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"Writing on the Soil": Literature's Influence on African Land Rights

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UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

WRITING ON THE SOIL: LITERATURE'S INFLUENCE ON AFRICAN LAND
RIGHTS

By

Ng'ang'a Muchiri

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Faculty
of the University of Miami
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Writing on the Soil: Literature's Influence on
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My research underscores complex interactions between African artistic production, nationalism, gender inequality, and land rights. I deploy East Africa's literary oeuvre—including novels, short stories and a Swahili play—to explore mutually informing social and artistic contexts that inspire phenomena as diverse as administrative land policies and utopian reformist schemes. I read transnational fiction against colonial photography and political manifestos, to address the “cross-pollination” of ideas and discourses. “Writing on the Soil” argues that postcolonial theory needs re-orienting towards materialist criticism and political conversations regarding resource inequality as suggested by texts that reflect on the material structures of neo/colonial domination in Africa. By recovering a lost argument within postcolonial theory about materiality and its influence on textual aesthetics and artistic production, “Writing on the Soil” examines the metaphorical labor that land performs in African literary and visual texts.

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Introduction:

“Writing on the Soil” examines the highly ambivalent attitudes towards land, space, and rights in African nationalisms and literary counter-narratives. Political power—democratic or elitist—has been the main goal for African nationalisms; hence, they are often primarily viewed as not only gender insensitive but also narrowly focused on the re-appropriation of land from colonial ventures. “Writing on the Soil,” however, shows that Africans ushering in the postcolonial era had a much more complex approach towards land, and land rights. On the one hand, colonial alienation of African lands became a rallying point for anti-imperial politics founded upon re-constructed pre-colonial traditions. Yet on the other, African nationalists witnessed on-going social transformations—including increased access to the public sphere for previously marginalized populations like women and youths—with much angst and pre-colonial nostalgia. This resulted in an equivocal attitude toward land: it came to represent both a life-generating potential and a threatening force—and in either case, the patriarchal postcolonial state sought to dominate and control. These notions about land, I argue, are the matrix out of which many African nationalist ideas of private/public space and land rights are born. Moreover, remnants of these divisive conversations challenge and influence contemporary African nation-states and their ensuing projects of citizenship and belonging.¹

¹ There exists a long history of European acquisition of African lands. A century before the Berlin Conference, in 1788, King Naimbana ceded part of present day Sierra Leone to the British Crown. While this transfer of land included the gifting of alcohol, tobacco etc. to the African sovereign, it is unclear what power differentials may have been in play, especially given the ongoing practice of Atlantic slaving (See *The African-British Long Eighteenth Century: An Analysis Of African-British Treaties, Colonial Economics, And Anthropological Discourse* by Techo Mbaimba Caulker for more). Other questionable land treaties and legislation include the 1888 codification of Algerian land alienation laws by French colonial powers, the 1900 Uganda Agreement between the Kabaka and the British Crown, the 1913 South African Native Lands Act, and the 1930 Land Apportionment Act in Rhodesia (Zimbabwe). See D. A. Low’s *The*

I: Analytical & Temporal Scope

Given the pervasive nature of the European colonial experiment in Africa, I find Glenn Hooper's approach to the colonial record instructive and appropriate. Hooper argues that the synergy between land and empire must be explored from a vast and diverse archive; not just from colonial maps and history books, and "from the notes and memorandums of those who worked at the chalk face of colonial administration, but especially from novels and poems and travelogue, the sort of material which arguably disseminated impressions of empire most effectively" (16). Hooper's privileging of literary production in the study of colonial empires hints at the aesthetic nature of the project of conquest. This immaterial component of colonialism—often manifested as the desire to spread European civilization to the dark corners of the globe—while hard to isolate, was just as powerful a motivation for the colonial project as economic and mercantile prospects. Colonial hype, whimsical yet powerful, is an apt approximation in describing these structures of feeling. Ultimately, powerful ideology was buttressed by aesthetics and sentiments that supported colonial discourse regarding African land. My intervention is attentive to both aesthetics and ideology—examining a spectrum of responses that attacked imperialist rhetoric on multiple levels.

In addition, this project underscores the complex interactions between African artistic production, land rights, and rural poverty. I engage twentieth century East Africa's literary oeuvre—including novels, short stories and a Swahili play—exploring mutually informing social and artistic contexts that birthed diverse phenomena including administrative land policies and utopian reformist schemes. I supplement my reading of

Mind of Buganda: Documents of the Modern History of an African Kingdom for more. Finally, dubious land transactions have continued to the present – including the leasing of hundreds of thousands of arable land in Ethiopia, Kenya, Mali, etc. to foreign conglomerates.

transnational fiction with legal documents, internal government papers, and political manifestos that address the “cross-pollination” of ideas and discourses represented in these texts. By indicating temporal and sensibility shifts in understandings of African identities I argue that postcolonial theory needs to be re-oriented towards materialist criticism and political conversations regarding resource inequality as suggested by texts that reflect on the material structures of neo/colonial domination in Africa.

Ironically, the continent is currently facing a second wave of land hysteria—(mostly) foreign, like the first, yet also intent on re-arranging African social and communal forms of life. The global land hype makes my discussion extremely pertinent, stemming as it does from the vast acquisition of African lands and the media coverage surrounding these transactions. For one, large-scale agricultural investments in Africa have been positioned as the solution to the post-2008 energy and food shortage in North America, the Gulf, China, and Europe; consequently, smallholder farmers’ loss of previously cultivated fields has been adopted by the global media as the African political issue of our times—one with easily identifiable culprits (nations from Asia and the Arab Emirates) and familiar victims (helpless Africans) (Kaag & Zoomers 6).² Unfortunately, most public discussions of global land deals do not consider the extent to which gender bias inhibits or facilitates an individual’s access to land resources. As economist Ritu Verma points out in “Land Grabs, Power, & Gender in East and Southern Africa: So, What’s New?” besides the latest round of land acquisition by foreign capital, there is a long-established pattern of “everyday small-scale gender land grabs and entrenchment of men’s outright ownership of land as heads of households” (63). “Writing on the Soil”

² In other words, while the current land grabs are depicted in language that recalls a “Scramble for Africa” after the Berlin Conference, 1885, the West happens to be on the right side of history—as protector of African peoples—rather than perpetrator of economic injustice—a role taken by the East.

foregrounds gender as a key factor in discussions of African land competition because taken together, these “micropolitical land grabs” subject women not only to loss of land but also to diminished social status (Verma 63).^{3,4} To reverse this trend of inequality, scholars and activists have posited human rights praxis as one tool to help empower women.^{5,6,7} In addition, African authors have marshaled literary aesthetics in the

³ Verma goes on to argue that “land investments and acquisitions remain gender blind. Farmers and pastoralists are often assumed to be men. Critically important differences between those with use rights, those who work on the land, and those who have inheritance rights are conflated, to the further disadvantage of women. The focus is predominantly on agriculture and economic productivity, without recognizing gender divisions of knowledge, labor, and decision making in farming, pastoral livelihoods, as well as cultural meanings of land. ... Similar to hegemonic gender-biased discourses of the past, new economic framing narratives continue to assume a trickle down of benefits in the belief that the free market will automatically take care of distribution, equity, and other market failures” (67). Furthermore, property relations cannot be subtracted from “power relations and the construction of sociocultural and gender identities that shape, and sometimes override, tenure rights and security;” hence, land grabs reflect social inequality where profits are further accumulated by those with more influence and know-how: men (Verma 68; 69).

⁴ In “Women and Land Deals in Africa and Asia: Weighing the Implications and Changing the Game,” Elizabeth Daley and Sabine Pallas demonstrate that women are “disproportionately” susceptible to the negative effects of contemporary global land deals; this occurs in several ways including the use of gender-based violence to suppress political opposition (178; 182). Overall, women are vulnerable in terms of: “productive resources, relative income poverty, physical vulnerability, and participation in decision making” (Daley & Pallas 183).

⁵ For instance, Poul Wisborg points out that “human rights – including to food, home, paid work, property, political participation, gender equality, and racial equality – affect or are affected by land tenure” (33). Hence, he concludes, “states permitting land appropriation (foreign or domestic) that deprives people of access to life-sustaining resources or other means of obtaining food are in violation of the human right to food” (Wisborg 37).

⁶ Jeremie Gilbert contends that it is high time land rights became entrenched as fundamental human rights. He argues that “land rights are not only directly impacting individual property rights, but are also at the heart of social justice;” for example, indigenous peoples around the globe “have stressed that territories and lands are the basis not only of economic livelihood but are also the source of spiritual, cultural and social identity” (116; 119). This has challenged the Human Rights Commission to develop “specific protection for indigenous’ peoples’ land rights by acknowledging the evidence that, for indigenous communities, a particular way of life is associated with the use of their lands;” in other words, “where land is of central significance to the sustenance of a culture, the right to enjoy one’s culture requires the protection of land” (Gilbert 119).

⁷ The African (Banjul) Charter on Human and People’s Rights (ACHPR) was first drafted in Lagos 1961, producing a document that served as the basis for future human rights charters. The Cairo Conference held in 1969 put forth another version but it was not until 1981 that a comprehensive text was forwarded to the African Union predecessor: the Organization of African Unity (OAU). As demonstrated in the Banjul Charter’s preamble, the document’s authors were keen to link their liberation efforts in the late Seventies with those that had occurred two decades before. What the Banjul Charter lays out as an individual’s rights to owning property is forward-thinking in its inclusion of community. The Charter recognizes unique sentiments about the community in African ways of being and seeks to accommodate these into law. These overtures, however, are themselves liable to abuse. While Article 14 states that a subject’s “right to property shall be guaranteed,” it immediately follows with a qualification that “public need” or “the general

continuing struggle against economic oppression. In East Africa, Ngugi wa Thiong'o stands out as an artist whose focus has long been the revision of the African postcolonial state to entrench inclusivity and jettison remnants of colonial ideologies. Moreover, Ngugi's interest in the distribution of wealth, poverty, and social justice has been adopted by other writers in the region and the texts I examine in this project are part of a conversation spanning over five decades and to which Ngugi serves as originator. Some of the work, for instance *The Promised Land* (1966) by Kenya's Grace Ogot, appeared just as Ngugi was making his mark in the field of East African letters and would have readily been juxtaposed by the reading public. Overall, Ngugi's concern with material inequality lays the ground for similar discussions in *The Afersata* (1968) by Ethiopian B. M. Sahle Sellassie, *Life and a Half* (1979) by Congolese Sony L. Tansi, *Arusi (Wedding)* (1980) by Ebrahim Hussein from Tanzania, *Coming to Birth* (1986) by Kenya's Marjorie Macgoye, *Uhuru Street* (1991) by Tanzanian M. G. Vassanji, and *The River & the Source* (1994) by Kenya's Margaret Ogola. In addition to thematic congruence, Ngugi's work shares a focus on intertextuality with short fiction by Uganda's Monica Arac de Nyeko: "In the Stars" (2003), "Strange Fruit" (2004), and "Banana Eater" (2008). In the next section, I will map out my critical approach to the texts listed above; after that, I will discuss Ngugi as one author whose work best exemplifies the critical issues I am engaging with in this project.

interest of the community" may sanctify encroaching on this right (Banjul Charter). Coupled with Article 21 which foregrounds that national resources be administered to cater to the "exclusive interest of the people," these two edicts are greatly susceptible to abuse. Furthermore, the Charter's recognition of a people's "unquestionable and inalienable right to self-determination" appropriately matches the sinister mass-oriented assertions of many a militia force (Article 20). Writing before the complete anti-colonial liberation of southern Africa, the authors of the Banjul Charter felt it vital to note that "colonized or oppressed peoples shall have the right to free themselves from the bonds of domination by resorting to any means recognized by the international community" (Article 20). The Charter's Preamble points out that "civil and political rights cannot be dissociated from economic, social and cultural rights," thus making it vital that nations were free to choose their own systems that govern politics and the economy.

II: Chapter-by-Chapter Synopsis

My main interest in this project is to examine literary production that chronicles people's disenfranchisement from land, the narratives that underpinned such inequality, and the counter-narratives that writers advance to imagine alternative forms of social justice. In chapter one, "Visual Rhetoric & Literary Tropes: Fantasies of Emptiness vs. Conventions of Ownership," I juxtapose archival documents by British settlers with Grace Ogot's *The Promised Land* (1966) and Margaret Ogola's *The River and the Source* (1994) in order to examine how these two Kenyan novels foreground a rejection of the assumptions on which settler productivity is premised.⁸ This analytical investment reveals how colonial representations manipulated black bodies to justify land alienation. Settler-produced visual documents portray an ideology that ignored indigenous land rights and simultaneously projected an idealized notion of British imperialism. However, Ogot and Ogola parody settler mentality and its connection to brutality, thus highlighting the violence enacted upon both colonized psyches and landscapes. Ogot deconstructs colonial convictions about East Africa's emptiness and the availability of land for European settlement by re-creating the challenging journey of an indigenous family from one location, or homeland, to another location—foreign land. Ogola, on the other hand, wields folklore to highlight traditions of indigenous ancestral rights of land ownership. Through their emphasis on gender, and their description of how Africans potentially deploy the rhetoric of empty lands to justify settlement, Ogola and Ogot add vital nuance to Ngugi's body of writing.

⁸ Such suppositions included a belief that African lands were empty, unoccupied, and ready for colonial settlement.

“Land as Literal/Figurative Object in African Socio-Political Interventions,” the second chapter, examines writing by Ethiopia’s B. M. S. Sellassie and Tanzania’s Ebrahim Hussein to argue that African struggles—both anticolonial and anti-monarchical—had mixed successes in their quest for equitable land policies. An agitation for indigenous land rights propped up both movements and their struggles for democratic governance. In addition, this chapter establishes the role of the African writer in the production of narratives about land rights, both against colonial and monarchical regimes, and the postcolonial nationalist regimes that followed. However, as Sahle Sellassie’s and Hussein’s writing careers exemplify, there are many hurdles for politically-minded writers who wish to inspire socio-political change. Ebrahim Hussein’s *Arusi* (1980) not only documents the state’s failure to nurture equitable land rights it also suggests that this inadequacy resulted in the transformation of Tanzania’s colonial-era dependence into neo-colonial subservience. Hussein’s allegorical discussion of land rights—using marriage as a trope—encompasses gender issues and uses competition between the sexes to comment on the rise of individualism at the expense of communalist norms. This critique of postcolonial African politics can also be deduced from B. M. Sahle Sellassie’s *The Afersata* (1968). Like Hussein, Sahle Sellassie indicts the state for its autocracy and inability to entrench bottom-up socio-economic reform. Using images of human shelter, Sellassie’s fiction portrays tenant/landlord exploitation. *The Afersata* is also important to my discussion of land rights because it wields the imagery of creation and destruction in a manner that invites a comparison to similar language in Ethiopian political rhetoric. This enables my research to trace the cross-over of metaphors from literary narratives of *natio*, to the construction of nationalist identity on the political podium. Ultimately,

“Writing on the Soil” underscores the relationship between politics and literature by highlighting alternative modes of local self-governance that potentially resolve post-independence inequalities.

In the third chapter of “Writing on the Soil,” I undertake an investigation of armed conflict and its function in creating landed/landless subjects using work by Congo’s Sony L. Tansi and Uganda’s Monica Arak de Nyeko. “Violence & the Creation of Landed/Landless Subjects” argues that insecurity of land tenure stems from the same political framework as political tyranny and gender inequality. In other words, Tansi’s and Nyeko’s writing—though disparate in time, place, and language—demonstrates that conflict over land often results in physical violence against women and the marginalization of minorities.⁹ Tansi’s *Life and a Half* (1979) depicts violence and trauma against the body through use of the grotesque and the mythical; he also focuses on the relevance of literary production in countering totalitarianism.¹⁰ Most importantly, Tansi establishes that writing about land under authoritarian conditions requires the deconstruction of the dictator’s charm and superhuman aura. Zones of production excite dictatorial dominance: cities—which inspire artistic creativity—experience violence against street-level political activism; the countryside—where food is produced—endures military incursions aimed at defeating rebels; and finally, the female body—and its capacity to procreate—suffers the tyrants’ desire to birth political heirs. The second half

⁹ Tirop Simatei demonstrates that there are “complex linkages between colonial violence, the violent responses to it, and the violations of the rights of citizens in the postcolonial nation-state;” in other words, there has been a continuum of terror perpetrated on African landscapes and psyches—starting from the European encounter to now (85).

¹⁰ Ngugi’s work intersects with the concerns in this chapter due to his interest in (neopost)colonial “bodies that have been dispersed and broken up, that have become alienated from themselves and their societies, but which must be reformed if the future is to be faced” (Hooper 58). For Ngugi, imperial ideology fragments the colonial subject while simultaneously dispersing pre-colonial cultural forms, hence he “urges consolidation and unity as a necessary method of self-retrieval” (Hooper 58).

of this chapter performs close readings of M. Arac de Nyeko's short stories; the value of this analysis is threefold. Nyeko's oeuvre anchors my examination of how the female subject is erased from debates about land rights, while also inviting an exploration of why claims of territoriality are often laced with ethnic prejudice. Nyeko's stories display varied conventions of asserting land claims in rural versus urban spaces and the effect of such choices on socio-political life. Hence, her short fiction is a powerful cultural artifact and analytical tool for my discussion regarding, simultaneously, narrative and its potential for resistance, the pastoral as a literary genre, violence—especially as it is manifested on the female body—and ultimately, land rights. For instance, Nyeko's use of mutilated male bodies enables the deconstruction of the rural idyll—much in line with Ngugi's writing. Additionally, Nyeko's "Banana Eater" exposes gender and ethnic marginalization vis-a-vis urban land rights and foreshadows a similar discussion in the last chapter of this project.

Finally, in "Belonging & Mobility: Urban Land Rights in East Africa," I examine urban fiction by Kenyan Marjorie O. Macgoye and Tanzanian Moyez G. Vassanji to argue that in lieu of actual land rights (post)colonial urban citizens enact ownership through acts of transgression and trespass. My investigation differs from earlier discussions of African urban literature in that I will examine the city as a cultural and/or geographic space while, simultaneously, juxtaposing urban and rural land politics. Urban dwellers respond to cultural and geographic aspects of the postcolonial African metropolis with a particular kind of political resistance: recurrent peregrinations that demonstrate agential power. My analysis of Marjorie Macgoye's *Coming to Birth* (1986) entails a discussion of land rights through acts of transgressing, trespass, and

performance. For instance, Macgoye's protagonist asserts belonging through her performativity as a city dweller; I argue that Nairobians react to social and physical barriers that seek to keep them out of certain spaces with deviance and disobedience. In this way, they have repeatedly re-inserted their presence in the very spaces where it had earlier been evacuated. The second half of the chapter features an examination of M. G. Vassanji's *Uhuru Street* (1991). Vassanji's work not only demands that a comprehensive appraisal of African land rights include an appreciation of inhabitation and mobility, but that we should also consider, as fiction does, both private and public spaces as political terrains where power struggles are repeatedly played out. In other words, physical terrains also shape political conflicts; geographies either provide the subject for the rivalries, or become the space in which these skirmishes happen. Finally, by focusing on the plight of East Africa's Indian diaspora, Vassanji brings to fore questions of ethnicity—especially ones that complicate colonizer/colonized narratives about land—and demonstrates how cultural and political struggles could also potentially shape physical spaces. What is important about this body of texts is that in diverse ways, they respond to concerns laid out by Ngugi's oeuvre. In the next section I will examine Ngugi's literary corpus before zeroing in on *Petals of Blood*—a text whose discussion of African land politics is extremely crucial for the argument I make in “Writing on the Soil.”

