

Africa: Moving the Boundaries

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“She is made of and coloured by the earth itself”: Motherhood and Nation in Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor’s *Dust*

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Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor identifies, ‘[t]he human body and person [as] the locus of [her] artistic quest’¹ and it is this focus on the body which drives her intimate portrait of Kenya’s independence struggle in her novel, *Dust*. Rather than engaging with the concerns of ‘diasporic identities [and] cultural otherness’², which so often form the preoccupations of the African literary diaspora, Owuor’s rendering of East Africa acknowledges the alterity experienced by Africans in their own lands, inhabiting peripheries within their home nations.

The novel is a sense memory, a synesthesia of bodies, emotions and landscapes, suffused in the sensation of *Uhuru* (freedom) indefinitely postponed. The opening vignette follows the final moments of a young, successful engineer turned criminal in disgust at the depths of corruption he encounters in Nairobi, Odidi Moses Ebwesit Oganda. Bleeding into the tarmac, fatally shot by police, Odidi hears his phone ring:

“Odidi savours the ringing.
It tastes of ordinary things.
Like presence.” (p. 13)³

As he lies dying, Odidi calls for his mother, *Akai-ma*, ...

[s]he wards off ghouls and bad night entities, wrestles God, cast ancient devils into hell before their time, and kicks aside sea waves so her son will pass unhindered.” (p. 11)

The life-force of Akai is a narrative lodestone, her actions and relationships shape the events of the novel. A great tragedy of *Dust*, is Akai’s inability to protect her family, in spite of her prodigious and elemental power. Akai Lokorijom is a woman whose initiation came at the moment of the protracted and painful birth of the Kenyan republic-

“while the colony tumbled into and out of its halfhearted local war, Akai bloomed. ... After she menstruated, the clan shunted her off to a secluded place to learn the ways of women ... Akai ran away before the sessions ended, and she sought her beloved stepfather: “Initiate me into manhood!”
He bellowed with laughter.
Akai laughed with him.
Her mother covered her mouth and thought Akai had been cursed.

¹ Speech at AFSAAP conference December 2016

² Githire, Njeri. 2010. “New Visions, New Voices.” *Transition*, no. 102: 182–88. doi:10.2979/trs.2010-.102.182. p. 187.

³ Owuor, Yvonne Adhiambo. 2013. *Dust*. 1st ed. London, United Kingdom: Kwani?, p. 13
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“You have shamed me.”
Akai twisted her nose. “How?”” (p. 237)

Akai’s refusal to fulfill the initiate obligations of her gender as a Turkana woman reminds students of Kenyan history of the struggles in Kikuyuland between the Kikuyu community and the British missionary campaign to end female circumcision, the so-called “Female Circumcision Controversy” of the early 1920s.

In the face of the erosion of traditional forms of tribal authority, the alienation of lands, the establishment of “native reserves”, and restrictive taxation systems, initiation stood as one of the powerful remnants of Kikuyu cultural identity and social organisation.⁴ The ban on both female circumcision, *irua*, and membership of the proto-Kikuyu nationalist organisation, the Kikuyu Central Association (KCA) refigured the Kikuyu tradition of female initiation. Defence of *irua*, ‘always the sign of a “true Kikuyu”’, came to be seen, not as a relic of rural Kikuyu culture, but rather, ‘as a mark of loyalty to the incipient, as yet imaginary, nation.’⁵ The KCA further politicized the circumcision issue by linking it to the land grievances of the Kikuyu, suggesting that this attack on Kikuyu tradition would jeopardise the tribal organisation of land – that ‘uncircumcised girls would not find husbands among Kikuyu men, and, therefore, would turn to Europeans who would not only take the women but also would take Kikuyu land.’⁶ The result of a concerted and coercive campaign against circumcision resulted in Kikuyu teachers and families of students who supported circumcision being expelled from mission schools, and the establishment of the Kikuyu run school system, outside colonial control.⁷ Although Akai’s personal initiation controversy echoes the Kikuyu struggle, Owuor’s choice to write Akai as a minority tribal identity, Turkana, is significant. Kikuyu accented English is a language of authority in Nairobi – heard in the voices of police, the medical examiner and the government officials who are present at Odidi’s death, and his journey back home in a coffin.

