Special Issue: Eastern African Literary and Intellectual Landscapes

Editorial

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Some of the articles included in this special issue of *Postcolonial Text* are revised versions of papers initially presented at a conference on "Eastern African Literary and Intellectual Landscapes," convened at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, on 22-24 October 2009.[1] An additional set of contributions owe to the efforts of Chris Wanjala, who initially called for papers for a special edition on East African literatures that was to have been published in *Postcolonial Text*.

The aim of the "Eastern African Literary and Intellectual Landscapes" conference was to bring together scholars of East African literatures and cultures to forge a deeper understanding of past and contemporary intellectual traditions in Eastern Africa. At one level, it sought to assemble scholarship with an archival focus and at another level to reflect critically on the state of production and consumption of Eastern African cultures. In the initial two decades of Eastern African political independence from colonial rule—that is the 1960s and 70s—the region's intellectuals played an important role in shaping the debates about the decolonization project, especially in regard to the vexed question of culture. Eastern African universities and intellectuals were indeed central in setting the tone of a number of seminal debates that emerged in the immediate aftermath of political independence in Africa and the global South more generally, and yet there remains a major silence in the sociology of knowledge production in Eastern Africa. If this critical inactivity could in the 1960s be attributed to limited literary production in the region, this is no longer the case. In the last two decades in particular, East Africa has witnessed a major flowering of creative talent and creative works which not only reveal depth of craft but also invite critical attention in order to understand the complex nature of contemporary social processes and the contests about the region's pasts. My hope is that the articles collected in this special issue will shed light on some of the region's distinctive contributions to African and global literary traditions, while also introducing texts that are not well known beyond Eastern Africa to a wider readership.

[1] I wish to acknowledge and thank the convenors of the conference: James Ogude, Grace Musila and Dina Ligaga.

Tom Michael Mboya's article on the *benga* music of Okatch Biggy, the bandleader who died in 1997 after dominating the music scene in the Luo-speaking region of western Kenya and beyond for much of that decade, draws attention to the ways in which the long history of political repression in the post-independence era came to shape the artist's response to the HIV/AIDS pandemic in Kenya. In a charged context in which the claims of ethnocratic political elites were supported by stereotypes about ethnic 'others,' battles for the capturing of the state were collapsed with issues of culture, morality and disease. Ethnicized bodies, of which the music of Biggy had a lot to say, became sites in which political and cultural contests could be fought. According to Mboya, Biggy's celebration of sex in a time of HIV/AIDS speaks about the artist's own personal dilemmas in the wake of rumours that he had HIV/AIDS, and also of the tricky exercise of affirming life in a time of death. But even more importantly, according to Mboya, the epicurean streak in Biggy's oeuvre points to a broader Luo denial of the disease, a denial occasioned by the moralistic postures of Kenyan public discourse and the ethnocratic character of the Kenyan state, which make the public performance of ethnic pride a compelling if also treacherous pursuit.

Marie Kruger's article explores similar issues of statecraft, identity and vulnerability through a reading of two notable East African women who each represent a generation of the region's writers: Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye, whose work has been published consistently since the 1960s, and Yvonne Adhiambo Owour, a younger author associated with the writers' collective that has had its work published in the edgy and avant-garde *Kwani?* literary magazine. Kruger's article brings two historical experiences, as represented in works by the two writers, into a productive conversation that links the Rwanda genocide, the long history of Jewish persecution in Europe and British settler colonialism in Kenya. She uses Owuor's prize-winning short story "Weight of Whispers," which considers the plight of an elite Rwandese family seeking refuge in Kenya, and Macgoye's *A Farm Called Kishinev*, which is an imaginative portrayal of what may have happened had Britain succeeded in effecting its proposal in the early 20th century to establish a Jewish colony in East Africa, to reflect on the exclusionary practices of the modern nation-state. What happens when identities such as "Tutsi" or "Jewish" are mobilized to achieve political ends? What are the consequences of the senses of victimhood or privilege that are frequently attached to identities assigned to citizens by modern processes of identification and population control? Kruger's answers to these questions are manifold and also nuanced. Ethnic or racial national homes, which are supposed to resolve longstanding problems of victimization, can easily turn into prisons. So can victimhood, which may easily turn into privilege in an alternative historical site, as in the case of European Jews who could have made some claims to whiteness in the context of the racial politics of colonial Kenya. The rapid transmutation of the Tutsi family, the Kuseremanes, from a position of privilege in Rwanda, to a nondescript refugee identity in Kenya also draws

attention to the perils of the biopower of neo-colonial states—as can be seen in the distinctions such states make between privileged citizens and disenfranchised strangers—or as in Mboya's article, between the true owners of moral health and their unhygienic 'others.'