III: Ngugi's Oeuvre

Ngugi's literary career, embarked on at the twilight of Britain's East African colonies, has queried the land issue from multiple perspectives—deploying, in particular, a Marxist critique from the late Seventies onwards. Ngugi's discussions of the

(post)colonial nation-state are filled with a “sense of abandonment and exile;” ultimately, Ngugi has populated his work with characters “whose defining experience is that home no longer exists” (Ogude 283). In other words, the writer’s fictional communities are alienated from their land—which had previously inspired a feeling of home and sense of belonging. Disenfranchised by colonial settlers and postcolonial rulers, Ngugi’s heroes and heroines repeatedly resort to fellow peasants and factory workers for political agency and a chance to resist economic oppression. In “Colonial Violence, Postcolonial Violations: Violence, Landscape, and Memory in Kenyan Fiction,” Tirop Simatei contends that Ngugi’s protagonist in *Weep not, Child* (1964), Nguni, demonstrates that “precolonial territory was never an empty space in the way the colonial expropriators visualized it, but rather a landscape already defined and mapped by local histories, myths, and memories of bequeathal and ownership” (87). Hence, the anti-colonial Land & Freedom Army re-ignited their collective mastery of the landscape, deploying their compendium of environmental know-how to harass Kenya’s *Pax Britannica* (Simatei 88).¹¹ Ngugi’s depiction of landscapes demonstrates the shifts and expansions of a terrain with fluid boundaries vis-à-vis such categories as public/private, fictional/real (Loflin 76). The author’s “concerns about land use, ownership, spiritual values, nationalism, and pan-Africanism are reflected in the description of the land;” overall, Ngugi’s landscapes are intricately tied to his cast of characters’ “spiritual, social, and political identity”

¹¹ The Kenya Land & Freedom Army, more infamously known as Mau Mau, waged a guerilla war against British colonial presence from 1952. The skirmishes were mostly conducted by groups of fighters who harassed British military or civilian establishments before retreating to the Mt. Kenya area to re-group and plan additional attacks. However, via superior war technology and the inherent division of the indigenous communities—pro-British loyalists vs. anti-British Mau Mau—the forest battles were effectively over by 1957. During that time, the guerillas used their knowledge of the terrain to avoid capture and to find sustenance.

(Loflin 76).¹² For instance, in *The River Between* (1965), Ngugi's omniscient narrator lays out the most noticeable geographic features—ridges, valleys, and River Honia—before using them to augur communal friction (Loflin 77). In the manner River Honia separates the opposing hills it indicates communal discord, as well as individual psychological turmoil brought on by two antagonistic cultural values: Gikuyu traditions versus Christianity (Loflin 79). At the same time, Honia—a Gikuyu word meaning “to heal”—is a possible site of reconciliation, communal renewal, and unification—just as it connects and waters the two ridges (Loflin 79; 80). Evidently, Ngugi has been a longstanding campaigner for African sovereignty—especially in regards to land and land rights.

“Writing on the Soil,” like Ngugi's oeuvre, is interested in the intersection between current concerns about global land grabs and the increased marginalization of women. My analytical framework in this project replicates the centrality of women in Ngugi's writing of land; hence, gender as a marker of identity is a key term of contention in my discussions regarding land rights. Ngugi's depiction of women in his fiction exhibits a spectrum of empowerment: from strong female characters who contribute their political agency to the anti-imperial cause, to the archetypal and retrogressive virgin-whore binary. With Ngugi wa Mirii, in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (1976), Ngugi constructs a female protagonist with “great wisdom and insights,” whose revolutionary valor includes not only militant activities, but also the tutelage of future warriors

¹² Biblical influence is especially strong in Ngugi's work whereby, Loflin argues, there runs the theme that the land belongs to the people who would develop it, based loosely on the Biblical notion of the good steward. The good stewardship of the Gikuyu, and the environmental value of fallow land, was not yet appreciated by the British.

(Ankumah 313).^{13,14} There has, certainly, been criticism leveled at Ngugi for retrograde depictions of women. In *I will Marry When I Want* (1980), land becomes interchangeable with the phallus, transforming the home into “an exclusionary space, where only those who conform to the masculine authority can stay;” in other words this is a community that disinherits its women (Mwangi 103; 107).¹⁵ Elleke Boehmer reads in Ngugi’s texts the enlisting of women “into the ranks of a male-ordered struggle,” or else their elevation “to the status of mascot at the head of the (male?) peasant and workers’ march” (189). In other words, “he places a male weapon in the hands of his women characters and sets them on pedestals as glorified revolutionaries, inspiring symbols for a male struggle”—betraying a collapsing of “national freedom with male freedom” (Boehmer 195).¹⁶ Similar accusations of omission are applicable to his analysis of postcolonial cultural praxis; for instance, in *Decolonising the Mind* (1986), Ngugi does not mention East Africa’s female writers in his suggested canon for literary study at the university level (Boehmer 190). Ngugi’s depictions of women—like Achebe’s—indicate a process of development away from patriarchal ways of thinking, over the course of a career—and often in dialogue with critics.

¹³ Evan Mwangi complicates Ngugi’s portrayal of positive female characters by pointing out that Gikuyu words used in *Petals of Blood* (1977) utter silence “the possibility of women shaking off the yokes of their slavery” (72). This results from the fact that even “positively drawn characters ... habitually tap into antiwomen vulgarity” (Mwangi 69).

¹⁴ Sam Raditlhalo maps out exemplary female characters. Raditlhalo argues that “Ngugi’s women are nationalists because Kenya—materially, culturally and politically—has become a battleground with women as a powerful and significant group of contestants” (6). Furthermore, “in articulating women’s struggles in Kenya, Ngugi thus began to link the social and political reality. The post-colonial texts of Ngugi on Kenya reveal an attempt at mapping possible futures through the intertwining of individual character with the body politic” (Raditlhalo 6).

¹⁵ Elsewhere, Mwangi adds that “what emerges from Ngugi’s early plays is a portrayal of female characters as totally subordinate to their male counterparts. Women are given minimal space. The focus in these plays is more on nationalistic themes than on the liberation of individuals” (96).

¹⁶ Boehmer further critiques Ngugi’s neglect of “the gendered and the structural nature of power, whether that power is held by national or proletarian forces” (189).

Given Ngugi's interest in land rights, it is equally important to think through the writer's foray into the Gikuyu novel. As Xavier Garnier astutely notes, experiments with the novel have been "closely tied to the political adventure" into which East African states embarked at the end of British colonialism (1). Hence, for Ngugi, the Gikuyu novel was an additional tool with which to conjure a postcolony free from neo-imperial cultural domination. Ngugi's Gikuyu novel—like texts from other minor literatures in the region such as Swahili—concentrates on "political questions, exclusively the socio-cultural dimension" (Garnier 1). This literary form has been used to reveal the "progress of politics"—making use of fiction's capacity to "mirror" society; Ngugi, however, has exhibited a more complex relationship with African—especially Kenyan—history than other writers in the region (Garnier 2; 4). Unlike his contemporaries who seek to "do away with the past and its traditional society," Ngugi neither wholly vilifies nor glorifies Africa's past. Instead, he *mines* it; returning to it relentlessly in search of motifs that are applicable in the contemporary struggle. Ngugi's work enables an appreciation of the varied responses that land engenders—as a rallying cry for anti-colonial movements, but also as a source of contention in Africa's postcolonial dystopia. His interest in women's relationship(s) to land, as well as his focus on processes of development and urbanization—which I discuss in the next section—map out the theoretical terrain which later chapters in this project will cover.

IV: Ngugi's *Petals of Blood* and Colonial Alienation of Land

It is in *Petals of Blood* (*PB*) that Ngugi crystalizes his critique of the African postcolony. The text begins with an exploration of land alienation as it was perpetrated

by colonial authorities. Ngugi's characters lament that "the white man first took the land, then the goats and cows, saying these were hut taxes or fines after every armed clash;" it was only after this that colonial forces captured young Africans to provide farm labor (18). Moreover, the rural folk depicted in *PB* are deeply suspicious of mercantile activities; they still remember how the European settler "took their land, their sweat, and their wealth and told them that the coins he had brought, which could not be eaten, were the true wealth" (*Petals of Blood* 18). Ngugi further demonstrates his misgiving towards global capitalism and the rhetoric of development, especially as it is applied to the global south. By mimicking newspaper language, he produces an obituary for three politicians murdered in Ilmorog—where most of the novel's action takes place—that juxtaposes local political elites with former colonial explorers. Ngugi notes that "the three will be an irreplaceable loss to Ilmorog. They built Ilmorog from a tiny nineteenth-century village reminiscent of the days of Krapf and Rebman into a modern industrial town" (5). The author is complicating the story of postcolonial progress and development by making more vivid the link between violent alienation of land in colonial epochs and the continued disenfranchisement of the poor at the hands of black political elites. Just as colonial rhetoric celebrated Krapf's and Rebman's civilizing touch, Ngugi parodies the politicians' modernizing hand; in both cases, progress is determined by outsiders—colonial or otherwise—whose paternalism overrules Ilmorog's future aspirations.¹⁷ Later in the text, Ngugi provides another example not only of the destructive nature of colonial technologies but also of the toll these took on African landscapes.^{18,19} In the olden days:

¹⁷ Johann Ludwig Krapf and Johannes Rebmann were German missionaries in East Africa. They spread the Gospel in the middle of the nineteenth century.

¹⁸ Emily Brownell and Toyin Falola introduce a novel literary genre—the technological pastoral—that examines the effect of colonial technologies at length. The two critics define the technological pastoral as

the land was not for buying. It was for use. It was also plenty, you need not have beaten one yard over and over again. The land was also covered with forests. The trees called rain. They also cast a shadow on the land. But the forest was eaten by the railway. You remember how they used to come for wood as far as here – to feed the iron thing. Aah, they only knew how to eat, how to take away everything. But then, those were Foreigners – white people. (*Petals of Blood* 82)

PB is deeply antagonistic towards colonial forms of economic production and their inherently rapacious and unsustainable use of natural resources.²⁰ Even worse, post-independence regimes continued in much the same vein, betraying the people's hopes of socio-economic reform that were in line with local beliefs. By depicting "the Bible, the Coin, [and] the Gun" as the "Holy Trinity," Ngugi also aims his censure at colonial religion (88). As it turns out, Ngugi's critique of colonial land policies can be leveled at

"the points of convergence and conflict between Western notions of an idealized rural and primitive Africa and the introduction of colonial technology, scientific ideas and commodification of land and animals" (Brownell & Falola 3). Their co-edited anthology, *Landscape, Environment and Technology in Colonial and Postcolonial Africa*, not only examines how "social control was often sought through environmental control," but also the role that European technologies played in "constructing colonial narratives of control, access, immersion as well as separation" (Brownell & Falola 6; 7). This phenomenon is best exemplified by the railway. "The railroad bifurcated the colonial landscape, dividing Africans as seemingly lost in time and prehistoric, and Europeans as embodying technology, reason, and progress" (Brownell & Falola 7). While commuting, colonial travelers viewed Africans and their environments as "prehistoric ... whereas the railroad and its creators were the epitome of modernity and progress" (Brownell & Falola 62). Travelling by rail enabled colonial settlers to fossilize life outside the railroad coach as "authentic, primeval," and idyllic (Brownell & Falola 68). The African world outside was misunderstood as "immobile, static and wild; a world that had to be tamed, controlled, disciplined and educated" (Brownell & Falola 69).

¹⁹ In Francophone Indochine, aerial photography played a key role in the transformation of the Mekong Delta during the Forties. This technology was deployed to provide proof for "colonial ideals that had significant physical consequences for mass resettlement and infrastructure development" (Biggs 110). Across the Indian Ocean, in German East Africa, aerial photography played an almost similar role. German colonials surveyed Tanganyika from the air, felt more in command of the territory, and "saw themselves as protectors of the African natural world [which they] accused the African population of desecrating" (Steinbach 57). Consequently, "the right to hunt in the colonies was a sign of the higher cultural status of the Europeans. It served to reinforce the claims of the Germans over the African soil and to suppress Africans upon it" (Steinbach 60).

²⁰ *Cultivating the Colonies: Colonial states & their Environmental Legacies* argues that "European rule in the tropical colonies showed the extraordinary impact of humans on the environment and the speed at which they could destroy nature;" moreover, it was during the colonial era that science and technology were increasingly deployed in interactions between humans and nature since, ultimately, "managing plants and managing people were not, after all, very different from each other" (Oslund 2). Additionally, "scenery that appealed to European notions of pastoral beauty was often part of a package that advertised a place's healthiness for Europeans and the wealth to be got by farming its land" (Wear 25). Ultimately, "Europeanizing" colonized landscapes transformed such spaces into healthier, more settler-friendly regions that would properly belong to their "new owners;" in multiple ways, the ideologies that underpinned environmental transformation and improvement legitimized colonization (Wear 37).

many other imperial projects outside East Africa—not only settler colonies such as Algeria and Zimbabwe, but also plantation enterprises such as those in the Caribbean.^{21,22}

Colonial alienation of land was traumatic for indigenous communities due to the resultant loss of sovereignty and material well-being. Ngugi's characters in *PB* lament that “there was a time . . . we had power over the movement of our limbs. We made up our own words and sang them and we danced to them. But there came a time when this power was taken from us” (115). Ngugi employs the metaphor of dance, choreography, and movement—key elements of pre-colonial African performativity—to think through indigenous political institutions before the advent of European rule. By doing so, the writer further underlines the home-grown nature of pre-contact African forms of life—whatever their limitations. In the aftermath of colonial incursions, African populations moved, “but somebody else called out the words and the song” (*Petals of Blood* 115). This is starkly contrasted to epochs when “Ilmorog, or all Africa, controlled its own earth;” Ngugi's interest in pre-colonial self-determination demonstrates that political and economic systems in pre-contact times were inherently more organic (*Petals of Blood*

²¹ Glenn Hooper notes that across the European imperial experience, “one, fairly constant, element for colonists to consider [was] how to physically combat and control the environment” (1). Local landscapes were a never-ending “source of surprise and challenge;” they were “threatening one moment, [and] filled with unsurpassed potential the next” (Hooper 1). Ultimately, the colonial lens saw land as a resource waiting to be “cultivated, improved, planted and, above all, secured;” this violent transformation of Kenyan landscape was especially visible during Britain's anti-Mau Mau campaigns—a time when Kenya's countryside was “disfigured with the mechanics of warfare” (Hooper 5; 14).

²² Many of these projects were founded upon the ideologies of colonial landscape narratives—whereby indigenous peoples, Africans or otherwise, “tended to remain part of the scenery and yield no agency over their surroundings, because the assumption has been that groups of people with ‘simple’ technology remain close to nature and shaped by it, rather than able to shape it” (Brownell & Falola 2). African environments have been continuously misread “as displaying little influence by humans;” such misperceptions have subsequently been used as justifications for foreign interventions on African lands (Brownell & Falola 1; 2).

125). Via one of his four main characters, Munira, a primary school teacher, Ngugi summarizes the history of black peoples around the world:

Today, children, I am going to tell you about the history of Mr. Blackman in three sentences. In the beginning he had the land and the mind and the soul together. On the second day, they took the body away to barter it for silver coins. On the third day, seeing that he was still fighting back, they brought priests and educators to bind his mind and soul so that these foreigners could more easily take his land and its produce. (*Petals of Blood* 236)

Consequently, it is with much anguish that Ngugi's Ilmorogians come to terms with the betrayal of their post-independence leaders. Having placed so much hope in the social and political transformation of their country after the end of British rule, Ngugi's characters are frustrated to learn that while the face of bureaucracy may have changed from white to black, the underlying ideology has not. Kenya remains a space where competitive commerce and capitalist exchange dominate other more congenial relations. Inequality is a vicious cycle from which the economically disenfranchised are unable to escape. Ngugi describes the African postcolony as a "New Kenya. No free things. Without money you cannot buy land: and without land and property you cannot get a bank loan to start a business or buy land" (*Petals of Blood* 254). Even after independence, land has remained a vital source of economic empowerment; unfortunately, access to land rights is still as restricted as during colonial rule.

The post-independence modernization of the Kenyan state has been traumatic for Ilmorog's community, with many of them "displaced from the land" while the rest provided un-skilled labor for agri-business and manufacturing concerns (*Petals of Blood* 302). Despite their efforts, Ilmorogians can at best only hope to dwell in "hovels and shanties;" they are shut out from upper class neighborhoods and the bungalows formerly

owned by European settlers (*Petals of Blood* 302).²³ This crisis in wealth accumulation—by the few at the expense of the many—causes deep soul-searching.²⁴ As Ngugi asks:

Why, anyway, should soil, any soil, which after all was what was Kenya, be owned by an individual? Kenya, the soil, was the people's common shamba, and there was no way it could be right for a few, or a section, a single nationality, to inherit for their sole use what was communal. (*Petals of Blood* 302)

At the core of this dilemma is the tension between individual ambitions versus communal needs.²⁵ While Ilmorogians, and Kenyan peasants and laborers at large, view the country's natural resources as available for public needs, a faction within the state has usurped power in order to amass personal fortunes.²⁶ Ngugi is deeply antagonistic towards economic systems based on private ownership of such key resources as land. He displays his discontent through the figure of Munira, a problematic character whose personal history is marred by shirking his duty in supporting the people's effort to oust

²³ In fact, the novel is deeply concerned with “an explicitly political and economic relationship between the worker and the land;” in this regard, “cycles of human life are seen as intricately interwoven with the cycles of production” (Loflin 80). In other words, Ngugi's main interest in *PB* is the manner in which communities, as a whole, alter their natural environments. For instance, one of the novel's protagonists, Karega, eschews Gikuyu beliefs about the land, in favor of a “socialist approach which relies on labor and communal action” (Loflin 80). This is further emphasized in the novel by the fact that while there exists no distinction in the natural environments of the rich and poor parts of Ilmorog, it is the “man-made landscape” that registers class inequality: luxury homes versus slums (Loflin 81). Loflin's overall argument is that Ngugi is among a group of African authors whose fiction challenges western representations of the continent, and seeks to “reclaim the landscape” for indigenous communities (Loflin 76). “Writing on the Soil” aims to expand that discussion by including less canonical writers, as well as demonstrating the continuity of that debate up to the 21st century.

²⁴ For instance in 1969, elite members of the Gikuyu community met at President Jomo Kenyatta's home and took an oath that, while mimicking Mau Mau practices, was utterly opposed to nationalist ideals. Instead, these ceremonies swore members into ethnic solidarity that would willingly sabotage Kenya's future for Gikuyu advancement (Odhiambo 39). This level of ethnic chauvinism is opposed to the forms of cultural nationalism that formerly helped establish anti-colonial politics in Kenya; the sabotaging of indigenous cultural institutions by elites bent on amassing riches serves as an additional form of disenfranchising the poor—they are not only robbed of national resources, but also of their cultural heritage—causing deep ambivalence towards the postcolonial state.

²⁵ Hence, for instance “large plots of 100 acres, in addition to former European residences, were given to each African social and political elite;” this is despite the fact that many members of this group *also* acquired land through national settlements designed for small-scale farmers (Gaston 44).

²⁶ In “Matunda ya Uhuru, Fruits of Independence: Seven Theses on Nationalism in Kenya,” E. S. A. Odhiambo points out that it was the “petty bourgeoisie” who scrambled after Kenya's independence in the hopes of concretizing their way into a national bourgeoisie (40). Furthermore, this group had no commitment to the ideals that rallied anti-colonial politics: “freedom, unity and equality;” indeed, these concepts were uttered with falsehood (Odhiambo 40).

colonial rule. Ngugi's omniscient narrator describes Munira's interaction with the rural community of Ilmorog thus:

within six months he came to feel as if Ilmorog was his personal possession: he was a feudal head of a big house or a big mbari lord surveying his estate, but without the lord's pain of working out losses and gains, the goats lost and the young goats born. When the rains had come and seeds sprouted and then, in June, flowers came he felt as if the whole of Ilmorog had put on a vast floral-patterned cloth to greet its lord and master. (*Petals of Blood* 21)

The author undermines Munira's sense of entitlement by repeatedly indicating that Munira is merely fantasizing, and that perhaps he is even delusional. By juxtaposing Munira's one-roomed shack where he lives with images of a "big house" as well as wealth in livestock, Ngugi suggests that Munira is irrevocably out of touch with reality, and hence his desires to possess and control should be similarly dismissed. While Munira's work as a school teacher can be viewed as "nation-building" its potential to effect positive socio-economic change is subverted by his use of language that shuts out communal values; by referring to Ilmorog as his "new-found kingdom," Munira simultaneously channels territorial conquests and feudal economic systems—neither of which are founded upon the ideals of democracy and self-determination that Ngugi imagines (54).²⁷ Inspector Godfrey, a police detective investigating the three Ilmorog murders, is another advocate for capitalism. Portrayed as a flawed character, I read his depiction as Ngugi's additional invitation for his readers to question capitalism. That Godfrey is unable to conclusively determine who committed the crime proves him

²⁷ In *PB*, Munira functions as Ngugi's "indictment of a western attitude toward nature; [Munira's] attitude is similar to the traditional, western pastoral depiction of rural life, which elevated the picturesque qualities of rural scenes but tended to overlook the poverty of the rural people and their struggles to survive" (Loflin 81). Consequently, Munira's word choice betrays his "desire for power and control; it is the language of the colonial masters. Yet Munira's fantasies about nature do not lead to any ties to the community or to a sense of belonging in Ilmorog, but only in frustration" (Loflin 81). In many ways, Munira's "alienation from the land represents the contradictions in a Kenyan accepting western premises about nature, power, and community" (Loflin 81).

incompetent. Hence, I argue, we are to dismiss the detective's attestation that "the system of private ownership, of means of production, exchange and distribution, was for him synonymous with the natural order of things like the sun, the moon and the stars which seemed fixed and permanent in the firmament" as the rumblings of a failed bureaucrat (*Petals of Blood* 333). Godfrey is not only an unsuccessful investigator, but also an incompetent political scientist.