Where the establishment of Kikuyu run schools has been credited with helping to consolidate Kikuyu resistance to colonial domination, Akai’s attendance at the missionary school was a product of her family’s poverty and the cultural belligerence of the missionary project. She persistently troubled earthly and divine authorities –

plagu[ing] her teachers with questions: What desire is at the heart of God? Who fills it? Where do stars go, if, as you say, they die? Where is the farthest far

⁴ Pedersen, Susan. 1991. “National Bodies, Unspeakable Acts: The Sexual Politics of Colonial Policy-Making.” *The Journal of Modern History* 63 (4): pg 648

⁵ Pedersen, S. 1991. pg 651, see also Natsoulas, Theodore. 1998. “The Politicization of the Ban on Female Circumcision and the Rise of the Independent School Movement in Kenya.” *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 33 (2): 154. doi:10.1163/156852182X00011.

⁶ Natsoulas, T., 1998, pg 144.” ... Faced with this mounting pressure from politicised Africans, and a lack of definitive support from the colonial government and courts, the missions announced that church elders, and Africans working for the missions, principally, as teachers, were to formally sign a document renouncing female circumcision and their membership of the KCA. Shortly after this announcement, one missionary society reported they had lost 90 per cent of the congregation and 80 per cent of its students.”

⁷ Natsoulas, T., 1998; see also Kenny, Christina. 2014. “Cultural Practice as Resistance in the British Colony of Kenya.” *Australasian Review of African Studies* 35 (1). http://afsaap.org.au/assets/ARAS_vol35no1_kenny_10-22.pdf.

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away? ... *Why is what you know more truthful than what I know?* (p. 236)

Akai embodies many of the fears of a breakdown in cultural order that were at the centre of the circumcision controversy; at once fearless, unwomanly and ungovernable – she was

a consummate shirker of herding duties and a cook who always burned food more likely to be found hunting, swimming, challenging young men to wrestling matches. (p. 237)

Walking home from school through the desert at the end of term, Akai meets two men at a water hole she visits on a detour, the British adventurer and colonial government enforcer, Hugh Bolton, and his servant Aggrey Nyipir Oganda. She is immediately attracted to Hugh, and begins an affair with him, living at *Wuoth Ogik*, the homestead Hugh had built for himself and his English wife in North Eastern Province, while an infatuated Nyipir looks on. If the fate of this relationship is a culmination of the Kikuyu fears that uninitiated women would take up with English men, Owuor offers only the unimaginable price Akai pays of the liaison. Akai's first children, born to her as a teenager, are twins fathered by Hugh Bolton; progeny of the late colonial moment. Hugh casts her out on hearing of her pregnancy, sending her alone, down the river to her family. Ostracized from the community on her return, Akai and her mother live at a homestead her mother builds outside the village. The women raise the twins in isolation, naming them Ewoi and Etir, Turkana names for the acacia trees which stretch out into the African savannah⁸.

During an argument over water, Akai slaps her mother – a rejection of authority which would finally prove fatal. Akai is cast out of her mother's house with a dirge 'you are dead...' (p. 369). The infant children of the late colony, rejected by their colonial father, and then by Akai's Turkana family, are sent out with their mother into the desert to be tormented by thirst; and to be consumed –in a bitter irony - not by dust, but by flash flood, 'it was not death that came, but water ... parad[ing] the carcasses of the newly dead.' (p. 370). Battling forces ultimately outside her control, Akai is unable to protect or nurture her children, to provide the emotional and physical safety of home. Akai chooses to operate without boundaries, though her ungovernability ultimately exacts an intolerable toll.

Returning to *Wuoth Ogik*, literally translated from Lou, 'the journey ends' (p. 334), Akai begins a relationship with Aggrey Nyipir Oganda. A Luo man from Lake Victoria, exiled to the desert of North Eastern Province, Nyipir reminds us of the boundaries which governed Africa beyond the violent borders of the colonial encounter.⁹ He is known in the novel by his middle name, after 'one of the ancestral brothers who led the Luo migration down the Nile, through Sudan, South Sudan, Uganda, Congo, Tanzania and into Kenya.' As Juliane Okot Bitek explains –

⁸ Hawthorne, William. 2017. "Leguminosae-Mim Acacia Tortilis Ssp. (Forssk.) Hayne Spirocarpa." *The Virtual Field Herbarium*. Accessed March 1. http://herbaria-old.plants.ox.ac.uk/vfh/image/index.php?item=6222&taxonomy=134&character_image=7734.

