her brings to his "mind's ear" the words of a Middle English lyric, like "the sweet ping of a lock springing open": a moment of recognition he desires to grasp. In his journey into his parents' fading memories, moments such as this may enable him to fix "that thing that was slipping from one generation to another, assuming a different shape in each, from grandparents to parents to children, across oceans and countries".

Cole's urge to "hold the moment" recalls the definition of photography Vladislavić borrows from another writer to describe the work of David Goldblatt, but also his own narrative strategies:

> Geoff Dyer uses a wonderful phrase – 'the ongoing moment' – to describe the status of a photograph. Every photo is a cross-section through time; it freezes a moment, which then stays with us, the viewers, in a sort of perpetual present. When I look at David's work, it is extraordinary how much life, how much history folds out of one of those cross-sections. … All these still

> moments, placed side by side, read one after the other, manage to set time in motion. The relationships between the photos, the changes or continuities they reveal when they are compared are just as important as the individual elements. I think I pursue a somewhat similar strategy in my work, placing texts side by side and allowing them to generate meaning through the ways they argue or agree with one another, rather than unfolding a seamless, linear narrative.[27]

[27] Vladislavić is referring to Geoff Dyer, *The Ongoing Moment* (London: Little, Brown, 2005).

Rather than texts that "argue or agree with one another", in Chris Abani's early novel, *Graceland*, it is two apparently irreconcilable myths that come into contact, producing "a radical re-imagination of the Nigerian postcolony". Madhu Krishnan sees the 16 year-old protagonist, a would-be dancer named after Elvis Presley, as a modern *ogbanje*, intersecting the traditional mythological igbo border-crosser, migrating to and fro between birth, death and rebirth, and between the human and spiritual worlds, with his version of the American dream. The presence of the *ogbanje* suggests "the fragmentation of individuals and communities in the postcolonial era", allowing the novel to engage with "the complexities of identity-formation and communal belonging in contemporary Nigerian society". Although it is "permeated by mythological significance", *Graceland* is "simultaneously sceptical of that very mythology." Self-reflexively highlighting its "undecidability and instability" as it critiques the very notion of mythologizing, the novel ends in the liminal "no place" of an airport waiting lounge: Oke, renamed "Redemption" and thus the bearer of a borrowed identity, is preparing to leave Nigeria for America, the country of his ambivalent and probably unrealizable dreams.

Creative mixings and crossings occur, not surprisingly, also in the field of language. The narrator in Cole's "Door into the Dark" comments on the difference between his own fluent but limited Yoruba and the "luxurious texture" of his parents' speech, which becomes his "access to things past." When she speaks of "old things", his mother's language takes on a metaphorical, poetic density, even though she is using an admittedly rare but also "normal locution, one that was comfortably nestled within the language."

For the protagonists of fiction written in Italian by authors of Somali and Ethiopian origin, the mixed space of their languages is more troubled. Ghermandi's story of a young girl in Ethiopia in the 70s, tells of how the changes introduced by the new government after the military coup of 1974 affect even the language that is spoken. Along with the Russian gymnastics displays, piano concerts and military parades that replace the American television series the family had enthusiastically watched each week, and with the removal from the market of "anything that could pollute the minds of the young. No more toys, cookies, candies, or chocolates", a new vocabulary and new meanings are introduced:

> In the gaps left free by everything that was being cancelled even from the simple world of ordinary conversation new words were being inserted.
>
> "Imperialist and capitalist": what had to be definitively eliminated from the country, in every possible shape and form.

> "The people's well-being": what had to be created or strengthened.
> "Ideology": a big word, smelling of ideas, reasoning, squaring off and hard lines.
> "Protecting ideology": soldiers on every corner of the city, neighbourhood control centres, check points and curfew from seven p.m. to six a.m.

As the new government's ideological stitching loosens, Ghermandi's narrator and her family adjust to the situation. Following the teaching of the grandmother, they manage to "find a fold in it for [themselves]", threads with which to "weave a piece of cloth, arranging its woof and warp according to [their] own desires". But for migrants and exiles the situation is more complex. Zuhra, Igiaba Scego's lively Romanesco and Italian speaking Somali protagonist, lives in Italy. Despite her Italian citizenship, she has an insecure purchase not only on her condition as a citizen, which not even her passport seems able to vouch for, but on the linguistic homes or landscapes in which she finds herself. Thus she "stumbles around uncertainly in the confused version" of her mother tongue, Somali, using "twisted" words, "polluted" sounds and with her "other mother peep[ing] out" in every conversation, word, sigh: "The Italian I grew up with and sometimes hated because it made me feel a foreigner." There is no way she can keep the borders separate between the two: "when I speak one of them, the other turns up impudently, an uninvited guest. There are perennial short circuits in my mind. I don't talk, I mix."

Zuhra's involuntary mixings could be seen as a form of *Fra-intendimenti*, the title of Kaha Aden's short story collection reviewed in this issue by Alessandra Marino, and thus as another expression of the "precariousness of intercultural communication as a border practice." As Marino explains, *fraintendimenti* – literally "misunderstandings" – "refers both to the migrants' condition of living in-between (*fra*) languages and discourses (*intendimenti*), and to the risk of failure that is embedded in the exercise of cultural negotiation." A risk that is visible also in the last of Shire's poems, expressing the alienation of a Somali exile in Britain who "can't compete" with the home of her loved one: while her experience of Somalia is indirect, vicarious and imperfect, her new home, the London she identifies with and considers hers, "can never be enough" for her companion.

The Africas imagined and re-imagined in this issue look both out and in as they engage in their constantly shifting and proliferating creative crossings. In "Lorha", another of the artworks whose alternating presence on our home page is activated by our readers' navigations, the South African artist Erika Hibbert re-imagines her elder daughter through multiple, variant replicas of Lorha's upper body. Seated together on a sofa, absorbed in the barely visible, ghostly laptop posed precariously on the girl's stretched out leg, their fingers delve delicately into the tangled strips of printed paper released by the computer, playing on them and with them, while strips of printed words curl round and over the contours of their hands and faces, drawing them anew with streaks of light and colour.

Finally, in "Cape to Rio", Hibbert's second image, the grave, beautiful face of a young African woman looks out from Africa across the ocean, while white, migrating, peace-bearing birds fly to and fro across her face and across this new/old mapping of the world.

Jane Wilkinson

Fig. 5. Erika Hibbert, "Lorha", 2010, charcoal on paper, courtesy of the artist.

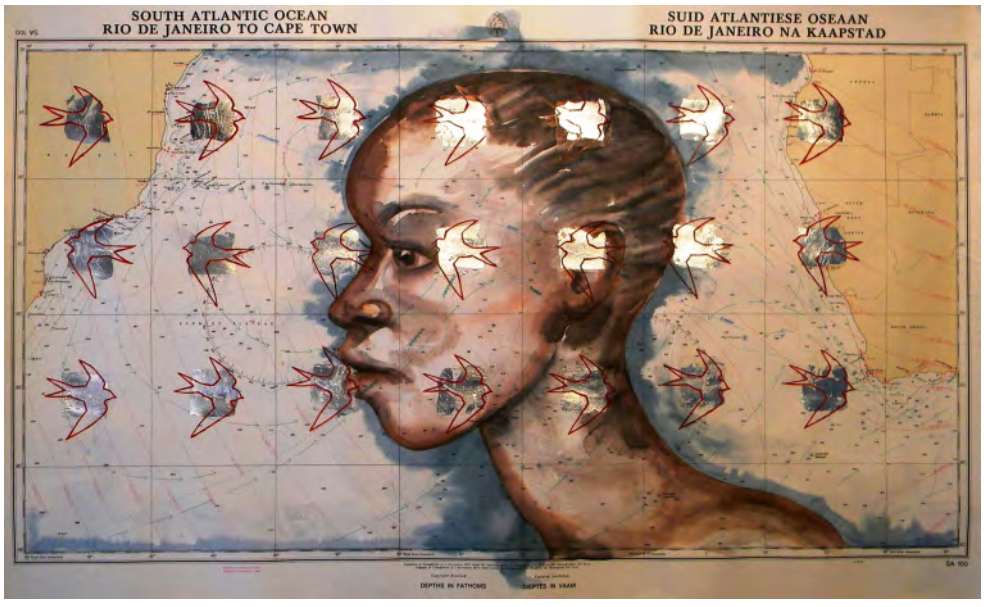


Fig. 6. Erika Hibbert, "Cape to Rio", 2010, ink, enamel paint, silver leaf on map, 955x590 mm, courtesy of the artist.

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.

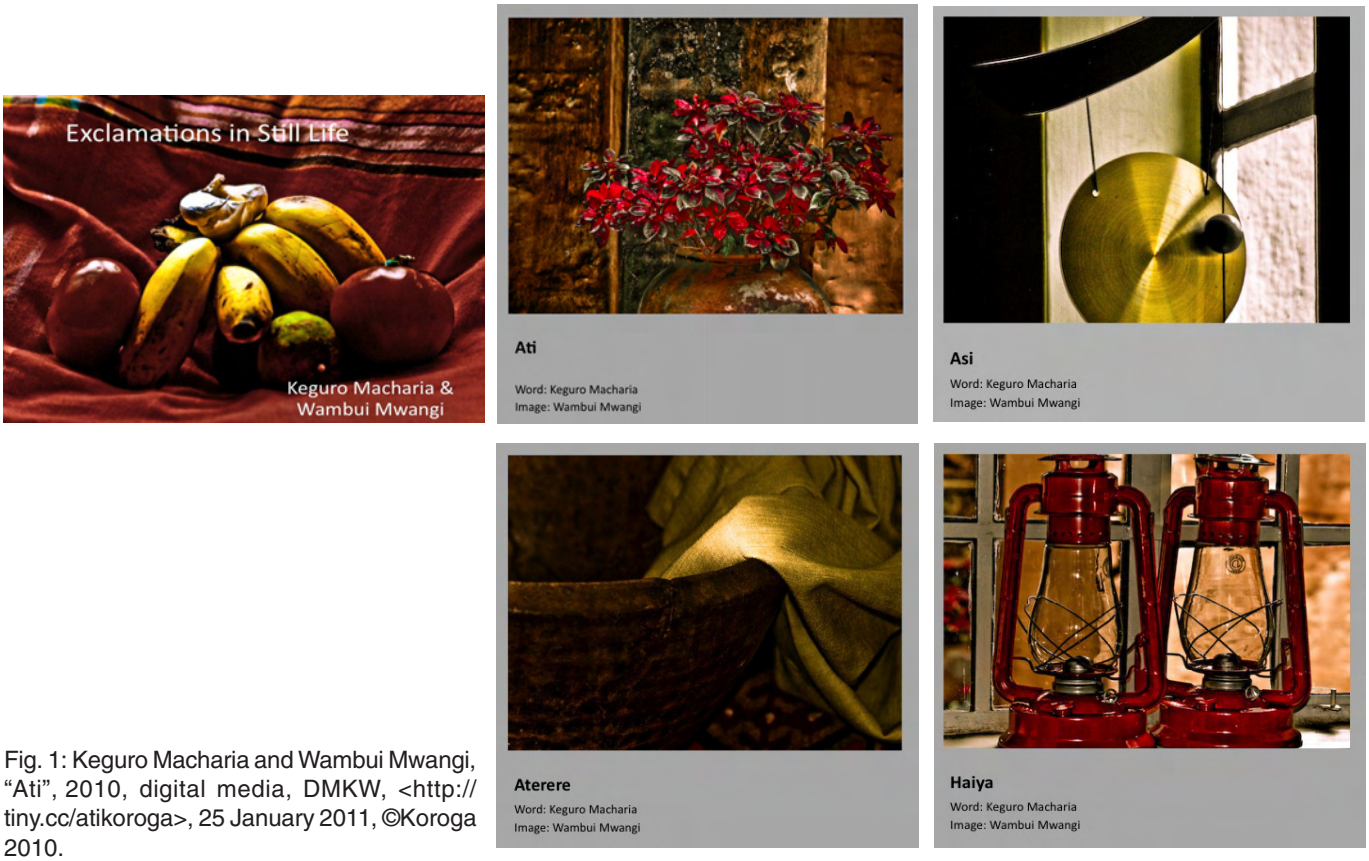


Fig. 1: Keguro Macharia and Wambui Mwangi, "Ati", 2010, digital media, DMKW, <http://tiny.cc/atikoroga>, 25 January 2011, ©Koroga 2010.

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":

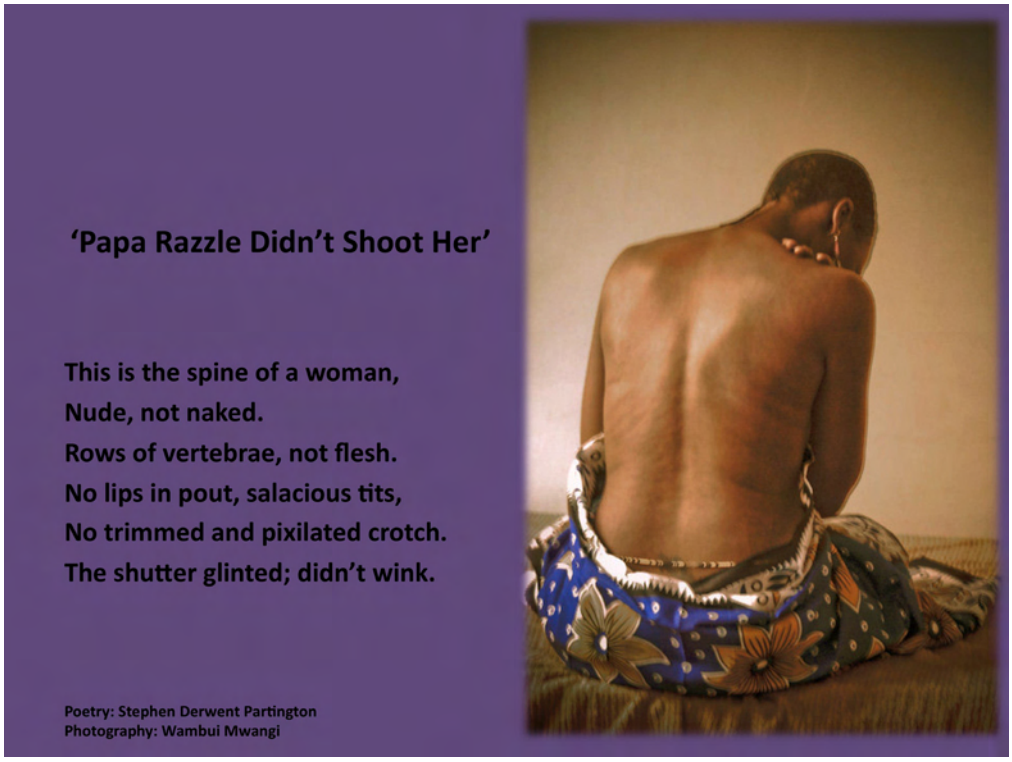


Fig. 3: Stephen Derwent Partington and Wambui Mwangi, "Papa Razzle Didn't Shoot Her", 2010, digital media, *DMKW*, <http://tiny.cc/paparazkoroga>, 25 January 2011, ©Koroga 2010.

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."

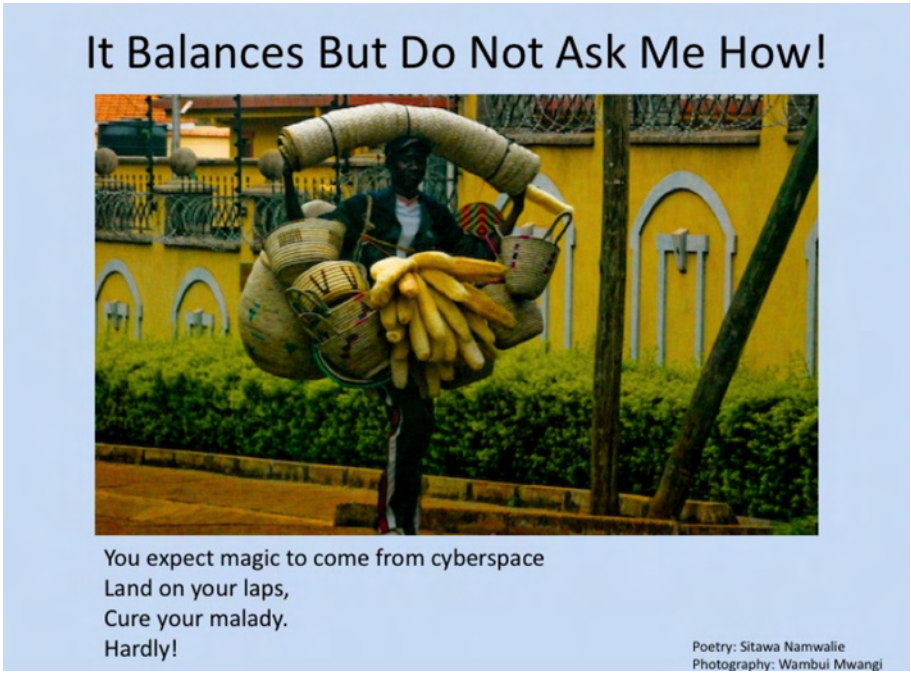


Fig. 4: Sitawa Namwalie and Wambui Mwangi, "It balances but do not ask me how!", 2010, digital media, DMKW, <http://tiny.cc/balancekoroga>, 25 January 2011, ©Koroga 2010.

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:

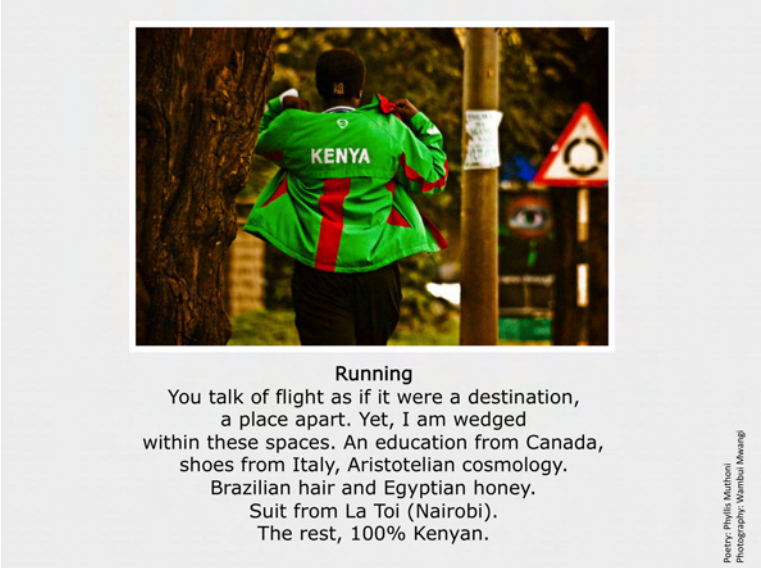


Fig. 5: Phyllis Muthoni and Wambui Mwangi, "Running", 2010, digital media, DMKW, <http://tiny.cc/runkoroga>, 25 January 2010, ©Koroga 2010.

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:

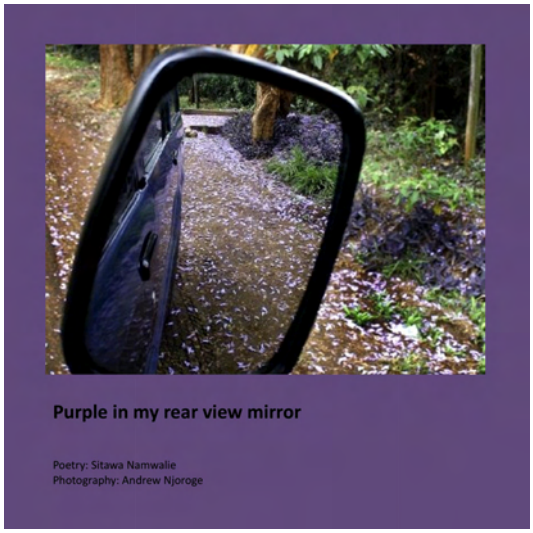


Fig. 6: Sitawa Namwalie and Andrew Njoroge, "Purple in My Rear View Mirror", 2010, digital media, DMKW, <http://tiny.cc/purplekoroga>, 25 January 2011, ©Koroga, 2010.

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:

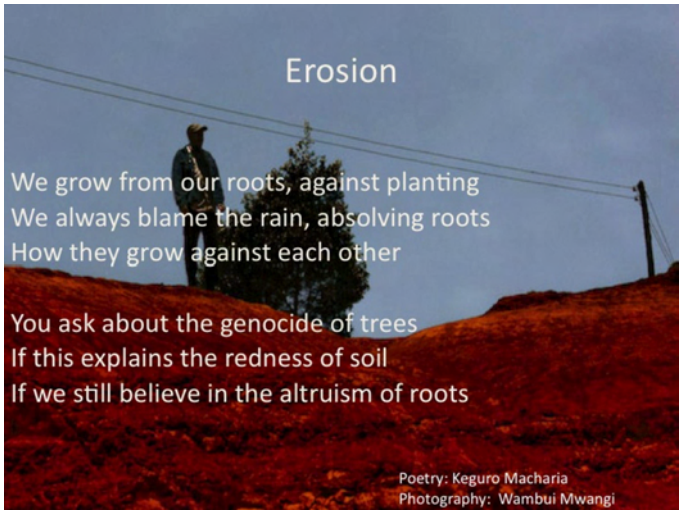


Fig. 7: Keguro Macharia and Wambui Mwangi, "Erosion", 2010, digital media, DMKW <http://tiny.cc/erosionkoroga>, 25 January 2011, ©Koroga 2010.

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:

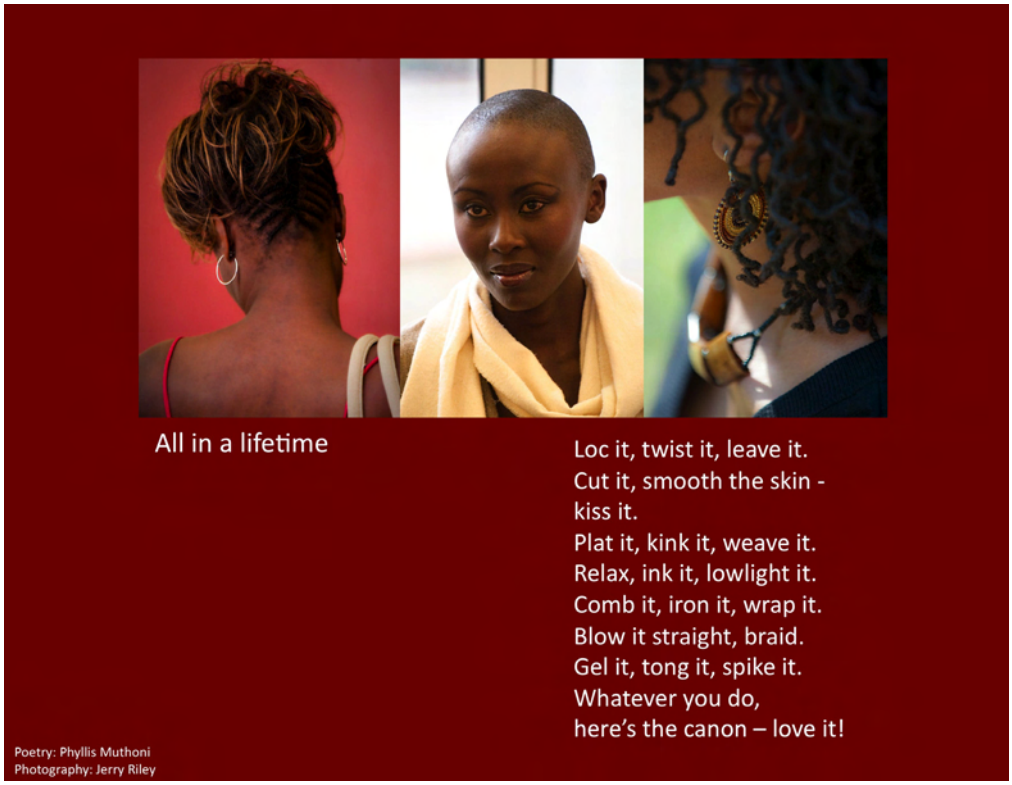


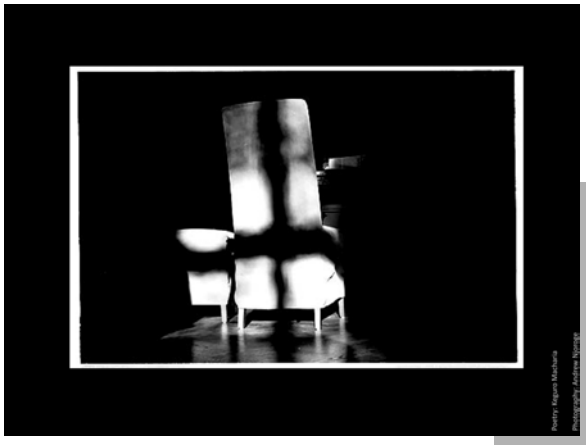
Fig. 8: Phyllis Muthoni and Jerry Riley, "All in a Lifetime", 2010, digital media, DMKW, <http://tiny.cc/lifetimekoroga>, 25 January 2011, ©Koroga 2010.

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.



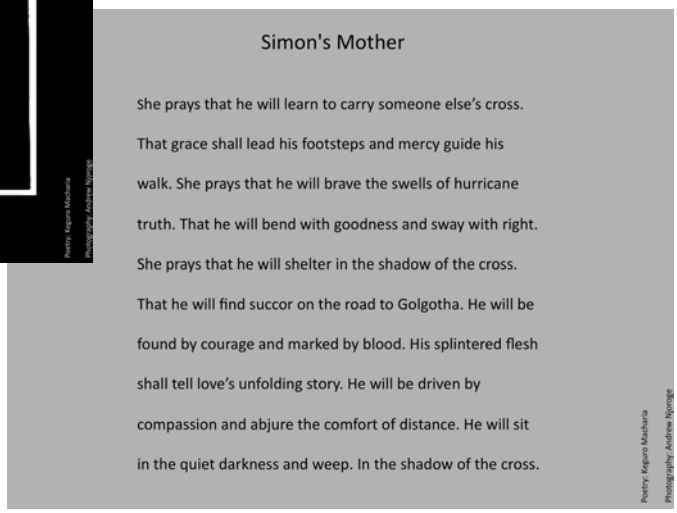


Fig. 9a-9b: Keguro Macharia and Andrew Njoroge, "Simon's Mother", 2010, digital media, DMKW, <http://tiny.cc/simonkoroga> and <http://tiny.cc/simonbkoroga>, 25 January 2011, ©Koroga 2010.

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.

Chika Unigwe

Hope

Maybe it was seeing the pictures of the Haitian earthquake on TV that caused something to snap in her. Perhaps it was particularly the image of a woman whose permed hair was matted in white dust and her face was empty. Her eyes looking out at the world were dead. It was easy to see that even though she had survived, it was not because she had willed it and that she did not care much what happened to her now. It was as if she was asking, I have survived, now what? That picture haunted Prosperous all through the night and made her feel sick so that she had to call Joke in the morning and tell her sorry, she could not come in to work. She sat in bed thinking of her dead father and wondering what the Haitian woman lost in the quake, what made her so unwilling to rejoice in her having been saved. She missed her father now with a new ache. If only he had been saved. She missed his voice.

They had seen the news together, she and Agu, her husband. But Agu coped with bad news better. He had shrugged the news, the picture of the woman, all the other images of the survived and the dead, off his capable shoulders and had cycled off to work. When he came back in the early morning, Prosperous was still – unusually – still in bed. She could not tell him what ailed her. She had no fever. No headache. Nothing she could easily identify.

"What is wrong?" he asked.

A general feeling of unease.

She saw the hope which lit up his eyes, heard the click he made in his mind as to what sort of illness she suffered from, but pretended not to notice. Instead of lying down to sleep, like he usually did after work, he let her lie in bed and went to the kitchen. She could hear him rattling pots and pans in the kitchen. Once, she heard a pot cover drop and she flinched. Agu was clumsy in the kitchen. She wondered what he was doing. He came back a few minutes later bearing a tray. "Tea for you," he said, placing the tray on the bedside table. He had sliced bread on her favourite trellis patterned plate , a big mug of tea and a jar of butter. Tears sprang to her eyes. She had forgotten how thoughtful he could be. You live here, she thought, and you get used to a lot of things: eating cornflakes in cold milk; missing your family; being followed around in shops. But the flip side of getting used to things is forgetting things you used to know. How could she have forgotten that Agu used to bring her breakfast in bed when they were newly married? Or that sometimes, when her backache became unbearable, he would give her a massage? Rubbing her waist with shea butter until she told him it was enough. Nowadays when he touched her, it was in anger. Even their lovemaking had become aggressive and she was always glad when it was over so that she could empty her sadness into rolls of tissue while sitting on the toilet. Of all the things she was told about Europe before

she came, nobody had thought to tell her that migration had the ability to change people and make them strangers even to those they were most intimate with.

He spread butter on a slice of bread, dipped it in tea to soften it and fed her, a bit at a time as if he were feeding a little bird. The same way her mother had fed her as a child whenever she was ill. It touched her now that he remembered. "Thank you," she whispered, tears choking her throat. How easy it was to forget, she thought again. How unfair I've been, she said to herself, as if the forgetting had been a conscious act on her part. As if Agu changing in the first place, had nothing to do with her forgetting what it had been like at the beginning, when they still lived in Nigeria , and had no idea that love was not always enough.

He sat beside her, feeding her until the four slices of bread were finished. Gently, he wiped her mouth with a paper tissue and asked her to lie down and rest. He would sleep on the sofa. She felt guilty. "No, sleep beside me," she said, feeling a tenderness she had not felt in a long time for her husband.

She did not know how long she slept or how many dreams she drifted in and out of because all the dreams were versions of one another. In all of her dreams, she saw rubbles of buildings and heard voices shouting from beneath the rubbles. She knew she was in Haiti, even before she saw the woman whose photograph had haunted her. But the last dream she had before she woke up, she saw a baby lying on the ruins of a house, surrounded by corpses and lifting a chubby, stubby hand to her.

Prosperous woke up crying and noticed for the first time that the radio was still on. The BBC was giving updates on the Haitian disaster. Thousands feared dead, a rescue here and there. People roaming the streets, too scared to go into houses. She wanted to switch off the radio but lacked the strength to get out of her bed and walk to where the radio stood on the floor in front of the clothes cupboard. The room was small; it had always seemed to her like she was sleeping in a shoe box but now she wanted the empty spaces filled. The empty space beside her on the bed, the standing room only space between the bed and the cupboard, the space between the bed and the door which led to a tiny corridor. She wanted all those spaces full, full, full.

The next day, she still felt unwell but she could no longer stand the guilt eating her up. Agu handling her like an egg, saying he could stay home if she wanted him to, and if he lost his job, there would be other ones. He would clean, he said and it pierced her heart. She knew how he felt about working as a cleaner. He used to say that he had not spent years at the University of Nigeria getting a degree in Finance only to end up cleaning. Europe might force him to do things he never thought he would – like work in a bread factory as a labourer – but not clean like a woman.

"I feel better already," she said. She willed some strength into her legs and got out of bed.

She called Joke and asked if she could come in and clean to make up for not coming in the day before? If she went early enough, she could still make it to her second cleaning job. "No problem," Joke said. She could come.

She went home after work and steeped herself into her normal routine. She cooked for Agu even though he asked her to take it easy, not to overwork herself, his eyes gleaming with a hope she refused to acknowledge. Could he not see that they could not raise children here? Where would they put a baby? In the bedside drawer? Could he not see that she too felt humiliated earning her keep cleaning out toilets and emptying dustbins with soiled tampons? She with her own university degree, and who had worked in a bank where she was called Madam?

On Sunday, he woke up as soon as she did and kept her company in the kitchen as she made him akara, his eyes following her every move as if he was soaking her in. While she fried the bean cake, he held her around her waist, a palm resting gently on her stomach. It was like they were starting their courtship all over again. She expected him to start serenading her again with her favourite blues tune like he had when they met. She hoped he would not because she did not think she could take it. The weight of the guilt would tip her over.

The house seemed empty, even when their friends came as they usually did on Sunday afternoon. They talked about the earthquake and the missing president and John made jokes about Nigeria being ruled by a ghost. "Where is he if he's alive then?" He shouted. "He is floating and ruling from beyond the grave, I tell you!"

"He spoke to the BBC," Emmanuel said. "Didn't you hear him on the radio?"

"I heard a voice on the radio," John said. "Who says the voice is who he claims to be? Did they show him actually talking? No. And that my friends, is suspicious. You know what my middle name is? Ahu ekwe. I'm not into believing without seeing! No fucking way!"

Agu was loud and effusive, darting from conversation to conversation, not really contributing to any. He was like an excited child at a birthday party. A few times, he called out to Prosperous to come and sit with the men in the sitting room. "No," Prosperous said. "The food in the kitchen won't cook itself if I sat with you here. There's still a lot to be done or else none of us will eat today." She avoided his eyes.

"Why are you acting like a newly married man?" John asked. "Leave the woman with her fellow women in the kitchen. I am sure they are gossiping about us." He laughed out long and loud.

In the kitchen, Anwuli complained that there was no room to lay the plates while she dished out the soup which was ready. There were plates of food on every available space. Akara from this morning when she had made too many, the rice she had made after the akara because she did not want to face Agu at the breakfast table, constantly asking how she was feeling and blinding her with the look in his eyes, and then the plantain she had fried just because. "Who's going to eat all this food? Are you having a party?" Anwuli asked. "Why make all this food?"

"I just felt like cooking," Prosperous answered. She did not tell her that she had been out all week, buying things to fill the house because she could suddenly not stand

to see it looking empty. She knew Anwuli wouldn't understand, nor would Oge whom she noticed now was observing the top of her fridge, her eyes reduced to slits.

On top of the fridge, the bowl of plastic fruit which had pride of place had been moved to create room for six miniature angels with red plastic hearts that popped out every fifteen minutes. The angels had rosy cheeks and long, blonde hair. They looked like little children with too long hair. Behind the plastic angels was a chandelier placed on its side. She had bought the angels and the chandeliers from a junk market she had stumbled upon. Nothing recommended them but their price (in the case of the angels) and their inherent ability to fill up spaces (in the case of the chandelier). The chandelier had glass drops shaped like diamonds and the drops hung over the fridge like magnified tear drops.

"What's that doing there?" Oge asked pointing to the chandelier.

"Oh, that. It's for the bedroom. Re-decorating."

She felt the word stand between her and Oge like a huge wall. It was not often that she lied to her friends. But how could she tell about the fire in her stomach which wore her out and the dreams she had and the sudden urge to fill up her house with things. She had thought that the more she filled the house, the milder the fire would become but nothing helped. The fire made her lethargic, so that even though she told Agu she was fine, he still constantly asked her how she felt and warned her to take things easy. Her legs felt heavy, as if they were retaining water and this made her steps sluggish.

"Maybe we should see a doctor?" Agu told her the next day, saying it like he was asking a question, the way he spoke when he was worried. His voice was gentle. It had lost the gruffness it had acquired from living here in Belgium, working in a bread factory all night, getting in only in the early hours of the morning to sleep, building up a new life on the ruins of the one that they had lost in Jos: their home, their careers blown up in the three days of religious riots that sent southerners scuttling back to the south of the country, and this new life constantly being reflected against the old and always, naturally, falling short. Returning was no option. ("To what?" Agu asked. "We lost our home, our jobs. Have we forgotten how much we paid the middleman to bring us here?" She had to agree that he had a point, but it did not stop the shouted arguments that once brought a neighbour at the door to ask could they please keep it down or he would have to call the police?)

"No," she shook her head. "There's nothing wrong with me. Nothing at all."

Again that hopeful look in his eyes. She avoided his eyes. Yes, she could see from the way he had been lately, that the old Agu, the Agu of Jos, was lurking behind the surly, given-to-fits-of temper man his life here had turned him to. But hope was not so easily rekindled. It would take a miracle and she did not have the temperament to believe in miracles. Not after everything that had happened to them. Not just yet. Besides, she had changed too.

Agu had to step over the basket in front of the door to get out. The basket was not the only new addition to the room. But Agu had not said a word about any of

them. It was almost as if he thought it was normal that she should cluster the house with the this and that's she bought almost every day. He indulged her even in this irrational buying spree. The arguments had stilled. There was a second-hand fan beside the bed, even though it was the middle of winter and it had snowed non-stop for a week. There was a rusting metal coat rack shaped like a man. From her bed at night, she imagined the coat rack was a human being and sometimes she spoke to it. She knew there was something incredibly sad about what she was doing, but she felt hopeless to stop it. She saw her life unspooling and she being unable to do anything at all about it. Maybe, she thought, this was how it felt to die. The unspooling was perhaps the prelude to something more tragic and final.

