Africa: Moving the Boundaries
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Narrative, Popular Culture and Resistance in East Africa

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Narrative (including story-telling, memorialisation, testimony) is one of the most powerful tools of self-apprehension and self-validation for oppressed people and potentially a mode of resistance. Narrative in this sense needs to be seen to go beyond the written to oral and visual forms. Not only film, television and social media but popular forms, not directly under institutional control-for example graffiti and street art.[1] Kenya has been the site of such as those of you who have read Mokua Ombati's account of the use of graffiti and public art to influence civil and political behaviour in Kenya in the AFSAAP Journal No 36, 2015, will be aware. As Ombati asserts "in the run up to the 2013 elections, the urban physical space became the new 'shrine' for graffiti. The display of graffiti … within the city of Nairobi entered the Kenyan public space with a bang" (Ombati 2015. p. 33). He describes it thus:

> The graffiti attacks elite corruption, poor governance, and the ineffective and unaccountable leadership considered to be a threat to the prosperity, stability and cohesiveness of the nation. It calls for effective governance and morally accountable and responsible leadership. While graffiti may not be considered an enlightened means of resistance, the mural displays and graffiti illustrations cover the public, physical space with slogans of uprising and protest that imagine the possibility of resisting elite oppression (Ombati 2015, p. 33)

Several of the murals reproduced show the image of what the graffiti artists term "vulture politicians", who prey on the people. One of the images shows a vulture-headed politician siting on the head of a woman. ...One of the graffiti reproduced shows a vulture with a rope around its neck being towed backwards across the image by a small human figure. The surrounding words include the slogan in a bubble from the towing figure, saying "Powers to the people. I will be the change. I want to see. My voice, My Vote, Our Future". As this suggests the emphasis is on the ability of people to employ the political process to effect change by refusing to vote for corrupt "vulture" politicians who are in other graffiti reproduced in the article shown carrying briefcases labeled "stolen loot". Boniface Mwanga, one of the artists, comments that:

> We are using images of a vulture member of parliament stamping on the face of protestors and parliament to tell Kenyans when you sell your vote, you are mortgaging 'our' future-the young generation's future … we are trying to

[1] This panel presentation draws upon a more extensive coverage of these issues that at the time of presentation and of writing this account of my panel contribution was still in preparation. That will be published sometime in 2017 as part of my contribution to the edited collection *The Social Role of Narrative: Human Rights and the Cultural Imaginary*, Gareth Griffiths and Philip Mead (Eds.), Ibidem, Hanover/London,

> encourage men and women of integrity and character to vie for elective office because if they don't you will find vultures on the ballot . . . (quoted in Ombati 2015,p.35)

But even more widespread across Africa than graffiti has been the use of popular music as a form of resistance . The music of Nigerian Fela Anikulapo Kuti is a notable example, as a song from his album *Beast of No Nation* can illustrate: the song lampoons the then military dictator Major-General Muhammudu Buhari, who had recently had Fela Kuti imprisoned.

> The time weh I dey, for prison, I call am "inside world" /The time weh I dey outside prison, I call am "outside world" /Na craze world, na be outside world/ CRAZE** WORLD *(after each line) **(crazy) /Na be outside- da police-i dey/ Na be outside- da soldier dey/ Na be outside- da court dem dey /Na be outside- da magistrate dey/ Na be outside- da judge dem dey /Na craze world be dat/ Na be outside- Buhari dey /Na craze man be dat/ Animal in craze-man skin-i /Na craze world be dat /Na be outside- Idia-gbon dey /Na craze man be dat- oh Animal in craze-man skin-i /Na craze world be dat /Na be outside- dem find me guilty/ Na be outside- dem jail me five years ------------------I no do nothing.[2]

The title song was taken up by the young Nigerian writer Uzodinma Iweala in his novel of child soldiers *Beasts of No Nation* (Iweala 2005). The novel was made into a film in 2015, illustrating again how porous are the boundaries of narrative in the modern world.