"Writing on the Soil," in addition to examining issues of African land rights, is also interested in writers' aesthetic choices. I investigate and determine to what extent an author's use of the pastoral advances or undermines her/his thematic concerns. For instance, Ngugi's *PB* challenges the (post)colonial idea of an African rural idyll. Although one of the text's protagonists is frequently "thrilled by the sight of women scratching the earth because they seemed at one with the green land," Ngugi suggests that this is a flawed view of rural forms of economic production (*Petals of Blood* 24). Munira's imagination that peasants are "one with the soil" and that their harmonious voices emphasize "the solitude he associated with his rural cloister" is wholly oblivious of the precarious nature of farming in Ilmorog (*Petals of Blood* 24; 75). Additionally, Ngugi's description of the landscape juxtaposes the idyll with visions of horror.

Ilmorog's geographic features form:

one of the most glorious and joyous sights in all the land, with the ridges and the plains draped by a level sheet of shimmering moonlit mist into a harmony of peace and silence: a human soul would have to be restless and raging beyond reach of hope and salvation for it not to be momentarily overwhelmed and stilled by the sight and the atmosphere. Even without the moon Ilmorog ridge, as it drops into the plains along which Ilmorog river flows, must form one of the greatest natural beauties in the world. (*Petals of Blood* 67)

And yet, in the midst of this natural beauty, there exists “a worm-eaten flower ... [that] cannot bear fruit;” hence, when Munira argues that communities “must always kill worms,” I read not only commentary on plant husbandry, but also a critique on postcolonial oppressors—worms who have delayed the fruits of independence (*Petals of Blood* 22). Ngugi challenges previous depictions of rural idyll by arguing that life in the countryside is just as hard, if not noticeably worse, than it was during the colonial era. This is a stark indictment of African independence and its authors for having failed to live up to the masses’ dreams. Ultimately, Ngugi’s canonical work approaches issues of African land rights from multiple perspectives—especially the influence of neo-postcolonial domination. “Writing on the Soil” not only complicates our understanding of post-independence African nationalism, but also extends Ngugi’s discussion of postcolonial citizenship by closely examining categories of identity such as class, ethnicity, and gender.

“Writing on the Soil” as a whole, then, recovers a lost argument within postcolonial theory about materiality and its influence on textual aesthetics and artistic production. I examine how authors have challenged the disenfranchisement of people from their land, and the kinds of counter-narratives imagined to effect socio-political transformation—some more successful than others. Like Glenn Hooper’s *Landscape & Empire: 1770-2000* (Ashgate, 2005), Mayke Kaag’s and Annelies Zoomers’ *The Global Land Grab: Beyond the Hype* (Zed Books, 2014), Emily Brownell’s and Toyin Falola’s *Landscape, Environment and Technology in Colonial and Postcolonial Africa* (Routledge, 2012), Karen Oslund’s co-edited *Cultivating the Colonies: Colonial States &*

their Environmental Legacies (Ohio University Press, 2011) “Writing on the Soil” underlines the importance of land rights in social mobility, citizenship, and belonging.

“Writing on the Soil” also examines the metaphorical labor that land performs in African literary and visual texts, while considering its materiality. This project thus complements a tradition of scholarship ranging from D. E. Cosgrove’s *Social Formation & the Symbolic Landscape* (Barnes & Nobles Books, 1985) and Jonathan S. Adams’ and Thomas O. McShane’s *The Myth of Wild Africa: Conservation without Dillusion* (Norton, 1992), to more recent volumes concerned with contemporary African land rights, such as Christine Berberich’s and Neil Campbell’s *Land & Identity: Theory, Memory & Practice* (Rodopi, 2012), James McCann’s *Green Land, Brown Land, Black Land: an Environmental History of Africa, 1800-1990* (Heinemann, 1999), and Vigdis Broch-Due’s and Richard A. Schroeder’s *Producing Nature and Poverty in Africa* (Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2000).

My intervention contributes to this expanding tradition of scholarship by demonstrating that categories of subjecthood—not just postcoloniality—are key factors in determining access to land rights. “Writing on the Soil” accomplishes several things that are unique in the landscape of African land rights scholarship. First, it is concerned with feminist cultural nationalism as espoused by Kenyan writers who created empowered female characters to counter colonial-era misogyny—both European and home-grown. Second, it explores how post-Sixties experiments with African forms of Socialism alienated women and ethnic minorities and reversed political gains of the independence era. Third, it pursues the African postcolonial dystopia even further, examining the symbolic deployment of male and female bodies in fiction centered on

land conflicts and political violence. Finally, “Writing on the Soil” explores contemporary African urbanity. This last part of my argument is keen on the tradition of transgressive practices of city-dwellers in their daily struggle for space and a sense of belonging (rights) vis-à-vis the central government—colonial or otherwise. Large academic and non-academic readerships have developed around the issue of global land grabs—a concept discussed by the IMF, United Nations, and the World Bank. “Writing on the Soil” extends this debate into the realm of literary criticism, visual and urban studies, and in so doing furnishes a new account of the basic creative and social dilemmas that lie at the heart of postcolonial literature.

Chapter 1: Visual Rhetoric & Literal Tropes: Fantasies of Emptiness vs. Conventions of Ownership

In my examination of East African land rights, this chapter is concerned with fantasies of emptiness as expressed in colonial visual documents as well as in Margaret Ogola's and Grace Ogot's novels. As the visual and fictional texts that I examine here will show, both settler and colonized communities "rehearse" notions of land ownership within the space of cultural artifacts. "Belonging," which emerges as a set of practices repeated over time, is deeply influenced by social norms; hence, a comprehensive debate regarding African land rights must include gender as a key category of identity and subjecthood. Colonial photography envisioned the colonized subject's body in a way that encouraged sinister use of that body as labor in settler agriculture. In the first section of this chapter, I will study images produced by Kenya's colonial machinery, under the auspices of the Kenyan Information Office (KIO). KIO's portfolio, like photography by other colonial artists—such as Germaine Krull and Maxime Du Camp—was intent on manipulating its portrayal of black bodies towards certain ideological goals. Colonial photography lends itself to a discussion of land rights due to its projection of ideas regarding order/disorder onto landscapes—complementing the imperial objective to bring "civilization" to otherwise chaotic environments—and ultimately its involvement in the European fantasy of "empty land."²⁸ Furthermore, the images seduce their viewers into

²⁸ There are several key works that establish the nature of British colonialism in Kenya. David Anderson and Caroline Elkins have done historical work to document the violence with which the Colonial Office met indigenous anti-colonial agitation in the Forties and Fifties. Jomo Kenyatta's *Facing Mt. Kenya*, Jaramogi Odinga's *Not Yet Uhuru*, Muthono Likimani's *Passbook Number F.47927*, Wambui Otieno's *Mau Mau's Daughter*, as well as Tom Mboya's autobiography all seek to explain why native Kenyans felt the need to dislodge British colonialism from their nation. Prior to both of these collections, however, is another set of texts that sought to explain the *need for* colonialism. In terms similar to Rudyard Kipling's "White Man's Burden," administrative documents produced by such organs as the Kenya Information Office, as well as writing by settlers such as Elspeth Huxley, and Karen Blixen all provide rationales for the occupation and colonization of Kenya—be it favorable climate for export agriculture, or the inability of

ignoring the chaos and violence associated with the creation of colonial settlements, urban or rural.

However, African postcolonial writing has produced chronicles of land ownership—native land was not empty, but has had an aboriginal history alongside colonial occupation—that are an alternative to those of colonialism. For example, Grace Ogot's *The Promised Land* attends to colonial bias regarding indigenous communities and their homes, and demonstrates colonial acquiescence to the violence connected with settler occupation. The writer stages her critique of European colonialism through representation of African colonizers. Ogot deploys folklore to construct narratives of belonging among Kenya's Luo community—weaving tales of epic battles between the Luo and the Nandi which enabled the former ethnicity to claim supremacy and ultimate ownership of arable regions of western Kenya. Moreover, folklore is important when Luo families migrate to Eastern Tanganyika; in this new homeland, customary rites associated with storytelling become important gestures to signal possession of "virgin land." Unlike the factual and historical Kenya outside her novel, in Ogot's fictional world resistance is enacted through magic. The effects, however, can prove to be just as fatal for "settlers" who attempt to dispossess "natives" even though (or perhaps precisely because) the two groups share the same racial heritage: African.²⁹ *The Promised Land* is important to my discussion of land rights in this chapter because of its use of narrative to challenge

local communities to take advantage of local resources. As may well be imagined, these texts propagate competing ideologies whose remnants can still be traced in contemporary Kenya.

²⁹ Mahmood Mamdani's *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* provides much needed analysis on the ramifications of the two labels "native" vs. "settler" in the Congo region. This discussion is also very appropriate in colonial regions known as "settler-colonies" such as Zimbabwe, Kenya, and Algeria. As it turns out, "native" and "settler" no longer refer to communities that can be differentiated by race, but rather to, for all intents and purposes, different groups of indigenous Africans.

colonial land rights discourse. On the one hand, communities produce explanations that privilege emptiness and the potential for settler occupation while simultaneously reproducing tales that foreground communal ownership of ancestral land. Ogot stages a conflict about settlement between black Africans that allows the reader to imagine questions of “otherness” and settlement outside the colonial paradigm. In other words, colonization of land—whether conducted by Europeans or Africans—is presented as a process, a narrative process. I believe the writer does this, in part, to highlight the importance of gender in discussions of African land rights.

Though published thirty years after Ogot’s work, Margaret Ogola’s *The River and the Source* shares several thematic concerns. At stake for Ogola is the capacity for Kenyan women to conceive novel ways of being; her text questions male privilege as a cultural norm by staging the symbolic absence of Luo sons from land transactions in the early part of the twentieth century. *The River and the Source* depicts the patriarchal alienation of Luo women and colonial disenfranchisement of indigenous Kenyans as systems of oppression that could be resisted through acts of self-narration. Ogola mobilizes communal myths of origin to resist British imperialism, and her female characters wield Christian narratives to challenge patriarchy. Her work is important to my discussion of land rights and belonging not only because it demonstrates the voiding of African customs as perpetrated by colonial officials but also because it responds to the imperialist rhetoric embedded in visual colonial texts. Through Kenya’s cultural heritage—including legal and oral traditions—Ogola then presents the reader with antagonistic notions of native/settler (outsider), men/women or husband/wife, as well as

violence/non-violence and reveals how these social binaries influenced patterns of land ownership.

Ogot's and Ogola's writing presents and critiques various conventions of ownership—divine bequest, myths of origin, and violence—all meant to safeguard a community's, or individual's, land possessions. Some of these conventions—especially bloodshed—fail repeatedly. Rather than provide further justification for the ownership rights of one entity over another, the novels subvert this mechanism and expose its unsustainability. Although armed struggle was a key component of anti-colonial efforts to oust European settlers, both authors suggest that its effectiveness could not translate into the postcolonial era. More importantly, *The Promised Land* and *The River and the Source* demand that post-independence African nationalisms resolve issues of gender equity in regards to land rights.

I: Colonial Visual Rhetoric

Photography's strength in surveillance and ordering lies in its ability to “stage” objectivity—an asset that imperialism made use of to prove that colonized geographies were de facto *tabula rasa*.³⁰ Photography as a discipline privileges its mechanical face and actively cloaks its ideological footing, taking refuge in universalism, technical expertise, and knowledge-seeking maxims. While emerging from different political

³⁰ In addition to photography and the written word, cartography was also recruited for colonial projects. Maps, by combining visual and literal techniques, deploy language in their “image-forming” capacity and provide layered visual vocabularies (Ngugi 15). While a map can be read without attention to its literal components, the written parataxis provides additional details that tell a story of their own. Maps have a “history of violence” in their long service to the nation-state (Harvey 7). The state, having monopolized maps and their “graphic form of discourse,” has over time become “the map’s most important sponsor [and] its heaviest user” (Wood 4). The emergence of African nation-states can be traced back to Berlin 1884 when European powers “carved” out their Spheres of Influence. The resultant political borders—many of which remained intact after Africa’s de-colonization—symbolize the violence enacted on African peoples and their homelands. The re-division of African societies into colonial spaces illustrates cartography’s complicity in processes of domination.

underpinnings, Germany's East African imperial project had some similarities to its British counterpart. For one, both were geared towards permanent European settlement; secondly, both deployed photography to excite prospective settler families and to encourage migration. To this end, "colonialist visual culture elided the differences between reality and an ideological fantasy of the future" (Sandler 39). Settlers sought to manifest a colonial imagery that was projected onto subjugated lands.³¹ German photographers in the early twentieth century, for example Ilse Steinhoff, attempted to "incorporate geographically distant territories into the heart of the German nation;" East Africa was "foreign yet German," trapped in the mechanisms of "othering" that accompanied colonial annexation (Sandler 37; 38). Curated as travel photography, Steinhoff's work feigned objectivity—much like colonial anthropology self-advertised as scientific.

British and German colonial photography in early twentieth century East Africa was, as it turns out, part of a long history of cooperation between photography and empire. As early as 1869, the British Colonial Office requested photographic images from its governors to assist in the scientific study of race (Engmann 53). Therefore Steinhoff's work, almost half a century later, was part of an expansive archive of European imagery about the racialized other. Ultimately, this photography was deployed in the "production, re-production, and maintenance of European colonial forms of knowledge" (Engmann 46). The success of colonial photography was in its ability to

³¹ The projection of a European fantasy onto a colonized region can also be discerned in a tangentially-related project: British photography in the West Indies at the turn of the twentieth century. The Jamaican tourism industry spawned a "tropicalizing iconography" visible in advertisement photographs which marketed the region as a holiday destination (Rosenberg 42). Overwhelmingly, the photos which emerged from these efforts are characterized by an outsider's gaze—one that objectifies the island and prepares it for European "pleasure and consumption" (Rosenberg 44).

“camouflage and maintain systems of power and domination inherent in colonial ideology and the colonial effort to categorize, define, and subordinate” (Engmann 52). For both German and British colonial efforts in the first half of the twentieth century, photography’s ability to transcend illiteracy and deliver a visual discursive economy to those marginalized by print media was crucial (Roberts 4). Intellectual work which demonstrates photography’s implication in the processes of “differentiating, ordering and controlling” advances our understanding of colonial subjugation and the resistance it sparked (Hight & Sampson 7).³²

With the advent of film, photography’s potency was augmented through audio and performance techniques and the British Colonial Office was actively engaged in producing material that supported its project of empire. The creation of visual artifacts to be consumed by Britain’s colonized subjects was a multi-pronged endeavor. It was, for instance, undertaken through such bureaucratic arms as the Empire Marketing Board, the Films Division of the Ministry of Information and the Colonial Film Unit. Other efforts included the presentation of policy—such as *Mass Education in African Society* (1944)—as well as film journals—for instance *Colonial Cinema*, a magazine published between 1943 and 1955; finally, there was the Bantu Educational Kinema Experiment—an early 1930s effort to help modernize His Majesty’s African subjects (Smyth “Development of British Colonial Film Policy, 1927-1939” 442). As its name suggests, the Empire Marketing Board advertised the benefits of colonial settler schemes across the British Empire. Subsequent iterations of the same bureaucratic structure were geared, not

³² Anti-colonial efforts in French West Africa offer overtly politicized uses of visual texts. After the military subjugation of Senegambia by France’s colonial machinery, Senegalese Muslims re-situated their resistance in a domain where the French had no advantage: religion. Using visual representations—chromolithographs with religious illustrations—of saints, martyrs and other religious figures, Senegal’s Islamic clerics sought to continue anti-colonial opposition.

towards European settlers, but towards the social and cultural transformation of their African subjects. Hence, the Colonial Film Unit produced and distributed such films as: *Post Office Savings Bank* (no date), *Village Development* (1948), *Childbirth Today* (1949), *Mr. Clever-who-Banks-his-Savings* (1950), *Murram Block-Making* (1950), *A Challenge to Ignorance* (1950), *Dysentery* (1950), and *Mr. Mensah Builds a House* (1955). Shared across Britain's African colonies—from The Gambia, Ghana, Nigeria, Uganda, and even south to Rhodesia—this filmography underwent translation to cater to local linguistic needs (Smyth "British Documentary Movement" 88). The films sought to educate Africans on subjects as varied as personal finance and public health. Underlying such efforts, of course, is the medium's utility as an agent of "colonialism and imperial rhetoric" (Hight & Sampson 7).³³ Imperialism's desire for absolute control over its subject—an ominous goal—was especially geared towards implementing black labor on white farms.³⁴

³³ Colonial visual culture, in photography or films, established a sinister use of the colonized subject's body. Often by seeking to erase native bodies from their indigenous environments, photography satisfied the colonizer's voyeuristic appetite. In a discussion of Germaine Krull's work in French Equatorial Africa, for example, Kim Sichel identifies "European fascination with black semi-nude bodies" (272). Krull's photos of indigenous women highlighted their nudity and demonstrated Africa's "differing standards of beauty" (Sichel 272). In other words, African bodily difference was figured as backwardness; if the African was from "out of this world," literally and metaphorically, it was much easier to dispossess her of her native resources. A similar impulse can be observed in Maxime Du Camp's photographic work in Nubia. Du Camp converted Nubia into a *terra nullius* by distancing it from its original inhabitants (Ballerini 44). Du Camp's photos are remarkable in their repeated inclusion of Ishmael, a young Nubian man. Ishmael, the lone figure, is granted a *presence* in Du Camp's work precisely as shorthand for African *absence* in contemporary global history. The protocols established by Krull's and Du Camp's colonial photography are not unique and can be traced to other spaces, on and off the African continent.

³⁴ African historiography demonstrates that heritage was a productive area from which to stage resistance. Raymond Williams' theorization about "structures of feeling" is of import here. How Williams identifies culture with "processes of change" helps to explain why many an African nationalist movement begun as a "cultural renaissance." In Kenya, for example, Jomo Kenyatta was initially an author and cultural critic in his position as editor of the magazine *Mwigwithania*, before he became a freedom fighter. Anticipating this, colonial hegemony worked to subvert any resistance by encouraging the colonized to identify more with the oppressor than with her fellow colonized peoples. Ngugi wa Thiong'o categorically implicates language for its corroboration of imperial endeavors; he identifies language as a problematic area fraught with contestation. In a famous passage, Ngugi notes that "the biggest weapon wielded and actually daily unleashed by imperialism against that collective defiance is the cultural bomb. The effect of a cultural

Like the Empire Marketing Board that preceded it, and the Colonial Film Unit that came after, the Kenya Information Office (KIO) was a colonial project tasked with public relations duties. Formed in September 1939, it was initially headed by Colonel R. B. Turner who—unlike Ewart Grogan the other potential appointee—was not a staunch European settler and could inspire some confidence in both the indigenous and Indian populations of British East Africa. Intent on countering enemy propaganda amongst Kenya’s civilian population, the KIO published newsletters in indigenous languages—including Urdu, Gujarati, and Swahili—and organized radio broadcasts at local village-level meetings (Gadsden 406). In addition to strengthening the loyalty of the colonized towards the Empire—and faith in the Allied Forces’ ultimate victory—KIO also sought to showcase African efforts in support of the war. By 1945, as World War II ended, KIO served to disseminate information about government policy on issues such as crop and animal husbandry (Gadsden 420).