Her father had asked them to settle in Enugu, why move continents to start afresh? Enugu was far away enough, they could find new jobs. Moving to Europe had not been her choice. It had been Agu's, and she would never forgive him for that. Nigeria had failed him, he said. And his contact had assured him that in Belgium he could easily get a job, save up enough to return to Nigeria a wealthy man. "Do you not want to live abroad, Prosperous?" He had asked her when he saw the doubt in her eyes. Yes, she did. But... "No buts," he said. Now her father was dead and she had not been able to go for his burial, because of complications with their immigration status. That had hurt her as much as his death, the inability to take a final long look at him, to say her goodbyes. To compensate for not being there, her sister had sent her photographs from the burial: a colour photograph of her father lying in state in a satin lined coffin. The coffin looked comfortable, snug but her father looked like a distressed man. It did not look like he was at peace. His face looked drained. It had the dry look of smoked fish. She had smelt it expecting the smell she had not completely forgotten to waft back at her. It was a shock, seeing him like that. There was nothing left of the man who had taken his family to Sunday lunches at Hotel Presidential. Pancreatic cancer discovered late had not even given him enough time to seek any form of treatment. The day she and Agu left for Belgium, her father had hugged her and said "See you," as if she were not journeying to the other side of the world, but instead was just popping out to buy a can of tomatoes from Property's store across the road. Now, she would never see him again. The second photograph her sister sent her was of their mother in a widow's black outfit. Her scarf had slipped and it was easy to see that her hair was completely shaven as prescribed by tradition. She felt sorry for her mother who looked like a lost child in the photograph. How would it be for her if she lost the Agu she was newly regaining? The sadness of her father's death became new and followed her around now too.

While she dragged herself around Joke's dusting the pictures in the sitting room, Joke had the TV on and so when the news came on that a pregnant woman who had survived the earthquake but had been too weak to give birth had been delivered of a healthy baby boy after two hours of surgery, she saw it. When the baby was shown in close up, scrunched up eyes and a mouth which pouted as if he was

sucking teeth, his head perfectly, wonderfully round, it was like something warm and bright climbed into her and nestled in the place where the fire had been. Everything that was unspooling inside of her stopped and started reversing their movement. She knew instinctively that this was what it felt like to be hopeful. The new mother was shown, tired and destitute but with a smile that enveloped everything else. Her eyes shone like Agu's had started to. Oge thought that if that baby were hers she would have named him Hope. Hope. The one thing she never thought she would ever get back. And now she had, she remembered other things she had forgotten. Like how her grandmother always said that God chased away flies from the cow with no tail. And she remembered that long ago, she had wanted Agu's babies. They had made plans. But those plans had gone with the fire that ate up their home, marked out as a southern home. She remembered the names they had chosen for their unborn children, and the room they had marked out as the nursery. And once she remembered, that memory chased away the more recent memories that had robbed her of sleep.

She dragged the vacuum cleaner into the bathroom to clean it out. She emptied the blister of pink pills she carried with her down the tub. Then she scrubbed the tub with a renewed vigour as if The Pill left stains on tubs. When she got home, Agu was still sleeping. She stood and watched him for a while and then she dug out blisters and blisters of pills, like the ones she had thrown down the tub from a handbag at the back of her side of the cupboard, hidden under a barrage of lingerie. She carried them into the toilet and emptied them all in the sink. Then she grabbed a pair of scissors and snipped the empty packet into tiny pieces and threw them into the air like confetti at a wedding party.

In the morning when Agu came back from work, she went into the bedroom after him. This time when they made love, she knew that they both wished for the same thing, the fulfillment of which Agu was already sure was coming to pass. She knew this too: Hope was taking root and spreading its branches and she and Agu would recover what they had lost. And that maybe love was indeed enough.

Ingrid de Kok

"Histoplasmosis" and Other Poems

Histoplasmosis

If after a few weeks you find yourself coughing,
your chest laced in a corset of steel,
tell your doctor you were here.
Tell him about the bats, their investment in the dark,
their droppings spongy fudge
which you probably tramped on in the cave,
the spores you may have breathed
now inhabiting your lung tissue
taking all your breath
for the growing fungus
inside you.

Don't panic. There is medication for this
if you reach an informed doctor early enough.
Your airways can be cleared again,
lungs restored to normal size.
But remember, a bat flew into your body
out of a cave. Your body is now a cave.
Your breath is the way in and out of the cave
its dark entrance the same as
its only exit.[1]

[1] First published in *Illuminations*, 25 (Summer 2009).

Donkey cart

At rush hour down Prince George Drive,
chain link between the City and the Flats
(not renamed yet to show who's boss),
a donkey cart and its travail of wood
creaks along, at a slow steady pace
driven by two men, brothers it seems,
their cheekbones are related.
Wiry and thin, they refuse to give way
to cars shooting by like guns for hire
and they look straight ahead
as if they own the road or one unlike it –
a rural track in a flat bosomed land –
or as if they own nothing,
neither this place nor that, and so do not
have to give way to traffic here or there
but just keep moving on.

A man limbers up to the lights
in shiny shorts, flexing oiled muscles.
He frowns at the mothy grey donkey
which blocks his way, slows his century.
But it knows about imprecations,
groaning wood, clattering tin,
and does not turn its head. And the brothers,
whose knowledge is donkeys, deliveries,
the need to get off the road
by sunset, travel on in the cart
at an uninterruptible pace,
as runners and cars pass by.

Notation

Late at night, the promised sputter of life,
birth-release, birth-cry,
seems just an imaginary oasis,
a mirror on the horizon,
and she another camel of indifference.

Could it be that inside her pregnant self
an emerald dial on the body's alarm clock
gives signals and direction,
flashes a semaphore of comfort
to the silent unborn in the filtered dark?

At the beginning, the stillness inside was
a candle wick in a vast station,
one waiting passenger fast asleep.
Then her body donned an apron.
Its big pockets muffled sound.

Later there was muzzled movement
as mute life surfed the veins,
breathing underwater,
soundlessly splashing,
a surfboard's curve against the belly's skin.

Finally a heavy counterpane
lies on her body implacably.
Can life, can song, break from this weight?
Oh becalmed boat in an unsounded sea
will some small body ever gasp or shout?

Shards

Near the Cradle of Humankind
Magaliesberg, South Africa

1. Early

Night's cold spittle
has tipped tall grasses.

Pools of cool light
bathe our eyes for an hour

as reeds weave
baskets out of morning air.

A moorhen's four chicks
are balls of soot across her bow.

The brown hyena was here
but has gone to its lair

its spoor fading fast
on the hardening path.

How still the present is
on this windless day

before heat reverberates
and rain clouds gather,

the only sound so far
the drone of tractors

excavating new roads
out of the past's dusty reservoir.

2. Caught in a thunderstorm

In a sudden gust of wind
a thud of acorns hits the ground
surprising us but not as much as

thunder's warning shot

just before rain delivers
its perpendicular blows

penetrating the rocks
as well as the dam water
and our own thin clothes.

Upright Egyptian geese
don't shiver at all
stolid nursemaids of pharaohs

and of baby Moses
asleep in his reed basket
as he floats through the sedge into history.

3. *Cradle on the ridge*

As the rain falls we think of roofs,
walls, we think about shelter

and the half-discovered cave
on the dolomite ridge nearby,

a crib that rocked our fallen ancestors,
sedimented eyeless prophets

of the land and weather
and what we would end up doing to them.

4. Dreaming in a new place

It is not as if old dreams depart
like foot soldiers recalled to another front
while wives knit socks, roll bandages

but new dreams do sunder in a different way,
break into shards – sliver of moon, arrow, ankle bone,
stone rattle, whitened horn.[2]

[2] First published in *Illuminations*, 25 (Summer 2009).

Thunderstorm in the city

The smell of gunpowder at high noon
warns us of war in the heavens
and by mid afternoon the cloud putti
start pouting, blow and spit
seductively, childishly, whichever you prefer
(which is the cartoon god with the full cheeks?)

Then a local god, say Soho Eckstein,
or a highveld producer with dark jowls,
projects light into lightning shards,
and the razor sharp glass
of comic strips and cut-throats
serrates the clouds

While in the same or maybe the next act
sound machinery behind the stage
becomes the stage: drums roll,
boom and batter

Till stones cast from the sky's slingshot
shatter windscreens, scatter pedestrians,
pile up ersatz diamonds on the pavements
and then rain is a thousand lashes,
flays the skin of the city
burns the hail, incinerates roots
and down jacaranda-purpled streets
washes away soil,
blood and evidence, for a minute, an hour,
no one can ever tell how long

Because the resurrecting sun flares back
through the clouds, a quick change artist
illuminating neon with letters like teeth missing,
golden texts no one can interpret
over the city's buildings and alleys

And from tin roofs and tar
the familiar smell of rusted dust rises
as the city brushes away again
its burning furious tears.

Serena Guarracino

Re-imagining through Sound: The Postcolonial Ear in *U-Carmen eKhayelitsha*

> Each film exists not in order to bring an essentialized, preexisting Carmen into being; the film is a cinematographic trace, what is left behind, as residue, like a comet's tail.
> (Ann Davis and Phil Powrie, "Theorizing Carmen")

The main issue posed by writing this article on the South African film *U-Carmen eKhayelitsha*, directed by Mark Dornford-May in 2005 and winner of the Golden Berlin Bear in the same year, is how to locate myself in it – as a scholar, an opera lover with a soft spot for Georges Bizet's *Carmen* (1875), but also an Italian native speaker with no knowledge of Xhosa, the language in which the text that interpellates me is performed and sung. It is on this lack of knowledge that the following considerations are based, as the film confronts and reworks a masterpiece of Western classical music while undermining the illusion of full comprehension by an audience familiar with both the story and the music of Bizet's *Carmen* (1875) but far less acquainted with Xhosa or maybe even with the South African setting of the film. More than a reading, then, this will be an attempt to listen from a "point of hearing"[1] – a position which offers a partial, relational experience in opposition to the rigorous distinction between subject and object presupposed by the point of view; and this necessarily marks the following as a series of reflections or refractions more than a comprehensive reading of either *Carmen* or *U-Carmen*.

[1] Adriana Cavarero, *For More than One Voice* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 121.

The practice of singing a well-known tune to different words or to the same words translated into another language sets up a complementary dynamics of familiarity and estrangement. In an essay written with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Judith Butler mentions the singing of the US anthem in Spanish by illegal residents in California. This case, while different in terms of actors and performative spaces, shows some similarities to the signifying practices at work in *U-Carmen*. To Butler, this performance poses a question of property (as well as propriety): "to whom does this anthem belong?" she asks.[2] While the Bush administration maintained that the anthem could only be sung in English, its 'mother-tongue', the migrants' gesture claimed the national tune as their own. At the same time, the performance made the anthem itself sound foreign, different from the sound singers and listeners (American and otherwise) have been used to sing along to. This listening experience proves somewhat similar to that of many of *U-Carmen*'s audiences. Familiar with the French libretto of Bizet's *Carmen*, used to humming the renowned Habanera from act I of the opera to the words "L'amour est un oiseau rebelle", they find themselves confronted with the Other sonorities and clicks of Xhosa, so immediately and utterly 'foreign' to European ears.

[2] Judith Butler and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Who Sings the Nation-State? Language, Politics, Belonging* (London, New York, Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2007), 58.

Through this act of estrangement, *U-Carmen eKhayelitsha* deploys an aural strategy that displaces the usual *Carmen* audiences from the privileged place created for them by the structures of classical music. Via its interpellation of the 'postcolonial ear', it relocates its spectator, framing her/him less as someone watching a film than as someone who is subject to multiple (and not only aural) interpellations not necessarily coalescing around a single positionality. As will emerge from the following considerations, the postcolonial ear is not based on one among the many different sensorial languages of the film or on the prominence that it gives to one or another of these languages, but on a different interpellation of the spectator by the cinematic text. Louis Althusser has famously argued that

Fig. 1: "L'amour est un oiseau rebelle", still from Mark Dornford-May, *U-Carmen eKhayelitsha*, 2005, Spier Films.

> ideology 'acts' or 'functions' in such a way that it 'recruits' subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or 'transforms' the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called *interpellation* or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: 'Hey, you there!'[3]

[3] Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideology State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)", in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. trans. by Ben Brewster (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 181.

The policeman's hailing calls his listener into subjectivity. Similarly, Bizet's *Carmen*, structured according to the musical as well as ideological discourses of Western modernity, hails its audience into received power-knowledge structures relating to gender, race and class, interpellating it into Western subjecthood. Conversely, when the audience is interpellated through the postcolonial ear created by the performances in *U-Carmen*, it is deprived both of the privileges of its position and of the ideological constraints that this engenders; the positionality it now inhabits is altogether more fraught and insecure.

Translating Carmen to Khayelitsha

The choice of Carmen as a way of telling a story about contemporary South Africa is not as odd as it may at first sound. Both the opera and Mérimée's 1845 novella, published in the orientalist-titled *Revue des deux mondes*, by which it was inspired, engage in a portrayal of difference where ethnicity intertwines with gender and class to create a character that has constantly been interpreted (both on stage and in criticism) as the embodiment of the Other. Mérimée's Carmen is a woman, a gipsy, *and* an underprivileged worker in a cigarette factory: her dangerous mobility spans geographies (as a gipsy), languages (Spanish and Romani), and even genders, as she claims for herself a freedom, sexual and otherwise, that male characters feel is their own prerogative. It is because of these multiple transgressions that she has

to die at the hand of the same Don José as the one who tells her story in Mérimée's novella: only in this way can her death reinstate and secure hegemonic narratives of gender, race, and class. As Elizabeth Bronfen has it,

> What is controlled with Carmen's murder is Otherness as constant volatility, as sexual difference, and as death's presence in life in the form of fading. What is controlled is Otherness, when this functions as a force disruptive of the security of sameness, of clear oppositions and stable identities.[4]

[4] Elizabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), 189.

In its transmigration from one medium to another, Carmen's story also exposes the shifting ground on which ethnic alterity stands. In Mérimée's novella, the symbolic realm of Otherness actually encompasses the gipsy Carmen as well as the Basque Don José, who is first met by the narrator as a notorious brigand and exotic specimen:

> I had no doubt that the man I was dealing with was a smuggler, or perhaps a robber. But what odds was it to me? … I was delighted at this chance to learn what a brigand is like. It isn't every day that you encounter one, and there is a certain pleasure in finding yourself in the presence of a dangerous individual, especially when you sense that he's feeling mild and amenable.[5]

[5] Prosper Mérimée, "Carmen", in *Carmen and Other Stories*, trans. by Nicholas Jotcham (Oxford: Oxford Paperbacks, 2008), 5.

In the original text, Don José features only partly as first person narrator, as he tells the primary chronicler about his love story with Carmen and the ensuing murder while waiting to be executed, integrating the latter's account of Carmen's story. He thus by no means endangers the role of the main narrator, a Frenchman well versed in letters and foreign languages, who, with his orientalist imagery and first-hand knowledge of cultural alterity, remains the primary source of authority in the text. He introduces himself to the reader in the course of an archaeological trip to Andalusia he has undertaken in order to look for the site of the Munda battle, an episode recounted in the *Bellum Hispaniense*. His findings, he tells his readers, will solve "the geographical problem which is holding all learned Europe in suspense".[6] *Carmen* represents a detour from this archaeological effort, where archaeology, as Catherine Hall argues, together with mapping and ethnography constitutes the disciplinary backbone of imperial power-knowledge.[7]

[6] Mérimée, "Carmen", 1.

[7] See Catherine Hall, *Cultures of Empire: A Reader* (London: Routledge, 2000), 25 ff.

It comes as no surprise, then, that the last chapter of the novella, added over a year after publication, should describe the culture and language of the Romani people, with Carmen reduced to the status of a specimen.[8] The novella employs a number of strategies expressing a Foucauldian "drive for control",[9] which finds its climax on the one hand in the killing of the woman and on the other in the domestication of her cultural difference through the detailed description of the narrator's study of Romani language. The novella closes with the (supposedly) Romani saying "a closed mouth, no fly can enter",[10] effectively pointing to the silencing of Carmen: "writing over Carmen's language, the Frenchman attempts to write her off. Sealing every possible orifice, the sexual and the verbal, he brings the story to its end – silence".[11]

[8] Mérimée, "Carmen", 333-340; it should be noted that this chapter is published separately at the end of the volume in the edition used for this essay.

[9] Paul Robinson, "Mérimée's *Carmen*", in Susan McClary, ed., *Georges Bizet. Carmen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 4.

[10] Mérimée, "Carmen", 339.

[11] Robinson, "Mérimée's *Carmen*", 14.

In Bizet's opera the main control device, the French narrator, disappears and the balance between exoticism and ethnography is redrawn according to the standards of *opéra comique*. The most explicit shift occurs in the character of Don José, made to occupy the place left empty by the disappearing Frenchman and accordingly to undergo a process of de-exoticization, especially in musical terms. The 'neutral' – i.e. Western – musical structure of the opera embraces Don José and leaves out Carmen: his canonical melodies (the most well-known being the "Flower Song" solo from act II) are in tune with the overall language of the opera and form an 'exotic' contrast both to the plethora of closed numbers, vocal runs and dance rhythms that characterize Carmen and her people and also to the Spanish setting of the opera as a whole with its toreadors and smugglers.[12] Don José becomes affiliated with the Europeanness of the opera's musical language, which is identified as classical (i.e., Western and white) by virtue of its very opposition to Carmen's own markedly exotic codes. Yet the divide between the two musical languages is only apparent, as both belong to the same milieu: even in exotic tunes, "what the European ear expected to hear was its own image of difference: this music reinscribes not so much its ostensible musical modes as European notions of what the Other is like".[13]

Carmen then could be said to interpellate its (Western) audience via a 'colonial ear', which guarantees the listener's positionality as the privileged subject of Western modernity, white, European and male. What happens when the opera is relocated in an ethnically othered setting such as the South African township of Khayelitsha? What happens, in particular, to the supposed neutrality of its musical language, including the conventional exoticism encoded in Carmen's own music? This displacement both exploits the connotation of Carmen as cultural Other and displaces her Otherness by eschewing the traditional codes of exoticism associated with Africa. The South Africa portrayed in the film is a contemporary setting, where African visual as well as aural elements (starting with the Xhosa used for dialogues and lyrics) are counterpointed by an outstandingly faithful rendition of Bizet's score. The film was based on a production of Bizet's opera by the South African company, Dimpho Di Kopane, meaning "combined talents" in Sesotho, one of the eleven official languages of South Africa. The company was founded in 2000 and includes about forty artists recruited across the South African territory; its work focuses on musical productions, including English medieval mystery cycles and John Gay's *The Beggars' Opera*, while in 2009 it presented its *Magic Flute* at the Singapore Art Festival – all works translated from their original languages into Xhosa, which is also an official language in South Africa.[14]

The translation of the libretto and the setting of the story in present-day Khayelitsha involved a number of adaptations of plot and characters, in what can rightly be referred to as a postcolonial appropriation of both novella and opera.[15] Carmen still works in a cigarette factory, but she also sings in a choir, the Gipsy Cigarette Choir, and her friends are not smugglers but drug traffickers. Jongikhaya, the Don José character, is a policeman who fled his native village after accidentally

[12] See Susan McClary, *Georges Bizet. Carmen*, 44-61.

[13] Ibid., 54.

[14] For further information about the company see Camilla Driver, ed., *A Short History of Dimpho Di Kopane: A South African Lyric Theatre Company* (Cape Town: Spier and Nando's, 2004).

[15] Linda Hutcheon mentions *U-Carmen*, together with Otto Preminger's *Carmen Jones* (1954) and Joseph Gaï Ramaka's *Karmen Geï* (2001), as postcolonial adaptations of *Carmen*, enacting a "transculturation" of the story as well as of the music: see her *A Theory of Adaptation* (London: Routledge, 2006), 153.

killing his brother. Most interestingly for an analysis of the use of opera in the film, the counterpart for Bizet's toreador Escamillo, Lulamile Nkomo, becomes an opera singer, coming back to his native Khayelitsha to give a recital after gaining fame and wealth abroad.

This complex adaptation of plot and characters clearly marks the intention to grant accessibility to story, dialogues and lyrics to a wide audience in the South African context. Yet this operation also results in a postcolonial appropriation of *Carmen*, marking the exclusion of French speakers, and more generally of audiences familiar with the French libretto, from complete access to the text. For them, the result of this linguistic shift is an unremitting estrangement, which I intend to confront by basing the following analysis of the film not on an English and/or Italian translation of the script, but on its English subtitles. Although this option is not to be excluded altogether, and may represent a further step in this research, I believe it is necessary to underline the production's decision to situate *U-Carmen* outside linguistic accessibility for a spectator such as myself. For European audiences, Xhosa is not only a foreign language but is also associated with migrants and the dispossessed, since although the number of Xhosa-speaking migrants to Europe is actually quite small Xhosa is a recognizably *African* language and not, arguably, a language with a cultural tradition that would grant it access to the hallowed halls of the opera theatre. Hence, the following reflections privilege this point of hearing, with a consequent stress on the representation of cultural alterity through the rewriting of Bizet's opera.

The theme of the opacity of translation is addressed in the very first sequence of the film, which shows a long close-up of Pauline Malefane, who plays Carmen, while a male voice-over recites a passage from Mérimée's novella, translated into Xhosa, describing canonical features of feminine beauty in contrast with the gipsy's own nonconforming charm.[16] The very first frames of the film confront the spectator with Malefane's gaze, looking straight into the camera, while the voice-over interpellates the audience into 'reading' her, her face in particular, through the characteristics enumerated by the narrative. As the male voice proceeds, Malefane's face comes closer and closer to the camera as the voice moves from a description of the ideal woman to one of Carmen herself. The audience is thus led to try to superimpose the described woman onto Malefane: are her eyes "slanting but remarkably wide", her lips "rather full but finely chiselled", her hair "rather coarse and black, with a sheen like a raven's wing"? Is her face "disconcerting but unforgettable"? Does she possess the "strange wild beauty" Mérimée's oriental imagery attributed to the gipsy Carmen?

[16] Mérimée, "Carmen", 14.

Yet, for the audience not able to understand Xhosa, the 'reading' of Malefane's face must be paired with the reading of subtitles – which of course helps in understanding the scene, but also highlights the act of translating Mérimée's text from nineteenth century Paris to twenty-first century Khayelitsha. In the change of focus away from Malefane's face to the written text and vice versa, reading is self-reflexively foregrounded and displaced, making the spectator aware of her/his

effort to interpret both the voice s/he hears and the body s/he sees. On the one hand, then, the sequence elaborates an economy of reading that frames Carmen as the object of the orientalist and patriarchal gaze foregrounded by the novella; on the other, it stages the impossibility of reading Carmen through the opacity of translation. Moreover, the refusal to use the French original (where French is also an African language) dispossesses the 'original' of its authority and universality.

The other side of this operation is of course the accessibility granted by the film to the wider Xhosa-speaking audience. The use of African languages in literary and cultural production has been supported, among others, by Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, who argues against the use of colonial languages as being unable ever to create a truly decolonized African culture.[17] In cinema, many directors have answered his appeal by producing films in African languages, which are then subtitled for distribution;[18] nevertheless, subtitles stage the distance between the text and the audience who needs to read them. They can be assimilated to other, literary strategies which make the alterity of the postcolonial text explicit for a global audience: "the post-colonial text, by developing specific ways of both constituting cultural distance and at the same time bridging it, indicates that it is the 'gap' rather than the experience (or at least the *concept* of a gap between experiences) which is created by language".[19]

Sound, Vision, and the Postcolonial Ear

The use of Xhosa also contributes to the aesthetics of realism at work in the film through the portrayal of its South African setting. Khayelitsha, featured already in the title, is one of the townships in the Cape Town area: created literally out of nowhere on the Cape Flats in the early Eighties, it was designed as a way to house African residents who since the late Fifties had been subjected to "a deliberate policy of exclusion and harassment", in order to leave other Cape Town neighbourhoods to white residents.[20] The original project envisioned "a well laid out town in which house-holders would upgrade core houses";[21] yet this informal settlement soon developed into an actual sprawl, characterized by derelict housing with little or no electricity and no plumbing. In the early Nineties, "four out of every five people in Khayelitsha live in two- or three-roomed shacks made of corrugated iron, plastic, cardboard and soft wood in some combination".[22]

This is the landscape that meets the audience's eye in *U-Carmen*, where Bizet's score is superimposed on a visual representation of Khayelitsha which borrows heavily from the codes of realist cinema in order to stage the violence embedded in the Carmen narrative as a consequence of life in the township. Most of the film is shot on location, thus avoiding the artificiality of staged sets in favour of the 'raw' effect of an urban setting. Other recurrent features are the use of hand-held cameras, which "creates the impression that the operator is a participant observer, caught up in the thick of action and events",[23] and a sparse use of montage, with the result that many scenes are shot in long takes which give the feeling of physically following

[17] See Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: the Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: Currey, 1986), xiv, where the author recounts his own shift from English to Gĩkũyũ.

[18] Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism. Multiculturalism and the Media* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 192. The issue of *U-Carmen*'s accessibility for an African audience also resonates with recent debates on South African cinema addressing the need to rethink the idea of film as a 'global' product, which too often implies privileging European (or European-friendly) stories and languages: see Lucia Saks, *Cinema in a Democratic South Africa: The Race for Representation* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2010), 77-78.

[19] Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures* (London: Routledge [1989] 2002), 64.

[20] Gillian P. Cook, "Khayelitsha: New Settlement Forms in the Cape Peninsula", in David M. Smith, ed., *The Apartheid City and Beyond: Urbanization and Social Change in South Africa* (London: Routledge, 1992), 126.

[21] Ibid., 128.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Julia Hallam and Margaret Marshment, *Realism and Popular Cinema* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 103.

Fig. 2: Between exoticism and realism: the streets of Khayelitsha, still from Mark Dornford-May, *U-Carmen eKhayelitsha*, 2005, Lady Film (Italy).

the characters as they move through the streets, alleys and wide roads, staging Khayelitsha for the eye of the camera and of the audience.

This emerges quite clearly in the opening scenes of the film, where Malefane's close-up is abruptly interrupted by a flash and a series of cacophonous sounds, like an orchestra tuning up before a concert. The camera backs up to show the interior of a makeshift photographer's studio where Carmen is having her picture taken, then further away and out of the studio at ground level, moving backwards in fast forward through alleys and backyards followed by children whose laughter intertwines with the dissonant backdrop sounds, until the frame widens up to close the sequence with a pan shot of the township from above. Then, after the audience has been led from Carmen's face through the streets and up into the Khayelitsha sky, the sequence continues with only the soundtrack of ambient noise, background voices and passing cars, with a montage of people fixing roofs, barber shops, stray dogs, street markets of food and (apparently second-hand) furniture, until we see Carmen approaching from an unpaved side street. As she belatedly joins the choir rehearsing bits from *Carmen*, the opera overture starts introducing more street scenes featuring street vendors, horse-drawn carts with tyres, kids on roller-skates and courtyard animals.

The general picture, often echoed later in the film, is one of diffused and apparently unsolvable poverty, but also of an ethnically diverse but still segregated community: in the scenes described above, everyone is black, as in most of the film. The Khayelitsha shown in the film is to all intents and purposes an all-black neighbourhood, which still bears the imprint of the urban policy that founded it in the apartheid era. White characters are mostly limited to flashbacks: here, their presence is strictly related to the metatextual element introduced by Lulamile, the opera singer, thus commenting both on ethnic relationships in post-apartheid South Africa and, at the same time, on the affiliation of operatic music to white cultural hegemony.

Lulamile's story can be read in counterpoint to Carmen's: she is arrested for assaulting a fellow labourer who switched the TV off during his performance; Jongi gets involved in the drug traffic during a party thrown to celebrate his return; his performance at the township school is the setting for Jongi and Carmen's final confrontation and her murder. Lulamile's success story is the other side of Carmen's tragedy, as he has managed to do what she can not: in escaping from Khayelitsha, he has been set free from the dynamics of poverty and violence that compel Carmen to seduce a policeman to avoid imprisonment and then to work as a prostitute for drug-dealers and finally be killed by her jealous and possessive lover.

Significantly, Carmen never seems to meet any whites in her daily life and work. On the contrary, white characters appear in memories of Lulamile's early years.

Shortly after his first appearance on the TV screen, the flashback to his childhood starts while he is driving across the South African countryside to the tune of *Carmen*'s entr'acte from act III, a pastoral melody for flute and orchestra evoking the mountain landscape where the gipsies are camping. In sharp contrast with this idyllic soundtrack is the ruthlessness of the images from the flashback, showing how Lulamile's equally peaceful childhood was shattered by the killing of his family by two policemen (one of whom at least is clearly white). The sequence proceeds with the child being entrusted by his grandfather to a white priest, who utters one of the very few English sentences in the film: "Come with me, you're safe with us". Finally, Lulamile is shown taking singing lessons from two white instructors. Through these characters – a policeman, a priest, and two music teachers – the film briefly but firmly traces a paradigm of interracial relationships, which can be of violence or care or even education but are all based on the same hierarchy: only by making good use of the relations with a white community which manages access to the only options for social mobility can someone from the township literally (as well as metaphorically) get out of Khayelitsha.

The only other white characters present in the film are the four instrumentalists accompanying Lulamile in his recital at the end of the film. As a consequence, classical music, as a Western and orientalist genre, seems at first to belong firmly to the white side of the black-white divide – a location the film reinstates, but also undermines through its own rewriting of *Carmen*. Far from being reduced to an expression of white hegemony and cultural colonialism, the visual association of opera with whiteness that structures Lulamile's story is actually countered by the film itself, which shows all the characters singing Bizet's score. The 'neutral', Western sound of the opera, including Carmen's exotic numbers, is grafted into a strongly situated visual language, where issues related to contemporary South Africa are confronted with the intentional immediacy emerging in the scenes discussed above. The result, to quote Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin again, is to make the "gap between experiences" resonate, to make cultural difference visible and audible without producing it as an easily manageable exotic commodity, where 'South African' and 'black' may seamlessly substitute for 'Spanish' and 'gipsy'. This shift leaves a trace, a residue "like a comet's tail",[24] which spoils the comfortable exoticism embedded in Bizet's musical language by staging its foreignness to the film's other languages, visual and otherwise.

The postcolonial ear is interpellated by this residue, which undoes the cultural authority of Western classical music by making its supposedly hegemonic language occupy the space of the Other.

[24] Ann Davis and Phil Powrie,"Theorizing Carmen", in Phil Powrie, Bruce Babington and Ann Davies, eds., *Carmen on Film. A Cultural History* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2007), 17.

Fig. 3: Metatextuality and intertextuality: Lulamile as Escamillo on TV, still from Mark Dornford-May, *U-Carmen eKhayelitsha*, 2005, Lady Film (Italy).

This emerges most evidently when the film stages competing aural languages engaging the cinematic space, reassessing the power imbalances that structure the opera. Not only throughout the film does Bizet's music have to compete with background noise and dialogue; but in two instances another music, in both cases sung by women, contends with Bizet for the audience's attention.

The first occurs at the end of the overture. Following Carmen, the audience is finally led into the cigarette factory, where the workers sing to accompany their work to a rhythm that counterpoints the final bars of the music, until both music and choir stop simultaneously as the scene ends. The first impression is that of a mistake – a case of bad soundtrack montage: the effect is to make the audience suddenly aware of Bizet's music, which had until then been 'invisible' as staple background sound, sustaining the rhythm of montage. The music is pushed both to the forefront of the audience's attention and outside the frame, as its extra-diegetic source is made apparent against the women's intra-diegetic song. The result parallels the use of Xhosa as a way of marking not the film's foreignness – and consequent exoticism – for the non South African audience, but the audience's own foreignness to the film's setting and language: the comfortable position guaranteed inside the opera by the music's European affiliation is no longer available, it is (literally) pushed outside the frame.

The second instance portrays a ceremony performed by Lulamile when he sacrifices a bull to his ancestors to thank them for their support while he was away from Khayelitsha, allowing him to become a famous opera singer. The ceremonial killing of a bull is, of course, also at the centre of the bullfight that frames the last act of Bizet's opera: here, Carmen's death is coterminous with the death of the bull, as we can infer by the choir that extols the might of the bullfighter just as Carmen falls under Don José's knife. The rhetoric of ceremonial sacrifice permeates Carmen's gruesome demise: the heroine stands as a scapegoat whose death works to consolidate the system her existence threatened, "the dissonant Other who is necessary for the motivation and sustaining of the plot."[25]

The film undoes the patriarchal ideology sustained in the opera by relocating the killing of the bull in a context of celebration and achievement, which shows Carmen without Jongi, who has just left to run to his mother's deathbed. In this festive atmosphere Carmen, the paramount Other, is shown as part of a healthy – if harsh – social environment, and as perfectly integrated in a community built on the sharing of food and wealth. Yet Bizet's version of the slaughtering of the bull is not simply dismissed: the entr'acte from the last act of the opera, foreboding Carmen's sacrificial slaughter in the festive rhythm for violins and Spanish-sounding tambourines, starts at the very moment when the cry of the bull announces that the sacrifice has taken place. The sudden irruption of Bizet's music undercuts to the knowledgeable audience the apparently idyllic atmosphere by evoking the violence that hovers just outside the edge of this scene – Jongi's gendered violence but also that of apartheid and post-apartheid race conflicts, of police misdemeanour and drug-dealing.

[25] Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings. Music, Gender and Sexuality* (Oxford, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 57.

Yet the women counteract this narrative by their own singing and dancing to what is markedly 'another' tune. As the scene cuts to Jongi sitting on a train on his way back to Khayelitsha, where he is shortly going to kill Carmen, the women's music fades out and Bizet's music becomes the soundtrack to Jongi's glowering face, exposing the opera's complicity with his motives and with Carmen's murder. The misalignment of the two soundtracks – and of soundtrack and image – undermines the very dynamic that would ground the white self and the black Other in Don José and Carmen respectively: it refuses to represent either Carmen or South Africa as exotic, stepping back from full visibility and audibility for an audience situated inside the tradition that has produced both Mérimée's and Bizet's versions of the story.

This last example best embodies the way the film displaces the audience from the safe position of a point of view into the unsafe position of the point of hearing, pushing it into the fraught space of the postcolonial ear, where no language, be it Xhosa, Bizet's music or the representation of Khayelitsha (both aural and visual), is completely transparent. The opacity of the text reverberates onto the audience, as its positionality becomes almost impossible to name. What is the audience that is being 'Other'ed by the representational strategies of the postcolonial ear in *U-Carmen*? Is it a 'European' or 'Western' audience against an 'African' one? A non-Xhosa-speaking against a Xhosa-speaking one? Or a non-South African against a South African one? Naturally, none of these binaries works, but the film does not simply efface them; the use of different aural and visual languages interpellates different audiences differently, problematizing the way classical music still shapes hegemonic narratives of gender, race and class. The question posed by *U-Carmen eKhayelitsha* is whether *Carmen*, and the cultural legacy it embodies, may be reduced to a perpetuation of these narratives, or whether it could contribute to a different structure of feeling: "we could consider music as one of the languages we inhabit, dwell in, and in which we, our histories, cultures, and identities, are constituted. ... At this point to ask what music is, is to ask what our culture is, who we are, and what are we doing here."[26]

[26] Iain Chambers, *Culture after Humanism. History, Culture, Subjectivity* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 115.

Alessandra De Angelis

Penny Siopis:

An Artist's Dance Through Medium and Vision

> Much of the sense and sensation in the paintings is embedded in the material itself: what floats, floods, flares, falls and fixes somewhere on the edge of form or formlessness. I am fascinated by the strangeness and openness of this process, which is intensified in the way I use my medium, viscous glue and liquid ink – a sort of *choreography of chance and control.*
> (Penny Siopis, emphasis added)

Interrogating the Limits of Perception.

In this opening section I discuss Siopis' most recent production, showing how she questions and overcomes her viewers' mental schemes and cognitive barriers through an ethics and poetics of vulnerability and openness. Her insistence on skin, frailty, bodily fluids or the liquid coexistence of different realms radically interrogates the threshold between public and private, between what is to be shown and what is not. I describe the artist's style as a kind of dance, a perpetual movement across borders, mediums and visions through which choreographies of colors emerge, and virtual, hitherto unknown possibilities are disclosed.

There is a taste for "unpredictability" in Siopis' paintings, which allows new possibilities to emerge from the artist's plans. A play with images which recall human experiences of excess, disorder, violence and grief is rendered through a skillful, almost erotic, sense-arousing and performative use of viscous materials. Her works appear elemental and mythological, personal and political at the same time, but they are also constantly uncertain, as if they were on the move: "What happens when ink and glue act on a surface is *unpredictable* and exciting. This unpredictability creates a vital *tension* or *energy* between form and formlessness, balancing them on *a knife edge*." The borderline is precarious: where anything might emerge, a patient suspension of disbelief is required in order to let oneiric images come into being and visibility in the space-time of the artistic process; Siopis waits for the glue to thicken and the colour to dry and set without intervening in the process of transformation: "the knife edge is a precarious condition where a slip and a split can happen", the artist declares, surrendering to her passion for turning points and surprise.