This is the aspect of Yvonne Owuora's work I want to draw attention to briefly today. Her career and work clearly shows how contemporary writing in Africa engages across boundaries, moving the division between popular and high culture and unifying African stories across national, class and ethnic identities.

Owuor's novel *Dust* may well be considered in due course as potential film material but even in its present form as traditional print narrative it shows how important the referencing throughout of popular music is to the shaping of the narrative. The ubiquity of reference to popular music throughout the text acts as a sort of soundscape, as the reader, who is presumed to be familiar with the songs and musical forms named and quoted in the text, is invited to "hear" the songs as an accompaniment to the words on the page, supplementing them and adding emotional and cultural density to the narrative. In this way the references to songs in the novel function in a way analogous to the way the score of a film adds to the experience of its audience. Every part of the text is imbued with references to music, beginning with the continual referencing and quoting of traditional Kenyan, Ethiopian, Somalian and Eritrean "water songs" (the novel is set in the remote Turkana region of

[2] http://www.nitrolyrics.com/fela-kuti_beast-of-no-nation-lyrics.html. downloaded November 12th 2016. It should be noted, of course, that Buhari was reelected President of Nigeria again in 2014, replacing Goodluck Jonathan in what has been hailed as a sign of the growth of democracy in Nigeria, since it was the first time a President in Nigeria was replaced by an election in which the loser stepped down.

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northern Kenya that borders on two of these countries, Ethiopia and Somalia). One of the major characters, the policeman Ali Dida Hada, is an Eritrean refugee who has crossed the largely porous and fictional borders fleeing what the text ironically calls "the Horn of Africa's liberation wars" (Owuor 2014, p. 219) and has adopted Kenyan identity. In addition the text is marked throughout with references to a wide variety of popular music. These range from current Kenyan forms such as *mugithi,* which records the "overloaded" culture, to use Achille Mbembe's term, (Mbembe 2001, po.147) of the bars of Nairobi's slums, through famous Kenyan musicians such as Fadhili Williams, to the Congolese singer and political activist Franklin Boukaka and the more romantic Cape Verdean female singer Cesaria Evora, as well as the songs of Fela Kuti discussed earlier. Thus, for example, early in the novel, when the main protagonist Ajany has just been confronted with the death of her brother Odidi, her pain at the situation that has led to his death and that of so many others is amplified by the text referencing one of the songs of the Congolese musician Franklin Boukaka.

> Outside sounds.
> Etude of squealing tires.
> Bird chirp.
> Machine-gun opening sequence.
> A scream.
> Fragments of a song from some unseen citizen's room.
> Franklin Boukaka's plaintive summons--*Aye Africa … kokata koni pasi, soki na kati koteka pasi*--and for a whole minute it overwhelms the frenzied crescendo screams of *Haki yetu,* 'Our rights'. (Owuor, 2014 p.21)

When the song is quoted, however briefly, a whole range of meanings that the text explores throughout and which are common to human rights struggles across Africa are invoked as the words of the song are recalled by the reader:

> Aye Afrika, eh eh../O Independence! O Freedom!/Chopping wood is tough/after chopping selling is just as tough/ with this suffering how sad/with the kids I won't make it/Some for whom I voted/ went for power and nice cars/When voting time comes/I become someone for them/I wonder/ the white man left/who is independent?/Aye Afrika, O Independence!/Aye Afrika, O Freedom![3]

Through this and many other references to this continent-wide range of popular music, the novel evokes a sense of a pan-African, shared space and common problems of oppression and abuse. These popular songs of protest and longing, like the traditional water songs, refuse to be contained within the limiting and divisive concepts of the sovereign nation promoted by the ruling elites. As discussed in the first section of this paper, the way those elites use ethnicity as a means to divide and rule the nation replicates not only the practice of the colonial rulers they are supposed to have displaced but encourages the brutal suppression of opponents based on their supposed conflicting ethnic and national identities. As well as using these references to popular music to create a "soundscape" that reinforces the novel's

[3] See the original with English subtitles at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LvDn11AEoas. Downloaded November 12th 2016.

message against brutality and corruption in Kenya, the text also references many of the popular images that have been developed in street art to represent the negative forces in Kenyan society. In particular, the image of the vulture to represent the forces of greed that oppress Kenyans that we saw was such a prominent feature of the recent street art in Nairobi is used throughout the novel.