For my discussion, I will focus on a group of images attributed to the Kenya Information Office and currently lodged at the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. *Albums of Photographs of Kenya, 1940-1948, its Natives and European Settlers: An introduction to Kenya, Vols. 1-4* is a collection of three hundred images; it provides a preliminary glance at Britain’s East African colony at the end of World War II. Like Steinhoff’s work, *Albums of Photographs of Kenya* has been pre-curated—someone chose these particular images, and determined the order in which they were to appear in

bomb is to annihilate a people’s belief in their names, in their languages” (3). Colonial education was a stage for demonstrating the colonizer’s superiority; the dawn of the classroom, and its attendant “psychological violence” came after the eve of “physical violence” enacted by the “sword” and the “bullet” (Ngugi 9). As this project will establish, postcolonial writers are keen on (re)deploying language as a tool against colonial alienation. In this endeavor, the seminal work done by Ashcroft et al in *The Empire Writes Back* sets the stage for my discussion of how formerly marginal/peripheral colonial outposts have wrestled the colonizer’s language and re-directed it towards anti-domination efforts.

the album—enabling a comprehensive view of European sentiments. Unlike previous work by the KIO, or even the cinematography produced by the Colonial Film Unit, these four volume albums enable a discussion regarding “corpuses of photographs” and how the selection that goes into creating such a collection is itself exemplary of colonial ideology (Bajorek 160). In other words, there is a discursive that exists from examining *Albums of Photographs of Kenya* as a complete oeuvre—an archive—rather than merely approaching it as an incoherent assemblage of images. The archive, as a discursive framework, has the potential “to illuminate the cultures, politics and institutional contexts by which it is constrained” (Bajorek 158). What makes it into the *Albums of Photographs of Kenya* is just as important as what has been left or what is missing.

Colonial photography lends itself to a discussion of land rights due its investment in ideas regarding order/disorder—complementing the imperial objective to bring “order,” as one characteristic of “civilization,” to otherwise chaotic environments—and ultimately its involvement in Europe’s imperial fantasy of “empty land.” Colonial Kenya produced a visual rhetoric privileging use of the native body for agricultural labor; more malevolent, however, is the medium’s expertise in making this link seem “factual.” Deployment of the black indigenous body in white settler farms was photography’s intervention in debates about productivity/unproductivity, as well as industriousness/sloth, vis-à-vis African communities. Moreover, though black bodies were always depicted laboring, they were also always under white supervision. KIO’s portfolio was intent on manipulating its portrayal of black bodies to accomplish certain ideological objectives. These spectacles of black labor under white organization reduced

the former to “beasts of burden,” or at least likened them to other inanimate farm machinery.

The collection of photos from the Kenya Information Office (KIO) provides evidence of these stereotypes in its depiction of European farming efforts. For instance, Figure-A & Figure-B show prosperous settler farms; the unsaid implication, of course, is that indigenous communities were wholly unable to achieve similar results and that they too needed taming. This provided further justification for their dispossession and the use of African labor on settler farms. Figure-A depicts three or four African men loading about ten pigs onto a truck. One man in the foreground seems to be corralling the animals from their pen, while three others look on. The image is framed to focus and center on the animals while the men appear on the fringes, mostly showing only parts of their body. My reading of this photograph is concerned with the extent to which the men are seemingly being rounded up alongside the pigs.

In Figure-B, hills form the background while the middle ground is filled with tall trees growing close together. It is in the foreground that we see nine or so African workers, mostly women and children bent over in a blooming pyrethrum field. The laborers are harvesting pyrethrum flowers which were generally shipped back to Europe for processing into pesticides. Though the black laborers are centered in the photo, this only serves to hide the fact that the photographer’s focus is not actually on the employees but on the farm and its produce. The workers’ faces are blurry; none of them emerge as individuals. Instead, by highlighting the color contrast between the black workforce and the white pyrethrum flowers, the photographer encourages us to view the Africans as one indistinct mass. Nevertheless, the laborers are vital to the picture’s implications: that an

ordered landscape is one on which blacks are hard at work for whites.³⁵ In both pictures, black bodies are part of the land in an objectified way; they are part of the socio-political “structure” that is the colonial economy. In contrast, colonial settlers were part of this same landscape in a controlling and/or dominating role. Even if not in the frame, they occupy the invincible positions of farm owner, farm manager, photographer, and audience for the image. By excluding representations of white farmers laboring in open fields, *Albums of Photographs of Kenya* establishes a labor dichotomy that is predicated upon race: blacks work, while whites oversee. This image builds on earlier representations of European rural landscapes in which white peasant labor was naturalized as picturesque *and* in the service of middle class or aristocratic consumption of “natural beauty,” and, implicitly, of food.³⁶

“African laziness” was a myth that white settlers often commented on. In a 1939 District Commissioner’s report a colonial official remarked with “consternation at the idleness of the modern black girl in Nyanza Province who seldom toiled and never sp[a]n” (D.C. Report). The preceding series of photos discussed in this section fall on both sides of this European administrator’s argument.

³⁵ We can discern similar rhetoric in nineteenth century landscape images of West Indian plantations.; in particular, James Hakewill’s *Picturesque Tour of the Island of Jamaica* (1820s). Another instance of photography hiding the labor of colonial production can be seen in Erin Haney’s discussion of images from the Belgian Congo. In this particular case, the violence of King Leopold’s regime is concealed and “nothing in the images suggests the physical demands of rubber sap on flesh, nor indicates the means by which people were compelled to this harvest. The photographer’s choice amounts to a staggering elision” (Haney 97). Neither the beatings nor the maiming that accompanied much of the rubber harvesting in King Leopold’s Congo has been depicted in this particular photographer’s oeuvre—despite the fact that the inhumane aspects of this colonial project caused a human rights uproar at the turn of the twentieth century.

³⁶ In “In the Wake of Colonialism and Modernity,” Biodun Jeyifo argues that such connections are further underlined by the fact that Europe enacted a “civilizing” process against its lower classes at the same time that colonialism was under way.

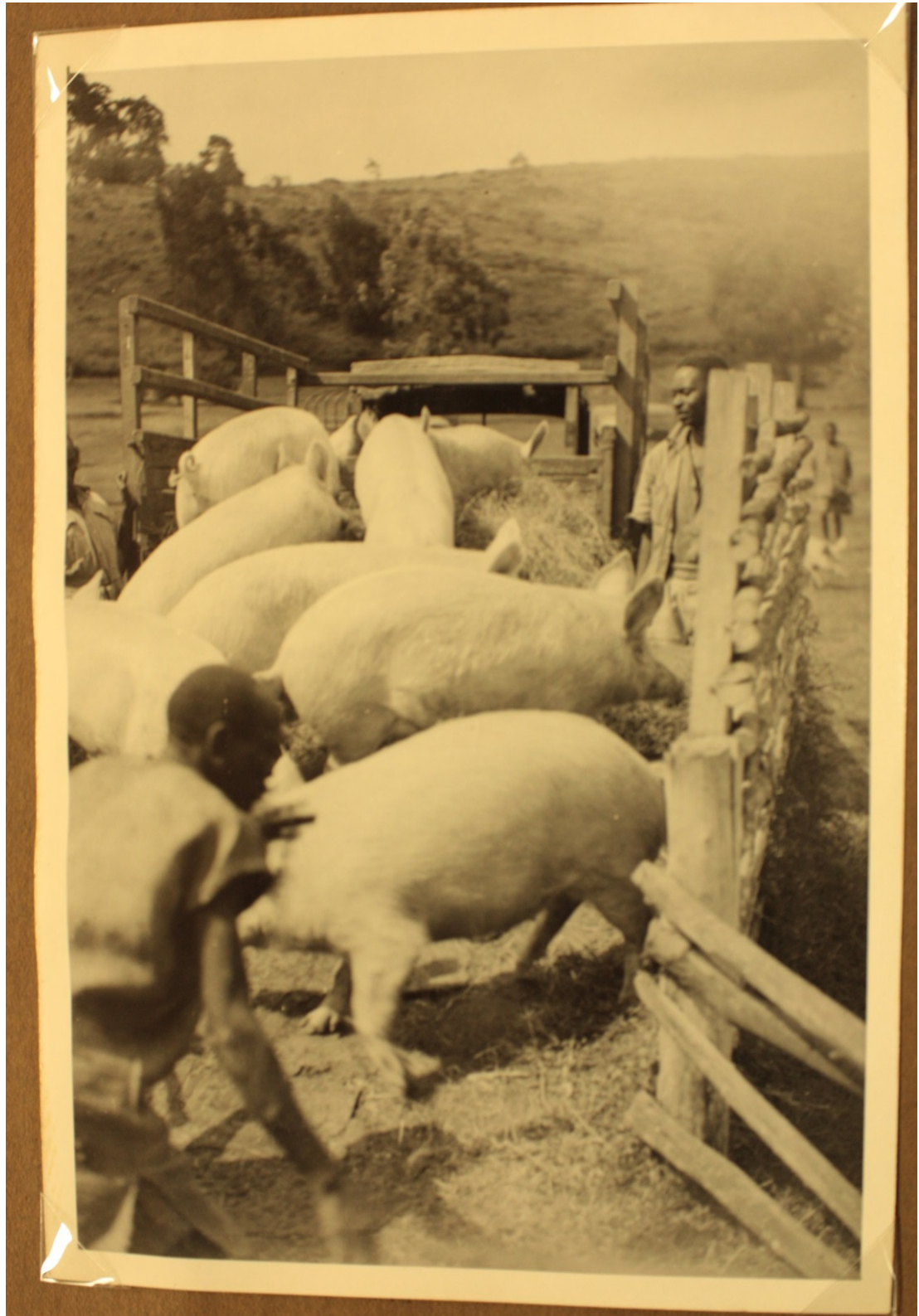


Figure-A Photographer unknown, Kenya Information Office, 1940-1948. Prints & Photographs Division, Library of Congress, LOT 3852 (G).



Figure-B Photographer unknown, Kenya Information Office, 1940-1948. Prints & Photographs Division, Library of Congress, LOT 3852 (G).

On the one hand, those photographs remarking upon the “order and symmetry” of the colonial project do this with the unspoken assumption that European “work ethic” was far superior to anything the native populations could conceive.

This prejudice was also premised upon sentiments that Other races had neither the requisite discipline nor strength to undertake the “civilizing project” that was under way globally. On the other hand, the images I’ve described undermine the fallacy of African sloth. They demonstrate, instead, that Africans were engaged in various economic activities that were essential to the overall profitability of the colonial venture. African laborers served as clerks, porters, domestic staff, health workers, police officers etc. in

addition to providing Kenya's settler community with cheap rural labor. At the very least, Figure-A & Figure-B invite us to question the grounds upon which Europeans made such sweeping generalizations regarding "the lazy African."

These two visual representations of colonial farm life, especially Figure-A, also invite investigation regarding the space of the African male in colonial Kenya. Young men—fathers, sons, and husbands—were repeatedly carted off to join the carrier corps in World War I and World War II. Frequently, many never returned, while some who made their way back home were permanently disabled, physically or mentally. For instance, several characters in Margaret Ogola's *The River and the Source* serve the British army as porters Tanganyika. One never returns and is thus classified Missing in Action (MIA), while the other loses a leg and ends up a beggar in Kenya's third largest town, Kisumu. Often, not even the bodies of the deceased were returned to their loved ones for last rites. Instead, a government document such as a soldier's dog tag or perhaps an identity card was returned to the grieving family with "much gratitude" from the British government. The prominence of men in Figure-A—perhaps an attempt to disavow the absence of men—is also a sinister allusion to a British form of gulags that made the African male, especially in Central Kenya, "rare and endangered." In response to anti-British politics in the late Forties and early Fifties, the colonial government set up numerous concentration/labor camps where it herded men from the Embu, Akamba, Meru, and Kikuyu communities. While women and children were imprisoned in fortress-like villages, men were carted off to remote areas with minimal communication access and forced to perform hard labor: building roads, quarrying etc. Both practices seriously challenged Mau Mau efforts to coordinate anti-colonial resistance. At the height of their

implementation, these British policies had emptied parts of Kenya of all male members of the community aged between fifteen and sixty. Finally, these images not only mask the reality of the absence of African men in the Kenyan landscape but in doing so they also evoke the forced hard labor men performed in colonial detention camps. In other words, the reverse side to the concentrated presence of black male bodies in these landscapes is their absence due to colonial violence and labor demands.



Figure-C Photographer unknown, Kenya Information Office, 1940-1948. Prints & Photographs Division, Library of Congress, LOT 3852 (G).

The self-imposed European mandate of civilizing the savage was the *raison d'être* for colonial missions.³⁷ In *Figure-C*, the photographer attempts to capture the

³⁷ Rudyard Kipling's *White Man's Burden* comes to mind as an artistic invocation of empire's goal to transform the world for the better.

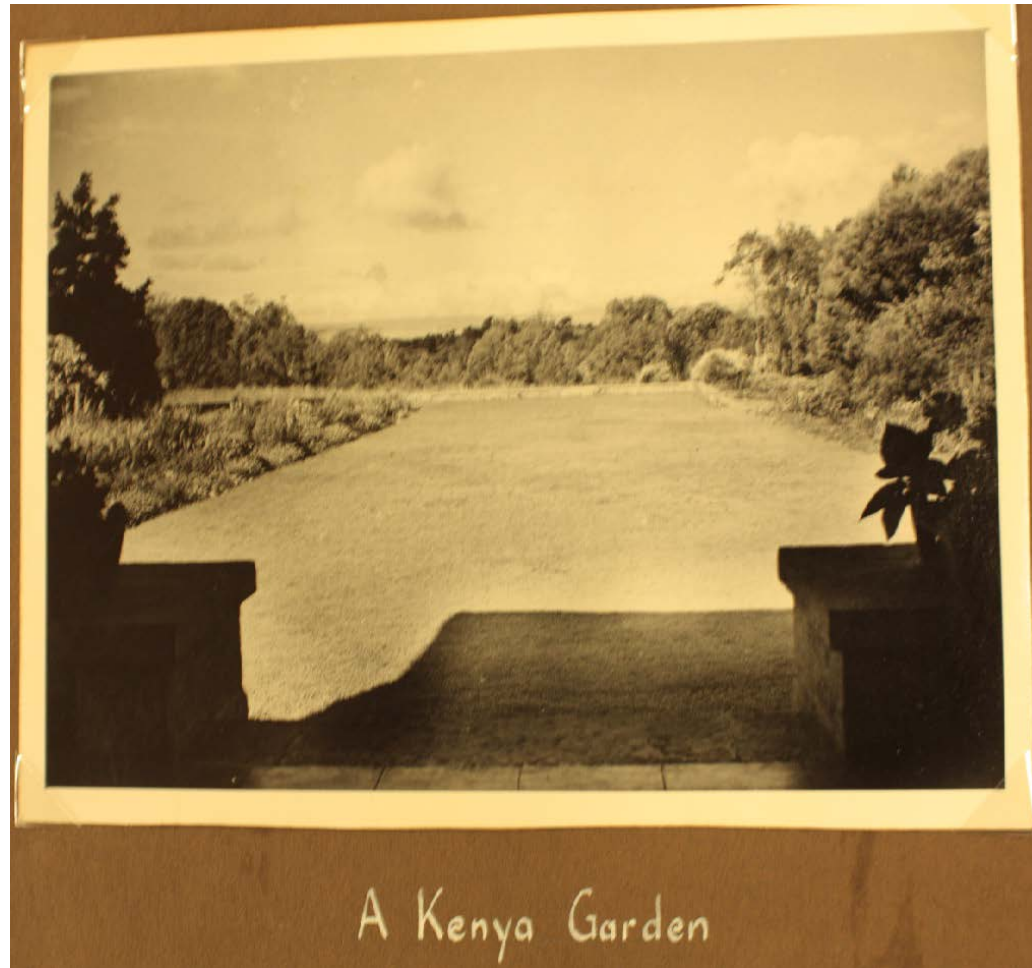
architectural and physical manifestation of white settlement in the territory—especially the colonial capital, Nairobi. The picture is taken from a fairly high angle, suggesting either a very tall observation tower or low flying aircraft. The first significant feature in the frame is the road cutting diagonally from the bottom right to the top left hand corner. On the road we see not only motorists and pedestrians, but also evidence of public transportation, and manicured lawns on either side of wide motorways. The arrangement of city infrastructure inspires such descriptions as “majestic, royal, and symmetric.” The second prominent feature is the 1/3 of the picture frame to the top right hand corner that is occupied by storied buildings. One can deduce that some of the buildings are occupied for commercial purposes while others are used as family domiciles. Overall, the image exudes an aura of proportion and magnanimity from the colonial city. What is significant is not so much that the visual rhetoric of the photographer is effective in its beguiling agenda, but that it serves to communicate a message entirely different from our contemporary understanding of colonial settlement as occupation. What lies hidden outside the frame is a much better indicator of the true nature of white domination in Africa. Not only is the photograph connected to representations of the countryside, it is also to be understood in relation to the rural turmoil that accompanied creation of colonial urban centers.

Firstly, the image seduces the viewer to ignore the chaos and violence associated with the creation of colonial settlements, urban or rural. To achieve an architectural sense of *everything in its place*, British colonial administrators alienated and displaced indigenous communities deemed a hindrance towards colonial glory. Health and sanitation was one of the more frequently invoked reasons to dispossess native

communities and banish them from ancestral lands. Consider, for instance, the 1925 conflict between the Church Missionary Society (CMS) and local communities in Maseno, western Kenya. The CMS, apparently anxious about the health of its white nurses and doctors, lamented that the “village is too close” (“Letter to Dr. Ernest Cook” Ross). By describing the neighboring African settlement as prone to an outbreak of the plague, Dr. G. M. Ross sought to have the natives moved and pushed back, creating some form of a cordon sanitaire. The fate of the village serves as an indicator of colonial prejudice and how it was deployed. Secondly, the image invites us to imagine how the qualities of order and symmetry manifest themselves in rural areas far away from the city. How the colonial master (and mistress) enforced direction in an African landscape that was otherwise understood as strange and other. And finally, how the rural colonial home, or the farmhouse, participated in the narrative of a British *mission civilatrice* enacted upon African peoples. In this regard, *A Kenya Garden* is the rural complement of Figure-C. Together, these two visual texts provide us with a fuller interpretation of what it meant for white settlement to take root in Africa.

A Kenya Garden deploys several motifs in its effort to connect with the viewer. The camera is positioned just at the edge of a verandah and captures within its frame a manicured lawn, a garden with flowers, and barely visible hills in the distance. The whole image is bathed by strong sunlight helping the photograph maintain sharp focus on both the foreground and the background. Overall, the picture is predicated upon a subtle balance between empty and occupied space. The empty, well-kept lawn in front of the house is an apt monument to the work of empire. Colonial projects, like the trade in African bodies that preceded it, were founded upon the emptying of African spaces. If

initially this meant emptying Africa of its sons and daughters for hard labor in the Caribbean and across the Indian Ocean, by the early twentieth century this had transformed into emptying Africa of its raw materials. Simultaneously, European empires took care to *cultivate* their African subjects—grooming them for clerical jobs, and frequently recruiting them into European armies.



A Kenya Garden Photographer unknown, Kenya Information Office, 1940-1948. Prints & Photographs Division, Library of Congress, LOT 3852 (G).

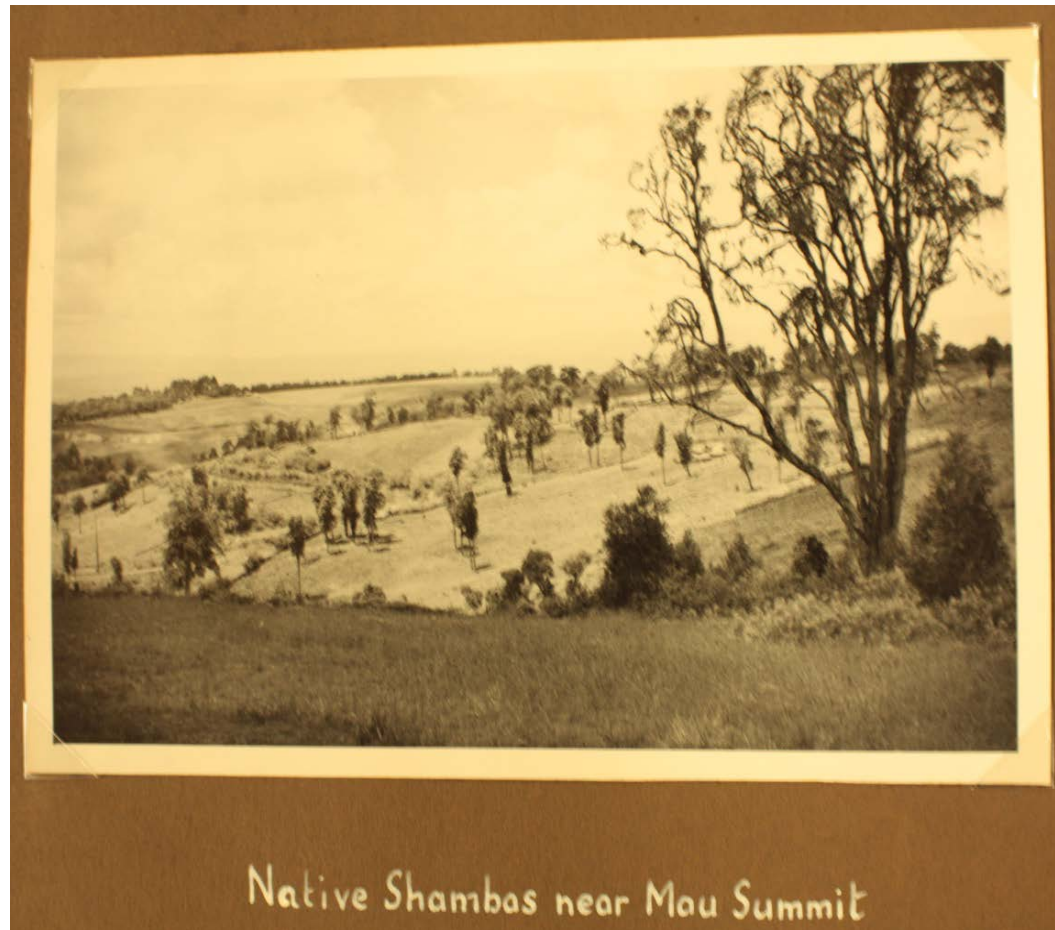
The void lawn invites us to question the possibility that native communities formerly resident on the site have now been relocated as happened, for example, in the

creation of Kenya's White Highlands.³⁸ The distant hills on the horizon and the open sky also contribute to this sense of emptiness. In addition, they hint at endless possibilities for the transformation of African landscapes into replicas of the British environment.