> The times seem to have made me hypersensitive to all sorts of imagery, especially that which marks *ambivalence* and the *imponderable.* In South Africa now we

> are confronted with the estrangement and dislocation that come with deep *uncertainty* about the stability of what we might call the social contract. At the same time, this instability can be an occasion for exhilarating change. It's a time of flux; a time which can congeal into sheer horror or open up to sheer ecstasy.[1]

Siopis' interest in the politics of reconciliation in South Africa is mediated and transfigured through a special kind of artistic sensitivity, which enables her not to think or represent, but to re-figure and re-imagine the social, intertwined with the psychical and the personal, and thereby to reveal the potentiality of becoming that as an artist and a woman she recognizes as a fundamental part of human experience. Her *modus operandi* translates the ethical into the aesthetical: two differently articulated dimensions of our perception that coexist without separation in her art. In the mundane world (not in an abstract realm of ideas), *ethos* and *aisthesis* coincide, in a perpetual translation of experiences and codification of stimuli. As Gregory Bateson suggests, a kind of dance interconnects all living forms; to the ecological mind the ethical gesture is always the most beautiful, implying neither moral metaphysical principles nor essence. The ethics of life thus becomes the stochastic process of the proliferation and articulation of difference through undecidable encounters, interactions and constant codifications.[2] This is precisely what "unpredictably" happens in Siopis' art. It too is made of undecidable encounters between imaginings *and* solid matter, free or nearly formless process *and* the inescapable, ultimate limits of the medium. The body of art becomes movement *and* arrest, process *and* form; more especially, it is virtual *and* material, dialectically intertwining intensive *and* extensive elements. The "wonder", here, to use Brian Massumi's words, is that "there can be stasis given the primacy of process, 'order out of chaos'",[3] that choreographies and images can emerge from bodily, mental and material flows and movements.

In fact, it is this insistence on the performative nature of painting that keeps it close to dance and movement, more similar to a choreography in progress than to an architecture. If, as the dancer, visual artist and scholar Erin Manning suggests, choreography emerges only as "a reaction to movement" and is never prior to it, in the same way an image or painting is the result of a potentially unending process, in constant relation to the reactions of its public. Movement is the force that consigns images to the future, to the not-yet that is momentarily hosted in the present. Movement "creates the potential for unthinking dichotomies that populate our worlds… [and] allows us to approach them from a different perspective: a shifting one".[4] Ethics and aesthetics become one relational science of interaction and contact, a dance through medium and vision (both the artist's vision, which must cope with the resistance of materials, and the public's vision and perception). Thus the public's encounter with the work of art becomes a sensorial experience where not only beauty but also change take place, while hermeneutics is substituted by participation and by the capability of being vulnerable to art.

Human encounters can be double, often ambiguous; a "poetics of vulnerability", as Siopis writes of her *Lasso* paintings, implies being weak and subjected to the

[1] Cit. in Sarah Nuttall, "On a Knife Edge: Penny Siopis in Conversation with Sarah Nuttall", *Nka, Journal of Contemporary African Art*, 25 (2009), 96, 105, emphases added.

[2] Gregory Bateson, *Mind and Nature. A Necessary Unity. Advances in Systems Theory, Complexity, and the Human Sciences* (New Jersey: Hampton Press, 1979), and *Steps To an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology* (New York: Ballantine, 1972).

[3] Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), 7-8.

[4] Erin Manning, *Relationscapes: Movement, Art, Philosophy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2009), 14, 15. For a more radical manifesto of dance as the "actual aesthetic act" and the "total act of being", see Hélio Oiticica, "Dance in my experience (Diary Entries)", in Claire Bishop, ed., *Participation* (London and Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2006), 105-109.

violence of others (or, conversely, seeking protection from it) and at the same time being more open to the world and its sufferings. This double side of perception is emphasized in the artist's works by her choice of medium: through layers of viscous glue, she is able to cover or reveal, binding images together and making them liquefy or thicken, or even appear to be decomposing. The material is in fact as thin as human skin, and can convey and play with the sense of both exposure and protection. "We live in turbulent times", the artist argues, writing about her choice of themes and materials:

> The integrity of our bodies and souls seems challenged at every turn. We are prey to violence, disease, global conflicts. We are so thin-skinned …. The poetics to which I am devoted emphasises as much the materiality of the image as its content or concept. Viscous glue can drip in a way that makes the image – or person depicted – appear decomposing, coming apart …. Glue can also cover the image like a protective second skin.[5]

[5] Penny Siopis, cit. in "Penny Siopis. Lasso, 20 September-20 October 2007", <http://www.stevenson.info/exhibitions/siopis/index2007.htm>, 12 March 2010.

As Judith Butler makes clear, especially in her recent writings about war, frailty, loss and mourning, it is vulnerability that makes living creatures' experience on Earth comprehensible and shareable, calling for a differently delicate and responsible approach to politics and ethics,[6] a call Siopis seems to make her own through art. Hardly any specific allusions to politics appear in her recent works; yet the focus on hybridity and the unpredictable and uncontrollable shapes assumed by life is itself a political theme. Energetic, shapeless streams of reddish, fleshy colors call for the loss of any sense of judgment: viewers are embraced by the carnal relationships that society so greatly fears and proscribes, and this turns into an open contestation of all hetero-normative and separatist rules of power. Nevertheless, by choosing fluidity as subject and medium, and waiting for the latter to thicken, the artist is enabled to give shape to formless suffering and emotions, thereby creating a new symbolic order. Enlivened by the beauty and sensuousness of the paintings, despite the contrast to the harshness of the floods of blood that they depict, carnal and symbiotic relations are rendered intelligible and enjoyable. Things unspeakable, such as menstrual blood, take form, deprived of their aura of taboo, and yet are never fixed or explained, but kept on the threshold of becoming. Through this "choreography of chance and control", the unseen is given materiality and visibility without being explained or fixed into schemes.[7] Conversely, it is enhanced through affects that stimulate response and the reformulation of old thoughts. We are not far from what feminist thought, as well as *écriture féminine*, have been bringing forth since Luce Irigaray's reply to Freud and Lacan in *Speculum. De l'autre femme* (1974), and Hélène Cixous' in "Le Rire de la Méduse" (1975), making the abject and the secret visible, capable of stimulating thought through primordial emotions – including that of 'shame'.

[6] See Judith Butler, "Vulnerability and Survival. The 'Affective' Politics of War", paper given at the Sovranità, confini, vulnerabilità Conference, University of Rome La Sapienza (27 March 2008); and *Precarious Life. The Power of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004).

[7] Penny Siopis, cit. in "Penny Siopis: Furies, 5 August-18 September 2010", <http://www.stevenson.info/exhibitionsbs/siopis/index2010.htm>, 31 January 2011.

The boundlessness of women's relations to their own bodies and to those of their dearest is also touched on in other paintings (*Twins, Wrest* and *Cling,* 2009; and *Bound* and *Mates* in 2007, for example) which display mothers and children, lovers

or twins clinging to each other, through images of limitless, undecidable figures immersed in flows of hot colors recalling blood and human fluids. Siopis does not invoke absolute symbiosis: a lack in the symbolic order (which is also exemplified in an excess of fusional relationships among women) is detrimental to female subjectivity and freedom. However, what the modern, white and western imaginary holds to be primitive and dangerous, "abject" (to quote Julia Kristeva), reacquires a quality of unlimited beauty in her art, even when these 'carnal documents' denounce conditions of sexual slavery or serious gender biases.

Fig. 1: Penny Siopis, *Three Trees*, 2009, ink and glue on canvas, courtesy of the artist and Michael Stevenson

In *Three Trees*, the use of glue, wet with deep fleshy pinks and reds, makes the images almost indistinct, merging characters and other objects together when everything should, logically and emotionally, keep them apart.

An extraordinarily tangible display of raw materials evokes an aura of visceral explosion, stemming from an unbounded experience of fluidity. Despite the horror of the scene, inspired by a Japanese *ukiyo-e* woodblock print she had found in a book on erotic art, the artist distills its profoundly ambiguous intertwining of eroticism and violence into a dreamlike atmosphere of distance.[8] Erotic form and traumatic content enter into collison; an image of rape painted in red and fleshy pink – a woman whose limbs are tied to the trees, her legs forced open by two satanic male figures – confounds the viewers' sense of reality, facing them with horror and with the sense of shame and perplexity that stems from their reactions to the incredible beauty of the painting. The work is in fact ambiguously exciting, evoking primordial sensuous responses and blurring the moral limit between social misfit, sense of justice and private, unlimited emotional potentiality: "painting is a particularly resonant way of embodying the imagination, the unconscious, fantasy. As a carnal medium in this sense, it is violent, erotic and beautiful."[9] Its passion eludes any attempt to control the aesthetic experience, while an unaffected but not unaffecting emotional distance bewilders and disturbs the viewer, even as it enhances the challenge of the artistic encounter. A confusion of spheres and psychic 'locations' becomes a challenge to the moralistic demand for a rigid separation between the realms of the *ethos* (the 'ideal', or the super-egoic structure) and the real (the world of drives and mere materiality); yet, I would argue, the painting also functions as a reminder of the lack of symbolic references in the erotic imaginary, a lack which should not exempt us from distinguishing violence from passion. The depersonalization of the emotions and feelings connected to violence opens new constellations of thought, and new associations and framing contexts. Crossing barriers and going beyond the limits of perception implies that trauma, deprived of individual features and psychological connotations, becomes an 'affect', able to

[8] Siopis in Nuttall, "On a Knife Edge", 101.

[9] Siopis in Sarah Nuttall, "On Painting", *Art South Africa*, 4.2 (2009), <http://www.artsouthafrica.com/?article=237>, 31 January 2011.

Fig. 2: Penny Siopis, *Flush*, 2007, ink, oil and glue on paper, courtesy of the artist and Michael Stevenson.

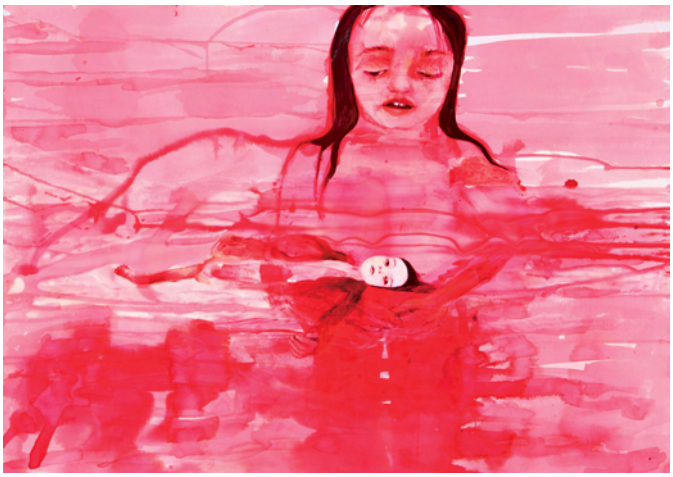


Fig. 3: Penny Siopis, *Melt,* 2007, ink, oil and glue on canvas, Cape Town, courtesy of the artist and Michael Stevenson.

give rise to different modalities of perception of – and relation to – reality. Viewers are thus enabled to investigate its social, imaginary, mental and 'discursive' structures, as well as the imaginary sexual archetypes within which the male erotic psyche is framed.[10]

Confusion and boundlessness are also part of the 2007 paintings, as for example *Flush* and *Melt*, which both evoke women's apparent lack of psychic and bodily limits, according to archetypical male or, more generally, social gender stereotypes and imagery and fear of losing control.

Traumatic contents – like blood, but also birth – become a starting point for reflection. Glue, imbued with red and pink colors, recalls the blood and placenta through which women frame and are framed, give life and are given life. Glue, which evokes tightness, bond, boundlessness, shapes not only human or animal features, but whole landscapes. In *Melt*, the glue seems to stem and flow from a woman-goddess's hair, drawing the outlines of mountains and seas and giving birth to an entire world out of blood, love and chaos; in this carnal, bodily Genesis, a tiny female creature appears, like a new-born woman, reaching a hand to the viewers.

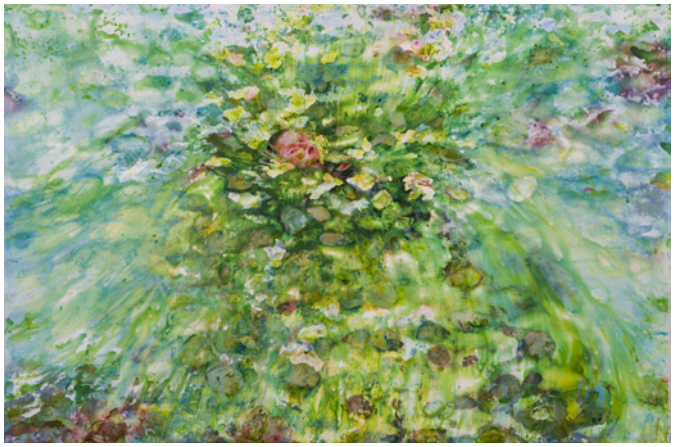


Fig. 4: Penny Siopis, 2009, *Still Waters*, ink and glue on canvas, courtesy of the artist and Michael Stevenson.

The coexistence of different spheres is also evident in *Still Waters*, where heritage is contaminated, rethought, and oriented to the emergence of the contemporary world.

The sight of a huge shoal of jellyfish invading Thessaloniki harbour had raised visions in the artist's mind of Ophelia, a traumatic, imagined scene of a migrant drowning in the Aegean and Monet's *Water lilies*. The flow of blues and greens, spotted by touches of yellow, recalls Monet, confounding his water lilies with the shapes of the jellyfish, mixing art history, dream and memory even as it addresses the question of migration and its calls for responsibility. At the centre of the image is the face of a

[10] For the relationship between trauma and affect, see Jill Bennet, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

woman, "a person who seems to be either swamped by the mass or emerging from it … coming up for breath", looking into our eyes and drawing us into the painting.[11] The imaginary, dreamlike atmosphere enhances the viewers' confrontation with this strange mix of contemporaneity and heritage, nature and vision, pushed beyond the 'discip-line' that separates genres.

[11] Siopis in Nuttall, "On a Knife Edge", 103.

Disorder in Freud's House: The Psychoanalytical Archive Exposed to Shame and Difference.

The works I have been discussing provide a useful introduction to a reconsideration of some of Siopis' previous collections. Here too there is an evident attempt to dismantle borders and categories of thought, but the artist is more involved in the psychic world of women than in the dance of colors and vision. In the paintings conceived around the beginning of the 2000s her "poetics of vulnerability" emerges around the ambivalences and ambiguities of the human condition and human feelings ("emotional states that exist on a 'knife-edge' between panic and passion, terror and tenderness.").[12] The works are already moving toward a suggestive encounter with their viewers. Rather than representing the artist's search for meaning as a cure for fragmentation and dismemberment, they force the public to project meanings onto the painting, questioning its search for answers without involvement or responsibility. Here the emotion of shame, inscribed on women's bodies and psyches as a social destiny that has become a carnal heritage, literally collides with the public, contaminating it and penetrating it with the affect generated by viewer-viewed relationship in the form of a shame-inducing spectacle. This emotion, though, emerges more from the act of looking from the outside at something private than from the content itself. As Zoë Wicomb has pointed out in a discussion of coloured identity in South Africa, the figure of the "Khoi/coloured woman Saartje Baartman, once known as the Hottentot Venus, who was exhibited in London and Paris from 1810 to her death in 1815" exemplifies the "inscription of power in scopic relations; the construction of woman as racialized and sexualized other; the colonization and violation of the body; the role of scientific discourse in bolstering both the modernist and the colonial projects".[13] With its focus on visibility, Siopis' work on shame – including her complex reconfiguration of Baartman in *Dora and the Other Woman* – is self-reflexively political, like much other contemporary artistic production from the so-called postcolonial zones.

[12] Penny Siopis, cit. in press release for 2005 "Passions and Panics" exhibition at the Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg; *Kunstaspekte*, <http://www.kunstaspekte.de/index.php?id=20019&action=termin>, 1 June 2010.

[13] Zoë Wicomb, "Shame and Identity: The Case of the Coloured in South Africa", in Derek Attridge and Rosemary Jolly, eds., *Writing South Africa: Literature, Apartheid, and Democracy, 1970-1995* (Cambridge: CUP, 1998), 91-105.

In her *Three Essays on Shame*, Siopis explores the emotions connected to exposure in a long-distance feminist and postcolonial dialogue with Sigmund Freud, one hundred years after the publication of his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905).[14] Freud invented his incomplete yet claustrophobic hermeneutic of female sexuality on the basis of a few therapeutic encounters he had had with Ida Bauer, the young girl he renamed Dora, laying the foundations of his theory of female hysteria and sexual passivity and reinforcing his theory of the Oedipus complex.[15]

[14] For the English version see Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 7, (London: The Hogarth Press, 1953), 130-243.

[15] See in particular "Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria" (1905 [1901]), in Freud, *SE*, 7-122.

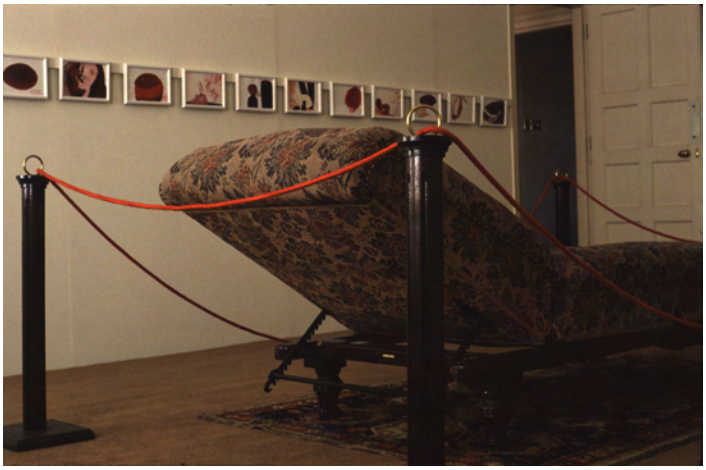


Fig. 5: Penny Siopis, *Three Essays on Shame*, 2005, London, Freud Museum, courtesy of the artist.

Three Essays on Shame is the title of Siopis' 2005 multi-media exhibition at the Freud Museum, in which, through interventions into three spaces of Freud's house, she re-inhabits and redesigns the home of the father of psychoanalysis, dismembering the completeness of both his furniture and his ideas and disseminating creative chaos as she brings his work and milieu into contact with South African culture and society. In audio recordings located in Freud's study, seven South African personalities express their feelings about the shame aroused by the horrors of apartheid and its complicities, the tragedy of AIDS and the difficulty of listening to the Truth and Reconciliation hearings.

The second intervention, in Freud's dining room, incorporates objects and artworks from Freud's collection of antiquities, together with films touching on shameful events and the use of shame as a weapon of resistance. A stylized terracotta figurine represents a woman, believed to be the Greek mythological figure, Baubo, exposing her genitalia and pointing at them with evident satisfaction. The installation articulates an association between the statuette's insistence on its 'site of exposure' and the resistance practice through which black South African women successfully opposed eviction by stripping and displaying their "shame" to the white policemen who were trying to bulldoze their homes, an episode narrated in the documentary *To Walk Naked*. By linking shame to socio-historical conditions of subalternity, rather than to the psychic individuation upon which early psychoanalysis insisted, Siopis re-discusses and reopens the psychological archive, contextualizing shame and female sexuality within the cultural and historical frame of colonial practices of exploitation.

In her essay on the exhibition, Siopis points out that "shame is arguably distinctive in being very visceral, a quality intensified by the fact that the feelings are often associated with bodily exposure and sexuality. Shame feels primary, primitive."[16] According to modern psychology, shame is prior to guilt, connected not only with the sensation of being exposed, but also, more subtly, to the fact of looking at what should not be displayed. In all Siopis' works on shame, what is immediately evident is the sense of being caught gazing, forcing the viewers into a more intense relation with the painting and its subject and thereby weakening the defensive barriers we put between ourselves and the rest of the world, caught on the other side of our 'scopic scenario'. "If the anxiety of being looked at is distinctive in shame, then the viewer is not a passive onlooker, but an uneasy

[16] Penny Siopis, "Shame in Three Parts at the Freud Museum", in Claire Pajaczkowska and Ivan Ward, eds., *Shame and Sexuality. Psychoanalysis and Visual Culture* (London, New York: Routledge, 2008), 153.

Fig. 6: Penny Siopis, "Shame Painting", 2005, glue, ink, and lacquer paint on paper, *Three Essays on Shame*, courtesy of the artist.

witness; the feeling of embarrassment rises from a sense of complicity in the act of seeing: "'*I should not be seeing this.*'"[17]

The primordial emotion of shame depends then on its always being located on the site of exposure, and its frailty in relation to others' eyes. Nevertheless, what makes people – especially women – ashamed is the feeling they are causing shame to those watching, *creating* shame, not only *experiencing* it. The feeling is thus more intricate than might appear; the emotion might be defined as simultaneously social and anti-social, public and profoundly individual. It reminds us

> how history manifests not in dated and dotted timelines, but in the myths that shape our imagination and nightmares. Siopis' work addresses complex emotional landscapes that emerge through fear, shame and passion, … intersect[ing] with the ways society is constantly being shaped through shifting power relations.[18]

Overlooked by Freud, who simply considered it a form of positive super-egoic morality, repressing carnal, affective primal relationships, shame is the emotion that seems, like skin, to connect the most intimate parts of human nature with society. If Freud's hysterics are rendered dumb, in that they are spoken *for* and not listened *to*, and if shame is connected, for them as for other minorities, with the uneasiness of not owning or mastering language (that is, of remaining inarticulate in the 'discourse' through which they are articulated), Siopis' display of invocations of forgiveness or apologies written on canvas around images of silenced women with hands on their mouths or throwing up the suffering and trauma caused by their abuse, is not a way of speaking for them, but, conversely, of showing and responding to their request to be listened to and to have the right to exist. Thus, a connection between silence and trauma on one side, and structured public speech on the other – the orthodoxy of the discourse of early psychoanalysis – allows for new modes of listening and looking. As Siopis concludes, "shame is a form of human relation",[19] and as such it is investigated in her paintings, in the attempt to modify our perceptions of limits, of what is eligible as 'trauma' and what is not, to make us more conscious of the gender biases that early psychoanalysis neglected.

By extending vision to the unknown and the invisible, whether historical, social, psychological or pertaining to the subtlest realms of the imaginary depth of the soul – Siopis pushes the limits of psychoanalysis further. Reaching beyond the orthodoxy of the discipline, she reveals the blindness that scotomized both the early pioneers and later scholars, offering a compassionate cure or remedy to the psychoanalytic archive. As she

[17] Ibid., 156.

[18] Rike Sitas, "Red. The Iconography of Colour in the Work of Penny Siopis. Penny Siopis at KZNSA", *Artthrob*, (2010), <http://www.artthrob.co.za/Reviews/Review-of-Red-The-Iconography-of-Colour-in-the-Work-of-Penny-Siopis-by-Rike-Sitas-at-KZNSA.aspx>, 30 November 2010.

[19] Siopis, "Shame in Three Parts", 157.

Fig. 7: Penny Siopis, "Shame Painting", 2005, glue, ink, and lacquer paint on paper, *Three Essays on Shame*, courtesy of the artist .

plays and dances with colors and body fluids, she unveils a world that is neither mysterious nor violable, but alive, different and somehow unfamiliarly distant, especially when the sad subject of her portraits is violence or rape. This sense of ambiguity between visibility and invisibility in their connections to shame links this issue with Siopis earlier pastel drawing, her 1987 *Dora and the Other Woman*, entirely conceived with reference to exposure and vulnerability. Its 'heroines' are Dora (Freud's hysteric), Sarah Baartman, and the artist herself.

In the Cut between Overexposure and Invisibility.

Dora and the Other Woman may be seen as the starting point for the artist's dismantling of the codified, stereotyped representations and prejudices against women's affectivity, mental health and sexuality exemplified by Freud's discussion of the Dora case, and her ongoing concern with gender biases eviscerated in their relations to racism. The protagonists of Siopis' drawing are the overexposed black 'indigenous' woman, the white hysteric and the artist, covering her eyes and turning her head away from a double disgrace: the spectacle she is herself portraying and the absence of women as agents of discourse. The bodies and psyches Siopis interpellates are stuck in a state of shame, a paradoxical mixture of invisibility and overexposure. The artist inscribes herself and her participation among these constellations, which include the voyeuristic creators of the discourse through which 'shame' is represented and women are constructed as the objects of representation.

Fig. 8: Penny Siopis, *Dora and the Other Woman*, 1987, pastel on paper, private collection, courtesy of the artist.

Before analyzing the work, I would like to underline how, in the scopic field of colonialism – which provides the historical and cultural background to this work –, black women (especially black 'Hottentot' women) have always been associated with shame. The black female body, entangled in a maze of discourses on essential differences and ethnic inferiority, was placed at the centre of the hegemonic spectacle of science and society, not too differently from Freud's hysteric. Intentionally exposed as the quintessential 'site of difference', it was also obliterated as a source of moral uneasiness for the white western onlooker, ashamed both by the sight and by the attraction he might feel for it. The body functioned as an inverted mirror, used to measure the distance between man and animal, but before which a man would never stand too long for fear of being swallowed into this obscure depth of the human species, the darkest of the continents, the epitome of bestial Africa.

In his widely published article on the iconography of female sexuality, Sander L. Gilman explains the relation between the West and the 'Hottentot' woman, considered the quintessence of the black simian African, underlining how she played the same role for Empire as the Jew had played and would continue dramatically to play for

European society.[20] At the time of British colonization of the Cape, Baartman was held to be the incarnation of pathological difference and animality. She died at the age of twenty-five in Paris, after being brought to Europe from the colony where she worked as a slave, to be displayed as an anatomical phenomenon. After her death, parts of her body were exposed in Paris, at the Musée de l'Homme, as samples of "Hottentot" female features, until 1974. Only in 2002 were the remains of her body – skeleton, genitals and brain – returned to Africa and given a belated state funeral. Her burial may be seen as a ceremony of national recomposition against the violence of colonialism and apartheid, a symbolic re-membering of the horrors and the fractures of the past, a tangible event marking the country's obsessive will to regain completeness and dignity through epic memories and grand gestures. Baartman's story is one of scopic obsession with racial identity: her journey across the ocean, intended to satisfy the curiosity of other peoples, served to enforce mental barriers and the technologies of modern scientific discourse. As Wicomb has made clear, Baartman, initially an icon of the sexual lasciviousness attributed to black women (as analyzed by Gilman), is now an easy icon of post-coloniality and the reconstruction of a national, indigenous cultural past. Although her story begins with the shame of her exposure to imperial and non-imperial eyes as an emblem of concupiscence,[21] the "project of recovery" is built around "injury, rather than shame". Yet, as Wicomb observes, "[m]iscegenation, the origins of which lie within a discourse of 'race', concupiscence, and degeneracy, continues to be bound up with shame. … What the case of Baartman then shows is how shame, cross-eyed and shy, stalks the postcolonial world broken mirror in hand, reproducing itself in puzzling distortions." Exposure, as well as the fear of miscegenation have been bypassed but not cancelled: Baartman's body is now mostly a site of contested politics of location (of omissions and representations), connected with the construction of a nation.[22]

Dora and the Other Woman appears stylistically more conventional than Siopis' later works. As the artist declares, it was made to *represent*, to play not on proximity and the affectivity of aesthetic involvement, but on distance. What she seeks to reproduce and dismantle here is precisely the geometrical perspective, the distant yet invasive object-subject relation between white male society and black, but also white, women. This perspective is what the Dora of the (self)portrait, and thus the artist herself, seeks to escape by covering her eyes and appealing to her "right to opacity" in the relationship.[23] The work plays around her lack – her refusal to be seen, to unveil her face – and, conversely, around the overexposure of the "Hottentot Venus", whose pictures are pinned onto the cloth that Dora is using to protect her eyes and body from the others' sight. As Brenda Schmahmann observes, a denunciation is being made against the scopic violence of both eighteenth-century French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot's representation and objectification of hysteria, and Freud's later psychoanalytical interpretation. A series of objects chaotically disseminated in the scene, including two small golden frames on the floor, one containing a mirror, and a red and gold curtain, swept back as on a stage, evoke the scopic scene as a spectacle that casts both women as objectified otherness: the white bourgeois woman symbolizing an 'other' psycho-sexuality; the black indigenous woman 'the other' of the human species.[24] By hiding

[20] Sander L. Gilman, "The Hottentot and the Prostitute: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality", in *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), 76-108.

[21] For the ambiguous erotic relationship between black women and white society in the imaginary realm, see Robert Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), and Ann Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

[22] Wicomb, "Shame and Identity", passim.

[23] For a discussion of the right to opacity, see Edouard Glissant (1990), *Poetics of Relation*, trans. by Betsy Wing (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 189-194.

[24] Brenda Schmahmann, "Representing Regulation – Rendering Resistance: Female Bodies in the Art of Penny Siopis", in Marion Arnold and Brenda Schmahmann, eds., *Between Union and Liberation: Women Artists in South Africa 1910-1994* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 196-222.

her eyes, though, Schmahmann argues, Dora/Siopis is unveiling the histrionic gestures insisted on by Charcot, subverting and mimicking the discourse of early psychoanalysis, but also perhaps repeating Luce Irigaray's provocative act in *Speculum*. Siopis' work, then, might function as a re-writing of hysteria in terms of liberation, transgression, and active, bodily resistance against phallogocentrism, as in Hélène Cixous' drama *Portrait de Dora* (1976), or in later work by South African ceramic sculptor Wilma Cruise.[25]

Yet another play on visibility and invisibility, another denunciation of patriarchal scotomas, is at work in this drawing. What is lacking in the representations of Dora and Sarah is not only the woman's gaze or her subject position in the discourse, but something more subtle and ambiguous. In contemporary depictions of Sarah, but also in the plaster cast of her genitals in the Musée de l'homme, the genitals are covered by a cloth or "tablier" (apron), a term that refers to the shape of her genitals (but which, ironically, also evokes a spectacle, by suggesting Elizabethan apron stages). What is rendered opaque – though not in the sense of respecting her right to opacity – is the very act of cutting her body parts, performed at the time of her death. "What is interesting," Siopis observes,

> is that the cloth seems to function as a cover for the break, the edge of the cast where the leg would normally appear. … I'm interested in the idea that there was some kind of need to cover a break but leave the genitals truncated, sectioned and exposed. The impulse seems to have been to cover the sign of the objectification – of the object. …. It's as if they don't really want to show what's really happened, namely the cutting up of this person's body. So they disguise the cut.

What is lacking is the cut. The cloth, metonymically, stands for the cut, the dismemberment of the black woman's body operated by asymmetrical powers. A similar fate was encountered by Dora, whose "sexuality was fragmented, taken away from her, in a sense by Freud. She was made an object … and turned into a spectacle."[26] Her cutting was covered and simultaneously revealed by Freud's written words, a parallel to Sarah's cloth. This fragmentation, revelation and donning is precisely what Siopis makes visible and tangible, subverting the presumed neutrality of the gaze.

The common features of both women's vicissitudes are objectification and display, as Siopis suggests. The focal point of her spectacle is condensed around lack, the hole that is apparently hidden by the cloth and that, on the contrary, is rendered visible and mesmerizing by the fabric itself. There, where the viewers' eyes are stitched to the strength of the forbidden (or 'foreclosed', to use Lacan's term), the shame that affects both Dora and the white woman artist as she looks at the disgrace of a violent, hurtful epistemology, but also the apron that covers Sarah's genitals to hide her 'shame', meaning is all the same inferred. As a way of ordering reality and stemming the luminous, infinite power of becoming, meaning arises precisely around the assumed mystery of women and their 'lack', however powerless, over-intelligible, or impenetrable. Onto that hole the public actively projects meaning through images; "and imagination has its own way with horror, filling our minds with images that get under the skin of our most intimate relationships."[27]

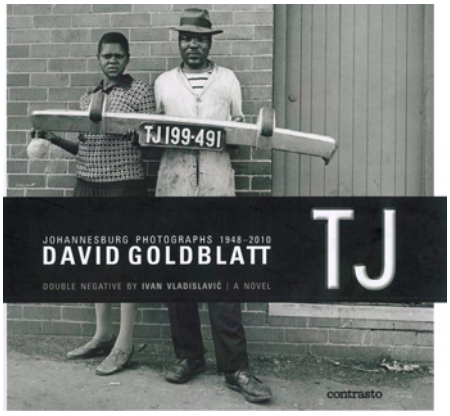
[25] Cruise's *Venus after Dora* (1990) is an act of homage to Siopis' *Dora and the Other Woman*. In "Ceramic Sculptures by Wilma Cruise: Fragments and Feminist Transgressions", *Interpreting Ceramics*, 8 (2007), <http://www.uwic.ac.uk/icrc/issue008/articles/19.htm>, 1 November 2010, Schmahmann analyses the relation between Siopis' and Cruise's rendering of hysteria as a site of transgression through their fragmentation of the female body against the act of looking.

[26] Annie E. Coombes and Penny Siopis, "Gender, 'Race', Ethnicity in Art Practice in Post-Apartheid South Africa: Annie E. Coombes and Penny Siopis in Conversation", *Feminist Review*, 55 (Spring, 1997), 121-123.

[27] Siopis, *Lasso*.

Paola Splendore

Double Negative and *TJ*: An Interview with Ivan Vladislavić



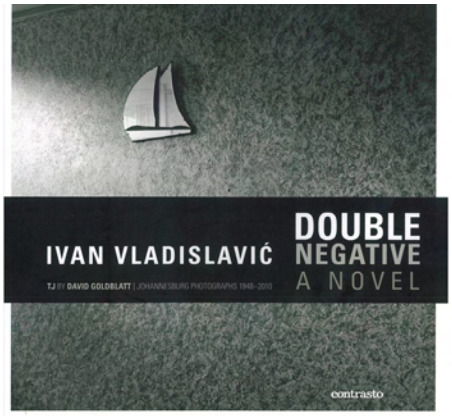


Fig. 1: *TJ/Double Negative*, courtesy of David Goldblatt.

TJ. Double Negative combines the work of two great contemporary South African artists: David Goldblatt, a photographer internationally known for his documentation of the changes in South African society in the course of the last sixty years, and Ivan Vladislavić, one of the most innovative voices in the literature of his country.[1] The combination is not casual. Both artists have devoted the greater part of their work to Johannesburg, a difficult and fragmented city, with a name, as Goldblatt puts it, that "does not easily slide off the tongue" and for this reason is often substituted by its inhabitants with abbreviations, nicknames and metaphors. The letters TJ which appear in the title refer to the no longer used initials on car plates which at one time indicated the region and the city: Transvaal, Johannesburg.

[1] (Roma: Contrasto, 2010; Cape Town: Umuzi, 2010)

The box published by Contrasto and Umuzi contains two volumes: the first, in large format, is a collection of several hundreds of Goldblatt's photographs, taken from 1948 – the official birth date of apartheid – to the present. Almost all in black-and-white (except for those in the most recent section), they make up an extremely valuable archive, which exposes the harsh reality of people, buildings, roads, homes, signboards, inanimate objects, with a force only photos can convey. The second, a smaller book, contains Ivan Vladislavić's new novel, *Double Negative*, set in Johannesburg like the author's entire production – three novels, two collections of short stories, various essays on urban building, and especially *Portrait with Keys* (2008): autobiography, reportage, cultural testimony all in one – which appears to be generated by a profound empathy with the metropolis.

The story narrated in *Double Negative*, set in the 1980s, with apartheid still at its height, is that of the discovery of a vocation or simply of an elective affinity between a University drop-out and a famous photographer, Saul Auerbach. Young Neville has no desire to study but finds himself forced to renew his University registration in order to avoid military service. He would like to be part of the adult world, find a job which would help him grow up, and studying seems to him to be a great waste of time. Meanwhile, although he does not share the militancy of many of his friends, he observes every form of injustice, criticizes the wishy-washy liberalism of the whites and the exploitation of the blacks, and

refuses the privileges of apartheid. Soon he accepts a job considered fit for a black man, the position of assistant to Jaco, an eccentric painter of signboards, zebra crossings and arrows in parking-lots. His father, alarmed at his son's lack of ambition and prospects, arranges for him to spend a day going around the townships in the company of the famous photographer, Saul Auerbach. The boy accepts reluctantly: he doesn't want to be preached at or to have to answer questions concerning his plans, and besides he has no interest in photography. But nothing of the kind happens. Auerbach takes him and an English friend with him in search of suitable subjects to photograph, addressing only a few sentences to him throughout the trip. After hours of driving through terrible heat they reach god-forsaken places just when the light has changed and they can't do anything. And yet the meeting leaves its mark. Soon after, in order to avoid military service, Neville moves to England where by pure chance he becomes a commercial photographer for advertising and periodicals.

Ten years later, at the time of the 1994 elections, his sense of belonging to South Africa is suddenly enhanced and he feels he has wasted the occasion to participate in the History of his country. The time has come for him to put an end to his self-imposed exile.

Back in Johannesburg, as if guided by an obscure instinct, Neville returns to the places he visited with the great photographer years before. He still has vivid recollections of his earlier encounter with the people of the township – ordinary people with their own sorrows and dreams, like the mother of triplets only two of whom are still alive, the collector of bizarre letter-boxes, the keeper of the package of undelivered letters, "dead letters", mutilated stories that can never be completely known like the snapshots that portray their protagonists. And it is these people he is still looking for. The repetition of the experience, implicit in the title of the book, *Double Negative,* shows how much Neville has matured, but many years will pass before he can call himself a photographer and summon up his courage to show Auerbach his pictures.