> Static. Kofi Annan's voice weaving through in words that don't connect: *Parties…eminent persons… bloodshed… peace… violence… Peace…spoken…Honorable gentlemen…war…tribal…politics…*
> Nyipir says, voice crackling, "They know when a body is cooling."
> "Who?"
> "Vultures". Within a dark nook in Nyipir's heart, a long-ago man whispers, "By the time I'm done with you, you'll become another. You'll become mad. To live." Nyipir shivers.
> "Vultures". Nyipir wipes his face with the blanket (Owuor 2014, p. 68).

This fascinating and powerful novel weaves together the story of the atrocities of colonial rule during the colonial period with the post-independence regimes' use of the same brutal methods to repress opposition to its rule, reinforcing the point made by so many popular artists that the current elite rulers have merely replaced the colonial oppressors and employ the same or even worse tactics to retain power. Throughout, the failure of the new rulers to transcend the practices of the repressive colonial regimes is emphasized by the incidents of the story and by the use of references to the popular awareness of how this oppression has continued expressed in popular images and music. The full use of these elements in this rich text must await a more detailed analysis than space permits here. But these examples show how popular and traditional art forms are forging new and mutually enriching relationships in modern Africa and uniting popular and traditional art forms in the struggle for human rights. That struggle often seems endless and sometimes inconclusive but if I may finish on an cautiously optimistic note, the history of narrative and of the human imagination and the social role they have played is a story of persistence rather than conclusion, of unending effort rather than of triumph. Like human rights themselves the truths such narrative seeks to tell are perhaps inevitably deferred, always a promise of what might be rather than what is, a promise of what we seek rather than what we have achieved. The social role of narrative is always in this sense an engagement with the unattainable. As J. Hillis Miller put it:

> The law is always somewhere else or at some other time, back there when the law was first imposed or off to the future when I may at last confront it directly, in unmediated vision. Within that space, between here and that unattainable there of the law as such, between now and the beginning or the end, narrative enters as the relation of the search for a perhaps impossible proximity to the law [. . .] the function of narrative for those who have 'eyes to see or ears to hear with and understand' is to keep this out in the open" (Miller 1987. p.25).

It may be too simple to suggest unequivocally, as Shelley did in the early 19th century, that "poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world" but it may be true to say that the forms of legislation and the forces that bring it into being are deeply influenced by how

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people narrate the experiences of their world. Story, image, song and written or spoken memories all act to construct the cultural imaginary from which we derive our own identity and through which we seek, however inadequately, to perceive that of others, recognizing the ways in which they differ from us and the ways in which we share their concerns and needs. Our engagement in this conference, often in recent years concerned more with academic forms of social analysis, reminds us of the power of literature and of the broader range of imaginative forms this particular novel highlights to engage with the importance of imaginative narratives

It is arguable then that what allows us to survive and develop as a species is not anything material, for example our ability to develop tools or to use language. As we reach out to broader ideas of where we stand as humans in the evolutionary pattern we recognise that other species have developed many of these characteristics. It is possible that it is the imagination that really allows human beings to behave in the ways they do, for good or for bad. The imagination allows human beings to conceive a reality different from that which they are experiencing and to understand their world as part of a changeable past and future. The exercise of this power to imagine allows human beings to manipulate their world in a unique way. This may be why we can cause so much devastation but it may also be the means by which we can take control of our future in positive ways. The imagination and its power, harnessed through story and memory, may be the most important aspect of our lives and the most neglected.

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