Simultaneously, however, the vastness of the land "out there" can also hold ominous signs. Can the small *in here* contend with the seemingly much larger and more dangerous *out there*? Indeed that question is represented in shorthand by the photographer's inclusion of a tiny section of the house, presumably the verandah. We catch a glimpse of a stone wall, potted plants and a concrete/brick floor in the picture's foreground. Behind the photographer and the camera is, we can assume, the rest of the house. The verandah wall is important here in demarcating a native/savage/untamed out there vs. a colonial/civilized/cultured in-doors. In conjunction with the cultivated plant fence visible in the middle, the verandah wall is the last bastion of white civilization.

Nevertheless, "out there" is not a singular phenomenon; the image depicts a series of borders which differentiate one brand from another. There are several *kinds* of out there and not all are benign or productive. Unlike *A Kenya Garden* which depicts a tamed lawn, other photographs show wild outdoor areas managed and owned by indigenous communities, *Native Shambas near Mau Summit* features a grassy foreground, a middle ground showing trees dispersed across cleared farmland, and a background that is dominated by a bright sky. The emptiness in the "native shambas" or indigenous farms – as the picture is titled – is quite dissimilar to that featured in the previous image.

³⁸ In his memoir, *Dreams in a Time of War*, Ngugi wa Thiong'o narrates the fate of a section of the Kikuyu community in the Highlands whose ancestral land was acquired by ex-service men of the British army, while the original inhabitants were packed in trucks and shipped off to an arid region of the country to eke out a living.



Native Shambas near Mau Summit Photographer unknown, Kenya Information Office, 1940-1948. Prints & Photographs Division, Library of Congress, LOT 3852 (G).

Though the space is almost idyllic, it does not inspire notions of home in the same way that the verandah wall does. The stone wall suggests that settler domiciles are permanent and monumental while the absence of native dwellings in *Native Shambas near Mau Summit* alludes to settler prejudice regarding their temporal and trivial quality.

The reading of this image is predicated upon a distinction of the audience from the subject matter. As it turns out, this differentiation is one of the ways in which landscape photography disseminates its rhetoric. “The concept of landscape encodes, measures and reproduces the viewer’s alienation from nature. Landscape measures our

distance from land” (Giblett 55). A successful viewing of *Native Shambas near Mau Summit* relies on the spectator’s ability to distance herself from the image, its contents, and as well as its context. In the hands of the photographer:

the camera objectifies land as landscape and in doing so renders it as a visual phenomenon for the sense of sight and as a surface for aesthetic appreciation. The land is rendered as a kind of cadaver laid out for the viewing pleasure of the explorer, settler, tourist or virtual traveler. Landscape sets up a subject-object distinction between the viewer and the viewed. It also institutes visual perception as the sole sensory relationship between them. It is a visual experience for the roaming eye/I which/who occasionally stops to take in ‘the prospect’ from a static viewpoint. (Giblett 53)

Approaching landscape photography, and painting, in this way allows us to unpack the ideological labor that such cultural artifacts perform. For one, the “capitalist” and “masculine” nature of landscape as an art genre means that it has been closely associated with “explorers, colonists, anthropologists and tourists” who proceed to “name places, or more precisely to rename, as the places already have indigenous names” (Giblett 54). In addition to rendering the history of terrains “invisible and mute,” *Native Shambas near Mau Summit* and other landscape photography also occlude the violence associated with its production (Giblett 54). In other words, the photograph’s frame excludes conflict associated with colonial encounters, racial prejudice, as well as any ideologies that underpin the initial production and subsequent re-production of landscape. While *Native Shambas near Mau Summit* more explicitly deploys techniques that akin to landscape ethnography, the four volumes that make up *Albums of Photographs of Kenya* are complicit with such ideological strategies. Many of the three hundred images have been chosen for their ability to seduce the European viewer and to further prop her notion of subjecthood that is both distinct and distant from any African others she may have previously encountered.

To counter a whole corpus of images and cultural objects that disseminate similar concepts requires precisely the kind of work that Grace Ogot and Margaret Ogola undertake. Each writer depicts the colonial encounter while taking care to provide contextual material and hence more fully challenge colonial fallacies. For instance Grace Ogot's *The Promised Land*—engaged directly with colonial bias regarding indigenous communities, their cultural norms and (land) practices, as well as disregard for the colonial cruelty connected with settler occupation. Furthermore, just as Africanist critics have denounced photographic work by Du Camp and Krull for its service to empire, Ogot's fiction resists the colonial ideology at work in Figure A's and B's deployment of the black body. While Figure-A minimizes and/or erases laboring black bodies and merges them with either built structures or farm animals, Figure-B focuses on African bodies and makes them central—yet subservient—to colonial agricultural productivity. Ogot, however, sidesteps the romanticizing tendencies of colonial visual artifacts and foregrounds, instead, the brutality that accompanies settler cultures. Her novel's depiction of Luo land acquisition questions the communal narratives that privilege Luo military might and disparage rival communities for their weakness and/or lethargy. By using motifs that are easily identifiable with settler colonies, Ogot intervenes in the postcolonial moment by making more explicit the connection between land and violence. Although Ogot does not directly represent European colonial belligerence, her depiction of African forms of settler colonialism works as an allegory for both British colonialism, and for the practice of land occupation in general. It is also a specific representation of intra-African land conflicts. Published just a few years after Ngugi wa Thiong'o's seminal texts, *Weep Not, Child* (1964) and *The River Between* (1965), Ogot's fiction joined an East African

body of literature that was already interested in the British dispossession of indigenous peoples. However, Ogot's intervention—and its focus on competition for land between native communities—enabled a discussion of gender—an issue that had so far been overlooked due to emphasis on the racial aspect of Kenya's colonized-colonizer relationship.

II: *The Promised Land*

Grace Ogot's *The Promised Land* (1966) deploys folklore to construct narratives of belonging among Kenya's Luo community. The author weaves tales of epic battles between the Luo and the Nandi which enabled the former ethnicity to claim supremacy and ultimate ownership of arable regions of western Kenya. Moreover, folklore is important when Luo families migrate to Eastern Tanganyika in search of less populated farmland; in this new homeland, customary rites associated with storytelling become gestures to signal possession of *virgin land*. Even more remarkable, however, is the fact that *home* is an idea that morphs across several generations. If historically home was the space violently wrestled from the Nandi, Ogot's characters attempt to set up new homes acquired by outmaneuvering indigenous Tanganyikan communities. As expected—and as has been documented in the first section of this chapter—native communities resisted incursions into what was considered ancestral lands. In Ogot's fictional world, unlike the factual and historical Kenya outside her novel, resistance is enacted through the auspices of magic. The effects can prove to be just as fatal for “settlers” who attempt to dispossess “natives” even though (or perhaps precisely because) the two groups share the same racial heritage: African. *The Promised Land (TPL)* is important to my discussion of land rights in this chapter because of its use of narrative to dispute land rights. On the one

hand, communities produce explanations that privilege emptiness and the potential for settler occupation while simultaneously re/producing tales that foreground communal ownership of ancestral land. As I will demonstrate, complications arise when competing sets of narratives—from the native versus settler point of view—are applied to the same land/space.

In chapter one, Ochola learns from a friend that farmers of Luo ethnicity have been migrating to Tanganyika in search of fresh land. Ochola shares this news with his new bride, Nyapol, but finds her far from amenable about moving so far away from home. Thus, Ochola's suggestion merely strains their not yet settled marriage. In the next chapter, Ochola is faced with a family intervention asking him not to migrate. He is adamant; eventually, he and Nyapol make the journey—first by bus to Kisumu then via ferry across Lake Victoria. Chapter three ends with Ochola having arrived in Tanganyika and symbolically claiming some land using the traditionally acknowledged sign: a ring of grass with a stone placed on top of it. It is in chapter four—soon after building his first home—that Ochola's relations with the Zangazi community he has moved into sour. One villager is particularly bitter that Ochola and other members of the Luo community act as though they “were born to rule” (Ogot 93). Nonetheless, Nyapol's family is gradually increasing in size, and she and Ochola have become successful farmers.

Halfway through chapter six tragedy strikes; Ochola suffers a mental breakdown and runs off into the bush, shouting wildly that he has been bewitched. Nyapol's attempts to chase after her husband fail. When Ochola emerges from the forest, his body covered with thorns, he resembles a porcupine. The family invites a famous medicine man, Magungu, to cure Ochola's skin condition. But the sickness defeats Magungu and he

leaves, promising to return if he finds stronger charms than those that have been used to harm Ochola. Nyapol and Ochola's brother take him to a colonial hospital where Ochola is attended to by white doctors. As it turns out, European knowledge on tropical diseases offers no solution to heal Ochola and he returns home to die.³⁹ Further misfortune hits the Ochola homestead when one child suffers from an epileptic attack, while the brave family dog suffers painfully—apparently from poisoning. Finally, Magungu returns with oils and ointments which cure Ochola's skin warts. The price for getting cured, however, is that Nyapol, her husband and children should all move out of the home before night fall. Ochola is incensed at having to leave his wealth behind and has to be physically dragged away from the homestead; Nyapol, on the other hand, is grateful to be finally quitting a place that has brought much misfortune to them. The couple and their children, minus Ochola's beloved dog, return to Kenya. Ogot ends the novella by claiming that although Ochola's body returned to his home near Kisumu, his soul was left in Tanganyika (193).

Critiques of Ogot's *TPL* have identified three main avenues of interpretation. First Ogot's novel has been viewed as commentary on nationhood; second, *TPL* has been discussed in terms of its resistance vis-à-vis retrogressive cultural practices, especially their effects on women; and finally, scholars have discussed the writer's use of language and narrative techniques. Ify Achufusi argues that Ogot ties issues of nationhood to

³⁹ Ogot's mention of colonial departments concerned with tropical diseases is quite significant, and so too is the fact that Ochola's health suffers when he and his family move amongst the Zangazi. In "The Prospective Colonist & Strange Environments: Advice on Health & Prosperity," Andrew Wear argues that propaganda urging British citizens to settle in the empire's colonies highlighted the health benefits of such relocations. An ideal colonial settlement was one that supported not only copious agricultural productivity, but also the perfect health of the settler and his (less often her) family. That Ochola's migration seriously endangers his health makes this region of Tanganyika not a suitable place for colonial settlement. Ogot plays with the expectations of wellbeing and riches that drew many European colonials out to various parts of their nations' empires. Additionally, of course, she exposes the fallacy inherent in Luo narratives of Tanganyikan migration and their desire to conflate such moves with instant prosperity. Of course, there were (racist) counter-arguments to pro-settling discourse in Europe that imagined the colonies as places that were very bad for white people's health, too.

“problems of morality” in postcolonial African societies (179). In other words, immoral acts by newly-independent Africans pose imminent threats to the nation-building project. In *TPL*, Ogot suggests that Ochola’s emotional abuse towards his wife is the cause of both his illness and his financial ruin. All in all, Ogot’s interest in “national politics” is somewhat minimal; compared to Ngugi’s work, for instance, *TPL*—though transnational in its plot—is much more concerned with “politics on the local level” (Kurtz 28). Ogot’s focus on regional political affairs serves as a gateway to her discussion about Luo cultural practices. Ogot’s writing, especially *TPL*, is on one level “strongly anthropological;” in addition to documenting the multiplicity of Luo traditions, the texts highlight conflicts that arise in the community in the immediate aftermath of Kenyan independence (Kurtz 28, 29). Though “firmly rooted in traditional culture, the tales of Grace Ogot are not merely a revival of past forms nor collections of items seen from the detached stance of a scholar;” *TPL* deploys “the art of blending emotion and fear, and sarcastic social” commentary to discuss women’s agency as manifested in Luo customs (Bardolph 41).⁴⁰ Just as critics have interpreted Ogot’s work via gendered lenses, her writing is *itself* a gender-conscious critique of Luo customs.

Africanist critics have been especially attentive to Ogot’s Nyapol; *TPL*’s protagonist, she is often described as “the Kenyan novel’s first complex and powerful female character” (Kurtz 30). As it turns out, Nyapol’s (literary) descendants can be seen in fictional work published up to three decades after Ogot’s work; for instance, Margaret Ogola’s Akoko Obanda in *The River & the Source*. Nyapol’s significance emanates from her “immense potential to subvert patriarchal structures” (Gikandi & Mwangi 132).

⁴⁰ Bardolph goes on to suggest connections between how Grace Ogot and Rebecca Njau use “horror and mystery” to discuss the advent of modernity in postcolonial Africa (51).

Though a young bride with minimal clout in her home and in the community, she repeatedly voices resistance against Ochola's decision to turn her into a stranger in a faraway land (Ogot 21). Nyapol's trajectory in *TPL* displays the influence under which Luo women traditionally lived and how they reacted to it. Rather than blind acquiescence, women responded with a variety of behaviors—including verbal arguments—even as they supported the very structures that stood in their way—for example marriage. Furthermore, to legitimize her critique of male hegemony within communal values, Ogot's Nyapol deploys traditional literary techniques. Both in *TPL* and in *The Strange Bride*, Ogot “uses myth and narrative voice to retell old stories through gendered lenses” thus engaging with the ambivalence of women's agency in post-independence African cultures (Gikandi & Mwangi 133; 132). Ogot's use of traditional lore can be read as one way of understanding Luo land rights.

Firstly, critical interpretation of Ogot's oral narrative techniques include an appreciation of her political commentary on Luo culture—the benefits of which are that Nyapol gains “self-knowledge through examining [her] traditions” (Kurtz 28). On their journey to Tanganyika, the protagonist reflects on Luo marital norms. Nyapol wishes she was still single because marriage has turned out to be “a form of imprisonment in which the master could lead you where he wished” (Ogot 45). Ogot's protagonist exhibits critical thinking and the ability to independently appraise her own ethnic heritage. She distances herself from her upbringing and invites the reader to re-evaluate Luo patriarchy from a woman's point of view. She is especially distraught that while she experiences the discomforts of a long journey, her parents and siblings were at that very moment “enjoying the tales of old times in the village they had lived for so many years” (Ogot

45). Nyapol is twice cursed; not only is she unable to share in the joys of evening storytelling, if she permanently re-settles in Tanganyika, she will never have such tales to tell her own offspring. The novel is against settler colonialism, and it deploys its criticism from the point of view of settlers—rather than the dispossessed locals.

Secondly, *TPL* problematizes a European literary form—the novel. Ogot’s text, often described as “a cautionary tale,” is skeptical of both patriarchy and colonialism and sees the two institutions as equally deleterious towards women’s agency (Flanagan 371; 380). As has been successfully discussed elsewhere by Joseph Slaughter, the novel did crucial ideological work for the European colonial project. Ogot’s postcolonial intervention disrupts the aesthetic elements of the realist novel through her use of magic and the supernatural. The inexplicable skin ailment that affects Ochola is a critique of his misogyny. Kathleen Flanagan argues that Ogot:

uses a European literary genre with no African counterpart but uses it with features of African folk tradition, such as the blending of supernatural with realistic traits. Ogot’s work becomes a disruption of European endeavors in Africa, both social and literary. (371)

In other words, Ogot’s unease with the racial domination enacted by colonial projects leads her to pen a narrative that interrupts European aesthetics embodied in the novel.

Ogot’s *TPL* can thus be read for its attempt to contrast western narratives—the novel—against indigenous techniques of narration—Luo folk tales which foreground the mystical. As I will show in the next section, there exist other opposing artistic philosophies in the text many of which I will marshal in my discussion of African land rights. In “La Femme et le Pays Natal dans *The Promised Land* de Grace Ogot,” Jacques Bede isolates duality as a key feature of *TPL*, its thematic concerns, and its narrative technique. Bede identifies some of the “multiple oppositions” on which Ogot establishes

the framework for her writing: communalism vs. individualism; the Promised Land vs. the water (Lake Victoria) that Ochola has to cross before arriving in Tanganyika; and finally, homelands vs. foreign lands (210; 214; 226). The festivity in Ochola's village is also contrasted to the loneliness the couple faces once they arrive at their new farm (Bede 210). Unmoored and far away from home, Ochola and Nyapol are neither connected to their native soil nor to the lake that borders it. For Bede, Ogot's discussion of the land and water demonstrates that she views both as two manifestations of "the same creative feminine force" (214). Hence, I interpret Ogot's imagery about homelands, "foreign lands," and water bodies as discrete points in a much larger narrative about African land rights. In light of human influences on the environment, it pays to think through environmental issues comprehensively. Rather than approach land rights and water rights as completely disparate phenomena, it's more beneficial to view them as complementary issues within larger ecosystems.

III: Fantasies of Emptiness vs. Conventions of Ownership

How Ochola and his community establish ownership of various spaces, both at "home" and "abroad," offers an opportunity for deeper investigation of land possession. As we shall see, narrative forms a core mechanism in communal and individual efforts to either disenfranchise others or safeguard one's land rights. Competition between religious myths—Christianity on the one hand, and paganism on the other—was also deployed to alienate indigenous land rights. This was in addition to the fallacies re-told in colonial photography—that European settlement was more orderly, more industrious and more productive—and the disenfranchisement of female agency. The disempowerment of female subjects manifested as either marginalization of women by Luo patriarchy or the

sidelining by British imperialism of “effeminate” colonized communities. Christian missionaries narrated, and propagated, the fallacy that African societies owned neither history nor science. In this sense, African knowledge was an empty vessel waiting to be filled with European “enlightenment,” much like African lands were unoccupied and awaiting white settlement. Ogot engages with the fantasies of “emptiness” by dramatizing the deep chasm that develops between Ochola’s brother, Abiero, and the rest of the family due to Abiero’s fervent beliefs:

Abiero changed. He became so possessed with his faith that the villagers thought he was mad. He stole his father’s precious pipe and broke it on a rock outside the village. He was hostile towards any of his younger step-brothers or sisters who sang traditional songs. The teachers at school had said that these were sins, things of darkness ... even dancing to the throbbing African drums annoyed him. Eager to civilize his brothers and sisters, he sang Christian songs to them with great fervor. (Ogot 34)

While the passage above does not mention land rights, inherent in Abiero’s rejection of Luo custom is his dismissal of indigenous forms of knowledge and social institutions. Abiero’s attack on oral tradition—songs and drumming—jeopardizes the generational hand-down of communal lore on marriage, farming, artisanal production, etc. His hostility dramatizes the friction enacted by colonial prejudice and its dismissal of non-western systems of knowledge. Ogot demonstrates the range of responses that traditional African beliefs inspired in colonial minds, from outright physical violence—such as invading and destroying communal shrines—to placing incentives in church attendance; for example in many colonies you could only acquire western education if you simultaneously got baptized and, outwardly at least, renounced your former religious beliefs. This rift, as may well be imagined, transcended religious misunderstandings and

impacted colonial views of African natural resources, especially land.⁴¹ Colonial imaginings about African “emptiness” encompassed not only geospatial spaces—land—but also cultural spheres—spirituality.