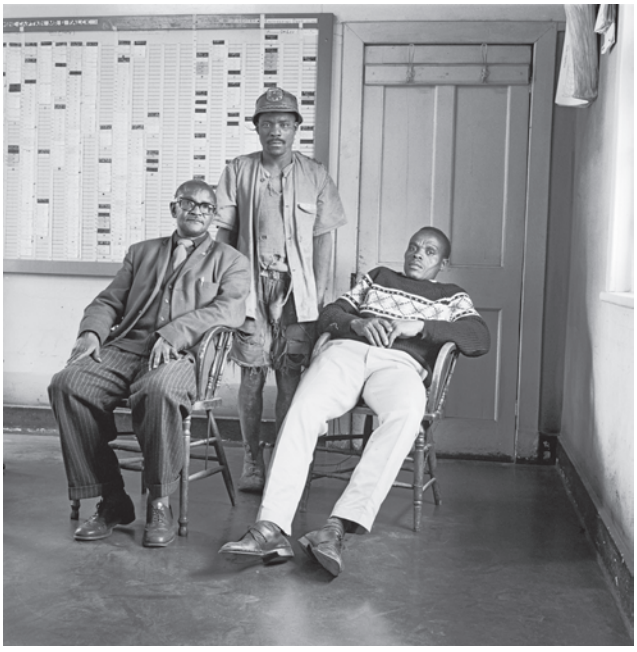


Fig.2:Time office clerks (they checked hours worked by each man) and a miner, City Deep Gold Mine. 1966, courtesy of David Goldblatt.

Though in *Double Negative* photography is both content and language, at no point does the text become didactic and try to explain what the art of photography consists in. When, for example, during the famous day trip to the townships, Auerbach's English friend – a typical opinionated photo-journalist devoid of any relationship with the reality in which he moves – asks him how one can understand whether a certain subject is worth photographing, the enigmatic answer is that it is the subject that summons him and imposes itself as 'image'. There are no rules. To take a good photograph one must be able to 'see' and know how to look, with respect and empathy. Few people succeed in this.

In the interview that follows, I asked Ivan Vladislavić a few questions about the genesis of the *TJ/DoubleNegative* project and about his work as a writer

PS: *It's an interesting fact that your first novel to appear in Italian should be not with a conventional literary publisher but with a publisher specialized in photography and visual arts. This says something relevant about the multifaceted nature of your work, which often relies on strong visual elements and objects. I'm thinking of all the maps, road-signs, photographs etc. scattered throughout your stories and novels, and of course of your longstanding interest in physical spaces, architecture and urban landscape, art and photography. "Double Negative" is described on the cover as the "visual part" of the "TJ project", revolving around the city of Johannesburg.*

Can you tell us how the project started?

IV: I felt an affinity between my work and David Goldblatt's for many years, and was pleased to discover that he shared this view. It's hard to say exactly what this quality is, except that we seem to find the same things interesting and see our surroundings in a similar way. In 2001, I was commissioned to write a text for *David Goldblatt: Fifty-One Years*, the catalogue which accompanied an exhibition of David's work at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Barcelona (MACBA). At the time, I was working on a sequence of short documentary texts on Johannesburg and so I put together a set of them for the catalogue. David gave me access to his archive of prints, and I became more familiar with his whole body of work. I already knew his books, but rambling through that astounding archive gave me a new appreciation for the depth and breadth of his photography. In the end, however, the texts did not comment directly on the photos: it was rather a case of arriving at texts that showed this affinity I spoke about earlier, that dealt with similar themes to the photos or threw them into relief. I think we were both pleased with the resonance between the texts and the photos. Perhaps from that time on there was an unspoken wish to work together again.

The idea of a joint project became concrete around 2006, when David began assembling a selection of his Johannesburg photos for the first time. I had finished my documentary book on the city, which was published in that year as *Portrait with Keys*, and wanted to return to writing fiction. In fact, I already had a half-formed structure for a novel in mind. Rather than writing a critical essay for *TJ*, I decided to pursue my own fiction towards a joint publication. In 2006, I spent a few days going around the city with David. I got some idea of how he works, and we also spoke a lot and got to know one another better. David then gave me a set of small prints, a partial selection of the photos he was thinking of putting into *TJ*, and I kept them on my shelf while I worked. I wrote the novel with these photos 'in the corner of my eye'. Sometimes I studied them very carefully; and then for months on end I tried to forget all about them, so that my writing could find its own course without being swallowed up in the images.

The actual writing of the novel took two or three years. Throughout that time, David went on refining his selection of photos and also making new work. It was

only when my text was at a fairly advanced stage that David saw what I was up to. We were then faced with the challenge of how to marry a book of photographs and a novel. Essentially they each demanded a different format, which made publication in a single volume impossible. We were lucky to find a designer – Cyn van Houten – who was able to resolve the problem so elegantly. And we were also lucky to find publishers, in Contrasto and Umuzi, willing to take on an unusual combination of books.

PS: *"TJ" is one of Johannesburg's many names: you have explored the city life more clearly in "The Restless Supermarket", "The Exploded View" and more recently in "Portrait with Keys", a book as much about the city as about yourself. But Jo'burg is not just the place where you live and the location of most of your stories and novels but also a sort of epitome of South African change. If you agree with this interpretation, could you explain how and why?*

IV: Like South Africa in general, Johannesburg is a huge work in progress. It is a young city – very young by Italian standards – having been founded as recently as 1886. It is also an unlikely city, in that it sprang from the discovery of gold on the Witwatersrand, and its growth has been driven by mining and money ever since. From the beginning, the place was marked by extremes: it was a city where many people made their fortunes and their names; and where many others laboured in poverty and died forgotten. Like most people who call Joburg home, I was born elsewhere: I grew up in Pretoria, came here as a student in the1970s and have never managed to disentangle myself again.

The old apartheid barriers collapsed quickly in Joburg, and it is South Africa's most integrated city, in my view. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, one could trace the massive social and political changes occurring in South Africa in the changing face of the city, and indeed one's own neighbourhood. This was fascinating to me, as a citizen and as a writer, and is what drew me to reflect directly on the city in my fiction.

In the past, Joburg was cosmopolitan in a limited sense, in that it attracted white immigrants from abroad, along with people from elsewhere in South Africa, but excluded black people or severely restricted their access to and enjoyment of the city. In the post-apartheid years, the city has become more truly cosmopolitan – or Afropolitan as some people put it – with the arrival of many people from other African countries. This has not been a comfortable process, as the xenophobic attacks on foreigners in 2008 demonstrated. Nonetheless, Joburg continues to attract people in search of work, a better life, education, excitement, opportunity – even if they

Fig. 3: Arriving family, King George Street, circa 1955, courtesy of David Goldblatt.

don't always find what they're looking for. It's this openness to the new, the sense that here people can try on another identity for size, can transform themselves and their circumstances, with a bit of luck and hard work, that makes Joburg the quintessential South African city. It is a rough, tough place, difficult to like and impossible to live in, but it also rewards those who survive. It concentrates and magnifies both our best qualities and our appalling flaws as a society.

PS: *With "Portrait With Keys" and "Double Negative" your writing appears to be moving away from the conventional novel form. Is it a deliberate choice? If so, does it correspond to a sort of shift from the 'abstraction' or fictionality of your first works to a more hybrid but also more realistic kind of writing?*

IV: I'm not sure I can trace a shift in a definite direction in my work. What I can say is that I enjoy exploring different modes and styles. Rather than preselecting and imposing a style, it feels to me that the style of the work arises, in a more or less intuitive way, from the material or set of interests I'm dealing with. At one point in the late 1990s, I was drawn to a documentary style; I needed to record what was happening around me more immediately than I had done in the past. This is the impulse that gave rise to *Portrait with Keys*. After pursuing that for seven or eight years, I had a need to go back to fiction, to start making things up in a freer way. I try to listen to the mutterings of my subconsious on this score.

I have been working alongside visual artists in various ways for about a decade. I mentioned earlier that some of the *Portrait with Keys* texts were published with Goldblatt's photos. Others appeared in a book of photos by the Scottish artist Roger Palmer (*Overseas*), and in a quirky book on product design by the German design duo Jörg Adam and Dominik Harborth (*Helfershelfer*; or *Second Aid* in the English version). In all of these cases, the texts were written with the work of my 'collaborators' in mind. I put the word in quotes because the collaboration has strict limits: I don't have a say in my partners' work and they don't have a say in mine. Rather it's a question of writing within the magnetic field of another body of work and trying to create an interesting interplay between the two.

My novel *The Exploded View* was also written in this way. It was the most extensive experiment of this kind prior to the project with Goldblatt. The conceptual artist Joachim Schönfeldt asked me to write a text in response to some 'illustrations' he had made. Although he had something briefer in mind, I eventually wrote a novel called *The Exploded View* (2004). Extracts from the novel and Schönfeldt's images were presented together in an exhibition called *The Model Men*, but the full text and the images were never published together and always had a fairly independent existence. Working with Goldblatt, however, our intention was always to publish the two elements together.

This way of working may partly account for the shift you've noticed in my writing: my work has been nudged into new territory by the proximity of other visions and approaches. This is precisely what I like about it. Another body of

work, with its own forms and preoccupations, creates a kind of obstacle in the smooth flow of my own interests. One has to both incorporate and exclude the influence of the other work, and this takes one in surprising directions. It's like trying to step elegantly through a minefield.

PS: *Two strands appear to dominate your writing: an interest in social reality and a strong penchant for imagination. Without being either strictly political or evasive your writing has been described as both satirical and abstract, as a feat of imagination. Which description comes closer to your intentions?*

IV: This ties up closely with your previous question. I like to think that my writing is neither one thing nor another. When I was starting out as a writer, I had a youthful need to prove that I had an imagination, and also to resist the dominant realist tradition in South African fiction, and some of my early fictions are therefore quite extravagant. As I've grown older and marginally wiser, I've realised that these things are usually more complex than they seem. Some of the modes I dismissed in my youth now seem fascinating to me, and I find it harder to draw clear distinctions between them. A work that appears to be a model of realism might ignite a whole range of symbolic or allegorical or otherwise abstract readings. This is one of the many lessons one can take from J.M. Coetzee. In any event, I enjoy the challenge of doing something different in a new text. I do not want to solve the same crossword puzzle over and over.

Another point of resistance for me as a young writer was the rather heavy-handed preoccupation with social and political issues in our literature. As much as I wanted to deal with the world around me, which was shaped in every aspect by racism and apartheid, I wanted to invent and surprise. There are countless examples of writers who engage politics and power in their work with imaginative energy, but a few who were important to me in those years were Eduardo Galeano, Milan Kundera and Danilo Kiš. It is no coincidence that some of their books appeared in the marvellous 'Writers from the Other Europe' series edited by Philip Roth and published by Penguin in the early eighties.

PS: *Your favourite authors, as I gather from previous interviews, are Dickens, Stevenson, Borges, Canetti, among others, and their inspiration is clear in your work. But you also often mention the relevance of Afrikaans authors. How important would you say Afrikaans literature is for you?*

IV: Again, your question ties up neatly with the previous one. I studied both English and Afrikaans literature at Wits University in the mid-1970s. In those years, the study of English literature was still dominated by the Great Tradition. Given the ways in which literary studies have been eroded since then, I am grateful that I had to study Chaucer, Elizabethan drama, the Metaphysical poets, the Romantics and so on. Nonetheless, the conception of the canon was frustratingly narrow. In three years of study, I did one brief elective on the contemporary

novel (Bellow, Patrick White, Iris Murdoch and a few others) and that was it. Crucially, there was no South African or African work on the curriculum at all. The thinking at the time seemed to be that students would explore more recent writing on their own anyway, and to an extent this was true. But the total exclusion of local work undoubtedly created a sense that it was inferior and not worthy of serious attention.

In this context, studying Afrikaans literature was a tremendous antidote. By its nature, Afrikaans writing was more concerned with our world and aimed mainly at local readers. The 1960s were a vital period in Afrikaans writing, with the rise of the so-called sestigers like André Brink, Breyten Breytenbach, Etienne Leroux and others. This energy carried over into the 70s, and I was lucky to be reading and studying the work of these writers as it was being published. By another stroke of luck, some of my teachers in the Afrikaans Department at Wits, notably the novelist John Miles, were fine writers themselves. They also ran the oppositional publishing house Taurus, which published both Miles and Breytenbach. The work they published appeared in our seminar rooms hot off the press. This was exciting for a young person with ambitions to write: it demonstrated, very graphically, that the world of books was not at a distance in time or space, that the stuff of 'literature' did not only belong in England in the eighteeth century, if you like, but was here and now, outside the window, in the streets.

Quite a few of the Afrikaans writers I admired had lived or studied in France, the Netherlands and other European countries, and this influence showed in their work. To me it seemed more innovative and contemporary than the work of English-speakers steeped in the Anglo tradition. Again, I have come to a more subtle view of this over the years, as I've become more attuned to influence myself, but I still read the work of Afrikaans writers – Marlene van Niekerk, Ingrid Winterbach, Harry Kalmer and others – with great pleasure.

PS: *Back to "Double Negative": photography is as much a pervasive theme in "Double Negative" as a metaphor and a stylistic choice. In a way, the protagonist looks back on his youth under apartheid through the photographer's lens displaying a series of snapshots in front of the readers' eyes. If Neville can be considered a sort of double for the novelist how does the 'photography metaphor' in "Double Negative" reflect on your writing?*

IV: Let me try to answer this by saying more about the form of the novel and what inspired it. In 2006, just when David and I were clarifying our project together, I went to see the twentieth-anniversary staging of the play *Sophiatown* at the Market Theatre. Afterwards, I bumped into the social historian Jonathan Hyslop, and we spoke about having seen the first version of the play in 1986 and now watching it again in 2006. Jonathan told me, to put it simply, that something he found interesting as he got older was how he began to see the larger dynamics of history played out in the small compass of his own life. As you age, you revisit your earlier life with a different perspective, and the meaning of your own experience changes. This

conversation made an impression on me. I remembered the circumstances in which I first saw the play in 1986: we were under a state of emergency, I was working at Ravan Press, where our publishing programme placed a strong emphasis on 'revisionist history'. Watching the play again, twenty years later, more than a decade into democracy, I was struck by how much its meaning had changed because the context of its reception was so different. Out of this grew the idea of building a novel out of cross-sections through time – presenting three distinct periods and exploring how things change over time. I had this three-part structure before I found the story about the relationship between two photographers.

Then, to answer your question more directly, I saw an analogy between my proposed structure and photography. Geoff Dyer uses a wonderful phrase – 'the ongoing moment' – to describe the status of a photograph. Every photo is a cross-section through time; it freezes a moment, which then stays with us, the viewers, in a sort of perpetual present. When I look at David's work, it is extraordinary how much life, how much history folds out of one of those cross-sections. I hoped to do something similar in my text.

Another aspect of this is that the photos in David's book *TJ* are arranged decade by decade, starting in the 1940s and coming right up to the present. All these still moments, placed side by side, read one after the other, manage to set time in motion. The relationships between the photos, the changes or continuities they reveal when they are compared are just as important as the individual elements. I think I pursue a somewhat similar strategy in my work, placing texts side by side and allowing them to generate meaning through the ways they argue or agree with one another, rather than unfolding a seamless, linear narrative.

None of this is very startling. Photography and film have soaked into every fibre of the written word. I can hardly imagine how one could write now without the work being shaped somehow by our overwhelmingly visual frames of reference.

PS: *The unavoidable question: did you really meet Goldblatt/Auerbach so early on in life? And if so, did he have an impact on you?*

IV: I first met David around 1987, although I knew of his work long before then. I told the story of our meeting at the launch of the book a few days ago, and perhaps it's worth repeating. I was working at Ravan Press and we were about to publish a book of poetry called *Familiar Ground* by Ingrid de Kok. She wanted to use one of David's photos on the cover of the book, as she felt it

Fig. 4: Portrait photographer, Braamfontein, 1*955*, courtesy of David Goldblatt.

Fig. 5: Women washing clothes and singing in the Newtown squatter camp. 1 November 2001, courtesy of David Goldblatt.

captured the atmosphere of the small mining town where she grew up and which she wrote about in her poems. Then, as now, David was very fussy about the use of his images. Her letter to him motivating her choice of the photo must have been persuasive though, because he agreed to let us have it. It fell to me to drive over to his house to collect the photo. David had a reputation for being brusque and I was very nervous about meeting him. When I got there, he took me into his study – the same room where he keeps his archive – handed me the print, and then told me very firmly exactly what could and couldn't be done to it: it could not be cropped; it could not be reversed; it could not have type put on top of it, and so on. The clarity and seriousness with which he set these conditions was a lesson in taking responsibility for your own work which I have never forgotten. But if you had told me then that I would end up working so closely with David, and that we would publish *TJ/Double Negative* together, I would have thought you were mad.

Karen Press

Monument to the South African Republic (on some photographs by David Goldblatt)

The long dry grass collects our history
and every few years burns it off
in a frenzy of memory.

Here it grows for two policemen who died
for the same cause, in Afrikaans and Zulu,
and who lie in heartfelt English
among broken cans and paper scraps
the grass has gathered for them,
for my lovely husband, from his lovely wife and children.

And here, around a modest stone obelisk,
memorial to the dead republic
erected on the day of its birth, the grass sways its long stalks
dried to the colour of biblical corn, sifting the summer wind
that brings grains of brick, cement,
old seeds and dog hairs to form a carpet
for the sparrows that visit, the tramps who sleep here –
for the town has understood to build
its street of chain stores and municipal offices
leading in the other direction, away from this
weathered, semi-literate scrap of older time.

In a graveyard a white concrete arch
loses its letters one by one leaving their grey shadows
behind like stains, vow of the dead soldiers
who came to rest here in a flag-shaped myth,
and the grass leaves a bare gravel patch
naked to the sun lest we forget, lest we forget
how nothing grows from such valour.

But just beyond the borderline of thirsty eucalyptus trees
it grows again, long and soft and ready to catch
someone's cigarette, some beer bottle splinter
smouldering there after a raucous night of farewells
and burn fast, and lay itself down as ash over the past.

David Goldblatt

Three Photographs

Memorials to two policemen shot and killed here by robbers on 3 July 2002, Whipp Street, Memel, Free State. Three men were each given two life sentences for the murders, 24 August 2005.

Monument to the Republic of South Africa 31 May 1961, Cornelia, Free State, 24 August 2005.

Memorial to two members of the African armed forces killed in what President PW Botha called the "Total Onslaught", Villiers, Free State, 24 August 2005.

Photographs courtesy of David Goldblatt and Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa.

Annalisa Piccirillo

Speaking with Nelisiwe Xaba: Re-dancing a Body, Re-imagining a Continent

The body is like a continent. It can be mapped, explored and aesthetically visualized in fixed forms, shapes and movements. The African continent is like the female black body. It has been choreographed, theorized and stereotyped. Both continent and body have been rendered simultaneously 'invisible' or 'hypervisible' by the western colonizing gaze; both have been objectified in dominant discourses by embodying and representing the mystery of darkness, as in Freud's recycling of Henry Morton Stanley's definition of Africa in his own representation of women's sexuality as a "dark continent" for psychoanalysis. Black feminist theorists – together with historians, literary critics, sociologists, legal scholars and cultural critics – have written extensively on the historical narrative constructed around black women's sexuality. The binary opposition that has characterized black and white female sexuality is condensed by the art historian, Lorraine O' Grady, in the following statement: "White is what woman is; not-white (and the stereotypes non-white gathers in) is what she had better not be".[1] The black body's sexuality is embedded in darkness, in the concealing, distorted vision of an essentialized 'dark body-continent'. The re-imagining of Freud's metaphor is the starting point for my research into the connection between the female *dancing* body and the African continent, in the course of which I encountered the work of Nelisiwe Xaba.

[1] Lorraine O'Grady, "Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity", in Amelia Jones, ed., *The Feminist and Visual Culture Reader* (London: Routledge, 2003), 174-186.

Xaba is a contemporary South African artist whose dancing narrates the political, racial and sexual movement through which South African female bodies have been choreographed since colonial times. Speaking with her about her theatre-dance, I seek to understand her personal act of re-imagining South Africa, the piece of the "Dark Continent" disguised today by the more positive image of the "Rainbow Nation".

Born in Soweto, Xaba studied at the Johannesburg Dance Foundation. In 1996 she received a grant for the Ballet Rambert in London where her diasporic experience of moving from South Africa to Britain and thence to other continents, began. The same year, she went on to work in what she calls an "American slavery tour" with the Soweto Street Beat Dance Company. A year later she joined the Pact Dance Company, turned freelance and started working with well known choreographers like South African Robyn Orlin, one of South Africa's most controversial and provocative choreographers and performance artists.[2] She also encountered visual art by collaborating with Rodney Place (*Couch Dancing*, 1998) and experienced contemporary drama with the French actress and director Sophie Loucachevsky in a work of confusion and sex change (*The Homosexual or the Difficulty of Expression*, 2003). In 2008, Xaba collaborated with Haitian dancer and choreographer Ketty Noël to create a duet titled *Correspondances* – a satirical look

[2] On Robin Orlin's work see <http://www.robynorlin.com/index.htm>, 12 July 2011.

into the politics of women to women relationships. Theatre, dance and visual art are completed by poetry in Xaba's cooperation with Lesego Rampolokeng in *Bantu Ghosts* (2009), a spoken word performance conceived as a tribute to the South African hero Steve Bantu Biko.

Since 1998, Nelisiwe Xaba has launched a solo career as dancer and choreographer of her own pieces: *Dazed And Confused*, *Talent Search For New Rainbow Nation Dance Co.*, *No String Attached 1&2*, *Be My Wife*, *Plasticization*, and her productions inspired by Sarah Baartman, the "Hottentot Venus": *They Look at Me and That's All They Think* and *Sarkozy says NoN to the Venus*. Her most recent piece, *Black!..White?* (2009), incorporates costume animation, music and dance, interrogating the politics of black and white (directed by Toni Morkel, and produced by the choreographic centre CDC in Toulouse France). Xaba is currently working on *Uncles and Angels*, the working title of her next solo project: a commentary on virginity testing for women and girls globally. The piece uses video projection technology to create multiple live recorded and pre-recorded images exploring traditional dance forms. [3]

Xaba's body language both as choreographer and as dancer have been enriched by her collaborations with other artists and performers and her own, individual work as she engages with constantly changing forms, objects, images and topics. Her experimental theatre-dance is imaginative, provocative and political: her skin color and sexuality are the main weapons for her challenging works. From slavery to apartheid, from colonial to contemporary times, the black female body has been associated with negative stereotypes produced in order to establish racial and sexual difference and maintain white male supremacy. Xaba re-dances some of these fixed images, articulated on the South African body.

In my approach to Xaba's work, the 're-' prefix serves as a kind of prop for my analysis. When applied to her performative act of re-dancing a body and re-imagining a continent, it suggests her endeavour to express 'other' meanings, to re-narrate and oppose resistance to the dominant discourses produced on the black female body and experienced by various groups of black women at different historical moments. What emerges is a very personal choreographic language, aimed at deconstructing the categories that have framed the African female 'body-continent' – and others – into an essentialist and eurocentric perspective. In a global vision, Xaba re-dances themes of racial stereotyping, gender opposites and cultural perceptions that may be shared by different races and nationalities. In a more local vision, the act of re-dancing stereotypes is understood as the act of elaborating a new image for the South African female and black identities. Through the act of dancing, she challenges and 'defers' the audience's gaze, whether black or white, European or African, directing it towards other visions and re-visions. The exploration of other physical, aesthetic and technological possibilities are part of her signature style.[4] As she re-dances labels and categories, she questions herself on what it means to produce a contemporary African dance piece for/on white stages in European festivals, displaying the power of her silent language: "What is

[3] Information from Xaba's website, <http://www.nelisiwexaba.co.za/>, 30 July 2010, integrated with the artists' personal communication (13 July 2011).

[4] Usually, there is an impressive and effective use of technology and multimedia art in her performances. Nelisiwe also re-dances her femininity with an original, aesthetic use of high heels on stage.

'contemporary African'? Does the color of my skin make my work 'contemporary African'?"

Re-dancing The Venus

Fig. 1: Nelisiwe Xaba, *They Look at Me and That's All They Think,* 25 July 2010, photograph, Castello di Monte Sant'Angelo (IT), © Annalisa Piccirillo;

Click here to view video, ©Dance Umbrella 2011.

Nelisiwe Xaba has produced two solos inspired by Sarah Baartman, the South African black woman better known, during her life, as the Hottentot Venus. In the nineteenth century, this young woman was cruelly exhibited and objectified by scientific experts and by the European colonial gaze because of her "unusual physiognomy" and particularly her genitalia and buttocks. In Europe, the alterity of all black females was constructed and 'choreographed' on the iconography of this 'other' body:

> The "primitive" genitalia of these women were defined by European commentators as the sign of their "primitive" sexual appetites. Thus, the black female became the antithesis of European sexual mores and beauty and was relegated to the lowest position on the scale of human development. The image of the black female constructed in this period reflected everything the white female was not … .[5]

Stereotypes based on racial and sexual difference are made in order to control and regulate the behavior of those rendered 'other'. When she re-dances Sarah Baartman, Xaba resists the concept of fixity described by Homi Bhabha as the ideological construction of otherness during colonial times: "Fixity, as the sign of cultural/historical racial difference in the discourse of colonialism, is a paradoxical mode of representation; it connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and demonic repetition".[6] Xaba's body translates Sarah Baartman's story into an autobiographic vision of the black African woman's body today, caught in between invisibility and hypervisibility, perfection and imperfection. By re-dancing the objectified sexual image of the female black body, she interrogates the voyeurism of colonial confrontations with 'the exotic', staging the ambivalence of the stereotype made of "power and desire", "presence and absence" and exposing the erotic obsession that lies at the heart of colonialism.[7]

Xaba's first Italian performance of her Hottentot Venus took place in July 2010, during the IVth edition of the Teatro Civile Festival organized by the Legambiente organization, in the suggestive setting of the Castle of Monte Sant' Angelo, in the province of Foggia (22-25 July). Entitled *The Venus*, it combined two of her solos: *They Look at Me and That is All They Think* and *Sarkozy says NoN to the Venus*, originally commissioned by the Musée du Quai Branly in 2009. *Sarkozy says Non…* is a more overtly political work: the piece is a comment on European immigration laws and

[5] Evelynn M. Hammonds, "Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic of Silence", in M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, eds., *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 172.

[6] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 94.

[7] Ibid.

policies, which have become increasingly anti-African. The title refers to the Sarkozy government's policy to give black immigrants 6000 euros to leave France.[8]

During the Festival, I asked the dancer a few questions about her work.

AP: *Nelisiwe, I would like to know why you chose dancing? When did you realize how powerful your body language is and when did you perceive the double aim of your dance: to produce entertainment but above all to produce a work about interrogation, political criticism and gender politics?*

NX: I started dancing during the political uprisings in the late 80s, this is when formal schooling in Soweto was interrupted, when the youth were rioting, throwing stones and fighting for liberation. So when I started dancing it was to find something constructive, something where I could spend my energy positively. At that time young people were stimulated to destroy government structures and white business, as a way of agitating politicians. And some of that was to our detriment. Some of it went against us because we were also destroying infrastructure that was vital to our everyday existence. So I had to find something intimate, elegant, something less aggressive. This does not negate the importance of the struggle or any form of protest, I chose to do it differently, in fact today's youth doesn't really do anything, they just follow the "elders"; so any form of protest is good be it through dancing or rioting.

So dance was a way of getting out of the streets, and a way to focus and invest in a vague future. At that time I was not thinking "I need to tell a story"; at that time I wasn't thinking "I need to address issues of feminism, I need to address racial issues." Politics was such a part of my everyday life that I wanted to dance, I wanted to be free. It was around the time of *Fame*, the American TV series, we wanted to dance badly.

At a very young age I was conscious about these issues, feminism, racism and religion. For me having been born in Soweto forced one to be political, it wasn't something I had to learn, it wasn't something outside of me. I never intended to make art out of this, or gain recognition by doing it or to make a career out of it. Also I didn't create my work immediately when I finished training, or when I left the dance school. I approached everything in a classical or 'traditional' sense, in a way. You learn to dance, you become a dancer and interpret with your body what the choreographer wants you to say; then after that hopefully you can say what you want to say and how you want to say it.

AP: *What has been crucial? When did you understand that yours was more than a classical way of producing dance.*

NX: I think my interest in other art forms has been crucial. If I had looked at dance strictly, I wouldn't have been able to do what I do. You know some people don't think I am doing dance, but I don't worry about them, I'm concerned with what I

[8] For images and further information, see "Xaba brings solo shows to the Market", at <http://www.artlink.co.za/news_article.htm?contentID=23411>, 12 July 2011.

want to say and how I want to say it. For me it is important how the message gets across to the audience. Sometimes I find dance can be limiting in how I want to get a message across. That's why I use dance combined with other art forms, like video installations, costumes and props, which give me the chance to be more direct.

Also if you work with the body on stage, if you put a body on a platform, in most cases, especially in the dance world, it is sexual and political, definitely. It differs according to what kind of body one puts on a platform, a naked female body, or a naked male body on stage, or if you put black or white on stage: it's always different to the viewer.

AP: *You trained first at the Johannesburg Dance Foundation in South Africa and then at the Rambert School in Great Britain. So with your body language you lived the migratory experience with a diasporic displacement from one continent to another, from one audience to another. How did this artistic and personal diaspora change your body and the perception of your 'continent', or cultural identity? In your performances on the Hottentot Venus, for example, the reference to the experience of displacement is given by the use of objects such as a passport, a suitcase, a paper boat and an airplane. Is the ironic use of these objects a way to negotiate your personal journey?*

NX: My work is a journey, and it's influenced by immigration, by traveling and being a foreigner, or seeking for greener pastures. Most migration is for economic reasons and not solely based on climate. Immigrants in most cases have no choice, they cannot afford everything they want, and they cannot buy whatever they want, but in most cases they want to get out of poverty to find a better life somewhere. When you arrive somewhere you are not always welcomed and you are always the 'other'. These issues are getting worse. Humanity's a strange thing. Those are the things we haven't managed to find solutions for. Tolerance and humanity – we haven't managed to find the balance.

In my first trip, when I actually left South Africa, I was going to America; I was younger, about 21, young in the sense that I had never left the country, never been exposed to a different culture and I had never lived alone, or had to sort out my life on my own, without my mother. I left South Africa with a dance group, so we left for America, but soon when we arrived it was clear for me that it was some kind of slave trade, because we were taken as young people who have never been outside Soweto to America without a return ticket. I suppose at that time the embassies were not so strict, but still it's not secure for the dancers. You don't leave without a return ticket because maybe you won't be able to return, and you didn't have a contract or a salary. But before you leave, just like Sarah Baartman, you're promised that you'll make money and everything's going to be fantastic when you arrive. But after a month it was clear that actually the intention of the producers of the show was just to bring a group of young dancers and musicians to hopefully make money, without any structures being put in place.

If it's clear that as a dancer you can be a stageaire, an apprentice, you need to be told it's just for your experience and not be promised the world. If you're promised

the world then it's different, it's professional, and you're working so that you can have some kind of remuneration. If that is not met then somewhere there's abuse.

When I arrived in the United States it was a cultural shock. Also to understand that now you're a foreigner, to imagine suddenly that you're an immigrant, at that age when you're supposed just to be a professional and working. I left the company, after less than two months, to explore life on my own. And when you're alone that's when you really get to be an immigrant, that's when you have to find a job, that's when you have to try and make a living in a foreign place, and that is never easy. You become a slave automatically, you don't have rights, you don't exist, and trying to exist when you don't exist is a strange feeling.

My trip in the United States was at an age when you search for identity, but it is also strange to search for identity in a foreign place! At that time I was researching, mostly around religion, going to different churches and different religions. I guess to try and find where I fitted. Also being exposed to the black community, in America, was part of this search for identity. I don't think you ever find identity, because for a minute you can think I can identify with this and then another day you think I can't be associated with that. It's funny, when I was young I was vigorously looking for this, and to think about it now when I am soon to be forty, it is like I still don't know what my identity is!

Sometimes my trips are so short. Those ones I hate because you don't get a sense of the people, the real people, not the artists. Artists are not real people, we find ways of dealing with each other everywhere in the world. But if you have to deal with normal people in the streets, for me that's cultural exchange. And for me that's the best one. There are people that leave their country and try to find the same community in another country. For me it was the contrary, I never want to be with South Africans where I am, it's like I might as well be at home and stay at home!

At the same time I suppose if you are an immigrant then maybe that's necessary, even more so today. Immigration in Europe is the favorite topic: politicians can't say anything without mentioning immigrants, as though immigrants are the problem to the world, but I don't think so. Especially looking at colonization: Europeans were the first ones to go everywhere and to live everywhere, and now that other people are coming to their countries it's a problem. It's a contradiction and it's created a complex.

AP: *Nelisiwe, could you introduce your provocative performances ("They Look at Me and That is All They Think" – "Sarkozy says NoN to the Venus") by referring to the costumes and accessories you use to stage the 'visibility' and 'hypervisibility' of your dancing body? For example in the first piece your skirt becomes a cinema screen, inflated air becomes body shapes; and in both you exploit colors: the first piece is very white and the second one very black. Could you talk about the use of costumes as contemporary art installations?*

NX: Yes, the two pieces, like the two colors, are opposites and complementary at the same time. When I create a piece I probably have one idea that I want to

explore, or maybe I look at a subject and want to explore that subject. In this case it was clear that I wanted to do Sarah Baartman, but not telling only her story, but using my history as a performer who always has to go out and perform in foreign places. So, the first thing was that I wanted to play with an object. Carlo Gibson is the designer who made the skirt. I approached him and said I wanted him to make me a skirt that we can open and then it becomes a screen. I already knew I wanted to project something around the politics of hair. At first I wanted to do a movie of myself, but then I thought it would get too personal and cost too much. Lucas Potter was the animator and he volunteered to make animation for me from what I told him I wanted to do. So Carlo made the skirt and only when the skirt was finished we started to make the piece. I decided to work with Carlo also as an outside eye, in the sense of directing. He's not a director, but he has a funny eye, he has a strange eye (his company is called "Strange Love"). I like his taste. So we made the piece; when he arrived with the skirt we were both, like: "Wow, we've created a monster, what we are going to do with it??!!" It had so many possibilities. I started to ask myself how I'd manage with the skirt. How tell the skirt what to do? Actually what became interesting for me was how my body has to manage with this object. That's always my interest: how my body has to manage with the objects, with the props; and then in that process my body finds a new language.

AP: *By re-dancing Sarah's sexual image you re-write on stage the exotic perspective of a 'different' body, and at the same time you explore the society's notion of beauty, poking fun at modern standard of a perfect – and sometimes artificial – female body. Although the 'perfect' body is still present on contemporary European stages, how did you try to dissimulate this perfection with your (im-)perfect body language?*

NX: In South Africa now politically Sarah Baartman has become a symbol for woman's liberation, even though she was not a feminist, she was a normal person, but this is what she represents. What is interesting is the perspective and the context: Sarah's body, or in general the South African black female body, in South Africa it's not exotic. Probably for South Africans *my* body is exotic. It is a funny thing, my body in a South African context is exotic because I am not big… no, not exotic: exotic is attractive, can be attractive, but in South Africa my body's not exotic and it's not attractive either. Men want women with full breasts and bottoms, full-bodied… I'm too petite in a South African context. I try to interrogate this imperfection also in the dance context. For example even for the classical forms my body is not perfect: I never look at my body as perfect.

When I did "They look at me…", especially the video part, it was to challenge the stereotypes of beauty, the Eurocentric standards of beauty, that you're beautiful only when you have Eurocentric features, that is: you have to have a long hair, long nose, or you have to be light in complexion, etc. This is problematic, especially in the black community because this is how the black mind also starts to look at you, how we start to look at ourselves, how we start to think: to be beautiful you have to

be light-skinned, you have to have long hair. So, for me the problem is not how the Westerners view me or us, it's how we Africans then view themselves, or how we look at ourselves, and how that becomes a standard of how we see black beauty. In my works I try to question this view.



Fig. 2, 3 and 4: Nelisiwe Xaba, *They Look at Me and That's All They Think,* 25 July 2010, photographs, Castello di Monte Sant'Angelo (IT), © Michele Tumaiuoli.

AP: *I find a certain relation between the diasporic experience lived by you and the figure from which you took inspiration – Sarah Baartman. Both of you are a 'body-continent' displaced and displayed abroad. The difference, an important one, consists in the fact that you decide how much to expose of your body in your choreography, you have the choice to dance and to resist with your body language; on the contrary, she had no choice. Is Sarah Baartman's story that of all women, not just Africans, who have no choice even in contemporary society?*

NX: I'm on a journey. I don't think I have arrived in how I want to say something, in how I want to choreograph. I never think choreographically, in a strange way.