If Mboya and Kruger focus on how power acts on bodies in contexts of political repression, Benjamin Odhoji's article considers how the specific systems of thought subscribed to by speakers of the Luo language (Dholuo) are encoded in symbolisms of the human body which can be found everywhere in Luo popular culture and literature. Odhoji revisits an old argument famously advanced in the context of East African literary debates by the novelist Ngugi wa Thiong'o to the effect that languages are storehouses of traditions of thought which are never fully recuperable in translation.

Like Odhoji, Aurélie Journo approaches the terrain of popular culture from a linguistic perspective, reading what she calls "hip hop literature" in *Kwani?* magazine with a view to showing how young East Africans have carved out new spaces for cultural and literary production. The work of a new generation of Eastern African artists differs from that of their predecessors in two distinct ways. First, the new generation draws its patronage outside of universities such as Makerere and Nairobi, which in an earlier era were the places in which the region's literary figures were made. Second, by their insistence on multi-lingual texts, in line with the heterogeneous character of the language scene in the urban centres in which they tend to live, such young verbal artists have pushed back English, which was for an older generation tutored at Makerere and Nairobi universities the preferred medium for literary undertaking. The result of this unsettled experimentation, captured well in Journo's reading of Jambazi Fulani, is a new edifice of verbal culture that may yet confound the old refrain that East Africa is doomed to remain in a state of literary barrenness.

The inclusion in this special issue of Adrian Knapp's piece on Uwem Akpan's short story collection draws attention to the malleable boundaries of Eastern African literatures. Although Akpan is Nigerian, the majority of the stories in his collection are set in Eastern Africa, a region in which he has lived and travelled. In its pre-colonial history, East Africa was a point of convergence for many migrating groups of people from other regions in Africa and beyond. In contemporary times, many of its cities and even rural settlements have continued to receive people—refugees, expatriates, traders, students and others—from many parts of the world, as the articles by Kruger and Alison Toron no doubt show. Yet, these histories of migration and exchange are routinely written out by rigid institutions of national literature that singularly seek to assign cultural legitimacy to states fangled out in living memory. However, this problem of classification does not preoccupy Knapp, whose focus is on how children in Akpan's stories forge new kinds of affiliations and community in contexts where the old bonds of filiation come under the pressures of poverty, inter-communal discord and political repression. If the natural

bonds to biological kin (which Knapp names as “filiation”) fail to provide succour to young children in Akpan’s stories, such children actively seek out other interpersonal or inter-subjective forms of identification (affiliation). The new modes and codes of interpersonal interaction born of such new forms of community represent for Knapp a compelling ethical vision for how newness can be built on the ruins of an older, unsustainable cultural consensus. What distinguishes the work of children in Akpan, so Knapp avers, is their insistent improvisation on “the broken shards of adults’ dreams” (Lakeland, cited by Knapp in this volume).

Alison Toron’s article is about one of the most accomplished works of historical metafiction and detective fiction in East African writing: M.G. Vassanji’s *The Book of Secrets*. The article is impelled by a need to rethink the critical reading of this important work, on the grounds that one of its central themes, gender and power in the colonial scene, has largely been omitted by scholars who have worked on it. Erased in the memories of the characters in the text, in a context shaped by masculinities that are in turn shaped by race, religion and nationality, the young woman Mariamu who is so central to any credible understanding of the novel has further been relegated to the realm of “silence” and irrelevance by the critics of the novel. This problem is further compounded by the fact that Vassanji himself withholds a lot of information about Mariamu’s relations with her step-father, her husband and Alfred Corbin, the British colonial officer at the heart of the text. Toron performs an intricate dance, giving forceful reasons why Mariamu is indispensable to a politically responsible reading of the text, while also stating powerfully why her story must not fully be told, as Vassanji himself suggests. It is through her silence that Mariamu as a subaltern African/Indian woman finds agency. Toron invites us to a complex argument in which the withholding of secrets can, paradoxically, be liberating.

Gender is also the topic of Chris Wasike’s article on the Ugandan playwright and theatre practitioner, John Ruganda. The article reads Ruganda’s oeuvre from the 1970s with a view to showing how he deploys women in ways that seem similar to the “Mother Africa” trope of much of African writing by men. Though Ruganda feminizes the Ugandan nation, Wasike argues that this usage of the woman as a metaphor does not lead to the dead-end of patriarchy that so many critics of the “Mother Africa” trope have bemoaned. Rather, in Ruganda’s plays, so Wasike avers, the figure of the Ugandan nation as a troubled mother speaks eloquently of the masculinized Ugandan state under General Idi Amin’s military dictatorship, which is actively subverted through female agency. Wasike’s is an invitation to critics of African literatures to read, with a new set of lenses, one of the most prolific and influential dramatists in Eastern Africa.