Using communities of Luo immigrants and indigenous Tanganyikans—the Zangazis—Ogot stages a conflict about settlement between black Africans that allows the reader to imagine questions of “otherness” outside the colonial paradigm. She does this to highlight the violence that accompanies settler colonies especially at the outset when “justifications” for domination are manufactured. Once again, the idea of productivity and narratives about the (un)productivity of one community versus another form the backbone upon which land claims are made and legitimized. Consider, for instance, when Ochola fantasizes about “Tanganyika, where the land was fertile... [and immigrants] owned large farms of maize and millet, beans and vegetables and were producing quantities of milk and ghee” (Ogot 13). Luo migrants are, supposedly, better skilled, better equipped, and more motivated than the Zangazi peasants they live amongst. This dichotomy, terribly familiar, is the same one that European settlers deployed when, for instance, they carved out prime East African farmland and demarcated it the White Highlands. Thus, we have to read Ogot with much irony when she writes that Ochola was convinced when “Ochwonyo’s visitors had said that wide expanses of the land were virgin territory. You could take as many acres as you could cultivate” (Ogot 14). Approximately five decades before *TPL*’s publication, similar narratives had been employed when discussing not just East Africa, but much of the African continent.

⁴¹ Said’s notion of orientalism is also gives us an apt way of understanding these misapprehensions; from the colonial point of view, colonized peoples were “Others,” who were both literally and metaphorically “stuck.” In other words, colonial officers saw their subjects as trapped in ancient cultural practices (pre-modernity) that were “static and unchanging.” See Edward Said’s “Orientalism,” and Homi Bhabha’s “The Other Question” in Padmini Mongia’s *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*.

Ogot's parallel between European settler culture in East Africa and Luo emigration in Tanganyika is further underlined by her use of letters as part of *TPL*'s narrative structure. Simultaneously, this juxtaposition is founded upon two opposing ideas: natal homes versus foreign lands. Ogot deploys the epistolary form to mimic communication between white Kenyan settlers and their families back home in Europe. Consider, for instance, the following report that Ochola pens for his sibling back in Kenya:

To my brother Abiero ... I should like to tell you that I have arrived safely in the land of Tanganyika. This land is very beautiful. It has many hills and valleys like the land of Seme, and the soil is very fertile. The soil ranges from light loam to heavy clay. There is a very heavy rainfall. A wide area near our home is covered with thick bush consisting of broad-leaved trees and long grasses. I have fenced in a large area of land for myself. Very few people live here, and those who do are mostly our people. (Ogot 85)

Through Ochola's letter, Ogot attempts to balance natal lands with foreign lands via knowledge of nature. The letter begins by finding similarities between Seme, Ochola's home village, and his newly-settled farm. In other words, Ochola is adamant that though the Tanganyikan region he now lives is far away from his family and friends, it is "just like home," in some ways. Ochola's document then attempts to describe the landscape in glowing terms, much like British propaganda which sought to encourage more immigration from the United Kingdom to East Africa. Having depicted the geographical acclaims of Tanganyika, Ochola then drops the *coup de grace*: this region of Tanganyika is scarcely populated or wholly unoccupied. This, of course, is the major difference between Seme, and Ochola's new farm in Tanganyika. While the former is overpopulated and its soil has been depleted, the latter is sparsely peopled and its numerous resources await exploitation. This dissimilarity between the two locations is digested through

narratives—such as Ochola’s letter—which propagate “fantasies of Tanganyikan emptiness.” More importantly, “just like home” is a mantra that seeks to appropriate some of the comfort which Nyapol and Ochola left behind in Seme. Additionally, it serves as a charm to help ward off, and possibly obscure, the increasing hostility of the Zangazi peoples amongst whom Ochola has settled.

The alternate side of such fictions, by default, was the creation of certain conventions which were understood to demonstrate land ownership. Ogot’s *TPL*, in addition to suggesting the moral justification for land alienation of indigenous Tanganyikans, also offers us a look into the process of this marginalization. The writer re-deploys Luo cultural practices and re-invents them in new spaces imbuing formerly benign acts with much malevolence. In Ochola’s boyhood, “a ring of grass” with a stone placed on top helped secure forest mushrooms—a rare find—from being harvested by other village children (Ogot 72). The act of plaiting grass into a circle and covering it with a rock signified ownership and the assumption of all possession rights. In his adulthood, and in a region many miles away from his childhood village, Ochola (re)discovers new meaning for the same grass-and-rock act. Ochola’s host in Tanganyika, Okech, instructed him to make a ring of grass and place a rock on it in the middle of a wild expanse of seemingly fertile, and empty, land. It was only once he was done that “suddenly the meaning of the actions came to [Ochola] ... This is no man’s land, Okech told him. You are the first man to put a ring of grass over it, so it’s yours” (Ogot 72).⁴² The symbolism of the grass ring is reminiscent of the marital ring—a motif

⁴² The ring also suggests other objects that have been deployed to demonstrate ownership, without any awareness that such cultural practices may or may not translate from one community to another. The colonial flag, whose rising and fluttering in the wind was often taken by European adventurers to signify dominion, is one such artifact.

that recurs in Ebrahim Hussein's work which I discuss in the next chapter. Ogot's use of the phrase "first man" truly goads the reader to make parallels with European incursions into Africa—voyages during which natural features were named for, or by, the "first European" to ever set eyes on them⁴³. In Ogot's text, it is much easier to see behind the façade of being first, since readers know that Luo migrants have found not an empty land, but an ecosystem with fauna, flora, *and* human habitation. Okech's insistence that Ochola is the "first man" on this land is a transparent chimera which fails even as it is uttered—further underlined by the very fact that Okech is himself a new-comer, and still a "stranger."

Luo traditions provided another rationale for migrants asserting ownership in Tanganyika: divine bequest. *Were*, the Luo deity, bequeathed land to the Luo community in perpetuity. The omniscient third person narrator in *TPL* informs the reader that:

when [God] created this land, he must have had a better purpose for it. He must have said that this land, like the land of Canaan, would flow with milk and honey so that its inhabitants could have plenty to eat and drink and live a better life. (Ogot 17)

The narrator invokes divine intent—through a specific Biblical allegory—while describing how Ochola's community came to reside in Seme and the Lake Victoria region. The most significant argument that Ogot's narrator makes is that God had a "purpose" for this land and it is up to its human inhabitants to fulfill it. The unspoken claim behind this myth of origin is that a population that does not fulfill God's plan to turn their farmland into a Canaan flowing "with milk and honey" forfeits its rights *and* deserves to be disenfranchised. In other words, in addition to the "fiction of discovery,"

⁴³ There is also the latent misogyny that accompanied such European "discoveries;" hence explorations that are named after the "first woman" are few and far between.

TPL offers a second interpretation as to why Luo acquisition of land in Tanganyika was justified: God meant that all arable land be used productively, any that is left fallow *should* be re-appropriated from its owners. Ochola and other Luo migrants, implicitly, saw themselves mandated by God to turn Tanganyika into a Garden of Eden—and thus the “promised land”—even at the expense of its autochthonous inhabitants. Once again, such rhetoric is very familiar. European settlers understood their occupation of African lands as the implementation of a much-needed *mission civilatrice*—heralding the advent of modernity (and Christianity) amidst the savagery that was Africa. In such cases, of course, a plurality of cultural artifacts was called upon to perform the prerequisite ideological labor. As examined in the first part of this chapter, colonial photography depicted black bodies whose imagined indolence justified their marginalization.

Indeed, Tanganyika would not have been the first geographical space in which Luo farmers worked hard to establish divine dominion; something similar happened in Ochola’s original village many years past. One morning, as Nyapol walks to her Seme garden, she recalls the historic process through which her ancestors had acquired the community’s present land. Ogot depicts Luo martial strength and Nandi dormancy as dual justifications for land alienation of the latter community by the former:

How could anyone think of leaving this land? Our ancestors died fighting for this land. The Nandi lived in these valleys and on these hills and they drank from the river below. The land was fertile, but the Nandi did not cultivate the land—they were herdsmen. Our grandfathers declared war on them because they did not know the value of land—they grew no crops or vegetables. (Ogot 23)

The writer situates Nandi idleness, and the community’s supposed inability to till fecund land and make it productive, as an additional iteration of the fantasy of emptiness. From the prejudiced perspective of Luo cultivators, animal husbandry is inefficient use of

scarce arable land. Moreover, Ogot communicates to her readers the manner in which physical might was converted into a convention of land ownership; that is, the Luo community now owns land that formerly belonged to the Nandi people, *precisely* because the Luo had a stronger and fiercer army. This passage equates might with land rights and seeks to prove that the stronger individual will also trump the claims of land ownership held by a weaker entity. Winning possession of land through violence, at least in Ogot's narrative, seems to bestow permanent ownership. Hence, Ochola's father tells his son that since "our fathers died fighting for this land so that you might inherit it. It is the more precious because your grandfathers bought it with their own blood" (Ogot 35). The physical violence that accompanied alienation of Nandi farmland by the Luos simultaneously endowed Luo sons with land rights in perpetuity, even as it made the land much more valuable because blood was spilt for, and on, it. The human blood that metaphorically bought this land becomes the invaluable element that Luo persons esteem highly and hence the great desire to ensure the land does not fall into the "wrong hands."

In both *TPL* and Margaret Ogola's *The River and the Source*, we see violence proliferate in its manifestation as a convention of land ownership. In Ogot's text, readers discover infighting amongst Luo families—conflict which fractures the community's unified façade. In Ogot's work *Seme and Gem*, depicted in Ogola's novel as two loving siblings within the Luo family, battle each other for scarce farm land:

Ochola recalled what his father had told him about the bitter war between the people of Seme and Gem. It had occurred on the very land on which he now stood. Then the people of Gem wanted to drive the people of Seme to the steep hills, which today are occupied by the Banyore. But the Seme overpowered the people of Gem and killed many of their great warriors. The people of Seme retained their land, and were able to hand it over to the children. (Ogot 42)

If Luo military prowess previously trumped Nandi land claims, it is unclear to whom the land should now belong given that both sides of the conflict identify as Luo. Clearly, conflict over limited resources existed for much of Luo history and it is unclear why one version of this conflict—Luo victory over Nandi settlers—should be more symbolic than the victory of one Luo clan over another. The latter scenario displays the limited extent to which violence, as a convention of land ownership, can be deployed—violence inevitably undermines the very rights it originally sought to safeguard. Ultimately, this passage also indicates Ogot's concern with conflict over land between indigenous Africans, primarily along ethnic lines, an issue that anti-colonial nationalism of the Fifties and Sixties shied away from. Fiction by Monica Arac de Nyeko and Moyez Vassanji—featured in the last two chapters of this project—unpacks power struggles along ethnic lines as well as prejudice against diaspora communities. For the most part, such competition has been elided from discussions of contemporary African socio-political challenges—and when examined, often neglects the repercussions of gender.

Gender, and the overall position of women, is another issue that postcolonial nationalisms have not adequately resolved. In Ogot's work, we witness a critique of Ochola's patriarchal attitude to his wife as well as his sense of his right to take "virgin" land from others. Furthermore, the text is interested in Nyapol's relation to land ownership, specifically, as a woman and the degree to which her rights are wholly discounted. For both Margaret Ogola and Grace Ogot, gender is an important factor in discussions of African land rights. In Ogola's novel, it is a certain understanding of gender norms that justifies why both Luo patriarchy and colonial settlers enact exclusivist land ownership claims. Both parties depend upon military success to justify their

entitlements. Additionally, Luo patriarchy foregrounds eternal and inheritable bequests from the Divine, while colonial settlement was based on an ideology of racial superiority. Ogola's work also shares in Ogot's anti-colonial textual politics; thus, *The River & the Source* engages with the colonial fallacy of an empty East African landscape, and deploys communal myths to oppose British imperialism. As in Ogot's fiction, folklore is a key asset in pro-independence resistance. Unlike in *TPL*, however, when marriage fails to empower women, Ogola's female characters use Christianity as a way to gain agency, and challenge male hegemony. Tragically, the reliance on Christian beliefs aids Ogola's protagonist even as it simultaneously heralds the decline of her indigenous way of life and the advent of a socio-political sphere dominated by Britain's imperial concerns.

IV: *The River & the Source* (TRS)

Margaret Ogola's *The River and the Source* (1994) is a tale about four generations of women. Akoko Obanda, the matriarch, is born on the shores of Lake Victoria just as British expansionism is making its first incursions into East Africa. Her childhood coincides with the construction of the Mombasa-Kampala railroad and the rest of her life is closely intertwined with European settlement. Not only does she lose her first son to Britain's World War I activities, she also ends up seeking help from a colonial administrator to prevent her brother-in-law from disinheritting her of her late husband's property. Her other significant interaction with colonial projects is facilitated by her daughter, Maria Nyabera. Maria, after several childless marriages, turns to the church for the solace and comfort that Luo parents in western Kenya derived from their offspring. Witnessing her mother's suffering at the hands of her in-laws, Maria urges Akoko to

accompany her to a Christian mission many miles away and start life anew. When Akoko eventually relocates, she moves with a young grandson, and Maria's daughter, Elizabeth.

Elizabeth is the third generation in Akoko's family, and she goes on to provide much needed posterity. In addition to becoming a teacher, Elizabeth marries and sires seven children; she thus makes up for Akoko's other grandchild who becomes a Catholic priest. At this stage in the novel, Ogola reminds her readers that the river which began with Akoko, and which "at one point had trickled to a mere rivulet in danger of petering out ... was [once again] gathering momentum" (190). Akoko's progeny, through Elizabeth, makes marital connections with various ethnicities in post-independence Kenya—including the country's expatriate community. Elizabeth's twins, Vera and Becky, embody a vision and tenacity that can be traced back to Akoko. Becky, unfortunately, succumbs to HIV/AIDS, but Vera makes it to the end of the novel as a professional engineer and a lay member of the Catholic organization, Opus Dei. Both by tracing the lives of several generations of Africans, and by deploying the motif "the dead have no use for the living who have eventually to tear themselves away so that the business of life might somehow continue," Ogola expertly depicts Kenya's colonial-to-postcolonial transformation (288). She demonstrates the socio-political changes that indigenous communities in Britain's East African colony, as well as other places around the globe, have endured and (to various degrees) transcended.

Ogola's text has been widely popular in Kenya, though, as we shall see, this popularity has not spawned much critical attention. A year after its 1994 publication, the novel was awarded the top literary trophy in Kenya—the Jomo Kenyatta Prize—and the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best First Book in the African region. From 1998, *The*

River and the Source (TRS) was adopted for the Kenyan secondary school English curriculum, ensuring it wide dissemination and heightened publicity. In the midst of minimal analytical consideration, one major thematic concern identified in Ogola's novel has been "the celebration of the spirit of womanhood" (Gikandi & Mwangi 131). Tom Odhiambo's "Writing Alternative Womanhood in Kenya in Margaret Ogola's *The River and the Source*," also foregrounds a gendered reading of the text. According to Odhiambo, Ogola's text is significant because it "makes strategic literary and thematic choices in 'telling' women's stories as an act of re-inserting them in the historical trajectory of the postcolonial nation-state" (236). Arguing that it is important to tell and highlight "stories of successful women," whether fictional or not, Odhiambo reads the very act of women narrating their own history as political (235). Not only does Ogola depict women as having the capacity to speak up and be heard—and thus courageous enough to demand their proper positions in society—she also stages protest against the "omission of the female character in African stories by her male counterparts" (Odhiambo 235; 237). Ogola's instinct to mythologize women is necessitated by the social demands placed on them. Not only are women entrusted with passing on cultural knowledge to the next generation, there are also heavy demands made on their labor vis-à-vis domestic production, subsistence farming, and child rearing. More often than not, however, the true value of such exertions passes unnoticed by a society that has come to "demand" more and more from women. Ogola highlights women's contribution to the home—both domestic and national—and celebrates their hard work. Thirty years after Ogot's work, women's self-narration is still groundbreaking work because of the political continuities that occurred between colonial and post-independent Kenyan societies.

Gender roles remained entrenched and the advent of African self-rule did not always correspond to women's empowerment and/or a scale back of patriarchal norms.

The centrality of women's narratives to Ogola's writing is corroborated in two ways. In the acknowledgement section of *TRS*, Ogola mentions her mother and great grandmother as key inspirations for the text:

The germ of this book was planted early in my life by my mother, Herina Odongo, whose gift as a story teller and acerbic wit are still the spice of our lives. For the first part of this book, I have extensively borrowed from the life and times of Obanda Kingi nyar' Ang'eyo – my great grandmother. (Ogola Acknowledgements)

Women as repositories of a community's heritage feature significantly in Ogola's text. Akoko Obanda and her female progenies are expert narrators who can bring to life traditional heroes for contemporary generations—much like the women in Ogola's childhood. Indeed, as Odhiambo notes, this is a very political act; what is at stake is not merely abstract power but also control of material resources, especially land. In addition to her mention of women in the paratext of *TRS*, Ogola also reiterates this idea in an interview with Michael Kuria. Once more noting that she “wanted to tell the story of ... very particular women that [she] admired,” Ogola contends that this was important because women's stories are “rarely ever told” (Kuria 126; 127). The writer then elaborates on the manner in which domestic chores inevitably make it impossible for women to self-narrate and self-mythologize in postcolonial African nations. Using anecdotal evidence, Ogola describes the hard routine that women often immerse themselves as they juggle motherhood, marital duties, professional careers, and so on:

The African woman is too unconscious of her own importance in issues and in creating change yet they do all these amazing things and work incredibly long hours. I was talking to a mother who wakes up at 4:00am and goes to bed at 11:00pm every night so that [her] children can eat and

have some sort of education. Because she does not work in an office she considers herself a non-working person. Because her husband goes to the office at 8:00am and comes back at 5:00pm he is considered a working person. If she is asked she says: *sifanyi kazi*, I do not work. It is this kind of woman whose story I wanted to tell in *TRS*. (Kuria 130)

For Ogola, it is important that her readers think through the dissimilarity in social values of women's work versus men's work. The denigration of women's work is a global concern for advocates of feminism. The writer re-tells this anonymous woman's story with angst not only at society's disregard of the important work women do in the home but also at contemporary veneration of men's work outside the hearth. These perceived differences and their consequences on women's position in society form the foundation of the kind of protest that Ogola stages in *TRS*.⁴⁴

At stake for Ogola is the capacity for Kenyan women to conceive novel ways of being. In other words, the text re-imagines female agency. Odhiambo reads *TRS* as advocating for an "alternative womanhood;" according to his definition, this includes "the depiction of the female subject as an active agent in the historical processes that shape her identity and experiences" (235). Given the trajectory of Ogola's female protagonists, and the kinds of lives they lead, Odhiambo's is an apt description of the paradigm shifts that women embody in *TRS*. Not only do Ogola's female characters "act" independently, their values and ideals are quite at variance with those of the communities around them. Odhiambo identifies a key moment in the text when female autonomy is forcefully re-injected into Ogola's Luo community: "The one striking feature of *TRS*," says Odhiambo, "is the bold claim to personal identity and freedom made by the baby child Akoko Obanda ... 'want mine'" (239). Ogola's protagonist, Akoko Obanda, shares

⁴⁴ This also, interestingly, echoes the contestation over how black people's labor was imagined by the colonizers. African production on colonial farms and factories was sidelined and/or denigrated before white managerial and administrative "work."

a name with Ogola's own powerful female ancestor. Furthermore, the fictional Obanda is acutely clear about her life's goals and desires. This powerful depiction of female agency is apparent in many of Ogola's characters; "Awiti, Vera, Becky and Wandia among others typify the kind of women that the writer imagines are needed if the efforts to overcome stereotypes and limitations for women are to succeed" (Odhiambo 249). This "go-getter" spirit, evident in Akoko Obanda's life, trickles down to subsequent generations of women. For instance, her trailblazing appeal to a colonial official for arbitration suggests an acute perception of shifting power dynamics in the nascent British colony (Ogola 85). Akoko quickly identifies that the advent of colonial machinery subsumes traditional forms of government and that one is best served by swiftly adapting to new forms of authority. This pragmatism is unmatched in *TRS*.