There are a lot of Eastern European women who have to leave their countries for greener pastures as always and their body is what they have and their body gets exploited. Moralists can always say prostitutes have a choice. Yes and no. The female body still doesn't have a choice. I mean we have individual choices, but in a global context you don't have a choice. We don't have the choice of how we want to see our bodies. If you look at commercials: anything they sell has to have a naked body, *anything.* So like that, we don't have a choice, and it goes back to what I said about black people starting to think that in order to be beautiful you have to have European features; and in the perspective of the female body this is

how young women also start to think, this is how they have to represent themselves… it's there all the time now. This gets even more complicated these days. There was a time when fashion was not so rapid and you still had the choice to decide what style you wanted to follow; these days there is no choice, now everything is the same, all the shops sell the same thing, so you don't have a choice of how you want to present yourself. The men also start to think what is beautiful or what is not for us. In the past there wasn't so much emphasis, you were covered, you were fully dressed, so the body was not so exposed and there were not so many issues of how slim you had to be. It's our need also to be part of society and it's not an easy thing because you have to stick to the rules that society has built. It's controversial or contradictory because there is a part of us that wants to be part of this new movement. It's always contradictory: we could say we don't want men to gaze at us, but sometimes it's pleasant!

My work is based around feminism but I am not crying or thinking that I can't survive because I am a woman, and I'm not saying that being a woman is difficult, though it can be very hard sometimes. I don't live my life thinking life is difficult because I am a woman! There are stereotypes everywhere. What I try to do with my work is to interrupt stereotypes imagined on the female body, and not only on the African female body.

Fig. 5 and 6: Nelisiwe Xaba, *Sarkozy says NoN to the Venus*, 25 July 2010, photograph, Castello di Monte Sant'Angelo (IT), © Michele Tumaiuoli.

AP: *You reject any categorization of your work and any label that could fix your style. Your interrogation on what makes you a "contemporary African dancer", is interesting: is it your skin color? Is it your origin? Or is it just your body's memory of contemporary and traditional styles? How do you negotiate this label? Does it block the liberty of your language, or are you challenging it by re-dancing your personal way of being African and of being contemporary?*

NX: It's clear for me that I do contemporary work, or better, it's clear that I don't do folkloric or traditional work. I'm not interested in traditional forms. But I use them sometimes in my work. In *Sarkozy says Non to the Venus* I used a little bit of Zulu dance, but I used it not to praise it, but sarcastically. It is like an ironic exposition of what the audience would like to see with my body.

When you're talking about a black body dancing, when journalists describe it they'll always say "energy", "eclectic"; so in some way it's this need to see a new image every second. When you watch tv all the time – which is what the masses do, what they come home for – you get used to seeing a new image every second, every split second; that's the reason why theatre is struggling, and this is a global issue. The audience wants to see something new… You must change, every split second you have to have something new to give. There's no time to digest anything. People are just swallowing, but they don't even know what they're swallowing. While, when you do something slow you force someone to engage, that is why I play with slow and fast movements finding a balance between them every second. You should be careful also – we're doing entertainment – that you don't put people to sleep, that you're not so slow that people are wondering what else to think about, that you still keep the audience alive.

Talking about industry, sometimes, yes, I belong – whether I want to or not – in the 'Contemporary African' industry. I belong in that market. But at the same time, when I see what is contained in this market I don't want to belong to it, I want to run away. I try to re-imagine this market but it's a big fight. In London, they made a special festival for African choreographers, but they didn't invite us to show our work as individual choreographers, no, we had to be in this African contemporary box together with other African choreographers, like when I took part in the *African Crossroads* section of the last Dance Umbrella edition.[9] I find it an insult to be put in a box with other people… It sounds arrogant, but I take it as an insult. I go to these festivals and I come back home thinking, why did I waste my time? I don't come back thinking "I have to work, wow, there's so much challenge, I'm inspired!" I come back home thinking "Why am I in this, why do I belong to this?"

[9] Based in London, Dance Umbrella Festival is one of the world's most exciting programmers of new dance. In 2009 a special section, *African Crossroads*, showcased works of dancers and choreographers from Africa. See <http://www.danceumbrella.co.uk/page/3110/African+Crossroads>, 30 July 2010.

Fig. 7: Nelisiwe Xaba, *Sarkozy says NoN to the Venus*, 25 July 2010, photograph, Castello di Monte Sant'Angelo (IT), © Michele Tumaiuoli.

AP: *For me, as part of the audience, it was strange to notice that you, together with Kettly Noël in "Correspondances", were the only African female dancers in the special section/box, as you call it, of "African Crossroads".*

NX: There are more male choreographers. Yes, it's a strange thing. Generally, in an African perspective when you get married that's the end of your career. Your husband tells you, you can't dance any more. And because you're married you have to stop. If I talk with my partner and we think this is maybe a thing to do or I want to stop, then it's understandable, but if my husband says no you can't do this any more then I find it an insult. Maybe that is why I'm not married! It's a funny thing. Going back to the idea of women being leaders, in Europe there's 90% probably of female dancers. The male dancers get more attention in a European situation, because there are few of them, sometimes only one in the class, so you're exotic, you get more attention from your teacher and you gain confidence. But in Africa that's not the reason. The reasons are different from in Europe. In Africa you're not allowed to dance as a woman, you can't have a profession using your body, it's immoral to use your body. So it is a question of possibilities.

AP: *During the next edition of Dance Umbrella Festival 2011 in London you will be re-dancing the Hottentot Venus, so you will once again invite the audience to face the historical figure of a body-continent, that of the South African Sarah Baartman. How do you think the audience will react to your personal re-imagination?*

NX: I cannot predict how the audience will receive or not receive me, in much the same way as I cannot dance the same way I danced yesterday. I hope they react, but how they react I wouldn't know, the reactions change depending on what the individual in the audience is feeling at the time, it's a personal thing. So there's no way I or any one else would know how they would feel or react until they feel it.

Agustín Reyes-Torres

Investigating the New South Africa: An Interview with Deon Meyer on *Dead Before Dying*

Deon Meyer is a highly successful South African novelist and short story writer, whose work, originally written in Afrikaans, has been translated into English and many other languages.

Dead Before Dying (1999) was the first of his novels to appear in English. The original edition, *Feniks*, came out in 1996, two years after Nelson Mandela became President of South Africa.[1] The author uses the voices of his four main characters to paint a picture of the 'New' South African society. Each feels differently towards the new post-apartheid regime and brings a particular outlook based on his or her background and experience. What all four have in common is their attempt to forget the past, start a new life and negotiate a new identity.

[1] Deon Meyer, *Dead Before Dying*, trans. by Madeleine van Biljon (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1999); *Feniks* (Cape Town: Queillerie, 1996).

The hero of the novel is detective Mat Joubert, engaged in investigating a series of apparently unrelated murders. At the start of the novel, shattered by the death of his wife Lara, who was also a police officer, Joubert is still mired in depression, although two years have already passed. A breakthrough becomes possible only with the arrival of Colonel Bart de Wit, on New Year's Day, 1996.

Appointed by the new black minister of law and order to the Murder and Robbery division of the Cape Town police force, de Wit introduces health tests to ensure the medical and psychological well-being of his officers. Joubert is forced into having weekly meetings with a psychologist, Hanna Nortier. After several of these encounters, discussing matters like Lara's death and his arduous relationship with his father, a racist policeman who grossly mistreated black or coloured criminals and colleagues alike, he is able to weep for the first time in 17 years. Joubert's progress can be compared allegorically to South Africa's new era and the objectives and effects of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which began its hearings in April 1996.

Another viewpoint is that of de Wit himself, a former member of the ANC, who tries to impress his new colleagues by recounting his experience, including training at Scotland Yard during his years of exile. Yet his account triggers uncertainty among the majority of his colleagues and he has difficulty in establishing a role in the New South Africa.

The third of the protagonists is Police Lieutenant Leon Petersen, one of the few coloured men of the Murder and Robbery squad. Still disrespected by many of the whites he has to deal with on a daily basis, he too has trouble adjusting to the New South Africa. Reclassified as black – "Not coloured any more, not Cape Malay or brown, but black" –, he is expected to "spark", yet neither he, nor any of the other members of the squad, white, black or brown, see any improvement

> All the troubles, all the murders and deaths and rapes, all the long hours with fuckers shooting at you and rich whiteys who act as if you're not there and your boss who says your must spark and the union which says don't worry, things will be fine, and a wife who says she wants to leave you…[2]

[2] *Dead Before Dying*, 276.

Finally, another viewpoint is provided by the psychologist, Hanna Nortier, whose life can be seen as an allegory for the old South Africa evolving into the new. As eventually appears, Hanna (formerly Hester Clarke) is a rape victim. The night Hester Clarke 'died', Hanna Nortier was 'born', emerging from the horror much as the New South Africa was emerging from the hateful years of apartheid. Unable to recognize her sullied body as her own, she decides to change her name and start a new life. Yet her reactions to the new deadly obstacle of HIV that she is now forced to confront prove to be behind the mystery Joubert is engaged in investigating.

AR-T: *Why did you decide to use detective conventions as the literary framework for your novels?*

DM: This is a question that people often ask me… I never really decided to write in the crime or thriller genre, I just wanted to tell stories and I think instinctively every author has a certain issue or a certain genre that they're sort of put in, in terms of the stories that they tell.

I only wanted to tell crime stories and I think I was greatly influenced by other crime fiction I read when I was a teenager; maybe that was just where I naturally fit in. I still don't think as myself as specifically a crime author or a thriller writer. I think of myself as a storyteller and it's for the publishers and the media and the academics to decide where, in which niche, I should be put in, so it was never a conscious decision. I love crime and I love thrillers.

Have you ever read Ed McBain's work? He's an American author, a New Yorker, who passed away in 2005. He had a huge influence on my own reading tastes and my own writing and he was probably the best crime author ever. He also wrote under his real name of Evan Hunter, he won a few Pulitzer Prizes for that. You know, it's very difficult to say but I think I was influenced by people like him and John D. McDonald but I never made a decision I wanted to write crime fiction.

AR-T: *After reading "Dead Before Dying", however, one realizes that you did some research in order to write this novel. The portrayal of the detective and his work with the police department is outstanding.*

DM: When I wrote this particular book, it was my first real crime novel. My first novel was called "He who plays with fire" in Afrikaans but it was never translated.[3] I don't think it was ever good enough for the international market. I often say that a first novel is like having a brother in jail. You can't deny it but you don't want to talk about it!

[3] *Wie met vuur speel* (Cape Town: Tafelburg, 1994).

My first book was not really a crime novel, it was more of a thriller. So when I wanted to write… well, it's a long story about how this book came about…

I had a totally different story in mind for *Dead Before Dying* and eventually Mat Joubert as a character just took over the story, and he decided what went into the novel. He made a lot of things happen in the book. But when I realized I needed a policeman for this specific character I went to what was then called the Murder and Robbery squad in Cape Town. It's the homicide squad I think they have in America – I know in New York and LA they have the homicide squad within different precincts. In Cape Town it used to be that way, but now we follow the British structure of policing; back then there was the murder and robbery squad.

I contacted the police and I asked if I could spend some time with the detectives. And I spent two weeks working with them as a work-shadow…

It was an eye opener. The one thing that impressed me most about this research was the influence of the work on the people…

This was in 1994. SA was going through a big transition. There was a lot of violence and crime at that time – a lot of it was politically motivated and a lot of it was simply because of the huge changes in SA. There was a big feeling of instability and these people were working with these violent crimes all the time. And it had an influence. Some of those cops drank, some of them got depressed. Some of them were alcoholics, some of them were divorced, because they just couldn't cope with working with such violence and such crime, often bloody crimes, and still go home and be among their families. Depression is Mat Joubert's way of coping, it's his way of absorbing it.

So that was the first thing that made a big impression on me, in addition to the way that they looked at crime, the way they investigated. It was a real eye-opener for me and I have a lot of respect for the police nowadays. They are not paid a lot of money but they work so hard, they are so dedicated; and they work with the scum of the earth often. I actually went with them to murder scenes and after the second one I said "no more". To work with that sort of thing everyday must have an influence on your psyche.

That's the thing that fascinates me about writing crime, to try to portray this world and to try and show what influence it has on the people themselves.

AR-T: *Were you influenced by anyone you saw in particular or is your novel just an outcome of your imagination?*

DM: I had the character of Mat Joubert created before I went to the police. But the whole subject of depression was something that I included later. During that time there were some political motivated crimes. Car tires would be put around the necks of people who were thought to be traitors, petrol poured onto them and lighted up. There were really terrible crimes and depression among cops was common, so the depression in Mat Joubert comes from there.

Then there's another character, Benny Griessel, who is based on one of the other detectives I met, but only in terms of how he looks.

The police have changed a lot. I did that research in 1994, and there have been so many changes in SA, within the police as well, and I'm happy to say that those

sort of violent crimes are not taking place anymore. We still have murders but we don't have that kind of politically motivated killing anymore.

AR-T: *That is something you actually refer to in "Dead Before Dying". When the detectives are investigating, they often ask the question: was the victim involved in any political party?*

DM: The reason for that is the bullet that they found in one of the victims, it seemed to them that the caliber was for a Tokarev pistol, which is a Russian-made pistol, which was used before 1994. There were basically two political movements that were banned: the ANC that is today our government, and the other is the PAC (the Pan-African Congress) and the PAC had a military arm and they used a lot of Russian weapons like the Tokarev; that is why these questions are being asked every time because when the cops hear Tokarev they immediately think about the military arm of the PAC.

I wouldn't have been able to write the same novel today because the PAC has virtually disappeared – if they found a Tokarev pistol now they would probably think it was the Russian mafia.

AR-T: *I was shocked that Hester was the murderer. Were there any clues that I missed?*

DM: I tried to show that she wasn't all that stable. As I said it was my first crime novel and it was one of the things that I really worried about – do you plot red herrings? You don't want to make the reader feel cheated; and I'm not sure I did it right. No, there weren't any clues… yes, it was a shock. I knew who the murderer was going to be…

Basically it's all about the point of view. You basically have three possible points of view for a novel:

The first person narrator. You can only show the reader what that narrator is seeing or listening, thinking, feeling.

The third person narrator. I had a literature professor that used to say that the third person narrator is like a video camera. The camera is behind the eyes of the narrator, the camera is on the shoulder of every character you use.

The third person omniscient narrator has the video camera up in the sky. He sees everything. He can comment on everybody. Normally, this narrator has a style, a specific way of looking at people.

With *Dead Before Dying,* it was third person narrative but the video camera was very much on the shoulder of Mat Joubert. There was not a lot of variation. I had to give the reader what Mat Joubert knew but at the same time, the reader also knows more than the detective. There are different ways of doing this.

AR-T: *Does Mat Joubert appear again in any novel?*

DM: He actually appears in the book that I am writing right now, *Spoor*. He is happily married.

AR-T: *To Margaret?*

DM: Yeah, to her. (Laughs)

I do refer to him in other books; In *Dead at Daybreak*, he comes in and tells his colleagues he is getting married. And in *Devil's Peak* he makes a little bit of an appearance. [4]

The problem with the characters, and I often say this, is that when you read a book you spend maybe three or four days with a character, maybe more. You grow fond of them. When you finish the book, you wonder what would have happened to him or her.

When you write a book, you spend a year or two years with these characters. And I don't think our subconscious can discern between real people and fictitious people. I grow so fond of them, so close to these characters than when I finish the book I often wonder how these characters are and I worry about them. I often make up stories about how they are doing and those stories become part of the next novels.

AR-T: *That's something that happens with other authors' novels. Good examples are Michael Connelly or Walter Mosley*.

DM: That's right. In my case, Benny Griessel has now become a central character.

I loved writing about him in *Dead Before Dying* because he seemed to be a catalyst. Every time he came into a scene he made things happen, whether he walked in at the wrong time… or was in charge of an investigation, so I always knew that I would write about him again. He was in *Devil's Peak* again, and in *Thirteen Hours*,[5] and I'll probably do another novel about him as well. He's a really nice character.

AR-T: *You said that back in 1994 when you wrote this novel there was a period of transition going on. Did you try to portray that transition through Mat Joubert himself? Because he went through a major transition in the book.*

DM: The police department is probably the one state department that has experienced the most upheaval and change, and it is also a much politicized thing in South Africa. The detectives I worked with were not only forced to cope with these working conditions and all these crimes but they were also going through a changing environment where suddenly politically everything was changing in the police department and outside.

Keep in mind when you write crime fiction, you are looking for sources of conflict all the time because you can't have conflict without suspense. Conflict is the mother of suspense. So when you create a character and you create a story around him, you want to give him as many conflicts as possible. Because that's what people like to read. If everything is easy and the character cruises through the story, then there is no story. So I just give all the troubles I can to Mat Joubert.

[4] Deon Meyer, *Dead at Daybreak* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2000); *Devil's Peak*, (F Howes, c2007; London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2007).

[5] Deon Meyer, *Thirteen Hours*, trans. by K. L. Seeger (London: Hodder, 2010).

AR-T: *Is that why you also include the character of the "sweetheart robber"?*

DM: Exactly!

The political environment was a very practical thing; I never write with the intention of giving the reader a snap shot of South Africa, at a specific time, or make social comments or political comments.

My only job is to write an entertaining story but if it happens in a specific setting I will use as many things from that setting that I can if it adds to the suspense, if it adds to the conflict between the protagonist and his world.

AR-T: *With so many political motives available, why did you use one as personal as Hannah's?*

DM: I didn't want to write a political novel or I didn't want to write about political crime or political issues back then. I thought I owed it to my country not to do that.

And I think, if you look at most crime fiction over the world, most of the crimes are personal. Those are the interesting crimes, the ones that the reader identifies with better.

If it is political it can be muggy. If it is personal, it is more captivating.

AR-T: *What about Mat Joubert's views? He condemns his father's racism. Does Mat Joubert represent a new generation in South Africa?*

DM: Yes, he does. Mat Joubert is more or less my generation and I think we are the generation (I'm talking about whites) with the most anger about apartheid. Because we were the first generation to be born in apartheid and to grow up in that environment, and we were lied to by everybody.

It is very difficult to explain to someone who has never been in those circumstances but everybody – our school teachers, our principals, our priests, our government – everybody was creating this impression that it was okay to have apartheid. The priests made us think that apartheid was based in solid Biblical principles.

Every time that there was something negative said about apartheid in the United Nations, the media would not publish it, so we lived in this world of propaganda and make-believe where there were very few truths, and we had to find the truths by ourselves. And it was often a painful process.

You get to the point where you realize that something is really wrong here. So I tried to put some of that anger in Mat Joubert.

My late father was a wonderful man but he came from a specific point of view, and I remember having these huge arguments with him about apartheid, but he believed it was right. I think it is understandable if you look at his generation and what they went through. But there was a lot of anger within us and some of it went into the book.

AR-T: *Have you developed that at all in your books?*

DM: In the next book after *Dead Before Dying*, *Dead at Daybreak*, I think I do. It is the story of the protagonist and how he comes to realize within that system of apartheid that it was really bad. But one must be careful…If you want to preach, you become a priest. If you want to entertain you become a writer.

I don't want to make any statement with my books. What I want to do is to use as much of the texture and the background and the setting as I can to make the characters and the story interesting.

But I think that the moment you start thinking you want to make this point, or you want to have this agenda, in terms of writing, in my genre, you're going to be in big trouble.

You can't put a protagonist into Cape Town and not portray an accurate setting around them. We all interact with our world in so many ways and on so many levels, so that happens almost by chance. And this provides the reader with a lot of background about South Africa and being South African, but it's never done on purpose, it's just part of the story telling process.

AR-T: *But you are criticizing apartheid somehow between the lines.*

DM: Yeah, but again, it is not deliberate. I create a character and I try to understand what forms this character and how he looks at the world.

I can never give my perspective. It must be the character's perspective.

My latest novel that was translated, *Blood Safari*,[6] has a bodyguard as the protagonist and he hates rich Afrikaners and I understand that because I also view them with a lot of distrust and worry, but he really hates them, so there's always a difference between my own point of view and my characters'.

[6] *Blood Safari* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2008).

When I create a character, I try and make up a back-story, just in my head, I don't write anything down, but I create at least in my mind the character's background, his family, the big influences on his life, etc. I need to know how he became the way that he is. That will determine the lens through which he looks at the world.

AR-T: *There is a question on Hannah and her interest in Mat Joubert – was she actually interested in Mat or was she involved with him only because of the investigation?*

DM: She was only close to him because of the investigation. I think she had experienced so much damage, psychologically. I don't think she would ever have been able to have a normal relationship. The biggest problem with having a female murderer is that the motivation must be very very strong. That's why the end is fairly shocking, because all the cases studies tell us and all the psychology tells us that women don't kill and rarely do it with guns.

If they do kill, they hire someone or do it by poisoning them, or that sort of thing. So I had to make the motivation very strong. And yes, she was only with Mat

Joubert because she wanted to stay close. Once she realized he was investigating the case, she wanted to be close to him.

AR-T: *Rape and sexual assault are part of the problematic issues in South Africa. Did you want to represent that in the novel?*

DM: I want to say something about crime in South Africa at the moment and in the last ten years. We often get a wrong perception in the media. You hear about South Africa being a crime-ridden, dangerous country. And it's not. The problem is that we have a democracy and a very transparent society. We are a third world country now evolving towards a first world country. So South Africa is a dynamic country in transition. Like other South American countries, like a lot of Far Eastern countries, like India and Pakistan.

The other problem is that we have a good deal of abject poverty, and then a small percentage of people who are very, very rich. That's a combination that makes it very difficult in terms of crime. Crime is often a socio-economic phenomenon, especially where you have such a huge gap between the haves and the have-nots.

I want to say that we publish our crime statistics openly and internationally. A lot of other countries are in a similar socioeconomic space but don't publish their crime statistics. Mexico is a great example. I think Mexico is the equivalent of SA in those terms. It is also a third world country rapidly moving into a first world country, with strong economic growth and these differences between rich and poor.

But you never see the full picture of Mexican crime statistics.

I am making a case here that South Africa is not so bad as many people think. We are not a first world country and the problem is that South Africa is compared to European countries, to stable communities where there is no real poverty. And those that are really poor comprise only small and isolated little groups.

I think 95% of the crime in South Africa happens in really poverty-stricken, township areas.

And they are almost always social economic crimes: crimes within the family, crimes within a very small community. And the crimes against women are similar. Again, during the apartheid regime only the crime statistics of the white community were published, but now we are an open society, a democratic country where we are publishing all the crime statistics. Again, if you compare South Africa with other countries in a similar social economic space, the situation is not as bad.

When they started publishing crime statistics for all communities in South Africa, one of the figures that was really frightening was rape. Again, compared with countries with similar socioeconomic space the rate is not as high, but there is too much. A lot of it has to do with alcoholism, people are getting drunk and committing these crimes…

The statistics in the past 12 months show that rape and other crimes against women are coming down.

AR-T: *Where is the influence of the media on these issues?*

DM: Crime has become a political tool.

The government should do more about crime but the government is doing a lot already. There was an article on the newspaper recently on how South Africa police is being helped by Scotland yard…

But crime happens everywhere. Michael Connelly is an American writer that writes novels set in LA. *The Lincoln Lawyer* is his latest novel.[7] We were talking about crime statistics in Los Angeles, and I thought to myself, thank goodness I don't live in L.A.

Crime is a relative thing – if you live in one of the townships you are more likely to see crime.

It is a political thing in South Africa. Whenever there is a crime, all the opposition parties blame the government and I don't agree with that.

[7] Michael Connelly, *The Lincoln Lawyer* (London: Orion, 2005).

AR-T: *You worked as a journalist for a period of time. Can you see the influence of it in this particular novel?*

DM: When I worked with the police I saw the pressure that is put on these guys. First of all, you have the internal pressure. The head of the unit wants to have more crimes solved, so he's putting pressure on his people. Then, the public puts pressure on them. And of course the media does too. They love a good crime story.

So it is this really bad cycle and I am fascinated by the whole process.

AR-T: *I'm curious, how long does it take you to write a book?*

DM: When I wrote this book, I was still working part time. I would get up early in the morning to write and then it took me two years.

Now, I am writing full time, since the beginning of 2008. This is the first book that I'll have completed while writing full time. The book that I'm working on right now, *Spoor*,[8] is a bit longer than the rest, but it's going to take me 10 months. I would say now it should take me about a year.

I've already started thinking about my next book too. The other day I actually started writing the first chapter. The thinking phase can take up to 3 or 4 months. Then I must start doing the research which can take another two months. So I would say 12 months average for a novel.

[8] *Spoor* (Cape Town: Human & Rousseau, 2010); the novel is now forthcoming in English as *Trackers* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2011).

AR-T: *Do you write your books in Afrikaans, and then when they are translated into English, do you go back and read them again?*

DM: I am very fortunate, I have a very good translator but when she's done, she sends the manuscript to me and I often spend two months working on it, and really making sure that everything is how I like it. Because however good she is,

she can't always know what my intention was or how I want to phrase it, and it's not that she did something wrong, it's just that I want to say it in a different way.

I think for writers, words have much more meaning than for non writers. These are the tools that you work with. I know people that work with wood and they have their own favorite cabinets and knives. I also have my favorite words and phrases. A particular way to structure paragraphs and sentences.

And for my translator it's hard to know all this.

The other reason for me is to make sure that nothing or as little as possible is lost in the translation. Because the English translation is the one that is used for the translation into French, Italian, Spanish, etc.

AR-T: *If the translation cannot be perfect, is there anything in this book that got lost in translation?*

DM: The only thing that ever gets lost in my books is the Afrikaans spoken in what we call the Cape Flats. In South Africa we have lots of different cultural groups: we have the black indigenous, the Zulu, the Xhosa. Then, you have the whites, and the people of mixed race, in South Africa we use the term "coloured" people. It is a perfectly fine term to use and in the translation, sometimes it is difficult to make it clear for the readers to understand that.

The point that I want to make is that the coloured people of the Cape Flats speak a version of the Afrikaans that is to my mind the most beautiful version of Afrikaans. It's a very musical, and lyrical, and humorous, it's a wonderful… perhaps not quite a dialect, but almost a dialect of Afrikaans. And I have a lot of friends that speak coloured Afrikaans and I just love it. And I use a lot of that in my books and you can't translate that. It's impossible to translate that.

AR-T: *There is also a black detective. His name is Leo Peterson.*

DM: He is actually a coloured detective.

AR-T: *Have you ever thought about writing a novel from the point of view of this character? There is no doubt that his perspective would be very different from Mat Joubert's.*

DM: In my novel *Heart of Hunter*,[9] I had a black Xhosa protagonist, and that was an incredible experience for me: to create a Xhosa and to try to see the world through his eyes.

When I wrote *Dead Before Dying*, there were no black detectives in the Murder and Robbery squad. This was in 1994 and there was still segregation, everything didn't change overnight, so it wouldn't have been credible for me to use a coloured or black protagonist.

Heart of Hunter is not a crime novel, it's much more of a thriller… The story is about this freedom fighter… And he is now in the New South Africa and he has training as a soldier and as an assassin. he can't find work… He has to find information…

[9] *Heart of Hunter*, (Stoughton, 2003).

AR-T: *Going back to "Dead Before Dying" can you talk about the psychic that you used. Why was she included in the novel?*

DM: When I was writing a book I read a case about psychics assisting the police, I think in the UK. I thought this is something cool to bring in. I did it because I thought it would add to the fun of the book. As you probably know, today there are tv shows that have psychics helping the police…

AR-T: *Are there more women now in police departments?*

DM: Yes, there are. Also, a lot of female detectives, I'm very happy to report. They seem to cope a lot better with stress. Also, it's better to have women detectives when working with crimes related to women.

I think the government is trying to have some gender equality in all the state departments in South Africa.

AR-T: *Have you ever thought about having a main character who is a female detective?*

DM: Yes, I have. I created a character. Her name is Mbali, that means flower in Zulu. She is one of the protagonists in the novel *Thirteen Hours* and she is going to be in the next novel too.

AR-T: *Are any of your characters or your stories based on people you know?*

DM: No, no. People email me and say: I have a great story that you have to write. But no, I don't use those. It's much more fun to create the characters and the story from the scratch. To me, the fun of writing is creating those things.

Teju Cole

Door Into The Dark

Mama and dada were in Chinatown with Rani. While they were away I introduced mom and dad to Ryszard Kapuściński. There's this Polish journalist, I said, who covered twenty-seven revolutions and coups in Africa and Latin America. Then I took my copy of *The Soccer War* from the shelf, and turned it to a chapter where Kapuscinski is in Nigeria. They were intrigued; mom looked at the chapter and, as the three of us sat at the kitchen table, read the first paragraph out loud to us:

> January 1966. In Nigeria a civil war was going on. I was a correspondent covering the war. On a cloudy day I left Lagos. On the outskirts police were stopping all cars. They were searching the trunks, looking for weapons. They ripped open sacks of corn: could there be ammunition in that corn? Authority ended at the city line.

She paused, and flipped forward to see how long the chapter was. Six pages. She continued reading, and read the story right through, with minimum editorial interruption from dad and me. Mom's reading was clear and controlled, the reading of a practiced reader, which she was not.

Kapuscinski's story centered on UPGA (pronounced as one word, like Apgar), the majority Yoruba party, and NNDP (each letter sounded out), the minority party in the region. NNDP, the Nigerian National Democratic Party, held the power. UPGA, the United Progressive Grand Alliance, was fighting it with an insurgency. Such lovely names. But these splendid organizations were cutting people to pieces.

The story took both mom and dad back to their youth, when they lived in the region through which Kapuscinski was traveling, precisely at the time he was traveling through it. They figured out, from his description, the exact route he must have taken on his drive through a country seized with the madness of war. Mom was in her teens then, and she'd known Chief Awolowo well. She had spent some time in his house when he was languishing in a federal jail for being national leader of UPGA.

He's a good writer, mom said, referring to Kapuscinski, his sentences are so short and clear. Then she put the book down, and both she and dad began to recount what that time had been like for them. They remembered the road blocks well, the burning buildings, the political fervor. Dad said, he would have gone by that old road, the dusty one that cuts through Ikorodu, up North to Ijebuland. I said, not the Lagos-Ibadan Expressway? Not at all, dad said, the Expressway wasn't built yet.

Kapuscinski, as he put it in his narrative, had escaped with a beating or two. Other white men had been killed. Many more (innumerably more) Nigerians had died.

My father was only a schoolteacher, mom said, but he was also the local UPGA chairman. I remember the cries of one man, she said, her voice suddenly darkening like a landscape when it is covered by fast moving clouds. I remember a man who passed in the street in front of our house calling out to my father by name. He was an NNDP man, and some young men were taking him out to a field to kill him. Please save me Olanlokun! This kind of desperate cry. The sound of a man begging for his life is like no other sound in the world, a sound I can never forget. My father was home, but he did not come out. He did nothing. But the man wasn't killed, mom said, they didn't kill him.

I did not believe that last part. I thought mom had changed the story, to make herself feel better. Perhaps she hadn't intentionally changed it, only misremembered. She perhaps later saw someone once who looked like the man who was to have been killed that afternoon, and made herself believe that this was that man, that the executioners had heard his pleas and released him in the field. But that would be unlike executioners, I thought. Once the blood rises, there's no turning back until someone else's blood is spilled.

But another time, mom said, there were some killings by UPGA people. My father wasn't there when it happened, but he must have been involved. As the local boss, he would have known something about it; he might have given the order. Anyway, there was a witness at one of the meetings, and he fingered several people.

Five men were to be arrested including my father. When the police came for him, they arrived with a unit commander who was a friend of his. This was during Ramadan, and there were guests in the house, breaking fast, praying. The commander held his troops back under the pretext that he would check out the situation, then he ran upstairs and warned my father, and my father escaped through the back. Then the commander came outside and brought the unit in: They say he's upstairs, let's go! My father was by then safely in his brother's house, in another part of town. That was where the legend began. For a long time afterward, the whole town believed that my father had a powerful juju that could make him disappear. There was no other explanation for how he gave an entire armed unit the slip.

Later on, weeks later, another unit was sent to arrest him. This time the exits were well guarded, the back of the house, and all along the sides. They led my father away. But the witness, the person who had helped the police crack the case, hadn't seen my father very well. The unit commander this time around was someone else, someone who was coincidentally also named Olanlokun, same as my father. He was not a friend of my father's but he knew him by reputation and liked him. At the line-up, the new unit commander whispered to his namesake to remove his glasses. The witness could not identify my father, who was never seen without glasses, in the line-up. My father was freed, but the other four men who had been arrested, his friends, were all sent to prison. They were in solitary for eighteen months, until power changed hands and they were released.

Kapuściński: The whole land of the Yoruba is in flames. It's a strange thing to read, as if this land of the Yorubas that was in flames were not where I myself grew up, as though it were some life-threatening territory on the far side of the moon.

Who remembers Atobatele, my mother said, or Areogun, or Ogunmakin? They were ordinary men in our town: farmers, government clerks, traders. Mom had a far away look in her eyes. They died for nothing, she said, or we have forgotten what they died for if they died for anything at all.

Even before I brought my parents and Kapuściński together, I had been wondering about the narrator of my novel-in-progress, a young psychiatrist named Julius. How would I bring his grandparents together with my own? I had to decide how permeable to make the boundaries between my fiction and the faraway truths out of which they were growing. The revelations about my grandfather made things no easier: now I was faced with the decision of how to make the private public. In writing this now, in telling these stories which vibrate somewhere around the truth, I defer the matter.

For me, grandpa had essentially been an intelligent old man, a local luminary I was proud to be related to. My forehead was high like his, I wore the same coke-bottle glasses, without which I was also unrecognizable. I had the same small and squinty eyes as he did. We idealized each other as people do when they are more than a generation apart. On the occasions when I spent time with him, he was interested in how I did at school, and he delighted in having amiable youngsters around, especially me, the first male descendant in his line. Grandpa had a son who was younger than me, by a wife who was only a little older than my mother. Until that son, he had had only daughters, eight of them. I was, in a sense, his first son. He did not tell me about his many grim capers before he became grandfatherly. There was nothing, certainly, about bodies dumped in the fields.

* * *

Spending time with mom and dad, the past emerges in sharp, tiny fragments; new facts join the old in creating my picture of what's happened in our lives, and what's happening. I feel this especially through the Yoruba. I speak the language fluently, but with mom and dad, I have to redefine fluency, because theirs far exceeds mine. Their Yoruba speech is garnished with apothegms, allusions and proverbs, an everyday language imbued with luxurious texture. Dad has a habit of using rare proverbs, and when he does, he seeks my face for signs of comprehension. I almost always understand the general outline of what's meant, and that allows me to cover my shame at not having heard the particular turn of phrase before, or in not catching its exact interpretation. My parents, in testing me this way, are my access to things past.

We were talking about Soyinka, and then about Duro Ladipo and Hubert Ogunde. These are the lions of the Yoruba theater. The traveling theatrical troupes

of Ladipo and Ogunde used to come to town when my parents were young. Ogunde, mom began to tell me, was more popular in his approach. He was a specialist in farces; he was also married to all his actresses, all at the same time. There were over a dozen of them. Ladipo, on the other hand, was more scholarly, a Yoruba anthropologist working within the Yoruba tradition. His plays were researches, bringing out forms and stories that were, by the 60s and 70s, lost to the public.

Are he and the members of his company still alive? No, mom said, dead. But she didn't say dead. She used an expression I'd never heard: *awon iyen ti f'ile b'ora*. How struck I was by the beauty of the phrase: those ones have taken earth as a robe. Or: they have covered their flesh with earth.

Mom wasn't trying to be poetic. It was a normal locution, one that was comfortably nestled within the language. It had perhaps occurred to her, instead of the commonplace *won ti ku*, because we were discussing old things. There was something familiar about it, something uncanny, even, something in the intimacy it implied between flesh and earth, that I thought I must have heard it before. But I could not follow the memory, or make it emerge more fully.

My mother, mom said, her attention settling on another aspect of the past, is being troublesome again. She's stuck on the same thing every time I talk to her, and I've told her I don't want to hear it.

My grandmother lives in Nigeria. She's just over eighty now. Her life has been hard, as an itinerant trader, as the owner of a small provisions shop, as one of my grandfather's five wives and by no means the best-treated of them all. But my grandfather's dead, and my grandmother has moved out of his house and now lives in the two-story building her daughters built her. She's a women's leader, a kind of deaconness, at the local mosque. She goes to parties, to market and to evening prayers. She sits in the security of her own house, in the company of her second daughter who, like her, is widowed.

She has a single obsession, mom said, and that's her burial rites. I must be buried the same day I die, she'll say, mom said, and I'll say, yes mother, I hear you. And I must not be buried at the house, because what's rotten must be thrown out. I hear you mother, what's rotten must be thrown out. And for seven days, food must be cooked and taken to the mosque and served to the poor, are you listening to me? Yes mother, yes, cook food, take it to the mosque, serve it to the poor.

And most importantly, my mother would say, mom said, most importantly, in the cupboard in the room that's next to the meeting-room in the house, you'll find my robes, the ones I must be buried in. Those are my burial robes, Kadijatu. Those robes and no other, you are listening? Yes mother, you've told me before. And she would say, yes I told you, and I don't want any mistakes about it. Only those robes, else why did I go to Mecca? Eh? Tell me, why did I become an Alhaja if I'm not to meet my maker wearing the robes with which I approached the Kaaba?