⁹ Okot Bitek, Juliane. 2015. "The Powdering of History: Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor's Dust." *Warscapes*. October 26. <http://www.warscapes.com/reviews/powdering-history-yvonne-adhiambo-owuors-dust>.

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Nyipir and Nyabongo (or Gipir and Labongo, depending on what Luo one speaks) were brothers who betrayed each other and forced a separation at the banks of the Nile with each brother on a quest to find *dala*, *gang*, to *wuoth*, to wander until they found a place to call home.¹⁰

If the ill-fated twins of Hugh Bolton and Akai were a metaphor of the failure of the colonial project, the children of Nyipir and Akai are the promise of the new republic. We meet Akai for the first time, aiming an AK47 at her adult daughter, Ajany, in the night-time headlights of the car which has transported the body of her son, Odidi, home to his family to *Wuoth Ogik*, which has become the Oganda family homestead, following the mysterious disappearance of Hugh Bolton many years earlier. Mad with grief at the murder of her son by police in the back streets of Nairobi, Odidi is not the first child *Akai-ma* has lost to the dust. And his death should have been prevented.

The soundscape of the novel is a Babel of languages and voices. The characters which populate the world of *Dust* are themselves holders of many names, speakers of many tongues – embodiments of African resistance to borders and nationalist monoculture – indeed, Gareth Griffith explores many of the popular political and musical allusions in his paper for this panel. Akai’s generation speak all Kenya’s official languages, ‘English, Kiswahili, and Silence’ (p. 287). For a novel so rich in dialogue and music, *Akai-ma* says little. Rather, it is the story of her intimate life – the men she loved, and the fates of her children – which drives the novel. Her silences speak to the terrible price of freedom, joining those of others who lived through independence, all of whom are, as Owuor herself articulates, ‘[s]ubject to a disgusting inner corrosion coming from such refusals to give name to [their] horrors.’¹¹ Perhaps in a realization come too late, upon receiving the coffin containing her son’s body, Akai –

... rocks her son, strokes his face, rocks her son. *Odidi*, she croons. *Odidi wake up. Son. Listen. Ebwesit. I’m calling you.*
To name something is to bring it to life. (p. 40)

Through the story of Akai, her lovers and her children, Owuor invites us to witness the intimate toll of the independence struggle, far removed from the easy patriotism which is the preference of the political elite of the late Republic who prefer the celebration of the life and martyrdom of select *shujaa*, warriors, Mau Mau heroes. Like the other newly imagined citizens of the Kenyan republic who populate Owuor’s trans-generational landscapes, Akai finds the boundaries of nation and family complex and stifling, unpredictable and violent. She is elemental, enigmatic, ‘made of and coloured by the earth itself.’ (p. 38) Just as she is of the desert, Akai repeatedly disappears into the expanse separating the homestead, *Wuoth Ogik* from Nairobi, ‘the *real* Kenya’ (p. 17). The desert landscape is often experienced as a place of death and privation, to be traversed, endured, survived; Akai seeks in it a kind of paradoxical refuge in times of desolation.

The insatiable desire for home burns through the novel, ‘a familiar sense of homelessness. Ceaseless unbelonging’ (p. 230). Most often this yearning is experienced

¹⁰ Okot Bitek, Juliane. 2015.

¹¹ Owuor, Yvonne. 2016. Keynote Speech, AFSAAP conference Perth

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as bodily sensation – reminiscent of *hiraeth*, the ephemeral linguistic gift of the Welsh, England’s first colonised. Without direct English translation, *hiraeth* expresses a heartache of a home lost in the ‘foreign country of the past’¹², an ‘intense longing for home and place ... so strong it can cause physical pain’.¹³ As Odidi is dying, his longing to return home washes through his consciousness, a melange of sensations, such that the emotion has become tactile –

Scent of return.