Paradoxically, however, Ogola's views about women's lives in postcolonial Kenya expressed outside the novel seem to contrast with *TRS*. It is difficult to reconcile Ogola's depiction of female agency in her novel with, for example, her rather retrogressive views in the same interview with Michael Kuria. More than once, Ogola exonerates men or advances traditional gender roles and biologically inevitable differences between the sexes. She not only argues that "women know how to give more than men do," she also declares that it is important for women "to give men the room they need in order to create strong families" (Kuria 131; 132). In what sounds like a defense of male hegemony, Ogola argues that patriarchy is "a biological necessity" (Kuria 133). Although she can imagine women giving selflessly to their families with no expectations of reward, the writer argues that unless a man is assured the family will accept his position as "the patriarch"—and thus that his self-interests will reign

supreme—he has no incentive to stay (Kuria 133).⁴⁵ Akoko Obanda’s life, especially her strong remonstrations against not only her husband but also her brother-in-law, diverges from the kind of idealized female reverence for men that Ogola seems to be advocating for.⁴⁶ Furthermore, Ogola’s vision for women is tied to their traditional roles around the kitchen. Despite her literary imagination of strong, professional female characters, she maintains that in her opinion “an African woman will forego almost everything except the chance to be a mother ... [and that]... what makes an African woman feel that [she is] truly a woman, a self-realized woman, is precisely to be a mother” (Kuria 132). Neither childless women, nor those who chose professional lives over motherhood, can be “women” at all in this view. Indeed, the novel’s emphasis on child bearing—Elizabeth’s fertility saving the family lineage—seems to reinforce this aspect of Ogola’s professed gender politics.

Ogola is categorical that women “work out of choice” while men, by necessity, have to pursue a career to attain personal fulfillment (Kuria 140). Her words echo the postcolonial nationalist belief that women were central to the nation-state primarily in their reproductive role.⁴⁷ According to these views, educating the girl child and offering young women professional opportunities were both a waste of resources that newly-independent African nations could scarcely afford. Even as Ogola privileged women’s

⁴⁵ Susan Andrade, for instance, identifies autocracy in male hegemony. In *The Nation Writ Small*, she argues that “patriarchy in the home serves either as a parallel to male-dominance in the public sphere or as compensation for men who are otherwise disenfranchised outside the house” (21).

⁴⁶ This inconsistency is, perhaps, caused by social constraints to which Ogola must adhere while expressing herself as a public intellectual versus the liberty in what she can include in a fictional text. Her own experience as a professional writer, after all, demonstrates that Kenyan women have career options beyond the hearth. This contradiction can also be read as an East African variant of the global feminism debate. Feminism can be a form of neoimperial discourse, and African women have attempted in many different ways to distinguish their own advocacy for women from that of Western women.

⁴⁷ Another facet of this argument, as Sue Kossew shows by drawing on Anne McClintock’s and Elleke Boehmer’s work, is that “nationalist discourse co-opts women as wombs of the nation or as icons of suffering and self-sacrifice” (qtd. In Graham 8).

ability to tell their own stories, and more than two decades after the initiation of the women's liberation movement, her public views inexplicably sought to confine the young Kenyan female back to the domestic sphere. Ogola's Vera, even more than the matriarch in *TRS*, is perhaps the character whose life is most in opposition to the writer's sentiments about women's lives. Vera is a professional—an electrical engineer—and she chooses not to marry—turning down Tim Muhambe's proposal for no apparent reason (Ogola 202). Given the author's preference for marriage and motherhood as the primary definition of female self-realization, readers should perhaps read more of Ogola's judgment in the disappointment with which Vera's father accepts her decision to be a lay member of the Opus Dei society. Her association with this Catholic body means she can neither marry nor adopt Becky's children after her twin sister succumbs to AIDS. Given Vera's positive feelings after she turns down Muhambe's proposal, I read her as a self-liberated character whom Ogola depicts as entirely capable of forging her own (radical) destiny.

Ogola's novel, nonetheless, tells new stories about women—often re-telling old stories in new ways. The benefit of this—despite extra-textual authorial intervention—is that women can re-imagine how to enact their agency. Hence, it is worth enquiring of the text, how do marital relations morph as a result of changing female agency? The antagonism that characterizes marriage can be witnessed in the lives of Akoko Obanda and her daughter Maria Nyabera. Akoko is the first to break cultural norms regarding marriage as enshrined in communal law, Chik. After having been accused of witchcraft by her husband's mother—a grave accusation—Akoko decides to return to her natal home and threatens to sever the marital bond. The community reacts in disbelief “such a thing was unheard of. Didn't a man own a woman body and soul? Marriage was sacred

and Chik saw to it that it remained that way by a series of taboos that made it almost impossible to sever the union (Ogola 32). As it turns out however, this is not the last time that Akoko defies Chik. Furthermore Maria Nyabera, just like her mother, refuses to be restrained by Chik dictates about marriage; as Odhiambo points out, “what is significant in the action of these two women is their refusal to be confined within the institution of marriage once it cannot offer them the supposed security and comfort” (241). In Ogola’s text, her characters’ dissatisfaction with marriage emerges from an infringement of their equality. Though adamant that “equality is a deceptive term because none of us are equal,” Ogola is yet keen to point out that “equality of opportunity” is paramount (Kuria 138). It is this that Akoko and Maria lack in their respective marriages. In the socio-economic milieu within which Akoko and her daughter live, land—and its potential to create wealth—was a key aspect of social mobility. Land ownership was an important beginning in amassing food stocks, which could then be traded for livestock, and these eventually exchanged for more land. Moreover, the more abstract attributes of land—as a resting place for the ancestors and as one’s connection to the cycle of life—were just as significant as its material qualities.

In the next section, I examine how Ogola’s novel addresses the question of land rights, particularly women’s (in)equality of access to land/land ownership. Despite the “rootedness” with which Ogola develops her protagonists—but which appears in a more diverse way in the author’s own upbringing—critical attention has so far not focused on the significance of characters’ relationship(s) to land—both as a physical and

metaphorical object.⁴⁸ While Odhiambo positions *TRS* in its postcolonial moment, and comments on the emergence of a monetary colonial economy as depicted by Ogola, he stops short of making vital connections between land alienation and the socio-economic changes that Akoko Obanda's community undergoes. Furthermore, while he identifies the importance of the family as a social unit, and an institution within which women struggle for autonomy and self-realization, he ignores the economic implications of male-female alliances as played out around Ogola's traditional (and modern) hearth.

V: Fantasies of Emptiness vs. Conventions of Ownership

My reading of Ogola extends Odhiambo's scholarship by identifying the novel's engagement with the colonial imagination of East Africa as empty land and the resulting socio-economic effects. In several ways, one of which involves the legal sphere, Ogola not only demonstrates the voiding of African customs as perpetrated by colonial officials but she also responds to the imperialist rhetoric embedded in visual colonial texts discussed earlier in the chapter. Through Kenya's cultural heritage—including the spheres of oral tradition and the law—Ogola then presents the reader with antagonistic notions of native/settler (outsider), men/women or husband/wife, as well as violence/non-violence and reveals how these social binaries influenced patterns of land ownership. For one, the colonial fabrication of Kenya as a *tabula rasa* inspired an equal and opposing

⁴⁸ Ogola's childhood is significant to how her text has been interpreted. Although she has Luo heritage from her parents, who both hail from Western Kenya, she herself grew up in the central parts of Kenya amongst the Kikuyu community in Nyandarua and Rumuruti (Kuria 128). The idea of "a natal place" is doubly subverted in Ogola's family by the fact that her father is buried not in his place of birth, as Luo customs dictate, but in his adopted home in Central Kenya. This is even more significant given the infamous S. M. Otieno burial court case where Otieno, a member of the Luo community, had instructed his wife to bury him in his adopted home—a farm near Nairobi—but the deceased's wishes were overturned by his extended family who undertook extensive legal action against his widow to assume custody of the body and bury it in its "rightful" place—his place of birth/his parent's home. Given Kenya's ethnic identity politics, Ogola's upbringing in a "strange" place—and her father's final resting place—are both unique events.

effort to prove ancestral ownership of land. Ogola's fiction, though published thirty years after Ogot's *The Promised Land*, similarly engages this side of Kenyan history by deploying several literary tropes which seek to confirm and foreground indigenous rights to land.

Colonial visual rhetoric in its suppositions of imperial order and productivity—as opposed to native disorder and unproductivity—was premised upon the emptying of black bodies from their indigenous settings. At the very least, this process alienated Africans from the realm of subjects (and landownership) and transformed them into objects (and landlessness). There are striking parallels between how imperialism related to its colonized subjects and how Luo patriarchy, with subtleness, marginalized women. Imperial hegemony in many ways self-represented as masculine; hence, the colonized were feminized and depicted as ripe for “penetration.”⁴⁹ Similarly, Luo male hegemony, as featured in Ogola's work, often alienated women and positioned them in problematic relationships vis-à-vis land. There existed competitive relations between men and women in their quest for material wealth and attendant social status. It is important however, to first appreciate how Luo women traditionally enjoyed access to the corridors of power. *TRS's* depiction of Akoko Obanda's marital difficulties demonstrates that women were afforded much respect in the Luo community Ogola imagines. After grave accusations regarding witchcraft from her mother-in-law, Akoko abandons her marital home, leaving behind her children. The arrival of her husband at her natal place prompts the convening of a council of elders in order to hash out the couple's grievances:

⁴⁹ For instance, in Ebrahim Hussein's *Kinjeketile*, (1970) German dominance in Tanganyika was attributed to the effeminacy of indigenous populations—suggesting that perhaps subjugated communities internalized colonial tropes.

On the twenty third day of the moon, the chief and seven *Jodongo* arrived in *Yimbo* to negotiate the return of their wife. The reception was chilly, but everything concerning as delicate a contract as marriage had to be handled according to the most stringent dictates of *Chik*; and *Chik* clearly stated that both sides of the story had to be heard before a decision could be made. ... let me call the woman to speak first as she is the complainant. (Ogola 37)

The manner in which the *Jodongo* performs its role as the law-making organ of society establishes women's access to vernacular justice systems, even in the first few years of *Pax Britannica*. Furthermore, this seems to suggest that women, though not necessarily considered equal to men, had equal opportunity to have their rights upheld, and to enjoy protection of their property. In Ogola's rendition, this particular pre-colonial institution—the *Jodongo*—unlike other colonial organizations, did not alienate women from material resources in general, and land in particular. Much in contrast to colonial photography, Ogola's text re-inserts indigenous Kenyan women into the heart of social relations and institutions. *Chik*, the network of cultural taboos and values governing public relations, demanded that women be accorded equal voice in crucial negotiations with wider communal repercussions. Regardless of *Chik* not being perfect, Ogola's depiction of cultural mores suggests that there were indigenous and organic ways for disenfranchised members of pre-colonial Luo societies to demand change. Ogola offers a rounded representation of Luo pre-colonial society that neither glosses over nor embellishes objectionable aspects of Luo life.

Marriage did not provide a wholly benign space for women's subjectivity. Rather than entrenched recognition of women's agency, marital ties accommodated female agency on a case-by-case basis—depending on the husband's disposition—and created much potential for male-female friction. Consider, for instance, Akoko's domestic

arrangement with her husband and contrast this to the way her brother-in-law, Otieno, treated his wives:

In spite of his many wives, [Otieno] desired his brother's wife who seemed to get younger every year instead of older. Even his youngest wife who was still in her teens could not compare with Akoko, with her flawless skin and still very trim figure kept so by hard work. Otieno treated his wives like sluts and they did not fail him. Owuor treated his wife like a queen and she did not fail him either. (Ogola 43)

Ogola highlights the husbands' respect for their wives in relation to the kind of agential space women have access to. If Otieno regarded his wives as objects, merely ornamental to his own individuality, his brother Owuor appreciated Akoko as a person. Owuor saw his wife as an individual subject who could in turn own other objects e.g. cattle, food stores, land etc. Owuor's marriage, unlike Otieno's, did not seek to write-off women from domestic—and communal—relations; rather, Owuor safeguarded and respected Akoko's individuality.

Problematically, women in the world of Ogola's text have but two choices—to be a "slut" or to be a "queen"—and both are tied to their sexuality. It is then no surprise that despite the spaces extended to women by the village council of elders, or by mutually beneficial marriages such as that between Akoko and Owuor, Otieno primarily views women as an extension to his private wealth. Hence, once Akoko is widowed, her brother-in-law sets about grabbing as much of Owuor's wealth as he can manage.

Otieno Kembo took over the chief's stool with glee and sat on it with heavy arrogance. He appropriated his brother's wealth and tried to grab his widow's personal property as well ... [Akoko] knew that as a woman, a widow and a sonless mother, the only male in her direct line being a little baby, she was greatly disadvantaged. ... She felt the weight of injustice that women have felt since time immemorial in her male-dominated world. (Ogola 66)

Otieno takes over the chieftaincy, his brother's lands and other movable property, and finally attempts to inherit Akoko. Ogola represents the tussle between Akoko and Otieno as representative of women's marginalization in the wider community and performs an indictment of indigenous gender relations in Luo-land. The writer is intent on deconstructing the view that women are objects, liable to "ownership" by men and not subjects in their own right, with the capacity to own and administer such objects as cattle, land, etc. In Ogola's view, women's access to land rights has always been mediated by men—either in the guise of village elders, a husband, or one's own son. Hence, in the event that these avenues of male support are lacking—or happen to be unethical—women suffer an infringement of their rights and/or property. The "battle of the sexes" is symbiotically resolved between Akoko and Owuor—and Akoko benefits; Owuor's demise, however, leaves her vulnerable to the greed and degradation with which Otieno conducts marriage.

Ironically, the struggle between Akoko and Otieno is resolved not by organic transformation of Luo customs, but by an external force—British colonial policy. Akoko presents her dispute to the District Commissioner (D.C.) closest to her village, at Kisumu. After some deliberation, the D.C. delivered the following verdict:

The complainant Obanda Owuor, also known as Akoko has convinced this tribunal that an injustice has been done. Therefore a contingent of *askaris* shall go to the village and forcibly remove the chief. He shall be made to return all that he has grabbed from his sister-in-law and his grandnephew. A council of elders shall forthwith rule the village until such time as the rightful heir comes of age. The council may elect one man to be a custodian of the chief's stool and their spokesman. The matter is ended. Next case. (Ogola 84)

This incident demonstrates Ogola's view that not only did women in newly-colonized communities immediately recognize the drastic transformation under which their

societies were undergoing, but they also acted so as to benefit from those changes.⁵⁰ This passage offers the reader mediated access to Luo pre-colonial society in Kenya and provides a sense of how a Kenyan woman in the early Twentieth century might have understood that historical moment. Women's relationships to colonial institutions thus displayed ambivalence; in other words, it is ironic that while the British D.C. upheld Akoko's right to her property, he was also part of a colonial system that alienated Kenyan communities from their land and labor, through oppressive cash crop farming. The D.C.'s capacity to arbitrate in Akoko's case simultaneously renders the Luo chieftaincy powerless and void. Any benefits that women might have gained as a result of their relations to colonial institutions were immediately undermined by the larger socio-economic upheavals that imperialism initiated. If the *Jodongo* was one example of indigenous institutions that offered women much needed agency and space for self-realization, Otieno's marriage and his antagonism towards Akoko demonstrate that women had an uphill task in asserting their rights to property. Luo patriarchal culture, much like colonial visual rhetoric, sought to alienate women from both power and control of material resources. In this gesture, both Luo patriarchy and colonial power were instrumental in the literal or metaphorical "homelessness" of certain populations—Luo women and indigenous Kenyans, respectively.

Patriarchal alienation of Luo women and colonial disenfranchisement of indigenous Kenyans were both resisted in various ways—one of the most significant

⁵⁰ As the representation of Nwoye in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* makes clear, the marginalized sections of pre-colonial societies—effeminate boys, widows, and twins in Achebe's text—were among the first converts into Christianity and the premier adherents to colonial law. Like every society that we know of, pre-colonial societies had flaws and marginalized groups; some of those saw an opportunity to better their situation in the disruption to the social order created by colonialism. This, however, does not mean that colonialism was "better."

being self-narration. If patriarchy and colonial policies were intent on propagating the fantasies of emptiness—either that Luo women were non-entities or that autochthonous Kenyans had no inalienable rights to their land—victims of both forms of injustice narrated themselves back into subjecthood and, potentially, land ownership. As critical attention to Ogola’s texts—as well as the author’s own explication—has noted, the writer is very aware of the need to “tell women’s stories.” My own reading of Ogola’s novel argues that this desire parallels earlier acts of resistance in which narratives served as political tools for demanding increased individual (or communal) agency. Ogola’s text serves many purposes in the aftermath of colonial projects in Africa, one being the chronicling of indigenous societies and institutions, much like Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiong’o have done. In addition to re-telling history, *TRS* marshals aesthetic conventions to demonstrate indigenous land rights. Ogola achieves this by deploying oral traditions and repeatedly invoking their educational role to pass on communal wisdom from one generation to the next. Through *Akoko*, Ogola offers her readers the following piece of tribal lore:

Were is a great spirit. He saw that the world needed more than spirit forms. So he created Ramogi and his brothers who were men. Man has a form which is spiritual. *Were* sent the men he had created to various parts of the world to settle in it. Ramogi he sent to the country around the great lake which was a great favour for he had more spirit than his brothers. The wife whom *Were* gave him was called Nyar Nam who embodied the spirit of the great lake. They had many children including Rachuonyo, Sakwa, Asembo, Yimbo, Gem, Uyoma, Nyakach, Seme and Ugenya among others who settled around the lake, tilling land, taming animals and catching fish. These are the children of Ramogi from whom we all arise. (Ogola, 74)

Akoko’s myth of Luo origin validates claims of land ownership in several ways. First, it establishes direct communion between a deity and Ramogi, the first man, and also the first inhabitant of this part of Kenya. Simultaneously, this claim invokes right of

ownership via divine gift, as well as right of first occupancy. The Luo community owns the land around Lake Victoria precisely because they did not dispossess any prior residents—in contrast to the Luo-Nandi conflict that Ogot describes in *TPL*. Furthermore, the names of Ramogi’s children, Sakwa, Gem etc. all coincide to the names of various regions where Akoko’s community lives. This rather convenient pattern makes it clear that the rightful owners (and heirs) of this land are those who have exercised their right to name places.⁵¹ Ogola’s move can be traced back to the writing produced by Jomo Kenyatta and Oginga Odinga, in the Fifties and Sixties, respectively.⁵² Kenyatta’s work on Kikuyu culture and Odinga’s on the Luo community, both reference myths of origin and their centrality in communal wisdom. In addition, of course, both writers use these stories to allude to the ancient nature of African communities and justify why colonial incursions encountered resistance. What Kenyatta’s, Odinga’s, and Ogola’s texts have in common is that they establish the native/settler binary and argue for inalienable land rights on behalf of aboriginal communities. Ogot’s *TPL*, of course, further complicates this binary by exploring indigenous African forms of “colonial” settlement.

Ogola’s female characters wield Christian narratives to challenge patriarchy. In this case, it is not entire communities re-writing themselves back into subjecthood, but rather portions of a society—women—marshaling the new religion to claim equal rights

⁵¹ As it turns out, naming is a globally recognized convention to display ownership; in *If this is your Land, where are your stories?* Edward Chamberlain makes a point regarding aboriginal communities in Canada and Australia. Their land rights are enshrined in the kinds of narratives they tell about their environment, its geographic features, climate, fauna and flora. Crucially, the care-taker role that such stories privilege vis-à-vis aboriginal communities and the lands they occupy, is vastly different from the exploitative intent of colonial map-making.

⁵² Jomo Kenyatta and Jaramogi Oginga Odinga were Kenyan politicians in the Forties through the Seventies. They both led efforts to oust British colonial rule from Kenya and went on to form Kenya’s first post-independence government. Kenyatta, while studying in the United Kingdom under B. Malinowski wrote *Facing Mount Kenya*, an anthropological work on Kikuyu culture. Odinga wrote *Not Yet Uhuru*, a memoir that also included history about the Luo community, after his fall from Kenyatta’s grace and much political rivalry between them.

of land ownership. Akoko's daughter, Maria Nyabera, was a great storyteller and she narrated the following biblical tales to her own daughter as well as her nephew. Each story was followed by teachings to the children on how they should behave. For instance after telling them about King David's adventure with the lion, Maria explained that David, the shepherd boy, "was so brave and good . . . that God chose him to be King. You must be brave for to be a coward is an insult to God and man (Ogola 104). When Maria told the children about the unique friendship between David and King Saul's son, Jonathan, she added, "my children we should try to be friends to our friends like Jonathan was to Daudi. If you have a worthy friend (a rare thing) never spare yourself for him" (Ogola 104). Courage and friendship are two qualities greatly admired in the community Ogola represents. In fact, the writer offers several examples of praise songs which the community uses to mythologize those men deemed bravest and/or most sincere of friends. While traditional praise songs do not offer women any space to be brave and/or genuine friends, biblical tales do. Praise songs are depicted as the sole preserve of male warriors, especially deployed to commemorate great battles; biblical tales, on the other hand, are held in trust by poor widows. Unlike the exclusively male praise songs, stories from the Old Testament—though primarily enacted by male characters—depict courage and true friendship as gender neutral ideals both men and women can cultivate. Consequently, if both husbands and wives—or brothers and sisters, sons and daughters and so on—can mature into responsible members of the society, Maria's re-telling of King David's life seems to question the privilege with which boys and men have been endowed. The ability to own land and property is one aspect where male entitlement has been preserved to the detriment of women.