She repeats the same thing until I'm exhausted, mom said, and I just don't want to hear it! I know what her problem is: it's her husband. He was buried in front of the house, the old family house, and that bothers her. She wants the cemetery and

nowhere else. And he wasn't buried in his Hajj clothes. And so she weeps every year on the anniversary. Oh, if they had asked me, I would have told them. I knew where he kept the robes, but no one asked me. Oh, poor Olanlokun, buried in ordinary clothes, like one who had not been to Mecca. And so, mom said, she tells me and she tells my sisters, and she tells her younger cousins, and probably anyone on the street who would listen: This room, this cupboard, these robes. I want no mistakes. No mistakes.

The Hajj had transfigured my grandmother. Through that journey, through the progression through various crowded airports, until she saw Mount Arafat and did her seven-fold circumambulation of the Kaaba, through her accomplishment of one of the central tenets of Islam, she had sloughed off her old life and had taken on a new one that put her into a precise relationship with eternity. In 1998, the year of her journey, most of the Nigerian pilgrims had been turned back, and my grandmother was one of a few hundred who got through. When she came back, everyone took to calling her Alhaja Lucky. To fit the moniker, she wore the perpetually serene mien of someone who had solved a long troubling problem.

My mother, an Anglican Christian, had financed the journey, knowing what it would mean to her mother to fulfil this final pillar of the faith. But, possibly, she'd had no idea how much it would mean. She'd anticipated the social fillip grandma would get from it, but had not counted on the much more serious existential grounding that it brought with it.

This matter of robes, I said, I think grandma's right. Mom shot me a look, having fully expected me to side with her. My train of unspoken thought just then was: Grandma is fortunate to have something in her possession that is so sacred to her, something of such surpassing worth that she wishes to have it on when she meets God. This sense of the sacred was everywhere under threat.

Alhaja Lucky's robes hang in a cupboard in the back room of her house, awaiting second use. I tried to figure what in my life was similarly weighty, and as I searched, I heard in my mind's ear the sweet ping of a lock springing open: I'd suddenly remembered what mom's earlier expression about flesh reminded me of, and it was, of all things, a Middle English lyric:

> Erthe took of erthe, erth wyth wogh;
> Erthe other erthe to the erthe drough;
> Erthe leyde erthe in erthen through:
> Than hadde erthe of erthe erthe ynough.

My heart growled with a desire to hold the moment. Mom and dad, young when I came into their lives – much younger than I am now – were getting old, aging before my eyes at a kitchen table in Brooklyn, led by our conversation into the byways of memory, into regions of their life stories that were opaque to me and becoming faint even to them.

Mom had laughed, and dad and I had laughed too when she read, in Kapuś cińskiś story:

> On both sides of the road, there was a village and the villagers had been watching the action. The people were silent; somebody in the crowd was holding up an UPGA banner. They all had photographs of Chief Awolowo pinned on their shirts. I liked the girls best. They were naked to the waist and had the name of the party written across their breasts: UP on the right breast and GA on the left one.

What, I wondered to myself, was that thing that was slipping from one generation to another, assuming a different shape in each, from grandparents to parents to children, across oceans and countries?

Then mama and dada and Rani returned from Chinatown. They had come with whole hens, bok choi, herbs, and salmon. Conversations shifted back into English, to accommodate the Indian in-laws, and turned to more immediate matters. The women began cooking, peeling potatoes, breaking the arms off the birds and we, the men, the three husbands, sat in the living room doing what men do when women are cooking, which is to say, nothing.

Madhu Krishnan

Beyond Tradition and Progress: Re-imagining Nigeria in Chris Abani's *GraceLand*

I. Traditionalism and Development: The Problem of Representation in Contemporary Africa

In his 1976 book, *Myth, Literature and the African World*, Wole Soyinka calls attention to "a second epoch of colonization – this time by a universal-humanoid abstraction defined and conducted by individuals whose theories and prescriptions are derived from the apprehension of *their* world and *their* history, *their* social neuroses and *their* value systems".[1] Soyinka, in this statement, calls attention to the difficult task of representation in postcolonial Africa, where traditional systems of knowledge have been replaced by the imposition of external values and epistemological categories. Operating through what Gayatri Spivak has called the "epistemic violence"[2] of the colonial encounter, Africa and African societies have been forced to re-imagine themselves through categories based in a Western episteme continuing the in tradition of what Frantz Fanon, speaking in 1959 in what would later be published in "On National Culture", called the first stage of national culture in the newly independent nation-state.[3] To combat this, Soyinka advises that "on the continent must come a reinstatement of the values authentic to that society, *modified only by the demands of the contemporary world*".[4] Thus, he expresses a not uncommonly-held belief that, in order to dismantle the discourses of colonial domination, Africa must return to its roots by seeking out the discourses of the pre-colonial past and reinstating their validity as methods of making sense of the world. Crucially, however, Soyinka sees this as a turn necessarily coupled with a view of the contemporary world, echoing Fanon's warnings against an unequivocal turn to tradition to find a mythic, ideal past.[5] Living with the irrevocable truth of the colonial encounter, a simple turn to the past, aping what has been referred to as "a nostalgia for lost origins",[6] could only result in a blind nativism and an easy dismissal of these discourses under the neo-colonialist view that "societies in which mythicoreligious ideas and social traditions play a significant role in intellectual culture must not … be rational or capable of 'philosophy'".[7] In order to give weight to its traditions, then, any return to an idealized African past must situate itself within the realities of postcoloniality in all its worldly effects.

The importance of navigating between the dual poles of traditionalism and Eurocentrism and the danger inherent to this difficult task cannot be overstated. Because of the immensity of the colonial encounter and the continuing traces of the unfinished process of decolonization, any imagination of the African continent and its nations which relies entirely on traditionalism would thus strip away the specificities of historicity while remaining "incapable of helping present Africans

[1] Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), x.

[2] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 127.

[3] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. by Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 158.

[4] Soyinka, *Myth*, x, emphasis added.

[5] Fanon, *Wretched*, 159.

[6] Spivak, *Critique*, 118.

[7] Peter Amato, "African Philosophy and Modernity", in Emmanuel Eze, ed., *Postcolonial African Philosophy: A Critical Reader* (Oxford; Blackwell, 1997), 76.

in their striving for control over their own destiny. By failing to take into account the great upheavals, such as colonialism, which occurred in recent times in the African universe, tradition of the ethnological kind is condemned to marginalization".[8] Similarly, a view of Africa which relies wholly on Eurocentric conceptions of development and progress would fall prey to a neo-colonialist stripping of culture and a removal of historicity from the continent. Bearing in mind this difficult negotiation, representations of Africa must work to overcome and subvert the grand narratives of pre-colonial idealism and neocolonial development in their realization. As Wendy Griswold states, no view of Africa can take the continent as static because "[t]raditional African communities … changed irrevocably under colonialism".[9] Any vision of the continent which denies these changes only serves to continue the suppression of liberatory discourses striving to true independence. Griswold goes on to note that, for a nation such as Nigeria, this is a particularly important and difficult task, as the nation itself was utterly fabricated and imagined through the colonial era and the lasting traces of an unfinished decolonization, a sentiment seen in Adéléke Adéèkó's claim that "the work of inventing [the Nigerian nation] … was never completed".[10] Thus, "[t]he idealized picture of the community before 'things fell apart' presents a distorted view to outsiders and to Nigerians" and diverts attention from the pressing issues facing postcolonial Nigerian society,[11] leading to the easy ascription of misapplied anthropological and ethnographic categories and a view which unfairly villainizes the notion of "fragmentation of the Nigerian national imaginary".[12] Derek Wright elucidates the intrinsic difficulty in any wholesale application of a totalizing discourse in his statement that, on the African continent, "[r]edress or relief for disillusionment is sought in Africanization, renascent communalism, democratic liberalism, and orature, and in alternating demystifications and curative mythologies of the African past. None of this … have proved be the 'open sesame' to the closed door of postcolonial dictatorship and the blocked path to genuine independence".[13] Instead, the recourse to assimilating discourses and epistemologies has been complicit with the continued subjugation of the continent under leadership with neocolonialist interests and the imperialism of global capitalist forces. Soyinka captures this notion in stating that the past "clarifies the present and explains the future, but it is not a fleshpot for escapist indulgence, and it is vitally dependent on the sensibility that recalls it",[14] indicating that any imagining of the continent must remain committed to its conflicting and competing contemporary discourses and the fragmentation therein. Instead of relying on traditionalist idealism, in implementing traditional motifs and mythologies in their work, writers and thinkers must maintain the notion that myth can both bear witness to the rupturing of colonialism and engage in a process of self-questioning, all while remaining situated within the material conditions of postcoloniality.

Through the adoption of such an approach, then, contemporary writing may enable a view of Africa which eliminates the totalizing tendencies of any one discursive presentation of the African world, either as an idealized lost society or

[8] Jean Marie Makang, "Of the Good use of Tradition: Keeping the Critical Perspective in African Philosophy", in Emmanuel Eze, ed., *Postcolonial African Philosophy: A Critical Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 327.

[9] Wendy Griswold, "The Writing on the Mud Wall: Nigerian Novels and the Imaginary Village", *American Sociological Review*, 57.6 (December 1992), 710.

[10] Adéléke Adéèkó, "Power Shift: America in the New Nigerian Imagination", *Global South*, 2.2 (Fall 2008), 12.

[11] Griswold, "Imaginary Village", 721.

[12] Adéèkó, "Power Shift", 12.

[13] Derek Wright, "African literature and post-independence disillusionment", in F. Abiola Irele and Simon Gikandi, eds., *Cambridge History of African and Caribbean Literature*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 808.

[14] Wole Soyinka, "The Writer in an African State", *Transition*, 31 (1967), 13.

as one striving towards a monolithic, Western-driven conception of development. While Soyinka, writing from the position of the immediate post-independence era, presents a singularly prescriptive notion of the writer and African society, in contemporary literary narrative, the re-imagining of Africa manifests itself in a multitude of forms and through a variety of co-existing discourses, reflecting the continent's disjointed transition into the current era. The past, rather than operating as a site of indulgence and escapism, may be recuperated through its critical function to serve as the foundation for an African imaginary that remains situated in the present. Through this distancing from the discrete categorical boundaries of Soyinka's time, contemporary writing instead can enact a more multifaceted and malleable picture of Africa and its nations.

In this paper, I will examine the way in which one narrative, Chris Abani's *GraceLand*,[15] does just this through its appropriation of mythology in the service of a radical re-imagination of the Nigerian postcolony. In *GraceLand*, the morphology of the indigenous Igbo *ogbanje* myth addresses the danger inherent in a turn to nativism by incorporating the normative values of another layer of contemporary mythology, that of the West as saviour. Fanon has claimed that "the intellectual who is Arab and French, or Nigerian and English, if he wants to be sincere with himself, chooses the negation of one of these two determinations. Usually, unwilling or unable to choose, these intellectuals collect all the historical determinations which have conditioned them and place themselves in a thoroughly 'universal perspective'".[16] Abani's narrative, I argue, sidesteps this self-defeating stance through the carefully mediated use of these two divergent discourses, ultimately subverting the very need for a 'national culture' in this respect. Because of its transformation of traditional mythology through the insertion of the driving forces of neo-imperial power, *GraceLand*'s recourse to myth, far from operating as a naïve folktale, serves to re-imagine Nigeria as the site of a complex network of discourses and displacements which are mutually irreducible and beyond the constraints of 'national' and totalizing discourses.

[15] Chris Abani, *GraceLand* (New York: Picador, 2004). Hereafter cited as *GL*.

[16] Fanon, *Wretched*, 155-156.

II. *GraceLand* and the Transformation of Traditional Igbo Mythology

Chris Abani's *GraceLand* is a novel which invites a mythological reading. Set out in two books, each of the narrative's twenty-nine chapters begins with two opposing statements on the Igbo kola nut ritual, one from traditional religious mythology and one from Western ethnographic anthropology. In each case, the two statements present oppositional views on the ceremonial presentation of the kola nut, highlighting the discontinuities between a traditionalist and an anthropological envisioning of Igbo society. Through the tension imbued by the regular occurrence of these conflicting views of tradition and ritual, *GraceLand* operates as a narrative both permeated by mythological significance and simultaneously sceptical of that very mythology. The coexistence of two planes of mythological thought, one traditional and one contemporary, serves to subvert the fabricated division between

reason and intuition so critical to any system of domination and subordination, two allegedly discrete systems of thought which instead operate in tandem throughout the narrative. Functioning as what Mark Turner terms a "double scoped narrative",[17] *GraceLand* complicates the notion of mythology while creating a critical discourse on the process of mythologizing and its effects in contemporary postcolonial societies and, in the process, demonstrates Gikandi's claim that, for contemporary African literature, "the simultaneous existence of a modern and a traditional world could only be negotiated through works of imagination".[18] By imagining the continual coexistence of modern notions of reason with traditional mysticism, *GraceLand* presents a narrative which continually balances the dual realities and responsibilities of each presentation.

In the traditional Igbo mythico-religious conception of the world, existence is divided between three planes: the spirit world, inhabited before birth, the material world of human beings and the spirit world of the ancestors.[19] These three planes are not seen as discrete, but instead function together to create the world in total. Spirits may interact with human individuals and vice versa, as the dualist conception of mind and body is replaced with a more complicated, open system of thought. Under this system, the *ogbanje* refers to the spirit-child, bound to uphold a pact made to their companions in the spirit-world. Once born, these *ogbanje* children wish to quickly return to their spirit-companions and so desire to terminate their human lives. However, this directly violates the Igbo directive that every individual must live out a full life in accordance with their *chi*, or destiny-giving personal deity, and, as a result, the *ogbanje* child enters into a cycle of birth, death and rebirth. The *ogbanje* is forced to exist in a liminal space that is neither entirely human nor entirely spirit but instead reflects the ambiguity of its divided existence.[20] In its traditional inception in Igbo society, the *ogbanje* story is used to explain the behaviour of individuals who are seen as strange, aloof or outside the norms of expected social behaviour. It is said that, because these individuals have divided loyalties in the spirit and human worlds, so their behaviour must betray conflict, reflecting the doubleness and paradox they embody.[21] More recently, the *ogbanje* myth has been used as a parable for the Nigerian postcolony itself, envisioning the nation as the spirit-child forced to continually reinvent itself.[22] While this application of the *ogbanje* myth minimizes the complexities of Nigerian national politics and presents a rather homogenous view of the society (which, given its ethnic divisions, is rather suspect), it nonetheless indicates the importance and wide application of the mythology in contemporary discourse.

Approaching *GraceLand*, the *ogbanje* myth provides one layer of meaning within the narrative and presents one possible lens through which to read it. Throughout the narrative, Elvis Oke, *GraceLand*'s 16-year-old protagonist, is represented through a series of dislocations and displacements, mimicking the birth-death-rebirth cycle of the *ogbanje* while highlighting the radical difference amongst Elvis's manifestations in each cycle. Over the course of these cycles, Elvis transforms from an idealistic rural boy, safely ensconced in his traditional world overseen by his mother and

[17] Mark Turner, "Double-scope Stories", in David Herman, ed., *Narrative Theory and the Cognitive Sciences* (Stanford: CSLI Publication, 2003), 117-142; Mark Turner, "Compression and representation", *Language and Literature*, 15.1 (February 2006), 17-27.

[18] Simon Gikandi, "African literature and the colonial factor", in F. Abiola Irele and Simon Gikandi, eds., *Cambridge History of African and Caribbean Literature*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 382.

[19] Chigekwu Ogbuene, *The Concept of Man in Igbo Myths* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1999), 5.

[20] Ifeanyi Menkiti, "Physical and Metaphysical Understanding", in Lee Brown, ed., *African Philosophy: New and Traditional Perspectives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 108.

[21] For information on the *ogbanje*, see in particular Chinwe Achebe, *The World of the Ogbanje* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishing Co. Ltd., 1986), 30-31, 60; also, for its doubleness and paradox, see Christopher Okonkwo, "A Critical Divination: Reading Sula as Ogbanje-Abiku", *African American Review,* 38.4 (Winter 2004), 653-654.

[22] See, for example, Ato Quayson, "Looking Awry: Tropes of Disability in Postcolonial Writing", in David Goldberg and Ato Quayson, eds., *Relocating Postcolonialism* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 227 and Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, "An Abiku-Ogbanje Atlas: A Pre-Text for Rereading Soyinka's 'Ake' and Morrison's 'Beloved'", *African American Review*, 36.4 (Winter 2002), 667.

grandmother, to a hardened, solitary teenager involved in the criminal underworld of Lagos. His idealized image of his childhood is demolished, while his dream of fame and fortune as a dancer is reborn in the decidedly more realist dream of survival. Physically, Elvis disappears from his home and reappears, fundamentally changed, at several different climactic occasions in the narrative. Nowhere, however, is the enactment of the *ogbanje* myth in *GraceLand* more evident than at the narrative's conclusion, marking the final *ogbanje* cycle. Having progressed through several cycles of dislocation and return, Elvis, at the narrative's end, is portrayed as less and less able to cope with the realities of his life on the streets of Lagos. With his home in the slums destroyed by the government and having survived a price on his head and days of torture, the narrative makes it evident that Elvis will not persevere through indefinite homelessness and its attendant hunger and disease. In a last-minute miracle of salvation, Elvis is given a visa to America, somehow procured by his friend Redemption for a fantasized emigration Redemption will never embark upon. The narrative ends as Elvis waits in the airport for his flight to be called. Already, at this point, the staging of this conclusion reflects the ambivalence of the *ogbanje*. As a liminal space, the airport waiting lounge functions as a setting without a nation, neither technically in the country of departure nor in the land of destination; in the conditions of transnational migrancy and contemporary exile, it is a place that is simultaneously no place at all. By positioning its conclusion in this setting, the narrative structurally highlights its undecidability and instability.

Elvis, in this moment, is unable to articulate any emotions or rationale: "He wasn't sure how to feel. On the one hand, he had the opportunity to get away from his life. On the other, he felt like he was abandoning everything that meant anything to him. Oye, Efua, his father, the King, Redemption, Okon, Blessing, even Comfort" (*GL*, 318). Igbo mythology mandates a social view of the world where individuals exist not in a vacuum but through their society and as part of a social whole.[23] As part of a social fabric, the individual exists beyond his or her own skin through the existence and perpetuation of the family clan, emphasized through the belief in reincarnation within a family line. Elvis is explicitly shown as breaking this communal pact. He is aware that, by leaving Lagos, he will cut himself out of the traditional tapestry-like existence of the community, effectively enacting his own death therein, but continues nonetheless. Elvis, through this departure, embodies the desire of the *ogbanje* "to be allowed *just to be*, to occupy their own place in the universe's grand scheme of things, to live and perform fully and consistently that *atypical self*, no matter how aberrant or grievous others experience them to be",[24] in choosing escape, marking his desire to exist outside of dominant, pre-written master narratives of tradition and society.

[23] Ogbuene, *Concept of Man*, 135.

[24] Okonkwo, "Critical Divination", 657.

Elvis finds himself unable to rationalize his departure, despite his misgivings: "He knew that what he thought he was leaving behind wasn't much, and after all, his aunt Felicia was in America. No, what he was leaving had nothing to do with quantity; nor, in spite of Redemption's protestations, did it have to do with quality. This was something else, something essential" (*GL*, 318-319). Neither qualitative

nor quantitative evaluations can provide a justification for his departure. It is simply, as the narrative says, something essential in his being which does not allow him to stay and instead compels him to leave. For the *ogbanje*, societal norms serve as a constraint; in place of societal standards which dictate that life progress through set stages in line with a community of values, the *ogbanje* operates as a singular aberration, choosing to reject the demands of socially-driven destinies. Despite his awareness of the comparatively difficult material conditions of Nigerian society, for Elvis, his atypical desire to leave is unarticulated and beyond the possibilities of description, rendered, as it is, undecidable. Instead, he must face the fundamental qualities of his character and follow his need to depart from his home indefinitely.

The novel ends as Elvis, by the assumed name on his visa, is called to his boarding gate: "'Redemption,' the airline clerk called. Elvis, still unfamiliar with his new name, did not respond. 'Redemption!' the clerk called louder. Elvis stepped forward and spoke. 'Yes, this is Redemption'" (*GL*, 321). The narrative closes with this excerpt and, by withholding any scene of Elvis in transit or in America, its ability to reorient Elvis's existence in this new setting is left ambiguous. Instead, his textual existence is suspended; as an entity, Elvis is left in a middle ground. Elvis is gone; instead, he is reborn in Redemption, an acknowledgement of the power, through the act of naming, of reinscription. With this ending, the narrative demonstrates the impossibility of giving closure to Elvis's uncontainable existence, where, as an *ogbanje*, Elvis is finally represented as neither here nor there, condemned to ambivalence. The ambiguity of this ending further hails back to Nigeria's tradition of popular literature, a genre which, as Stephanie Newell writes, forsakes closure in its endings, instead "structurally testifying to [its] own inability to construct interpretive frames around the world"[25] and situating itself as a narrative reflective of popular existence in the Nigerian postcolony. With its similarly inconclusive ending, *GraceLand* motions towards the inability of mythology, as a governing framework, to bring conclusive order to its world and situates itself within a popular tradition which reflects the interests and anxieties of its society.

As the analysis thus far has indicated, *GraceLand* is not, however, a straightforward retelling of the *ogbanje* myth. Throughout its course, the narrative plays with the traditional elements of this myth, transforming them through the process Vladimir Propp, in his pioneering study of folktales, has termed "externally motivated substitution".[26] Elvis, as *ogbanje*, does not die in the physical sense; instead he disappears to a new land. Nor is Elvis reborn; instead, his character shifts through a series of manifestations and is ultimately left ambiguous. Elvis-as-*ogbanje* is not, by any means, directly analogous with the traditional myth. Rather, the *ogbanje* in *GraceLand* mirrors the historicity of its postcolonial setting, reflecting Eze's remark that "modern African writings operate on several other historical levels. On one level, the traditions one presumably writes about … is experienced by the writer as alive …. But on another level, the writer also knows that the tradition in question has been damaged and transformed in an irreversible manner".[27] In shifting the elements of the traditional myth, *GraceLand*, as a narrative, reflects the changed

[25] Stephanie Newell, *West African Literatures: Ways of Reading* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 106.

[26] Vladimir Propp, "Fairy-Tale Transformations", in Brian Richardson, ed., *Narrative Dynamics: Essays on Time, Plot, Closure, and Frames* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2002), 86-87.

[27] Emmanuel Eze, "Language and Time in Postcolonial Experience", *Research in African Literatures*, 39.1 (Spring 2008), 26.

and dynamic society it springs from. As a modern *ogbanje*, Elvis's narrative progress operates within the conditions of postcoloniality as well as traditional mythology, functioning beyond the sphere of an easy nativism in order to engage with the complexities of identity-formation and communal belonging in contemporary Nigerian society.

III. The Mythology of Migrancy and the American Dream

Most critically, *GraceLand* transforms the site of the *ogbanje's* split allegiances through substitution. Rather than develop as a struggle between loyalties and ties in the human world and the spirit world, the narrative of *GraceLand* stages the conflict of the *ogbanje* as one between a desire for an idealized indigenous homeland and a desire for the chance at prosperity promised in the mythical West, represented in the narrative by America. Throughout the novel, *GraceLand* is peppered with references to another form of mythology, that of the American dream and the myth of postcolonial progress through migration. Elvis, like his companions, indulges in occasional fantasies of success and fame in America and references to American popular culture, particularly through Hollywood cinema, are on par with references to African media within the narrative. For some critics, in fact, *GraceLand* is most powerfully read as a statement of postcolonial development through migrancy and the transnational circulation of Western commodity culture, where "America rescues the narrative and its protagonist when Elvis runs out of escape outlets from the confining destinies that beset him in Lagos".[28] In this view, the narrative's promise may only be fulfilled through the invocation of the West and its epistemic values, subsumed under the mythological discourse of salvation through emigration and the irredeemable stagnation of the postcolonial nation-state. The novel's conclusion, seen as such, shifts from a staging of indigenous mythology to a staging of exile and asylum, leading to a tendency to read the narrative entirely through the lens of Western-driven developmental progress.

[28] Adéèkó, "Power Shift", 16.

Because the narrative also functions through its transformed indigenous mythology, however, it fails to allow such an uncritical view of America and the resulting adaptation of a totalizing discourse of neo-colonialist progress. This is particularly evidenced by Elvis's own ambiguity towards America and the supposed grace it would bring him. Early in the narrative, Elvis begins to ruminate on his feelings towards the country: "He mused over his mixed feelings. His fascination with movies and Elvis Presley aside, he wasn't really sure he liked America. Now that the people he cared about were going there, he felt more ambivalent than ever" (*GL*, 55-56). For Elvis, America is not simply the place of dreams, idealized, as Albert Memmi discusses with reference to the youth of North Africa, as a utopia of maximum possibility.[29] While Memmi presents a straightforward picture of yearning and certainty that in the Western metropole, happiness and prosperity will be found, Abani's Elvis presents a much more complicated picture. America is

[29] Albert Memmi, *Decolonization and the Decolonized* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2006), 70.

not a guarantor of success; it is simply another, different place, where its mythological status, as land of opportunity, is questioned. For Elvis, America may be seen as the cause of Nigeria's economic and postcolonial ills (*GL*, 280) and as complicit in neo-imperialist global domination. It is a place which is taking his loved ones from him (*GL* ,165-168), reducing his already fractured family unit to none. America, for Elvis, while a pleasant dream, would in reality change nothing: "What if he had been born white, or even just American? Would his life be any different? Stupid, he thought. If Redemption knew about this, he would say Elvis was suffering from colonial mentality" (*GL*, 78). By holding America at a critical distance, the narrative complicates any attempts to read its conclusion as a wholesale validation of migrancy and progress through the assimilation of American value systems. Instead, Elvis's ultimate departure must be read, at least in part, as part of his trajectory as *ogbanje*, leaving the status of his final journey both uncertain and ambivalent. America is not salvation: it is just a place and another gamble. Elvis is not guaranteed happiness and, in fact, his actual chances are low. The American myth must contend with the discourse of the *ogbanje*, transforming America into another liminal space while simultaneously complicating the trajectory of the *ogbanje* through its implication with colonial mentalities and discourses of global inequality.

IV. Double-scoped Stories and Emergent Spaces of Existence

GraceLand, by filtering the traditional myth of the *ogbanje* through this second layer of mythology, unsettles the mythology to its foundations and disallows a simplistic view of the narrative as grounded in traditionalist values. The use of the *ogbanje* myths shifts from what could be seen as an attempt to recuperate the traditional notions of the past or idealize a society forever altered by colonialism to a commentary on the fragmentation of individuals and communities in the postcolonial era and a questioning of the drive to development through the wholesale embrace of neo-liberal values. Neither the nativism of a turn to traditional mythology nor a press towards the West for salvation may be sustained in the narrative, which enacts the contradictions implicit in both views. Instead, the narrative operates as a palimpsest containing the traces of both epistemological views. Snead claims that, regardless of "their hesitancy about coming to terms with the specificity of African literature, few western readers seem unwilling to talk about its 'universality'. The new critical valorization of 'universal appeal' … is frequently applied to African works… even though the word 'universality' seems often to function as a code word meaning 'comprehensibility for the European reader'".[30] Through its re-imagining of Nigeria through the dual lenses of traditional and contemporary mythologies, *GraceLand* disallows the easy 'universals' of the metropole and forces a reckoning with the historicity of the nation. Any universal within the narrative must come to terms with the specificity of its positioning in Nigerian society. The narrative does this through the simultaneous activation of two layers of irreconcilable mythology, both of which hearken beyond the boundaries of the text as a "doubled-

[30] James Snead, "European Pedigrees/African Contagions: Nationality, Narrative, and Communality in Tutuola, Achebe, and Reed", in Homi K. Bhabha, ed., *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990), 237.

scoped narrative", or one which, by utilizing two or more distinct master plots in tandem, emerges as a unique, third narrative space. In his theorization of the double-scoped narrative, Mark Turner calls it "a great mental leap" where readers "connect two stories that should be kept absolutely apart, and … blend them to make a third story". These stories become "the source of our creativity and knowledge" because it is in these spaces that narrative may re-imagine tradition and prescribed master plots.[31] In contrast to the broader notion of hybridity so often used in postcolonial criticism, *GraceLand*'s use of a double-scoped narrative maintains the subjectivity of its stances and the specificity of its historical situation, creating a blended space in which the double-articulations of individual and communal meaning work to create an environment in which conflicting identities may continue to flourish and alternative paths to progress and personal fulfilment are authenticated. Turner states that "[f]ar from blocking the construction of the network, such clashes offer challenges to the imagination. The resulting blends can turn out to be highly creative",[32] emphasizing that, in contrast to a vague notion of hybridity, the specific selection of oppositional elements in a double-scoped blend are what allow the narrative to emerge in a space where dynamically constructed meanings may proliferate. Throughout, the narrative operates on an affective level as a double-scoped critique of the very notion of mythologizing as it stands in the condition of postcoloniality, doing so through the interaction of two irreconcilable and irreducible layers of mythologizing, each of which questions the epistemological value of the other.

[31] Turner, "Double-Scoped", 119 and 133.

[32] Turner, "Compression", 19.

GraceLand enacts this critical and transformative function of myth to foreground the very opacity of mythologizing as a process, most explicitly through the character of the King of the Beggars. In the narrative, the King serves as the voice of traditionalism. The King constantly questions Elvis's drive to success through material gain and his easy adoption of American cultural standards for happiness and survival. The King urges Elvis to remain connected to his lost idealism when confronting the nation, presenting a view of Nigeria as victim of American neo-colonial policies. Eventually the King dies what is perceived as a heroic death in a showdown with a corrupt government official, implicitly positioned as the embodiment of the neocolonialist policies of post-independence Africa. After his death, Elvis begins to question the validity of the King's stance: "[Elvis] had come to terms with the King's death; but he hadn't come to terms, and probably never would, with the way the King had been deified. He was spoken of with a deeply profound reverence, and the appendage 'Blessings be upon his name,' usually reserved for prophets in Islam, was being used whenever his name was invoked" (*GL*, 310). The King, deified by his community, is exposed in the narrative as having been motivated by a personal revenge quest, cheapening his martyrdom. More troublingly, the uncritical view of the King-as-culture-hero disallows the complexity of his desire for justice and flattens his engagement with the people to a caricature of itself. Through Elvis's critical stance against the mythologizing of the King, *GraceLand* makes explicit the questioning of myth noted as critical to any

hope of a liberatory future.[33] The King's deification takes on another level, as a warning against the duplicity of mythology and the danger of blind dogmatism therein.

V. Conclusions: Towards an Open Future

In his reading of *GraceLand*, Obi Nwakanma refers to Elvis's flight to America as marking a tendency, in contemporary Nigerian literature, "to question, as a result of disillusionment, the value of nation and national belonging".[34] Yet the narrative, as double-scoped, complicates the issue beyond national belonging as a binary marker. Communal belonging is both questioned and confirmed; traditions are respected while simultaneously displaced. No statement wholeheartedly supporting any totalizing discourse may be maintained; instead, the narrative demands a consistently dynamic negotiation and re-imagination of meaning throughout its course. As such, *GraceLand* serves as an emergent space for narrating the postcolony, free from the nostalgia of nativism implied in the return to indigenous mythology and the attendant yearning for lost origins as well as from the contemporary view of the West as saviour and economic and social development as the mythological slayer of ills. In its structure, the narrative answers back to the inherent contradiction of postcolonial narrative which, as Elleke Boehmer has noted, "cannot bring what it promises: a completely united and unifying history, an absolute unity with the national body. To conceptualize that fusion demands self-division. In effect, to transfigure body into narrative, to escape from being only a figure in another's text, is to effect a break in the self".[35] In *GraceLand*, the use of mythology elicits this uneasy unity in fragmentation through the organization of the narrative as inherently split within itself, expressing the capacity of narrative to make impossible meanings accessible while navigating what Òlakunle George has referred to as the difficult task of all African writers, "the need to speak of and for a collective identity and destiny, from within an enunciatory space that is exterior to that identity".[36] Caught in the tension between a deified past, on the one hand, and the neo-colonialism of the West-as-salvation, *GraceLand* chooses neither and both, simultaneously, an impossible position somehow made possible through the narrative structure, and as such, legitimizes the possibilities and necessity of transgressive identifications within postcolonial societies. Through the use of a simultaneously activated double-scoped narrative, *GraceLand* subverts the demand for a single 'national culture' and presents a new imagining of Africa as unchained from the oppressive dictates of mythology and the domination of culture heroes and folk heroes. At the same time, Africa is also imagined as no longer at ease with neo-liberal mythologies of development; instead the narrative functions as a re-imagining of Africa that is both traditional and contemporary, yet neither uncritically.

[33] Isidore Okpewho, "Home, Exile, and the Space In Between", *Research in African Literatures*, 37.2 (Summer 2006), 69.

[34] Obi Nwakanma, "Metonymic Eruptions: Igbo Novelists, the Narrative of the Nation, and New Developments in the Contemporary Nigerian Novel", *Research in African Literatures*, 39.2 (Summer 2008), 13.

[35] Elleke Boehmer, "Transfiguring: Colonial Body into Postcolonial Narrative", *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 26.3 (Spring 1993), 274.

[36] Òlakunle George, "The 'Native' Missionary, the African Novel, and In-between", *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 36.1 (Autumn 2002), 18.

Gabriella Ghermandi

In the shade of the shameless branches laden with bright red flowers

We are stories
of stories in history.
Corners or centres
of the warp and woof
of the fabric of the world.
Folds within
the weave of events.
We are the stories,
we are history.

In the end, grandma Berechtì – grandma Blessing – was right.

When I look at her in the photo hanging in the living room she smiles at me, still ready to say, "listen to me, my experiences, I've already lived so long in this world, for you and all the ones who will come after you, and if you can pass on my experiences and then yours along with mine…!"

"Nothing, I tell you, nothing of what happens to us, whether wonderful or catastrophic, do we keep wholly or wholly throw away. And in the terrible things that happen there is always some piece of the cloth, some fold in the fabric, that we will want to hold on to."

She said this while I, we, everyone, were crying and plotting against the regime.

And again, "The things of man are not made to be unstable forever, sooner or later they adjust themselves and find their own equilibrium!"

Nowadays I often find myself thinking over these words, and I discover a bit of cloth, a small fold from those years, that I hold on to with a happy smile.

Something from that catastrophic time that I'm not throwing away is my bicycle.

Ah, yes!

I learned to ride my bike by pedalling down dirt tracks, back streets, market alleys, between stalls and piles of vegetables heaped on the ground, determined as only children are, dead set on learning, without letting myself be daunted by falls, skinned knees, bumps and bruises....

I learned to ride during the years of the regime, thanks to the regime.

But maybe it would be better to tell you the whole story from the very beginning.

It was September, the smiling month of September when the great rains come to an end.

One day there was a strike, the first in Ethiopia's history. Taxi and lorry drivers occupied the city streets with their vehicles to protest against the rise in the price of petrol.

The next day, suddenly, without any warning, we found ourselves trying to keep afloat in the unfamiliar waters of a new government. Before we could understand the meaning of the word, before we could roll it correctly on our tongue, we were struck by the coup, which turned our whole world upside down.

My family and I spent the first few days in hiding inside our house, listening to the machine-gun shots and peeking out from the veranda at the armoured cars driving up and down the streets all around our neighbourhood.

My father and grandma Berechtì were the only ones who weren't afraid of the guerrilla warfare just beyond our front gate, because they had been through the big war! While the shooting was taking place outside, grandma Berechtì walked back and forth in the living room going about her usual business, and at every machine-gun shot she repeated, "*Wai! Ghena ai dechmoun iziatom?*" (What! aren't these people fed up yet?)

The strange routine of the dictatorship, which lasted 17 years, was established in only a few weeks. When some sort of normality was set up and people had grown used to the new leaders' faces, we once again returned to the pattern of everyday life.

And then came the Thursday evening when my father got up from the table to perform an action that belonged to the realm of habit: he went over to turn on the TV.

Before the 'upset', every Thursday night my large family – all except my grandma, who wasn't very interested in the box, as she called it – used to gather about on the sofas to watch the next episode of *The Fugitive*.

That night my father turned the knob and the TV came on, but instead of images the screen was lit up by black and white stripes and an irritating noise invaded the room.

My father went behind the TV set, trying again and again to push the knobs, move the wires of the antenna..., but nothing happened; "kisch kischschsch", the television continued its grating sound, rasping against our ears.

The curfew had already begun, so we couldn't go onto the roof to try to adjust the antenna, nor could we go to Atò Iemane's, the only other person besides ourselves in the neighbourhood who had a TV.

"Well! No TV today!" said my father. "Tomorrow! Tomorrow we'll fix the antenna and we'll watch *Bonanza*. You'll see, it's sure to be the antenna"; at which my grandmother intervened, with her hands on her hips and a challenging note in her voice: "Let's hope it's broken forever. With all the stories we could tell each other, here we are spending our time staring at the box with empty eyes..., turning ourselves into idiots, bah! It's unbelievable."

"But grandma" – said my cousin Daniel, defending television, "they tell good stories, with lots of images."

"I can tell you good stories, too, if you want! I know as many as you could wish for and you could ask me questions if you didn't understand, think about that, and I would answer, something the box certainly wouldn't do!"

"Come on grandma, the TV is a different thing altogether, it's better."