Burnt acacia-resin incense. Desert essences – dung, salt, milk, smoke, herbs, and ghee, the yearning for rain. (p. 15)

Throughout the novel, we meet characters for whom this pull of origins, and the desire for the familiarity of home is overwhelming, even where these places have been previously abandoned in favour of the “Far Away” (p. 17). Akai herself is a locus of homecoming, experienced by her lovers and children as a kind of grounded, earthly phenomenon, ‘flow[ing] like magma, every movement considered, as if it has come from the root of the world’ (p. 38), because as Owuor reminds us, ‘sometimes we are places, not people’ (p. 13). Searching for this sensation of home is an abiding metaphor of nation. As Pamela Petro explains in the Welsh case, ‘the deeper, national *hiraeth* is something you don’t have to go away to experience. You can feel it at home in Wales. In fact, that’s where you feel it most.’¹⁴ For Kenyans, the tantalising promises of *Uhuru*, were denied even at the moment of national independence, the fate of Kenya sealed with the assassination of Nyipir’s hero, fellow Luo, and charismatic independence leader, Tom Mboya. Kenya’s nationalism has failed to deliver on the promise of independence, producing only the bitter fruits of graft and corrosive ethno-politics.

Give this pain to no one else – family as metaphor for nation

Dust is a kind of mythography¹⁵ of the Kenyan republic, told through the body of Akai – in equal parts because Akai herself is a mythic embodiment of nation, and because the fates of her and her children are the fates of all those ‘holders of a persistent and transcending dream’¹⁶ of the Kenyan nation. So much violence within the post-colony is manifest *within*, and *against* families. Where Ngugi and Achebe use the centrality of the normative pre-colonial African family and community to illustrate the destruction of the colonial project through the disintegration of the family unit, Owuor’s imagined Kenyan families are already and always living this destruction. In contrast, Coetzee’s *Disgrace* leaves us with knowledge that the progeny of the new, allegedly racially integrated South Africa is tainted by the original violence of rape. While the futility of the romance in Andre Brink’s *Beyond Darkness* offers nothing of the hope of a new generation in a

¹² Davies, Russell, ed. 2015. “Hiraeth and Heartbreak – Wales and the World: Curiosity, Boldness and Zest.” In *People, Places and Passions*, 1st ed., 169–228. “Pain and Pleasure”: A Social History of Wales and the Welsh, 1870–1945. University of Wales Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt17w8h74.10>.

¹³ O’Connor, Kaori. 2009. “The Secret History of ‘The Weed of Hiraeth’: Laverbread, Identity and Museums in Wales.” *Journal of Museum Ethnography*, no. 22: 82–101. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41417139>

¹⁴ Petro, Pamela. 2012. “Dreaming in Welsh.” *The Paris Review*. September 18. <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2012/09/18/dreaming-in-welsh/>.

¹⁵ To humbly borrow from Audre Lorde

¹⁶ Selasi, Taiye. 2014. “The Unvanquished - ‘Dust,’ by Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor.” *The New York Times*, February 28. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/02/books/review/dust-by-yvonne-adhiambo-owuor.html>.

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protagonist assisting the suicide of his lover, and being tried for her murder. On the explicit tragedy of love in the post-colony, and the failure of family formation in the post-colonial world – *Dust* offers the reader a qualified redemption, only in the death or scattering of the previous generation, and a literal bonfire of structures of the past – can a new Kenya be imagined.

As much as Akai is consumed by her love for her children, we find her incapable of giving or receiving affection, communicating little of love or vulnerability. Grief and love alike are expressed and experienced as kinds of violence. Characters of *Dust* experience love as a punishment, a weakness, a madness – Nyipir experiences his love for Akai as his Achilles heel in a colonial prison during the Emergency where, after enduring days of torture, finally their threat to find and torture his wife breaks him, ‘only then he screamed. ... Creeping, crawling shame. ... he had wailed, *Unisamehe!* Mercy! Can’t describe the ways of losing faith’ (pp. 315 - 317). The product of the love of Hugh Bolton and Akai turns Akai into an outcast, realizing the bitter price of living outside clan authority as she is thrown out of her lover’s house, only to be thrown out of her mother’s home with her infant twins. Akai is called *Akai-ma* but this foundational maternal identity is more a reminder of the children she has lost – to the tyranny of the desert, her own family – unable to protect them from the emotional and physical violence that has shaped her own life, or from the “real Kenya”. Writing on Shailja Patel’s collection of poetry, *Migritude*, Kenyan intellectual Keguro Macharia noted