And she, moving off into another room, "Huh! The past is behind us and the future is coming, full of trouble! Watching a box instead of talking to each other!"

But the TV had stopped working, and it wasn't because of the antenna. It was the new government's politics: no more American television series. And, again because of the new government's policy, luxury goods also disappeared, as did imported cars, private houses, private property, landowners... and, to the sorrow of us children, anything that could pollute the minds of the young. No more toys, cookies, candies, or chocolates....

In the gaps left free by everything that was being cancelled even from the simple world of ordinary conversation new words were being inserted.

"Imperialist and capitalist": what had to be definitively eliminated from the country, in every possible shape and form.

"The people's well-being": what had to be created or strengthened.

"Ideology": a big word, smelling of ideas, reasoning, squaring off and hard lines.

"Protecting ideology": soldiers on every corner of the city, neighbourhood control centres, check points and curfew from seven p.m. to six a.m.

And when the new words came to life, becoming part of our everyday phrases and expressions, the "Allies of Ideology" arrived: Russians, Bulgarians and multicoloured Cubans poured into our country. Last of all came "our allies' merchandise" and the hot, dusty Ethiopian lowlands were full of men's bicycles from Mao's China.

"But the things of man are not made to be forever unstable, sooner or later they adjust themselves and find their own equilibrium!" Grandma used to say. The stitching that held things together was too tight even for the new government and soon, despite the Protection of Ideology, it grew looser and we were able to find a fold in it for ourselves. Threads with which to weave a piece of cloth, arranging its woof and warp according to our own desires.

My father found it difficult to bear the claustrophobic climate of the city suffocated by the curfew, the continual military checks, the night-time roundups, so my grandmother sent out a call for help to all the members of her family and even to eee… Abba Alem (the father of the world).

One day Gebremeskel, a cousin of my mother's, arrived at our door. Crossing the courtyard, he waved a piece of paper with a satisfied look on his face and shouted, "Berechtì, Berechtì." As soon as he was in front of my grandmother he put the piece of paper in her hands, saying, "Here you are" and she, "Dummy, you know I can't read," so he took the paper back and began reading.

It said: "The provisional military government of the People's Socialist Republic grants permission to Mr...., to his only automobile and all the members of his family that can fit in said automobile, to pass the first road block and continue as far as the second, where...." In short, we could go to Nazareth, a small town a hundred km. south of Addis Abeba, to relax and detoxify ourselves from the capital city's climate of repression.

Nazareth, or Adama, as it had been renamed by the regime, was in the lowlands. Being so flat, it had been invaded by the famous bicycles from Mao's China, to my great joy. Every corner of every street was full of them. Bicycles and government-appointed hirers waited calmly in the shade of a tree for customers to arrive.

I repeat – to my joy!

Ah! Bicycles!

As far back as I could remember they had been one of my great passions. The kind of passion that gallops through your blood, blurring your sense of danger.

At one point there had been one in our house that belonged to my brother. I'd never learnt to ride it though I'd tried time and time again.

Every afternoon, trying not to be noticed, I'd go down into the courtyard to Aberrah, our guard, who had received the order *"be biskilitu ai agsuat"* ("don't help her with the bicycle"), an order that I managed to convince him not to obey, with the same trick, every day... "Aberrah," I would say, "How does it go? Right turn!" and I would turn left; "Left turn!" and I would turn right. And, his hands in his hair, he would begin to shout: "*Ere! Ere! Ere*! *Indezi adelem icco*"– It was too much for him, it was something that went against his nature, those mixed-up orders had to be put right at once: "No! That's not right. Left turn means turn to the left and right turn means to the right!" "And then?" I would spur him on. "And then: forward, march! at ease! attention… !" and when he had correctly performed a series of military commands, he would start up with the usual litany: "Eh! We're only young once. When I think of how I ended up with the Italian soldiers... . Have I ever told you? I'd gone to Jimma, on foot. When I arrived in the town, I saw the Captain in front of the coach station, with a suitcase by his side. He said something to me in Italian, I didn't understand his words, but I understood his gestures. I went up to him. Communicating by gestures, he asked me to carry his suitcase. I put it on my shoulder and followed him to his house. That's how it all began. At first I was his wife's odd-job man. Ah! Italian women. Lord, how she hollered. 'I made a mistake, pardon ma'am' was a phrase I had to say every day."

Then the story went on to tell about when he was enlisted in Mussolini's army. "That was when I learned to smoke. The sergeant would say, 'have a smoke, Aberrah' – and he would give me cigarettes: *Nazionali* without filters or *Terzilli* or *Indigeno*. Ah! Those were the days! Who knows why I miss them so much, why I miss the Italian army. To think it wasn't even my army, it was the army of the colonizers.

Each time I let him talk until his heart, softened by the emotions the memories called up, opened completely. Then I would give him a honeyed look and ... "Aberrah, would you help me get on the bike" and before he could say a word, "Please, just this once." *"Anci guraghe, ulle be milasishign ti gejignallesh"* ("you bad gurage" – the gurage people are the traders of Ethiopia) "every time, you win me over with your clever tongue. Please, just this once…" he would say, mimicking me. "Every day is your just this once. Well… ok, go and get that dratted piece of tangled iron. But it really is just this once." Then I would run to the shed to get the bicycle out, open the gate in front of the house, prop up the bike and get on while Aberrah held the saddle. When I was in the right position, I would give the command, "let go," and throw myself down the steep slope that started below our gate.

And from behind, all at once mindful of the order he'd been given, he would shout, "Mind now, when you get to the bottom put on the brake this time, else your father will murder me tonight."

But braking wasn't my aim. That whole race was just to allow me to face the challenge of the steep climb that was waiting on the other side of the slope.

Each time my ambition was thwarted. At the bottom of the slope the bike would stop short and throw me into the shop of Alem the hairdresser, my legs sprawling amongst the jars and chairs, my hands and knees bleeding and the bike outside the door. Finally, one night in March, I heard noises. I used to get confused by the mixture of Italian and Ethiopian festivities, I never knew whether it was one or the other we were celebrating. Thinking it was Santa Claus, arriving with his gifts, I kept quiet. But it was thieves, and they stole my cousin's blankets hanging on the line, and the bicycle.

After some days, malicious rumours went round the neighbourhood that the "thieves" were friends of the hairdresser's who was fed up with my daily visit, and the theft of the blankets was a mask to hide the real reason for the break in: to save Alem's flourishing business.

In any case, whatever the reason was, I was left without a bicycle until the memorable Saturday when, once we had got past the second military check-point, the small city in the lowlands lay spread out before our eyes, sending ripples of surprise up and down my veins.

Nazareth, or Adama, as the new government had renamed it, was a cross-roads of three tarmac streets amidst a sea of dust raised this way and that by the Gari or taxi trucks. Behind the three streets were dirt roads, small markets, fruit-shake stalls spilling over with fragrant green pawpaws, and then the Franco Hotel, formerly the property of an Italian – a capitalist – nationalized now by the government, and the Warush Hotel, where we lived, which was made up of a central building surrounded by a row of rooms buried under gaily-coloured bouganvilleas, and two towering acacias laden with bright red flowers, whose shameless branches reached out over the garden wall throwing their shadow onto the other side.

And Ghrma, the bicycle hirer, with his halo of uncombed hair, a wooden comb stuck in the middle of the halo and a brilliant, white-toothed smile, standing under the shade of the shameless branches laden with bright red flowers. And beyond, in the sunlight, with their shiny black leather saddles, the bicycles. All rigorously green and black, and all rigorously men's bicycles.

In front of them was a large clearing bordered by a row of pepper trees, my training ground.

Persuading my parents to hire a bike for me for an hour every day wasn't that hard. I put into practice a trick that I'd learnt worked well: insist. They almost always got tired before I did.

With Ghrma there was no problem. He adopted me in less time than it takes to say it, and under the sweltering sun of the Ethiopian lowlands he taught me to ride, holding onto the saddle and running behind me for the whole of the hour.

Where I come from, everything is done as a community and even my cycling lesson was a community event and had its spectators – the hotel waiters.

Comfortably seated in the shade where Ghrma had stationed himself, they shouted out advice and slowed down the occasional passing car, "Go slow, there's a little girl who's learning to ride a bike."

There was a great deal of bustle surrounding my lesson. Every passer-by, whether on foot, on horseback or in a car, felt obliged to make a comment. "Huh! now we have to see a girl doing boys' things!"; or "Look what progress, thanks to the new government girls ride around like boys!"

Ghrma's rapid marathons alongside my bicycle bore positive fruits, and before the month was up I'd learnt to keep my balance by pedalling fast round the clearing, under the attentive eyes of Ghrma and the Warush waiters.

At that point I could have launched out to explore the corners and byways of Nazareth, but there was still a problem. The bicycle was too high. I could hardly reach the pedal when it was down all the way to the bottom, even if I pressed my groin against the crossbar and the tip of my toes on the pedal. Should I have to stop suddenly or get off, I wouldn't be able to.

This worry held me back for a while, and so I stayed in the clearing and counted the stones, but as I grew more confident about my balance and speed an irresistible curiosity and desire to explore began to torment me, like a fly that keeps you from sleeping, and the worrisome voice that had been holding me back grew weaker.

Good teacher that he was, Ghrma followed my inner impulses, and when he thought I was ready he unveiled a secret to me, "You'll be able to ride around here! This is the old Italian neighbourhood and all the houses have low garden walls. If you need to, you can use them to stop yourself." And with these words, he almost pushed me out of the protected space of the clearing.

My first push on the pedal shot a thrill up my spine. I turned right to go along the Warush garden wall. The thrill grew keener. I kept on pedalling…

It was a dirt street full of holes and carts driving around wildly. I kept on going, as my teacher had taught me to. I rode all round the hotel wall and showed up on the opposite side of the clearing. Covered in sweat!

Ghrma was waiting for me. "Well?"

"I was scared."

"Where there is fear, there is also courage! Tomorrow you'll go farther!"

Every day I added another stretch of road, discovering low walls and other places I could use for sudden stops, but my muscles were rigidly tense, trying to control every movement. I couldn't relax, and I only paid attention to myself and my bicycle and to keeping it under control.

The move beyond this, which finally allowed me to turn my eyes outwards, happened suddenly.

I was riding as always close to the Warush wall. A bouganvillea appeared on the other side. On its orange flowers, reaching up towards the sun, fluttered clouds of white butterflies. A flurry of them came down toward me. Without thinking, I stretched out my hand to touch them and went on pedalling. When I realized I was riding with only one hand, a thrill of excitement shook me from head to foot. I went on riding, holding on with one hand and looking at the free hand in wonder, reached the clearing and, hand in the air, started shouting, "Ghrma! Ghrma! Look, I've learnt, look! I'm riding with only one hand!" and stopped, throwing myself, bicycle and all, into his arms. His uncombed halo waving, "Brava! Brava!" he rejoiced as he kissed me. "Brava! Brava!" and he went on kissing my cheeks, his halo still waving until the comb fell out onto the ground.

"Brava! Brava!" the waiters said, and our bodies joined together in one enormous hug.

Then Johnson, the oldest waiter, pushed into the tangle and made room for himself. In between the arms of the others, first I saw his forehead appear with seven deep wrinkles in its brown skin; then his grizzled, pomaded hair, pushed back in small waves down to the nape of his neck; and finally his tender eyes, searching for mine before he spoke the words, "I've saved some butter for you, I knew this was the right day, if you come now there are slices of hot bread and strawberry jam…"

"Butter!" I exclaimed, "Yes! Yes, I've put aside a bit of butter."

After lunch, Mekonnen, one of the younger waiters, came to call me. "Ghrma is looking for you." Outside, under the shameless branches, Ghrma and all the waiters were waiting for me. Ghrma picked a small twig of bright red flowers and put it in my hair. "And now you must pay back the favour, to all of us – we taught you and now you … you will be our telalaki," our errand boy.

I felt my heart grow into a smile so big that it flowered on my lips.

Telalaki, telalaki! I would do errands for them all day, without having to pay for hiring the bike.

"Agreed?"

Telalaki! Telalaki!

I nodded so hard the twig fell to the ground, but he picked it up, blew the dust off the red flowers, and put it back in my hair.

Most of my errands were for the cook. Every day he sent me to rummage through the kerefa, kosserath, betsobilia and kororima stalls. Every day he sent me to a market farther away, and one morning, during one of these frequent expeditions, as I turned round after buying white lilies at the flower market for his wife's coffee ceremony, I suddenly found myself in front of a yellow sign hung crookedly over the dusty window of a tiny, almost invisible shop.

Painted on the sign in smudgy black brushstrokes were the words, "All that's left from dot dot dot." The dots stood for capitalism, imperialism.

The sign roused my curiosity, and I went in.

I found myself inside a narrow tunnel, infinitely long and dark, which immediately excited my sense of smell. Sweet stuff, there was a smell of sweet stuff, of ... a smell of ... cookies, and … candies and… and while I was trying to identify the other smells, my sight got used to the dark.

The "All that's left from dot dot dot" was a long, narrow tunnel full of all of God's blessings – little cookies, candies, chocolates, sugared almonds….

I was breathless with wonder.

I went out again, picked up the bike and flew towards the Warush, dropped the bike with Ghrma and ran to my father, "Papàyou'llneverbelieveme Ifoundashopfullofcookiescandiesandchocolate," and I stretched out my hand. Every molecule of my face was shouting as loud as it could. "It's heaven come down to earth" – and he smiled at me, touched, and handed me a few dollars.

I ran back to the shop. I spent half an hour rummaging around to make my choice and in the end I chose a box of delicious English oatmeal cookies. While I was walking out, satisfied, my fingers already busy opening the packet, I found myself in front of another wonder: a cinema.

A cinema that was open and still working and showing films.

And do you know what they were showing? An Italian western, *Per un pugno di dollari*.

I picked up the bike, flew back again to the Warush, left the bike with Ghrma and once again ran to my father.

"And what have you found this time?"

The overload of wonder was so great that I almost stuttered, "A movie-house, a real movie-house, they're showing a western in Italian – *Per un pugno di dollari*." He turned white, "It's a film by Sergio Leone." I stared at him, puzzled. "He's a great director." I stared at him again, still puzzled. "It doesn't matter. Tell mamma that tonight we're going to the cinema."

The socialist, anti-imperialist and anti-Americanist ideology was like liquid poured out in a single jet. It soaked deeply into a small area of the ground where it fell and then spread unevenly into the surrounding area, losing its strength and leaving large gaps as it moved farther away from the soaked area in the middle.

And Nazareth with its little "All that is left from dot dot dot" shop and its cinema was there to prove it.

And the Nazareth cinema?

There would be a lot to say about the Nazareth cinema. The films it showed were always the same. A dozen westerns or so, full of scratches and bubbles, but which were shown in a context that was never the same. That was the real fun, the life that animated the cinema as if another film were being projected.

There were those who participated by taking an active part in the life and adventures of the main character: thunderous applause and shouts of encouragement, advice as to the love story… . There were those who chatted about other things because they'd already seen the movie hundreds of times but still ducked instinctively to avoid the shot whenever a pistol was pointed in their direction. Then there were those who came to occupy the best seats so they could sell them to wealthier spectators at the last minute. There were boys who came to spy on the long-legged girls with seductive eyes and older ones who were already flirting, hidden behind the red velvet curtains. And then there was a constant coming and going of people who had come to look for someone and who came in and went out, accompanied by the usher who lit their way with a small, feeble torch, and shook the curtain as they entered, revealing the young couples hidden behind it, and commenting, each and every time, "My goodness! Your turn has already come! My goodness, how time passes! You're already grown up, too." And then there were stories, stories and yet more stories.

When my father tired of seeing the same films over and over again, I started going to the cinema with grandma Berechtì, whose curiosity had been aroused by my accounts and by my father's expression of disgust, "They make so much noise that even if you've seen a film 20 times, you never understand what's happening and how it ends!"

With her it was even more fun.

The films at the Nazareth cinema were divided into four parts, with tickets that cost less as the film went on. Between one part and the next there was a long pause during which the spectators who had just come in asked the others what had happened up to then, and grandma Berechtì, who loved telling stories, always tried to convince someone that, although it was the same film as last month, this time the story had taken another direction because the camera operator had added something new. Something that had been cut during the previous showing.

And she invented endless stories that captivated the audience, until they were rudely interrupted by the operator shouting through the projection hole: "Berechtì I want to get home before dawn! And you idiots, stop listening to her, the film ends just like all the other times".

And in the end?

After I'd seen the same westerns at the Nazareth time and again, one day the son of signor Iemane arrived in Addis Abeba, out of breath. He'd been sent by his father.

"The TV is back on!" he shouted.

It was Thursday. "Maybe tonight they'll show *The Fugitive*" said my father. That evening, as in times past, my father got up from the dinner table and went over to the TV. He turned the knob while we all waited in trepidation.

Before our wide-open, incredulous eyes, the screen lit up without any stripes or noise. At that point we were convinced that in a few seconds the images of *The Fugitive* would appear, and you can imagine our dismay when instead of the American TV series we found ourselves watching the pirouettes of a Russian gymnast participating in a gymnastics contest.

Unluckily for us, that was the new TV, the TV of the People's Government. Just gymnastics, piano concerts, military parades and political propaganda.

When we all complained that we'd been tricked, my grandmother commented with satisfaction, "Huh! TV! It always belongs to the regime, conceived and created to make you stupid! However I put it you still don't believe me, but that's the way it is. Before we were allied with the Americans and we only had American programs, now we are allied with Russians and we only have Russian programs. Huh! It's all controlled by the regime."

"But you go to the cinema when you're in Nazareth" said Daniel.

"Yes, but that's different, there you have the film but you also have real life. Believe me, children, leave the box alone, it's better to be together, amongst ourselves, and tell each other stories."

Translated by Brenda Porster and Jane Wilkinson

Igiaba Scego

Extracts from *Oltre Babilonia*[1]

[1] Igiaba Scego, *Oltre Babilonia* (Rome: Donzelli, 2008), 443-5, 34-40.

Epilogue

Mum talks to me in our mother tongue. A noble Somali, where every vowel has its meaning. Our mother tongue. Frothy, off-putting, bold. In Mum's mouth Somali turns into honey.

I ask myself if my mother's mother tongue can mother me. If Somali sounds the same in our mouths. Can I speak this mother tongue of ours? Am I as good as she is? Maybe not, no, certainly not. I'm not up to Maryam Laamane's level.

No, I, Zuhra, daughter of Maryam, come nowhere near any sort of nobility. I don't feel I'm an ideal daughter. I stumble around uncertainly in my confused version of the alphabet. My words are all twisted. They stink of tarmac roads, cement and crowded peripheries. Every sound is polluted. But I try all the same to speak to her in the language that unites us. In Somali I found the comfort of her womb. In Somali I heard the only lullabies she ever sang to me. In Somali I dreamt my first dreams. But then, each time, in every conversation, every word, every sigh, my other mother peeps out. The mother that breastfed Dante, Boccaccio, De André and Alda Merini. The Italian I grew up with and sometimes hated because it made me feel a foreigner. The vinegary Italian of the local markets, the sugary Italian of the radio reporters, the serious Italian of university lectures. The Italian I write in.

I'd never be able to choose another language to write in, to bring out my soul in. Written Somali isn't the same thing. It can't be. Or at least it can't be for me. Somali, to tell the truth, is a language I hardly know how to write in. A few words perhaps, but I muddle up the double consonants, the spelling. Written Somali has a strange history behind it. It is said to have been born in 1972, or was it 1973? I couldn't swear to the exact date, but I know written Somali is still a very young language. Mum doesn't even know how to write in it: she left the country before the literacy campaigns willed into being by the dictator, Siad Barre.

What an awful man that Siad Barre was! He killed, molested, tortured. But a lot of people only remember him for introducing the Somali alphabet. "He gave us a written language" some demented person will tell you, his arid mouth full of stupid enthusiasm. All the abuse, tortures, murders and threats are forgotten. All he's remembered for is his alphabet. "After his time, there were even more killings. In these eighteen years of civil war, the warlords have committed far worse massacres." But it was he who signed the first foul massacres in the red ink of Somali blood. It was that cursed Siad who paved the way for the present disaster. And then, the Somalis who say this forget that the whole question of putting their language into writing went back much earlier than Siad Barre, who merely harvested other people's

ideas. Even in the case of the Somali alphabet, all he did was to appropriate something that belonged to other people.

Maryam Laamane doesn't know how to write Somali in the Latin letters Siad swiped from others. She writes in the Osmania script. Mum's Somali is oral; her Somali is made of story-telling, poetry, music and song. On the rare occasions when she writes, she does so in strange letters no one else remembers any more. She learnt them as a child in the cultural resistance meetings she was dragged to by her elder cousin, the patriot. She was just a little girl then and she had fun making doodles on squared paper. Her doodles were the letters the young Somali members of the League for written Somali had chosen for their language, so that they could sign their new-found independence in an alphabet of their own.

It was Maryam who told me the story of Osmania. She says those first letters – curvy like water snakes and folded round and round themselves like ox tripe – were much more suited to the wealth of Somali sounds. "All these square shaped letters the white people use aren't right for us. Latin letters aren't right for our rich vocabulary. Look at the toughness of the T. Or the snaky sibilance of the S. You can't trust them, these letters. They'll never really convey what we say, what we think, or what we want to keep. They're traitors. They're foreign."

When she talks, my mother is always pregnant. Pregnant with that other mother, her language.

I like listening to her. It makes me travel inside her. I'd happily be silent for ever, just to listen to her. To be present at the delivery of a mother, delivered by my mother. Instead I have to talk too and my voice comes out as a hesitant stammer. I hear screechy sounds, my sounds, and I feel so disgusted at hearing my shaky voice that it makes it almost impossible for me to continue. …

Mum likes my mixture of Somali and Italian. She says it's my language. But I still feel ashamed of it. I'd like to speak both of them perfectly, without any smudges. But when I speak one of them, the other turns up impudently, an uninvited guest. There are perennial short circuits in my mind. I don't talk, I mix.

The Negropolitan (extract)

"They're polytheists, a bunch of fucking polytheists, that's all they are these Romancatholics." Abdel Aziz says all this without any punctuation marks. All together, without a single breath in between. His little boy's voice getting tougher and tougher with every vowel that comes out of his mouth. A condensation of dry fury, that's what Abdel Aziz's uvula has produced. It almost scares me. I'm forgetting I have a naughty little boy in front of me and above all that this little imp is my cousin.

I'm worried. Very worried. His high-pitched voice pierces my nervous system. Almost shattering it.

Please tell me it isn't true. Tell me they aren't back. Tell me I'm on an acid trip and that Abdel Aziz isn't saying what I'm afraid he is, what my ears are boycotting

and what I'm not even sure I've really understood. Say something. Anything. Even an insult. I never take anything, I swear, but today I'd rather be on a high, at least I'd have a rational explanation for the rubbish my cousin's coming out with.

Silence. No answer. I've tried them all. Jove, Buddha, Shiva, Ra, Zoroaster, Mithra, St Paul, St Francis, San Gennaro, Milingo. No one is able to explain. No miracle happens. The heavens aren't opening. Nor even the waters of the Red Sea.

They're back. It's so evident it stuns me. They're back, it's them, the Jehovah's Witnesses. When Abdel Aziz goes over the top like this, it can only be them. What can they have said to get him into this state? I'd like to say: "Cousin, the Council of Nicaea has come and gone. Anyway, we're Muslims, whether or not Jesus Christ was a spirit, a man, God or sheer madness, it's none of our business. For us he's a second order prophet. A reserve." But I haven't enough energy to say anything. I want my dilapidated old sofa. I want to lean my head back and maybe even close my eyes for a second. But I don't have time even to sit down. In less than two hours Lucy will be here. I've got to get a move on. Our seats are booked on a shaky old train heading for "Paleeemmu".

From there a boat will take us to Tunis. To Africa. I don't know Africa. Despite the fact that black blood runs through my veins. And that I was born there. Still, it's not like I knew it, it's not at all the same thing. You are born for the strangest reasons. For one more lemon vodka, a languid gaze, a mistake, a revenge, or sacrifice, and yes, even for love. So I was born in Africa and that's that. I came out of Maryam Laamane's warm womb, whimpered a bit, was washed and then sucked that sour milk I have no memory of.

I don't understand why I'm going there now, to Africa. I think Lucy insisted. And I didn't know how to say no, I suppose. I hardly ever manage to say no to anybody.

"Zuzu, you'll see, it'll be like being at Miami Beach." For Lucy Miami Beach is the tops when it comes to entertainment. To her Miami is a place made of three Ss, sunshine, shopping and screwing. You stretch yourself out like an iguana, get suntanned, go on a shopping spree and *last but not least* [*in English in the original*] get screwed in an energetic gym session with some goodlooking local. Lucy knows all this because she's seen it on tv. Her favourite series is naturally *Miami Vice Squad.* That old stuff from the eighties, with these two politically correct policemen, one a pale-faced infidel, the other a deluxe version of a curly headed negro, who go at it full strength with the three Ss, especially the last of the three. Between one babe and another, they also solve the odd case, with plenty of chases, gunfights and fake sweating sessions in their authentic 100% cotton Armani suits.

But Lucy's never been to Miami. I don't believe Tunis is like Miami Beach. I mean I don't even know if Miami Beach is like Miami Beach, but Tunis isn't, that's for certain. Everyone I talked to before this trip told me it's like going to Latina. What did you say? Am I understanding rightly? Am I paying 230 euros for the train and ferry round trip to end up in Latina? A town full of Fascists? Sorry, I want my money back.

"And then, Zuzu, the school is excellent." Ah yes, the school. I'd forgotten. Lucy and I have enrolled at that Arabic language school, the Bourguiba School, highly esteemed by Arabic scholars the world over. You go in and after a while you're a grammarian of the first century of the Hejira. And, *in sha' Allah*, after just a few days of the Bourguiba treatment you can hardly manage to recognize the uvula you arrived with. The enrolment fee includes a complete transplant of your vocal apparatus, roots and all. After only a few lessons you're able to pronounce even the infamous *'ayn*, the most bastard letter of the Arabic alphabet.

Shit, it's ages since I last had thirty days off (thirty-two, since I managed to include a Saturday and Sunday), and where do I go to spend them? In a school! No comment. And not in any old school – in a school of Arabic! Couldn't I have had a hobby like needlework or pottery, like normal, sane people? Did I really have to get messed up with classical Arabic? What a terrible idea, Zuhra. A terrible idea. Like all my other ideas.

…

"What I'm saying is that these Romancatholics believe in the Trinity… They believe God was made as three beings, which is absurd. God is one. Jesus is called the son of God because he's the primogenital spirit, not because his father had a fling."

What shall I do, shall I block him? Yes, I'll block him. Also because Abdel Aziz is frankly too good-looking to end up in the arms of that dirty swine, Lucifer. I fill my lungs with as much air as I can, hold it the right amount of time and then let it explode as I yell at him. What do I yell? *Haram*, of course. *Haram* i.e. impure, un*kosher*, un*halal* – smelling of sin, in other words. Abdel Aziz jumps back. Well, he doesn't exactly take a jump, but a step or two. Maybe only a little step. But the blow has struck home and he's going white, my little cousin. I'm beginning to enjoy myself, in the meantime, and I say it again, *haram*, putting even more stress on the H this time. If Bin Laden were to see me he'd recruit me right away for his next videoclip from the grotto. I can already see myself with my Kalashnikov made in Transnistria – a dump of a place where if you have enough money you can make your own nuclear bomb and sucks to Bush and Ahmadinejad – there I am, being watched by families whining in front of Al Jazeera from the Gulf to the Maghreb. My voice would get to be more popular than that of Fairuz, the Lebanese nightingale.

For now, all I am is an unlucky idiot who if she doesn't get a move on won't be able to catch that train for Lati… Oops, sorry, for Paleeemmu.

But first I have to tick off that little cousin of mine and remind him we're Muslims and there are certain things he really can't say. At least out of respect for his elders, me that is, who entered her thirties just three days ago. I couldn't care less if he doesn't say his prayers five times a day (like I do, even if I only started to quite recently. But I feel guilty about the time I didn't. I mean, I wasn't brought up the right way. I was at boarding school. But I do know the Opening Sura, I really do), nor could I care if he keeps Ramadan, or pays his annual zaqat or goes on the pilgrimage to Mecca. But he can't come and preach Christian stuff to me every

day. The Vatican's definitely not in my top five. And I'm even more allergic to the Jehovah's Witnesses. It's open war between me and them, I'd say. Before, I swear I couldn't give a damn. I'd see them on the street and when they stopped me I'd smile, walk more quickly, overtake them gracefully and give them the slip. Then one very unlucky day, they caught my two little cousins alone in the flat. Mina was asleep and Abdel Aziz offered them biscuits and tea, my biscuits, my beloved chocolate cookies!

"It's a good way to learn Italian, sister," he said. "What's more, it's all free." You see, my cousins have only been with me seven months, they came on a makeshift, overloaded boat and now Italian is a must, since they'll be spending their life here for a while (as *clandestini*). What was I to do? So, "OK, if it's for your Italian..."

Since then, the rat hole I insist against all evidence on calling home has been stuffed. What with? The magazines brought by those conversion fanatics.

It's not that I have anything against them, understand. I don't hate them, that is. I have the greatest respect for them, but they've invaded my vital space. When I found *The Bible – God's Word or Man's?* in the midst of my dirty bras, I swear I really burst. The flat is lined with stuff like *Why should you read the Bible?* Yes, why? Abdel Aziz slips them in all over the place. In the kitchen, in between my Caetano Veloso cds, among the fake gardenias and, last but not least, on the shelf I keep for books on Islam. If he puts one of those shoddy magazines in with my Qur'ans, I swear I'll kick him out of the flat. Hey, wait a minute. It's not what you're thinking. I'm not one of those blasted fundamentalists. But, shit, everything in its place. You see, I'm really fond of Abdel Aziz, but his brain's turning into a piece of gruyère with all this stuff. Or is it the mourning for his lost homeland that's rotting his brain away?

I take out my plum coloured passport. I look at it. Zuhra Laamane. Me, with my mother's surname, even if that's a bit unusual. Me, myself, in person, flesh and blood, tits, cunt and all. Me, an Italian citizen. An Italian citizen? The usual doubt assails me. Will my passport be enough to prove it? What if I brought my driving licence too? And my film club card? Yes, I'll bring that with me too. And my supermarket gift points coupon? And my cultural association card? And my National Library card? Yes, I'll take them all, the whole lot. Even my petrol coupon. It all helps. All these cards have my name printed on them in block capitals, don't they? And my address as a resident in the Eternal City. None of them say I'm Italian, unfortunately, but at least they show I live here. They strengthen the Italianness of my passport.

You see, I never want to go through what happened to me in Spain again. When I went Zapata wasn't there yet. I think the right was still in power. Not that it makes all that difference. At least in Italy. People say you can see a bit of difference in Spain… perhaps… but I live here. In Spain they wanted to arrest me. Not at the airport where even a Saracen negro takes it for granted this sort of thing might happen, no, not at the airport. They wanted to arrest me at the central police station. Think how batty the *guardia civil* must be. Imagining I had gone there in order to get myself arrested by them. All I wanted was to get a temporary residence

permit so as to open a bank account. I was just a girl who was taking her first steps as an Erasmus student in Valencia, the home of *paella* and *horchata de chufa*. Shit, only a bank account, nothing transcendental. The chap at the door looks at me with his half-wit little eyes drooping like a sixty year old's fake tits. He looks at me, his eyes popping out of their sockets. Then he begins to finger my identity card almost as if it were a porno star's bottom. He turns the poor thing over and over, ignoring the seventy odd people in the queue behind me. Then up he jumps with a feline leap and two minutes later I get taken away by four energumens, huge, muscular blokes, who look as if they've just arrived from a training camp for marines and are about to break your bones to bits. They look at me and one of them shows me his badge. "*Por favour, seguidme*" says the friend beside him. I didn't understand at the time what was happening. I was a nobody. An Erasmus student. But scenes from films I'd seen began to surface in my mind. The things that happen in a Hitchcock film when the hero is unjustly accused of a crime. You know, the sort of thing that happens to Cary Grant in *North by Northwest*, not to Zuzu baby. Instead they take me into a room, blind me with a lamplight (like in a B-movie) and begin to question me. Well, perhaps that's too big a word for what they're doing. They just go on and on repeating the same old motifs: *Eres clandestina. No eres italiana. Puta. Marica. Falsificadora de papeles.* I lose my temper. They let me go forty-five minutes later, after my phonecall to the embassy in Madrid. Apologies from everyone in the police station. Fuck your excuses, *entiendes, amigo*? Those were the worst fortyfive minutes of my entire life, olè.

Since then, I'm always lined with documents every time I go away.

Translated by Jane Wilkinson

Warsan Shire

"Grandfather's hands" and Other Poems

Grandfather's hands

Your grandfather's hands were brown.
Your grandmother kissed each knuckle,

circled an island into his palm
and told him which parts they would share,
which part they would leave alone.

She wet a finger to draw where the ocean would be
on his wrist, kissed him there,
named the ocean after herself.

Your grandfather's hands were slow but urgent.
Your grandmother dreamt them,

a clockwork of fingers finding places to own –
under the tongue, collarbone, bottom lip,
arch of foot.

Your grandmother names his fingers after seasons –
index finger, a wave of heat,
middle finger, rainfall.

Some nights his thumb is the moon
nestled just under her rib.

Your grandparents often found themselves
in dark rooms, mapping out
each other's bodies,

claiming whole countries
with their mouths.

Old spice

Every Sunday afternoon he dresses in his old uniform
tells stories of the men he shot, the women he saved.
No one believes him.

Thirty years ago he was spat at from a balcony,
a young immigrant who climbed the building
with triumph under his tongue
to come back with blood on his shirt
and a look in his eyes no one could recognise.

His daughters sometimes ask him to dance.
His laugh is gravel, his knuckles are unmarked graves.
He married his first love, she still has long curls that
reach the small of her back, sometimes he wraps
the strands around his hand like rope.

He smoothes old spice into coat lapels,
can load a gun underwater in under four seconds,
cries while listening to Suulfe and Dhuule,
has a framed photograph of the old president.
He used a Swiss knife on his young bride,
sobbed as he held Italian linen between her legs.

He is dying like an old flag.
This summer he wants to go back home,
no one knows how to tell him
that it won't be the way he left it.

Questions for Miriam

Were you ever lonely?

Did you tell people that songs weren't
ever the same as a warm body or a soft mouth?
Did you know how to say no to the young boys
who cried outside your hotel rooms?
Did you listen to the songs they wrote,
tongues wet with praise for women like you?

What sweaty bars did you begin in?
Did you see them holding bottles by the neck,
hair on their arms raising as your notes hovered
above their heads?
Did you know of the girls who sang into their fists
mimicking your brilliance?

Did they know that you were only human?
My parents played your music at their wedding.
Called you Makeba, never Miriam, never first name,
always singer. Never wife, daughter, mother,
never lover, aching.

Did you tell people that songs weren't the same
as a warm body or a soft mouth? Miriam,
I've heard people using your songs as prayer,
begging god in falsetto. You were a city

exiled from skin, your mouth a burning church.
I've carved my own body into
districts, rioting my throat sore.
Your songs fed starving women, Miriam,
quietened the need to hate my own body.

Tell me – who kissed your mouth silent?
Who helped moan the songs out of your stomach?
Did you ever spit out blood?
Were you ever silent for days?
Were there months when your husband
grieved your voice? Did you ever hate them,
the arms thrusting out of crowds?

Did you ever hate us,
the banshees in the audience,
little girl dervishes in their small living rooms,
dish cloths tied around our heads
swirling like their skin depended on it?

Did we want too much of you?
Did our love make it hard for you to sing?

Did you ever write drunk elegies for your heart?
Were you too embarrassed to sing them for us?
Was your strength a showpiece of staccato and timbre?
Did you howl belly up in rented rooms, open suitcase,
air thick with cigar smoke and roses?

Miriam – you, who we made sing at her own funeral,
was a song warmer than a body? Were you
more lonely than those sobbing over your cassettes?
And can you forgive us if we still want
your voice singing us out, at our own funerals?

Tea with our grandmothers
For Basil

The morning your habooba died
I thought of my ayeeyo, the woman
I was named after, Warsan Baraka,
skin dark like tamarind flesh,
who died grinding cardamon
waiting for her sons to come home and
raise the loneliness they'd left behind,

or my mother's mother, Noura
with the honeyed laugh, who
broke cinnamon barks between
her palms, nursing her husband's
stroke, her sister's cancer and
her own bad back with broken
Swahili and stubborn Italian,

and Doris, the mother of your
English rose, named after
the daughter of Oceanus and Tethys
the Welsh in your blood, from the land
of Cymry, your grandmother who
dreams of clotted cream in her tea
through the swell of diabetes,

then your habooba Al-Sura,
God keep her, with three lines on
each cheek, a tally of surviving,
the woman who cooled your tea
pouring it like the weight of deeds
between bowl and cup, until the steam
would rise like a ghost.

Glossary

Habooba – Arabic word meaning beloved woman, used as the word for grandmother in Sudan.
Ayeeyo – Somali word for grandmother.
Macaanto – Somali term of endearment, meaning sweetness.

central line is red, circle line is yellow

I can't compete with your home.

I cannot become sky and soil, hot tarmac and airport taxis.
I cannot hug you like your uncle, burly embraces filled with baritone Arabic.

I don't know your alphabet, I can't remember the words you teach me,
I can only listen to your stories.
write about your memories.
sometimes cry for silly, stupid, British reasons.

but I can't compete with your home.

I am not mountains nor am I back roads.
I am not the singing woman with the sugar voice who knows all of your alleyways.
I can't say I know how you feel, I don't know my country like that.
don't know its hot air in my face, haven't felt it under my feet.

I'm jealous that I can't be homesick.

and it hurts that I know
that me and my London can never be enough for you.

Translating fire

My uncle Olol was named after the Somali
word for fire. His actual name translates thickly into
its worst moment. When it is at its most hungry,

before soot or smoke, after flame, after
it buckles, spits, licks whole houses down,
squats over entire cities, how it can burn
things from existence.

Or the irony that his first wife on hearing
that he had left the country and married again,
drank lighter fluid and swallowed a match.

I want you to imagine how his name
took advantage of every breath in her body,
how he reduced her to ash from the inside out.

Now take all these things my love
and use them selfishly to describe
either the burn of being away from me,
or the bearable heat of being touched.

Kwame Dawes, ed., *Red: Contemporary Black British Poetry* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press 2010), xx + 252 pp., ISBN 9781845231293, £9.99.

Reviewed by **Manuela Coppola**

The celebration, in 1998, of the fiftieth anniversary of the arrival of the Windrush triggered an "archive impulse" as Paola Splendore and John Thieme define it in their introduction to "Black British Writing: Sea-Changes", *Textus*, 23 (2010), 317. This impulse is testified by the impressive number of publications which commemorated the arrival of the first ship of Caribbean immigrants at the English port of Tilbury marking the birth of a new British society and of a generation of "hyphenated" authors. While collecting the literary achievements of Caribbean-British and Asian-British authors and acknowledging their contribution to critical negotiation of Britishness, the literary anthologies, edited volumes and critical studies published in the last ten years also offer a rethinking of the label "black British", defining, questioning and challenging this controversial coupling.

Needless to say, "black British" has always been a contested category. This encompassing term was first used in the mid-70s, when it gained currency as "a way of referencing the common experience of racism and marginalisation in Britain," as Stuart Hall famously argued in his "New Ethnicities" (in Kobena Mercer, ed., *Black Film/British Cinema*, ICA Documents 7, 1988, 442). However, Alison Donnell suggested that the term has never been easily confined to national boundaries, given its ambiguous reference to a collective identity both "international in its referents and counter-national in its intent" ("Nation and contestation: Black British Writing", *Wasafiri*, 17: 36. 2002, 11). As it provided a common political identification for the collective struggle, "black" thus became a sort of "unifying framework" according to Hall (442), weaving identities across different ethnic and cultural experience. By the late 1980s, fractures had started to emerge, and the umbrella term proved to be a limiting and hegemonic definition imposing homogeneity and dismissing complexity. In this light, the alliances and solidarity created across second-generation immigrants from different cultures started to creak at the seams. While the hegemony of the black experience in Britain shifted towards an engagement with difference and was replaced by a focus on more specific ethnic identities, the use of the term has remained a questionable practice to be constantly discussed and renegotiated.

An ongoing problematisation of the label "black British," without necessarily entailing its rejection, has in fact characterized the contested terrain of multiculturalism in the last two decades. Kept as a site of struggle over blackness, the term has often been used as a provisional and contested category, subject to interrogation and open to critique. However, this openness to debate and willingness to discuss is exactly what seems to be lacking in Kwame Dawes's most recent

anthology, *Red*: *Contemporary Black British Poetry*. The editor, a poet, novelist, playwright and critic, whose work also includes the collection *Wheel and Come Again: An Anthology of Reggae Poetry*, feels that at this stage there is no need for works that strive to define black Britishness "as an ethnicity" (17). Regardless of the debate that has flourished in the past few years on *Wasafiri* (17: 2002) and elsewhere, reviving the by now famous "Reinventing Britain Forum" (14: 1999), Dawes does not bother to offer his critical stance on the subject. Dismissing any attempt to engage critically with the term and its cultural and social history, the editor acknowledges in his Introduction that "black British" is a category constantly subject to change, but takes no pains to rediscuss it. On the contrary, he claims that, as the term "was enough of a defining factor," the poets were simply asked to confront the suggested theme. Therefore, in Dawes's words, "[i]f a poet felt comfortable with the label 'Black British', then he or she was welcome to submit work to the anthology." (19) However, Dawes's use of the umbrella term is unconvincing when it avoids tackling the question of definition.

Published by Peepal Tree Press, the leading publisher of Caribbean and black British Literature based in Leeds, *Red* is part of a tradition of poetry anthologies published in Great Britain seeking to define a black British canon. Yet, being the first anthology of contemporary black British poetry in ten years, since Lemn Sissay's groundbreaking *The Fire People* (1998) and Courttia Newland's and Kadija Sesay's *IC3* (*The Penguin Book of New Black Writing in England*, 2000), *Red* boasts the right of being "an anthology that is less about defining Black British identity or announcing its presence and credibility in the literary world, and [is] simply about reminding readers that as poets, Black British poets are ultimately interested in the word and in the joy and challenge of making images and finding music through language." (20) This assertive claim foregrounds nonetheless a sort of liberating attitude, a provocative gesture freeing poetry and literature at large from the constraints of limiting labels and definitions. In fact, the anthology has no defining criteria, let alone that of nationality or language – the opening poem by Abdullahi Botaan Hassan "Kurweyne" is a translation from Somali by Martin Orwin. In this light, the choice of opening up the category across national and linguistic boundaries undoubtedly complies with a transnational approach which explodes national boundaries and complicates issues of national belonging. The collection includes remarkable work by award-winning authors and young, lesser known poets from Dawes's Afro Poetry School; "page poets" and spoken word artists, and poets thriving on the border between the two, like Patience Agbabi. In fact, poets as diverse as Linton Kwesi Johnson, Grace Nichols, Jackie Kay and Moniza Alvi, from a Caribbean, African, South-Asian background who evidently "felt comfortable" with the Black British label, all submitted to Dawes their "meditations on red", to quote from a poem by Jamaican author Olive Senior. For all its unevenness (the collection includes well-known poems together with unpublished or recently published work), *Red* presents a wide range of explorations of the subject

theme, from conventional associations with blood, violence, passion, and sexuality, to more unpredictable interpretations.

The anthology is divided into six sections, each introduced by quotations on red ranging from Bob Marley to Oscar Wilde, from Ramayana to a somewhat unexpected Gwyneth Paltrow, while the poems are simply arranged by alphabetical order. Red is often the signifier of life experiences, associated with menstrual blood, giving birth or children's questions to their fathers (as in Mir Mahfuz Ali's "Dad, Why are Roses Red?"). Red evokes troubled parental connections, as in Jackie Kay's moving blues, "The Red Graveyard", and complicates blood ties through colour-blind visions, as in Patience Agbabi's "Seeing Red". However, red is also the colour of childhood memories in another country, or of an imagined past recreated through borrowed stories. The wound of displacement and the comfort of belonging are equally conveyed by images of hibiscuses and flamboyant trees, while for Imtiaz Dharker it is the pomegranate that "always reminded me / that somewhere I had another home" ("How to cut a pomegranate", 63).

The reflections on red alternate personal and collective memory. Politically engaged poems are represented in the anthology, which includes John Agard's reflections on blood leaving "its print on history's purest page" ("Sonnet #13"), and Linton Kwesi Johnson's 1974 "Five Nights of Bleeding", recording the madness of the racial violence of that tense social and historical period of British life. Red is also the colour of contemporary conflicts, as in Bernardine Evaristo's "Revenge" on the seeds of revenge sowed after 9/11 (76-84), a poem which is in a sort of dialogue with Patricia Foster's "Red Hibiscus," depicting another British soldier "scattered across an Iraqi field / like pollen from the head of a red hibiscus" (87).

The Standard English dominating the anthology is at times 'disturbed' by poems written entirely in Jamaican English, as in Jean Hall's "Grandma Clarice Red Doorstep", or in Khadijah Ibrahim's "When My Time Come". In both cases, language resonates with the memory of ancestral wisdom or a mother's funeral instructions to a daughter, asking that her ashes be spread across the Thames so as to "mek de wave tek / mi back to which part mi did come from" (100), while Trinidadian-born Roi Kwabena uses creole in "Sure, Reds" to convey his political reflections on the country. In Dorothea Smartt's "Red Mudder," creole weaves memories of the poet's father as "a young fella 'bout Bridgetown in 1933" (210) as the poet learns of the passing of the repository of that memory, her father's first wife. Moreover, poems are often inhabited by untranslated words and expressions from Caribbean and South-Asian cultures, and the notes at the end of the volume provide the reader with information about those French patois words, Punjabi terms, Hindu festivals, or West African poets that coexist in the anthology, testifying to the cultural diversity of its contributions.

The richness of the authors' approaches in this fertile and inventive production inflects red in all its hues, from scarlet to vermilion and crimson, from anger, loneliness, and pain to sensual love and belonging. While some of the poems overtly address the experience of migration, racial tensions or memories of a colonial past,

others comfortably confront the proposed theme of the anthology without feeling the burden of representation, the pressure of speaking for their community. In his choice to refuse engagement with the term "black British", provocatively dismissing the importance of defining or questioning it, Dawes seems to miss a chance to contribute to and expand the debate on its future directions in the twenty-first century. However, by leaving the borders of this category flexible and porous, the anthology leaves both the poets and their readers free to grapple on their own with the meaning of black Britishness, negotiating a "black British identity" which can still be identified with a cultural politics committed to resisting and challenging dominant systems of representation, as Stuart Hall had suggested for the eighties. Claiming their space of representation, the contributors seem to reshape and revise that space from a variety of perspectives and overlapping territories, eluding the constraints of internalized categories about race and identity, and implicitly calling for a more radical challenging of the "black British" label.

Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People* (New York, London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010) pp. 496, ISBN-10: 0393049345, ISBN-13: 978-0393049343, $27.95

Reviewed by **Marie-Hélène Laforest**

In her Introduction to *The History of White People*, Nell Irvin Painter, Professor Emerita Princeton University, writes that she "might have entitled her book *Constructions of White Americans from Antiquity to the Present*. It is a pity she did not, for with the current title, the volume inevitably falls short of one's expectations. *The History of White People* is therefore not a universal history of white people, but one about the construction of whiteness and racial categories in the United States. Although addressed to a wide readership, the book is deeply researched and Painter makes it a point of citing solely primary sources, even as she sets up the context in which race theorists operated, their education, their lack of formal training in some cases, and the wilful diffusion of some 'race' texts to the detriment of others.

The book is a superb synthesis of the most fallacious theories which racists have used in the U.S. to buttress social inequality. Painter starts with the Greeks to point to the historic sources intellectuals have used to justify White Anglo-Saxon Protestant supremacy. Thus the reference to antiquity in her would-be title is far from anachronistic.

Painter proceeds chronologically. She lingers on Herodotus to prove that white people too have been slaves (the word itself deriving from Slav), including the English. Why would they sing "Rule, Britannia! rule the waves: Britons never will be slaves" were it not their own memory of enslavement?

A light-handed irony traverses many pages of the book. The legendary beauty of Circassian, Caucasian, and Georgian women, which will become iconic and provide such great inspirational force in nineteenth century painting, cannot be confuted since no pictures exist of them, Painter writes (77). At the same time, she reminds readers that "Current iconography of the Caucasus shows bombed-out cities and oil rigs" (4), and that the term Caucasian (so proudly donned in the United States) rings differently in Russia, where it describes Chechnyan "terrorists" and is a synonym of Black. No less ironic is her description of the celebrated figure of the odalisque, which derived from the profitable commerce of white slave women with the Turks. Drawn from Sir John Chardin's travel accounts, his references to these women's "bodily stench" and "vileness" (45-48) are obviously disregarded.

Her subject matter certainly lends itself to wry humor since so many preposterous claims surround the construction of whiteness and blackness. From Pliny the elder to Medieval Europe, fantastic tales of peoples abounded and myths and legends and travelogues produced narratives of monstrous beings outside of Europe's frontiers. In Africa, in particular, it was believed that there were people without noses, with eyes in their breasts, and ruled by dogs.

Many ancient texts, like Pliny's *Natural History*, eventually lost credence, but other works of antiquity continued to be quoted well into the eighteenth century, when the era of scientific racism began. From Painter's analysis of Julius Caesar's *De bellum gallico* (54 BCE) and of Tacitus's writings (98 CE), the difficulty of drawing clear lines of demarcation between peoples already emerged. In antiquity differences between peoples were ascribed to climate, geography, and culture; with the eighteenth century the cards are laid on the table and an actual racial ideology was constructed. It is the time when the taxonomy of plants and animals led to that of human beings through the work of Linnaeus. The Swede linked appearance to temperament and forged a scale in which people who looked like him were irremediably placed on top. But the quagmire of races will only worsen with pseudo-scientific fields of study like phrenology (skull measurements) and early anthropology.

Painter's insistence on the eighteenth and nineteenth century serves her purpose to bring the history of race on U.S. soil. Burgeoning European racial thoughts were picked up by Ralph Waldo Emerson – influenced by his friend, Thomas Carlyle – and diffused by him, allowing them to gain immediate currency in the country. Still, Emerson is revered as "the embodiment of the American renaissance, but not, though he also should, as the philosopher king of American white race theory" (151), Painter affirms.

The search for influence on U.S. thinkers also explains why some European theorists are explored at greater length than others. Johann Friedrich Blumenbach's impact in the U.S. was particularly significant. In 1795 he "introduced aesthetic judgments into classification" (79) and linked the term 'Caucasian' "firmly to beauty". To current American sensibility, it may appear odd that North Africans and Indians were part of the Caucasian family, while Russians and Lapps proved difficult to classify for the pseudo-scientists of the era.

In the U.S., white superiority garnered strength by claiming Anglo-Saxons as the forefathers of the nation. Thus WASPs, it was claimed, had "immutable Teutonic traits". Unearthing Caesar's vision of the *Germani* and interpreting it as referring to absolute characteristics, U.S. whites were able to see themselves as members of a valiant and pure race. As Painter writes, what Caesar saw as "manifestations of conquest and commerce" was transformed into "inherent racial difference". Later, under the spell of German Romanticism coupled with the beauty ideal of blond, blue-eyed women, a narrative which aimed at defining who could be counted as American was produced.

Racial lines, however, were far from being stable. They shifted as whiteness faced new challenges in the nineteenth century. At different historical conjunctions, the Irish (one can recall the memorable title of Noel Ignatiev's book, *How the Irish Became White*, 1995), and Southern and Eastern Europeans became incorporated into whiteness. Thus Painter solidly makes her point that contradictions abound in race discourses. With a foray into current demographics in the United States, she points to the designation of Latino/a in U.S. censuses, a linguistic classification,

which stands alongside ethnic forms of identification. Not unlike what had happened with the construction of Aryans or Indo-Europeans by way of linguistic criteria in the eighteenth century.

Identity constructions involve erasures, distortions, stereotyping and scapegoating. Juggling through race discourses, Painter presents evidence of each of these practices in the book. In the past, the binary equation which linked whiteness to freedom and blackness to slavery left unfree whites out of the story. Still, in the British colonies 400,000 white immigrants arrived as unfree laborers and an additional 50,000 were convicts (42). Thomas Jefferson, she writes, "ma[de] English people 'our ancestors' and the creators of the Magna Carta 'our Saxon ancestors'" (111). Of Jefferson's inconsistencies, Annette Gordon-Reed has given ample evidence in her magnificent book, *The Hemingses of Monticello* (2008); here Painter reveals his fallacious thought process in constructing early America's genealogy.

As her narrative continues discriminatory practices as a result of race thinking are deployed. Even Ulysses Grant, a decade before the Presidency, complained of "his lack of 'privileges' compared with German job seekers who seemed to have all the luck" (149). As readers will discover, many roads in the history of race lead back to Germany.

Nell Painter's account becomes more engaging when she discusses the mid 1800s and the early decades of the twentieth century. Bigotry against Catholics and Jews, Irish and Italians are known facts, but here she provides evidence, for instance, of the Irish ability "to use the American color line to elevate white – no matter how wretched – over black", as when in the mid-1840's Irish American organizations actively opposed abolition with their votes and their fists" (143).

The book is a minefield of information on the 'racial' theories and practices which developed in the U.S. under the pressure of immigration. From the development of polygenesis and eugenics to the use of cephalic indices and intelligence tests, to the descriptions of 'degenerate families' and sterilization practices, the muddied story of race is displayed through Painter's remarkable scholarship. If Francis Galton's name is most readily associated with eugenics, Painter calls American Madison Grant the "eugenics mogul"(327).

Still, despite the considerable influence of men like him, "multiple enlargements" of whiteness occurred, albeit always "against a backdrop of the black/white dichotomy" (201).

At the end of the nineteenth century, major universities entered the racial debates, sometimes as protagonists. Edward A. Ross, founder of sociology in U.S. universities, coined the expression "race suicide" picked up by Theodore Roosevelt to exhort the "better classes" to reproduce in large numbers to counteract the negative impact of poor whites and immigrant workers (250). Frantz Boas, known for his liberal views still upheld an 'us'/'them' division along ethnic lines. A fact which emerged clearly in the pages Alice Gambrell (1997) has dedicated to Boas's relationship with Zora Neale Hurston.

With Ruth Benedict's *Race: Science and Politics* (1940) new views on race became popular. This heralds what Painter calls the fourth enlargement of the concept of Americans, happening not least as a result of the U.S. having to distinguish itself from the racial politics of Nazi Germany.

As Painter enters the twentieth century, her work begins to take greater account of popular culture and a few literary texts, like *The Great Gatsby,* make their appearance. However, she remains linked to a historiographic tradition which has apparently not found cultural studies or postcolonial approaches useful. The latter have suggested, for instance, we should look at theories of race as "covert theories of desire" (Robert J. C. Young, *Colonial Desire. Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*, London, New York, Routledge, 1995; 2002, 9) .

The axioms with which Painter begins the book are well served throughout as she proves firstly that race is an idea, not a fact (ix); secondly, that whiteness is a fluid concept configured differently at different times in U.S. history; thirdly, that geneticists in the twentieth century have denied the existence of 'races' and demonstrated the reality of only one 'human race'.

"On the Non-Existence of Human Races" by physical anthropologist Frank Livingstone appeared in 1962 (*Current Antrhopology*, 3.3, June 1962). Yet almost fifty years later, many still do not believe that race is a social and political construct, that conquests, trade, and migrations have made us all multiracial, that skin pigmentation is not linked to temperament or intelligence and that it can change fairly quickly. Painter's book is addressed to them and to all those who are still baffled by the unique forms racism has taken in the United States. The "peculiar institution" certainly created a peculiar people, still obsessed today, perhaps not with the one drop rule, but with race and percentage of bloodlines. Luckily, this is not true of all white nations.

Despite its merits, *The History of White People* does not seem to be the definitive book on the history of whiteness which the title evokes. One would have liked to see, for instance, more about the role of the Church and Christian iconography in racial constructions. Still, even those cognizant of the general outline of the history of whiteness in the U.S. will find in Painter's book an array of facts and gain new insights into American identity formation.

Kaha Mohamed Aden, *Fra-intendimenti* (Roma: Nottetempo, 2010), 144 pp., ISBN 978-88-7452-232-3, 13 euro

Reviewed by **Alessandra Marino**

Fra-intendimenti is Kaha Mohamed Aden's first, brilliant collection of short stories. For this young Italian and Somali author, who lives in Pavia and works as an intercultural mediator, writing is both triggered by autobiography and rooted in the experience of connecting cultures and migrant communities through the task of translation. With its very title, *Fra-intendimenti* introduces the central theme of the precariousness of intercultural communication as a border practice. The deconstruction of the Italian word *fraintendimenti*, literally meaning "misunderstandings", refers both to the migrants' condition of living in-between (*fra*) languages and discourses (*intendimenti*), and to the risk of failure that is embedded in the exercise of cultural negotiation.

Aden engages complex and delicate political themes in captivating, fluid prose: "Nonno Y. e il colore degli alleati" and "1982: fuga da casa" dig out the history of Italian colonialism and relate it to the post-colonial clan wars in Somalia; the condition of the African state, shattered in pieces and continuously put together again – recollected – like a puzzle according to contingent political needs (50), is staged in "La casa con l'albero". "Eeddo Maryan", "Nadia" and "Xuseyn, Suleyman e Loro", among other stories, depict fragments of migrants' lives in the Mediterranean peninsula, sometimes presenting controversial characters like the housekeeper Nadia, who considers lying a liberating force, freeing her from her patronizing white and liberal employer; "Che ore sono?" and "Un te' serio bollente" discuss the language of inclusion and racism and provocatively question the vocabulary connecting migration with illegality. These and other stories in the collection openly address the issue of colour, or 'the fact of blackness' to borrow Frantz Fanon's famous title, and its intersection with gender in a growing multicultural Southern European country influenced by the xenophobia of the Northern League.

Placing colonialism, migration and racism at the heart of her literary production, Aden's book further expands a network of publications constituted by the works of Italian authors of African origin, such as Cristina Ali-Farah's *Madre Piccola* (Frassinelli, 2007), Igiaba Scego's *Oltre Babilonia* (Donzelli, 2008) and Gabriella Ghermandi's *Regina di fiori e di perle* (Donzelli, 2007), among others. These postcolonial Italian writings' engagements with such urgent political issues have a significant impact on the contemporary literary canon and, more importantly, question the common understanding of what the national tradition, and Italianness itself, can be.

Employing the theoretical framework provided by Engin Isin and Greg Nielsen's *Acts of Citizenship* (London and New York: Zed Books, 2008), I suggest that Aden's

writing may be looked at as an act of citizenship, for it intervenes and tries to actively modify dominant discourses on nationality and belonging.

Nielsen and Isin explain that rather than being merely a document or a definite status, citizenship can be seen as a practice whose *enactment* questions its construction as a biopolitical device, linking bodies to territory, and its foundation in the law of blood. An example of the disruptive and transformative acts the book takes into consideration is the Montgomery boycott initiated by Rosa Parks; an act ignited by a single subject that triggered a radical revision of rights. Actors putting citizenship on trial exercise their political subjectivity by calling into question the monolithism of juridical language, thereby opening a way to future possible articulations of a form of "citizenship to come".

Conceiving an act of writing as an 'act of citizenship' means to underline the political and imaginative potential that literature can mobilize and how it intervenes, if it does, in the redefinition of a resistance to the logic of state inclusion. Aden's stories, containing an open call for a restructuring of social relations, may implicitly provide a key to answer these questions. On the one hand, her constant call for allies, as in the title of the second short story "il colore degli alleati"("the colour of allies"), aims at challenging the foundation and reproduction of the community on the law of blood and on the 'naturality' of birth. On the other, the liquid genealogy of feelings and emotions that emerges from her writing is already a step beyond the orthodoxy of binary and heteronormative parental relations and an opposition to the fixity of the language of law and belonging.

Analysing in detail the prologue of the book can help exemplify the affective process Aden's writing initiates. *Fra-intendimenti* begins with the author's "self-portrait": a choral introduction in which Kaha presents herself through three grandmothers. Disrupting the normativity of nuclear family ties, the women accompanying Kaha beyond the threshold of the book are not two, but three. Suuban embodies autonomy: she prefers to face exile in the desert rather than living in the shadow of her son; Xaawa is an activist for women's right to vote and her life teaches rebellion and disobedience; Xalima symbolizes care, because her double role includes both taking care of her children and nourishing hope for independence.

Since the forties, Xaliima's house was the place where children used to receive their education, but her household was also the site "where one could *absorb* the language of independence" since it was here that the liberation movement used to meet. In this matriarchal house, "full of mystery and filled with relations" (7), independence could be absorbed like an affect transmitted in the air. The affect of freedom was the primary material to be handled and the basis for the construction of a network of relations enabling political activities with a highly transformative purpose.

Relationality is one of the key elements highlighted in the theorization of the acts of citizenship: by challenging normative ideas of identity and the "exclusiveness" of belonging to the state, acts mobilize other subjects. The affective power of the

language of liberation constituting the foundation of the author's education becomes the means, in *Fra-intendimenti*, to initiate new links via other words and via the Italian idiom.

The relation with and through words immediately comes into play with the introduction of the granny-teacher Xaliima, whose motto had to do with remembering to keep words "well composed" (it. *ben composte*). In its double connotation, the adjective 'composed' seems to suggest that words should always properly appear in their place, without any grammar mistakes; but the expression also evokes a different dimension: single words create new meanings when they are joined together in new structures.

Fra-intendimenti is the result of this configuration of different words, idioms and life, putting to work an affective dimension. Aden's 'composed words' reveal the opacity of the translation of conversations and tales, including expressions in the Somali language or literal translations of idiomatic phrases into Italian (as in the case of the phrase 'opening a dream', 65). Such a creative use of the language originates narratives that, while constructing imaginary communities or communities of the mind, also destroy their monolithic status.

Even though the book opens by linking the affect of independence to words, the author moves on to propose her own writing be considered the basis for new creative political production. If the social dimension is animated by an affective production that redefines the formation of subjectivity and stimulates the emergence of agency, narrations can undoubtedly intervene in this process. The performativity of literature can stimulate a desire to oppose the repetition of normative discourses and creating newness.

Aden's short stories do not just speak about bodies; they speak *to* the bodies, triggering the propagation of what Clotilde Barbarulli, in an essay on migrant literature entitled "Parole, corpi e passaggi nell'in-finito arazzo urbano", labels as "corporeal feelings" that resist any attempt at dematerialization. The power of the body lies in its capacity to be a figure of desire and, consequently, in its ability to make projects (*Il Sorriso dello Stregatto: Figurazioni di genere e intercultura*, Pisa: Ets, 2010,134). Desire and project are central to *Fra-intendimenti*, as they constitute the interconnection between affective production and political praxis.

The productive force of Aden's texts shapes images of the Italian society that do not appear in every day media reports. Her writing questions the state of collective memory and challenges the aggressive language of news and politics, often assimilating migration to criminal offence. Her resistance takes place by enacting the disruption of an Italian identity constructed on the amnesia of colonialism and by presenting concealed images of the postcolonial state.

It is also important to notice that the publication of this book comes at a time of crisis and in a context in which the language of politics is unable to respond to instances of representation for second generation Italians, migrants and so-called *clandestini* (illegal immigrants), whose exploited black labour significantly sustains the national economy. After the revolt in Rosarno and migrants' strikes on March

1st, social acts and writing intertwine in the common request for rethinking participation in the public sphere.

Aden's writing shapes what Liana Borghi in her introduction to *Il sorriso dello Stregatto* ("The Cheshire Cat smile") calls "affective citizenship" (Pisa: Ets, 2010, 12): the creation of a relation with alterity that cannot simply be reduced to the binary logic of inclusion/exclusion. Aden translates Borghi's expression into "elective citizenship" and represents it as the "house of emotions" where her three grannies live together (10). The creation of this house, which at the same time is a desire and an antidote against the aggressiveness of the state's exclusiveness, is a political project. It performs a possible drive away from the law of blood defining her double belonging: her Somali citizenship, drenched in the blood of clan wars, and her Italian citizenship, rooted in the violence of colonialism and in the assumed 'naturality' of filiation reproducing nationality.

The Spirit Machine and other new short stories from Cameroon, ed. by Emma Dawson (Nottingham: Critical Cultural and Communications Press, 2009), pp. 142. ISBN 978 1 905510 21 4 (UK), 978 1 60271 018 4 (USA). £9.99, $16, ¤12.

Daughters of Eve and other new short stories from Nigeria, ed. by Emma Dawson (Nottingham: Critical Cultural and Communications Press, 2010), pp. 171. ISBN 978 1 905510 27 6 (UK), 978 1 60271 023 6 (USA). £9.99, $16, ¤12.

Butterfly Dreams and other new short stories from Uganda, ed. by Emma Dawson (Nottingham: Critical Cultural and Communications Press, 2010), pp. 136. ISBN 978 1 905510 30 6 (UK), 978 1 60271 927 6 (USA). £9.99, $16, ¤12.

Man of the House and other new short stories from Kenya, ed. by Emma Dawson (Nottingham: Critical Cultural and Communications Press, 2011), pp. 253. ISBN 978 1 905510 32 0 (UK), 978 1 60271 029 0 (USA). £12.99, $20, ¤15.

Reviewed by **Jane Wilkinson**

New writing in English, or, more specifically, "new world Englishes fiction" is featured in four recent anthologies of short stories from Cameroon, Nigeria, Uganda and Kenya. Emma Dawson, the editor, is specialized in the teaching of World Englishes literature in schools in England and the series is probably designed for educational use, while still undoubtedly likely to appeal to other readers.

All four anthologies follow the same format as they are part of a single project aimed at finding, researching and publishing new and relatively unknown authors from different countries (although not all the writers are "new" or "unknown" within their own country). A call for short stories is made to writers, writing groups, universities and other organizations in the country addressed. Before selecting and accepting the stories submitted, the editor undertakes a journey to the country. Here she performs an act "of 'listening'", recording testimonies, gathering information from "those who know" – writers, readers, teachers, critics, those "who are writing the literature *now*", making new contacts and carrying out research into the history of the country and its culture, criticism and literary events. The call for submissions is then re-opened for a brief period and a final selection is made for publication.

A single format is also used within the anthologies: a map of the country; a general editor's preface illustrating the project; personalized acknowledgements followed by an identical closing formula; an introduction whose first section, "Defining 'World Englishes Literature', shared by all four anthologies, consists in an overview of the definitions: John Talbot Platt, Heidi Weber and Mian Lian Ho's model of "New English" (1984), Jennifer Jenkins's "World Englishes", "first" and "second" diasporas and "English as a lingua franca" (2006), and Braj B. Kachru's 1982 model of "World Englishes" and of "Inner, Outer and Expanding circles". The definitions are also examined more specifically in their relation to postcolonial literatures. The section closes with an invitation to move beyond the tendency to view Anglophone writers in relation to their colonial past, which the editor believes to be the prevalent inflection in previous discussions, exploring the "many other avenues for discussion and appreciation of this enormous body of writing." (13). The second and third sections of the introduction – "World English Literatures in Cameroon [/Nigeria/ Uganda/ Kenya]" and "Write There, Write Now" (or "Write Here, Write Now", which is used, curiously, only in the case of the Ugandan anthology) – are specific to each volume. After providing a summary of the development of literature in the country addressed, the editor devotes a couple of pages to very brief accounts of the stories included, ending with a list of references which however only includes bibliographical details for the works quoted, not those referred to and at times discussed.

The stories themselves are followed by biographical notes and a photograph of each of the contributors. Several of the authors have already published some of their work, although not all the biosketches include indications as to the publishers or even the country of publication. One imagines they are local, but it would have been interesting to have more information – also in order to facilitate access to other work by the same authors. The publishing scene in the different countries is briefly addressed in the "World Literatures in X" part of the introduction, but more information relating to the individual authors would have provided a useful integration. The high quality of their writing is also a confirmation of the importance of local as against foreign publishing for the development of the countries' literature, despite the very considerable difficulties encountered by local presses.

The writers appear to belong to quite different age groups – several are young, some very young, others were born half a century ago – and they range from presidents of the local Writers' Associations to students and others who are publishing for the first time but show considerable talent. Although men outnumber women in three of the anthologies (only one woman writer figures among the Nigerian authors), the Uganda collection boasts five women writers as against three men. FEMRITE, the association of women writers in Uganda, founded in 1995, is clearly a dynamic, stimulating presence in the country, playing a role among the female authors or would-be authors similar to that of the Kwani Trust for writers in general in Kenya. Many of the stories, whether their authors are women or men, deal with questions of gender and sexual orientation, several with the world

of the internet, emailing and social networks, reminding us, incidentally, of the liveliness of African writers' blogs and websites, whether in Africa or in the diaspora, where so much of the new writing circulates. The quality and interest of the stories varies, but this reader at least found all of them original and well worth reading. The impression from all four anthologies is of an extremely lively, varied and promising literary environment, contradicting the fairly widespread opinion that the best African authors are now to be found outside Africa.

While the introduction to the literature previously produced in each of the countries is too brief to allow much comparison with "what is being written *now*" (although, especially in the case of the Ugandan, Cameroonian and in part the Kenyan anthologies, of considerable interest in its indication of the organizations and institutions that promote new writing), the impression is indeed one of novelty. Even where, as in Ba'bila Mutia's "The Spirit Machine" and Oscar Chenyi Labang's "The Visit" (Cameroon), or Ikeogu Oke's "The Discovery" and Alpha Emeka's "Haunted House" (Nigeria), or Ismael M. Akango ADD's "A Night in Hell" (Kenya), 'traditional' figures, beliefs and practices return, the perspective is new and they are usually inserted in a contemporary environment, whether urban or rural (a partial exception, from Cameroon, is Job Fongho Tende's "The Lost Art", set however not in the past but in the future: 2150 and 2153 A.D., and telling the story of a sculptor of religious statues, descended from a lineage of Bantu craftsmen, caught in the conflict between church and state). One is reminded of the work of Okot p'Bitek and, particularly, of Taban lo Liyong's transmutations of traditional stories and his invitation to writers "to take off from where the anthropologists have stopped", using the traditions "as part and parcel of our contemporary contentions and controversies", in his introduction to *Eating Chiefs* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1970, x).

A strong element of suspense is present in numbers of stories. The anthologies tell generally of considerable economic hardship; episodes of violence and sexual abuse; a high incidence of mortality and disease – several stories touch on the HIV/AIDS pandemic, notably John Nkemngong Nkengasong's "Kakamba" (Cameroon) and Muthoni Garland's "Kissing Gordo" (Kenya); others present the traumas suffered by child soldiers and their families (as in Ugandan Beatrice Lamaka's impressively beautiful and moving "Butterfly Dreams" and in the memories that haunt the nightmares of Kenyan Alison O. Owuor's protagonist in "Screaming Thunder"); corruption in high – and low – places (a topic present in nearly all the stories) and the closely related theme of abuse of power positions in ministries and universities: several of the protagonists are university professors or work at the university – one of the characters who struck me most with her tenacity and humour was Mimmie, secretary to a depressed professor of lexicology in Mbuh Mbuh Tennu's "The Betrayal", Cameroon; while another of the Cameroon stories, Eunice Ngongkum's "A Lie Has A Short Life", tells of student protests.

Although pessimism abounds in the protagonists of most of the stories, there are also ample examples of courage, generosity, resilience and humour. Some stories

(Ugandan Yusuf Serunkuma, "The Naked Excellencies", or Kenyan Lloyd Igane's "Shaba Park", for example) are given a sharply ironical or satirical twist, reminiscent in some ways of Ngũgĩ's representations of Kenyan leaders in *Devil on the Cross* (1980/1982), or of Ahmadou Kouroumah's *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages* (1999). Others are love stories, usually tragic tales of the absence or failure of love, sometimes within a couple, sometimes within a family; many involve the condition of women or of the ill and the disabled (see for example Ugandan Violet Barungi's tragic "Impenetrable Barriers" and the presence or fear of AIDS that circulates in all four volumes).

Contrary to what one might have expected, given the linguistic orientation of the introductions, language varieties and registers and interlinguistic relations do not appear in many of the stories, although many include untranslated words and even phrases from the local languages or lingua francas. The prevaricating imperium of French – both standard and non – in officially bilingual Cameroon is amusingly foregrounded in Tennu's "The Betrayal". The editor has obviously and to my mind rightly given precedence to the literary quality and interest of the stories included.

The rush to get the anthologies into press in order for the stories still to be new and unknown is probably responsible for the number of typos in some of the stories and even introductions – the Kenyan introduction, for example, misspells the names of Samuel Kahiga and David Maillu and curiously sees Jomo Kenyatta's *Facing Mount Kenya* (London: Martin Secker and Warburg, 1938) as one of the "1960s ethnographic and anthropological works" (18), rather than as one of the ethnographic and anthropological works that circulated widely in this period. Certainly Secker and Warburg's reprints in the forties and fifties, the new edition of the book by Mercury in 1965 and especially its inclusion in Heinemann's African Writers Series in 1979 contributed to its fame and allowed easier access to it by writers as well as readers, but this kind of error, particularly in volumes that will be used in schools and universities, tends to be recycled. More seriously, several of the stories deserved and needed far more careful copy editing and proof reading. But, again, it was of the utmost importance to publish the collections as quickly as possible and it should be possible to make further corrections in later editions.

The project is excellent and has supplied all those interested in the present – and future – of African writing with some fascinating reading and the desire for more. Only the limitations of space and time prevent me from giving way to the temptation to comment on all the stories included in the anthologies; the presence or absence of references in this review, aimed at giving a very general idea of the topics and issues to be found in them, is in no way indicative of a scale of value or even personal preference, as future readers will hopefully be able to discover for themselves.

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Emma Dawson, ed., *The Spirit Machine and other new short stories from Cameroon* (Nottingham: Critical Cultural and Communications Press, 2009), pp. 142, ISBN 978 1 905510 21 4 (UK), 978 1 60271 018 4 (USA). £ 9.99, $16, euro 12,00.

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