“if “love” could be paraphrased, I think it would be that: “*Give this pain to no one else.*” ... it is a prayer, a hope, an expectation, uttered to a distant transcendence, and perhaps it can only be uttered to a distant transcendence, because it asks for what seems impossible.”¹⁷

The inability of Akai’s fierce motherhood to protect her children is emblematic of the failure of the Kenyan state to protect and nurture its citizens. The pain is intergenerational, “a coagulating wound. ... it seeps and spreads, and becomes a subterranean stream of blood in Kenya” (p. 315).

“[T]he sun in Nairobi ... is brutal in its rising.”¹⁸

Dust is a novel made of elemental substances – landscapes are dust and flood; emotions are expressed as sweat, tears, blood. Nyipir remembers his time tortured in a British prison as ‘[s]hit, urine, sweat, blood, tears and shame’ (p. 316). Human emotion takes on a viscosity in Owuor’s Kenya, where violence moves through people, and communities like the capricious rains, and floods which shape, destroy and remake the landscapes. Kenyans pray for independence like a desert prays for water, only to be granted flash flood. A foundational alterity is produced through the tyranny of distance, and the struggle to comprehend the new demands of a new, unfamiliar, and uncaring nation. Owuor’s nation demands unthinkable sacrifice of its citizens, while offering nothing in return.

Akai joins these elemental forces as magma, emanating from, and returning to the earth. But Akai is not a maternal archetype, rather her relationships and her children suffer the

¹⁷ Macharia, Keguro. 2013. “Reading Shailja Patel & Love.” *Gukira*. May 7. <https://gukira.wordpress.com/2013/05/06/reading-shailja-patel-love/>.

¹⁸ Owuor, Yvonne Adhiambo. 2006. *Weight of Whispers*. Kwani Trust. p. 22

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consequences of her resistance to cultural rules. The Kenyan historian Tabitha Kanogo describes the effect of the increased mobility of the colonial encounter afforded ‘travelling and travelled’ women, for whom ‘migrations of the body more often than not resulted in migrations of the mind, the heart, the psyche’.¹⁹ But this freedom, and individual agency, ‘whether it was newly acquired, or repeatedly thwarted ... depended in large measure on the unleashing of forces over which no one involved had control.’²⁰ If Kenyan girlhood was ruptured by the colonial encounter, Owour’s women are literally disrupted, displaced, dislocated, and isolated. Akai is an allegory of the forces she unleashed in her quest for ‘fresh universes’ (p. 236).

Writing on the state of literature in East Africa, Njerie Githire noted the Sudanese poet and critic Taban lo Liyong ‘lament[ed] ... what he saw as a literary wasteland, a dry, desolate, barren stretch of wilderness where literature simply refused to sprout’.²¹ Githire argues Liyong’s scathing critique fails to acknowledge the depth of Africa’s oral traditions, and normalises a hierarchy of literary production which privileges written texts. If our journey through *Dust* has taught us anything, it might be that the expanse of desert is an infinitely productive space; that dust is the formative substance of nation, at times infertile, volatile, unpredictable, dangerous, consuming. *Dust* reminds us of the amorality of ordinary substances – blood, dust, salt, water and fire are transformative, healing, and destructive in turn.

Commenting on her novel, Yvonne Owuor explained that she –

“wish[ed] to understand something about [her] country, one that murders the best of its own. What kind of nation gets terrified of a great imagination? What kind of people annihilate holders of a persistent and transcending dream?”²²

The fates of the characters of *Dust* have biblical resonance, at the whim of elemental forces of the Old Testament, including not only the physical tyrannies of the landscape, but the equally unpredictable and violent forces of the colonial encounter. The independence struggle is experienced here as a fundamental test of humanity - test more often failed than passed.

¹⁹ Kanogo, Tabitha. 2005, *African Womanhood in Colonial Kenya 1900 – 1950*, James Currey, Oxford, p. 8.

²⁰ Kanogo, Tabitha. 2005, p. 1-2

²¹ Githire, Njeri. 2010, p. 182.

²² Selasi, Taiye. 2014.

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