Ogola questions male privilege as a cultural norm by staging the symbolic absence of Luo sons from land transactions in the early part of the twentieth century. In addition, she interrogates the colonial premise that military conquest and its attendant violence were an adequate price for land. *TRS* re-hashes British involvement in WW1 and its heavy toll on the lives of indigenous Kenyans. In particular, the text narrates how young men died in the service of the King in anti-German campaigns. In Akoko's village Obura Kembo, Ambere K'ongoso and Nyaroche Silwal travelled as part of the King's African Rifle to fight the Germans in Tanganyika; Obura and Ambere died while Nyaroche lost a leg and lived a beggar in Kisumu, never to return home (Ogola 56). These three men are representative of a lost generation in Akoko's community—an age group whose absence jeopardizes the continuity of male dominance through father-to-son land bequests. Their deaths or physical disability during military service strain the gender-biased land rights precisely because men are favored over women; as a dearth of male heirs emerges, patriarchy flounders. Furthermore, if British martial victory over Germany entitled it to Tanganyika (ownership via conquest) what dividends do Obura and his fellow African soldiers gain as a result of their involvement in this venture? As it turns out, of course, African service men received nothing from the Crown while their white counterparts got generous land grants. When this happened again in the aftermath of World War II, intense anti-British politics emerged. Clearly, then, violence as means of gaining land ownership is fraught with problems—in this case, due to colonial racism.

Even in the absence of racial differences, violence as a mode of acquiring land is still problematic—no less in its anti-colonial guise. Ogola obliquely refers to the great

social upheavals that were happening in central Kenya during the Fifties. Primarily, she points out the violence that characterized this part of Kenyan history:

Things became very bad and lorries carrying the dead, purportedly Mau Mau were a common sight. There was suspicion everywhere – white against black and black against white. The Kikuyu especially suffered greatly – and could be shot, maimed, killed or translocated at a moment’s notice. They returned atrocity for atrocity and blood flowed – both black and white. (Ogola 157)

Unlike Frantz Fanon who argues that “violence is a cleansing force,” and thus elaborates on the benefits of anti-imperial warfare, Ogola is much more ambivalent about bloodshed in anti-colonial politics (94). She does not foreground the cathartic quality of extreme acrimony. Instead, Ogola’s depiction invites disturbing questions regarding revenge and the extent to which it hinders national re-appraisal of key questions about inequity. Even as Ogola highlights Kikuyu suffering during colonial Kenya—as exhibited by the random violence which could be enacted on them—she also seeks to flatten indigenous cultural differences under the rubric “black.” On the one hand, she deploys “black” as a category that encompasses ALL African experiences at the hands of their colonial masters, yet she is forced to emphasize the Kikuyu community’s involvement as atypical of what other “black” Kenyans experienced. It is almost as though Kikuyus are blacker than other “black” Kenyans and hence the recipients of especially heinous acts under British colonial policies.

Ogola’s discussion reflects a dilemma that has plagued historiographical projects in Kenya since independence. Endeavors at memorializing anti-British politics often result in depictions that, like Ogola’s, foreground both Kikuyu exclusivity and exceptionality—twin effects of the unique violence that the colonial state enacted on Central Kenya. Such ideas have been co-opted for the purposes of ethnic chauvinism

especially in regards to the question: after Mau Mau activities succeeded in ousting British colonialism, to whom should the country and/or land belong? Should it not belong predominantly to the Kikuyu who bore the brunt of British oppression rather than collective ownership by the Kenyan nation? What is left unsaid by Ogola's phrase "the Kikuyu suffered greatly," is that other communities grieved, too. Frequently however, the corollary to Ogola's statement is assumed to be "no one else suffered." Furthermore, even if Kikuyu interests reign supreme will these be managed by the "loyalist" section of the community—that which collaborated with British policies—or will these people be marginalized? Once more, while Ogola's use of "Kikuyu" suggests a homogenous community with similar experiences at the hands of colonial officers, nothing could be further from the truth. The very words *loyalists* and *Mau Mau* express the various camps that Kikuyu families sought to align themselves with during the anti-British guerilla war, with crucial repercussions vis-à-vis land rights. As it was understood by the Kenyan population—and as historical evidence suggests—loyalists collaborated to safeguard British imperialism and were rewarded with land grants and their children with formal education. On the other hand, Mau Mau sympathizers were often relocated from their ancestral land, corralled into densely-populated villages, and forced to eke out a living under extremely harsh conditions. These and other conundrums—such as what qualifies as cooperating with British imperialism given that European dominance gave minimal opportunity for resistance—are all encoded in Ogola's short remarks about Mau Mau violence.⁵³

⁵³ See David Anderson's *The Histories of the Hanged: The Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire* (2005), and Caroline Elkins' *Britain's Gulag: The Brutal End of Empire in Kenya* (2005).

Rather than enshrine Kikuyu land rights, Mau Mau anti-colonial efforts merely invited multiple inquiries regarding ethnic identity, ethnic chauvinism, and the composition of the newly independent nation-state. As it turns out, such queries have been of grave importance from independence onwards. Fighting the colonizer for “land rights” elided, not only the complexity of indigenous claims to land, but also the effect of the conflict with colonialism itself on those claims—issues that have brought forth multiple forms of inequality in the postcolonial state. While Ogola’s novel teases out the consequences of the ethnic question in relation to land rights in Western Kenya—where the Luo community pre-dominates—it does not attempt a similarly in-depth investigation in relation to the Kikuyu natal area of Central Kenya. Furthermore, her focus on Akoko’s quest to safeguard her property from a greedy brother-in-law demonstrates that even in relation to Luo cultural traditions she downplays the ethnic issue in favor of gender.

This chapter has been concerned with fantasies of emptiness—empty lands, cultures void of “civilization” or purpose, and subject positions that are unimaginable as land-owners—as expressed in colonial visual documents as well as in two texts by Kenyan women spanning the period after independence. The two postcolonial novels stage and critique various conventions of ownership—divine bequest, myths of origin, and violence—all meant to safeguard a community’s, or individual’s, land possessions. As we have seen, some of these conventions—especially violence—fail repeatedly. Rather than provide further justification for the ownership rights of one entity over another, the fiction undermines this mechanism and argues against its sustainability. While violence was a vital component in anti-colonial efforts to oust colonial settlers, its effectiveness did not translate into the postcolonial era. As I will demonstrate in the next

chapter, Ethiopian and Tanzanian attempts at land re-distribution not only further exposed the fallacy of “emptiness,” especially in the countryside, but also displayed why violence should be wholly disavowed in debates on land equitability. A key continuity between the fictions in this chapter versus those in the next is the presence of an overarching authority with the power to grant land. While both Ogot and Ogola assign this power to *Were*, the Luo creation deity, Ebrahim Hussein and B. M. Sahle Sellassie look to the socialist post-independent state. In the first decade of African self-rule, the government emerged as a crucial mediator in land (re)distribution—a key natural resource. As I will argue in the next section, Sellassie’s work largely ignores the gender question, and focuses instead on the issue of political will. Hussein’s work, however, is keenly aware of gender biases in the division of communal resources.

Despite the thirty-year gap in publication of Ogot’s versus Ogola’s work, not only do the texts focus on similar thematic concerns, they also seem to provoke the same critical reaction: evasion. The two books are not so different since they both deal with ideas the mainstream public would rather ignore: gender and ethnic biases. They both underline the importance of gender in understanding the issue of land rights. In addition, neither text has been fully appreciated for its intervention—an issue that seems to dog other East African writers. Sahle Sellassie’s fiction was published in English at a time when the Amharic reading public far outnumbered the English-reading audience in Ethiopia. To say the least, his work has been largely sidelined. So too has Hussein’s work—despite his success earlier in his writing career when he was able to garner official support. Shifting my theoretical focus from Kenyan writers to other artists in the region enables an appreciation of the hurdles writers encounter in their desire to spark socio-

political changes. These hurdles include not only being ignored by critics, but also government repression and censorship.

Chapter 2: Land as Object in African Socio-Political Interventions

This second chapter explores discourses on land reform in Socialist post-independence African states. In addition, it continues my earlier discussion of the importance of gender critiques in debates about African land rights. Ebrahim Hussein's *Arusi* (1980) not only dramatizes the state's failure to nurture equitable land rights the play also suggests that this inadequacy resulted in the transformation of Tanzania's colonial-era dependence into neo-colonial subservience. Hussein's allegorical discussion of land rights encompasses gender issues and uses competition between the sexes to comment on the rise of individualism at the expense of communalist norms. Even more importantly, the difficulties that the author has encountered in disseminating his work are emblematic of the hurdles African writers face in their desire to spark socio-political change. Finally, Hussein's cynicism about the Ujamaa dream demonstrates to what extent the ideal of African Socialism had become morally bankrupt. This disavowal of postcolonial African politics can also be deduced from B. M. Sahle Sellassie's *The Afersata* (1968). Like Hussein's fiction, Sahle Sellassie's novella indicts the state for its autocracy and inability to encourage bottom-up socio-economic reform. An additional similarity is that Sellassie also deploys his critique using a motif of quotidian rural life: the hut. Using images of human shelter, Sellassie's fiction portrays tenant/landlord exploitation and juxtaposes it with communal benevolence. Such contrasting relationships enable an argument regarding state-level socio-economic injustice and the lack of a grass-roots approach to land and/or other forms of socio-political reform. *The Afersata* is also important to my discussion of land rights because it wields the imagery of creation and destruction in a manner that invites a comparison to similar language in Ethiopian political rhetoric.

The first half of the chapter explores land rights in Tanzanian political history, especially during the period of President Julius Nyerere's doctrine of African Socialism (Ujamaa). I then examine Ebrahim Hussein's work and its position in the larger body of Tanzanian letters before outlining the significance of his play, *Arusi*, in my discussion of African land rights. The second half of the chapter begins with an assessment of land rights/land reform in Ethiopian political history, especially after the 1974 Socialist Revolution. I then perform a survey of Ethiopian literature, and review its attempts at political agitation, before investigating B. M. Sahle Sellassie's *The Afersata* and its critique of Ethiopian land rights. Unlike my previous chapter which explores the dream of African independence—and the hopes that writers like Grace Ogot kindled—this second part of my project deals with the dystopia of the African postcolony. Fiction by both Hussein and Sahle Sellassie displays much bitterness at the disappointing results of African experiments with self-rule.

I: Dramatic Rendering of Tanzanian Political History

Tanzanian history—marked by events that alienated indigenous communities from their cultures, and material resources, especially land—demonstrates the importance of land rights as a unifying platform for anti-colonial politics. The 1905 Maji Maji rebellion led by Kinjeketile Ngwale, a traditional healer *cum* seer, was the most memorable of these initiatives. Ebrahim Hussein's dramatic rendering of the Maji Maji uprising—*Kinjeketile* (1969)—is an apt example of African literature historicizing political events—especially ones that revolve around land rights—for posterity. Hussein's play highlights alienation of native lands as a key source of contention between

German settlers and their colonized peoples. Consider, for example, the lamentation by the female character Bibi Kitunda.

Bibi Kitunda: ... all that work for nothing. Our men work a lot, but they get nothing. We don't even have food in the house ... famine is inevitable. All the men are working in Bwana Kinoo's plantation and not on their own. So, of course, there must be famine.
(*Kinjeketile* 1-2)

Through Bibi Kitunda, Hussein highlights the oppressive labor practices entrenched by German colonial concerns. The re-direction of indigenous labor away from food production to cash crop farming and the harvesting of raw materials for Berlin industries seriously undermined Tanganyikan food security. A secondary cause of the contention between indigenous peoples and German settlers is the definition of the term “work.” The long hours spent by Bibi Kitunda’s community performing hard farm labor is not worthy of equal compensation – in German eyes. The activities Bibi Kitunda and her neighbors are engaged in on behalf of German farming interests are closer to forced or conscripted labor than voluntary and meaningful employment. We get a sense, then, of Tanganyika as a nation under siege. Mkichi, one of Bibi Kitunda’s fellow villagers, describes the alienation that ensued after German occupation:

The Red Earth is still in our country. What's more, he has taken our country from us by force. And we, like women, just stare at him. Now he has forced us to cultivate his cotton plantation for him. We just stare at him. He has got us paying him taxes. (*Kinjeketile* 5)

Mkichi identifies three reasons why his is a wholly disenfranchised community: racial, economic, and gender. Brute German force—manifested as Red Earth—compels indigenous Africans to participate in exploitative economic and political relationships (work and taxation), which are then interpreted through gender (“we, like women”).

Mkichi's description of Germans as "Red Earth" garners its potency from highlighting what they are *not*: African/black/indigenous. Unlike Tanganyikan black soil which aptly represents its indigenous inhabitants the alien nature of German occupation is easily "read" from a basic characteristic of their biology: skin color.

Economically, Mkichi's country has been denied access to not only productive labor, but also land and financial resources. By paying taxes to maintain German occupation, Tanganyikans spend capital that could otherwise have been re-invested in local industries. Jane Plastow argues that Hussein's re-writing of the Maji Maji struggle is one of "the most subtle ... historical-liberation plays" written in Tanzania (138). And while this is true in regards to Hussein's use of ritual performance and its potential for political agitation, it is not the case when we think about his discussion of gender. Hussein, by positioning women outside of the national concern and the anticolonial struggle, repeats the misogyny evident in several other nationalist texts.⁵⁴ Despite Bibi Kitunda's role as a torch-bearer and political activist, Hussein's Mkichi argues that femininity is equitable to cowardice and capitulation to foreign interests. This is quite paradoxical given that there are at least two instances in the text when women admonish men for inaction against their German oppressors. Clearly, in at least these two scenarios, women deserve to be lauded for their pre-revolutionary grassroots contribution to the Tanganyikan struggle for self-rule. Hussein's *Kinjeketile* reaches back to establish links between Tanzanian literature, anti-colonial resistance, and land rights. In this particular case, literature memorializes past events and preserves them for future generations.

⁵⁴ *Masters of the Dew* by Jacques Roumain as well as the earlier works by Ngugi wa Thiong'o are often cited for their singular misrepresentation of women as victims incapable of making any contributions towards ousting colonial powers.

However, the relationship between African literature and land rights can also be visionary—both drama and fiction serving as a catalyst for opportunities in land access and ownership.

II: Independence & Arusha Declaration

Six years after independence, President Julius Nyerere's 1967 *Arusha Declaration* envisioned a novel path for Tanzanian development: one more democratic than either German or British colonialism. In Nyerere's assessment, European imperialism had left the country wary of exploitation and oppressive labor practices. To correct this, Nyerere's *Declaration* foregrounded more equitable taxation, government ownership of means of production, and financial independence as key areas in post-independence socio-economic justice. At the core of the *Declaration* was the administration's decision that all land belong to the state; such an overt gesture towards socialism had repercussions on citizens' land rights. Mention of less oppressive taxation systems, state control over factors of production, and fiscal autonomy suggested the inception of more inclusive land access and ownership policies.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ The *Declaration* identified the link between government wealth and the taxation of citizens. "When it is said the government has no money, what does this mean? It means that the people of Tanzania have insufficient money," wrote Nyerere (*Essays* 20). Hence, unlike colonial forms of tax revenue, the *Arusha Declaration* and the resulting Ujamaa policy were aimed at initiating more equitable (re)-distribution of national wealth. The *Declaration* recognized that "people pay taxes out of the very little wealth they have" and that to insist on more tax collection increased the financial burden on citizens (*Essays* 20). Nyerere also pointed out that despite Britain's absolute control of Tanzanian land, this condition had not enabled the creation of a socialist state intent on impartial allocation of public resources. For Nyerere, this was mostly because the government was a foreign occupying force. Acknowledgement of the people's choice was a major contributing factor to Ujamaa's initial success and its acclaim both at home and abroad. Coming on the heels of repressive foreign imperialism across the global south, Ujamaa was viewed as a sovereign alternative to top-down forms of leadership. Finally, unlike neighboring countries which made no effort to de-link themselves from international forms of capitalism, Ujamaa sought financial independence as a safeguard to its political self-rule. As per the *Arusha Declaration*, "independence means self-reliance. Independence cannot be real if a nation depends upon gifts and loans from another for its development" (*Essays* 23). Nyerere recognized that international flows of capital also bought the political allegiance of their recipients and tried to resist such overtures. Close scrutiny of Tanzania's financial relations with

The *Arusha Declaration*'s discussion regarding government oversight over factors of production, especially land, did not fully clarify the way forward as far as land rights. Ujamaa's legal framework—and its capacity to direct national development—emanated from its official sponsorship by the sole political party: Tanganyika African National Union (TANU). The overlap between what the *Arusha Declaration* set out to achieve and what was already enshrined in the Tanzanian constitution raises questions about the supremacy of each document. Although the constitution is assumed to be a cardinal document, the *Arusha Declaration* had extensive reach into all aspects of Tanzanian life.⁵⁶ While both the national constitution and the *Arusha Declaration* spelled out numerous state duties and citizen land rights, with time the latter were increasingly sidelined and forgotten.

Given the 1964 attempted coup in Dar es Salaam and the British navy's assistance to Nyerere in quelling this mutiny, it is perhaps unsurprising that three years later the *Arusha Declaration* relied heavily on the metaphors of warfare:

TANU is involved in a war against poverty and oppression in our country; the struggle is aimed at moving the people of Tanzania (and the people of Africa as a whole) from a state of poverty to a state of prosperity. (*Essays* 17)

From among several metaphors that have been used to represent the nation-state—a family, the human body, and so on—Nyerere chose to depict Tanzania as a war machine, and its efforts to improve the people's living standards as combat. The *Arusha Declaration* was thus a manifesto for revolution—with the attendant social upheavals that

foreigners was vital to judge if they advanced or retrogressed concessions to self-government that the country had already won from its former British masters.

⁵⁶ For instance, Tanzanians' "right to freedom of association" and "right to receive from society protection of ... life and of property held according to the law" are fundamental rights enshrined in the constitution AND in the *Arusha Declaration* (*Essays* 13).

accompany such drastic national projects. If the process of Tanzanian socio-economic development was the equivalent of going to combat, Nyerere was literally, and metaphorically, the Commander-in-Chief. He had at his disposal the country's wealth both in terms of natural, and human, resources. Nyerere's war against destitution, illiteracy, and poor health demanded his subjects' absolute faith in his decisions.

In efforts to reverse emerging political cronyism among urban elites, Nyerere turned to metaphors of cannibalism to better explain exploitation in Tanzania. He argued that since rural farmers created much of the wealth that propped up the state, they should have proportionate benefits from national development. *Unyanyasaji*, or exploitation, was a frightening phenomenon associated with capitalist nations like Kenya and South Africa, and Nyerere invoked it to caution that "people who live in towns can possibly become the exploiters of those who live in the rural areas" (*Essays* 33). Nyerere's proclamation contended that "although when we talk of exploitation we usually think of capitalists, we should not forget that there are many fish in the sea. They eat each other. The larger ones eat the small ones, and the small ones eat those who are even smaller" (*Essays* 28). Aware that an emerging political echelon in the nation was intent on using its positions of power for selfish reasons, Nyerere was adamant that the country maintain vigilance.

The rural-urban divide is central in discussions of land rights and agricultural production. Nyerere urged all citizens that "the biggest requirement is hard work" (*Essays* 30). In particular, he was dismayed to note that male populations in rural areas, as well as sections of the female population in towns and cities, do not work as hard as village women and urban men. Nyerere, however, did not delve into such issues as social expectations and impediments to women seeking work in modern work places away from

the land. It is worth noting that the President's admonishment of urban women is surprisingly similar to colonial policies of population control which—from Nairobi, to Dar es Salaam, and even Johannesburg—sought to restrict women's lives to the rural sphere and made it very difficult for female laborers to reside in towns and cities. This phenomenon is especially apparent in the fourth chapter of this project when I discuss urban fiction from Nairobi and Dar es Salaam and women's roles in these emerging (post)colonial cities immediately before and after the advent of self-rule.

III: Reaction to Ujamaa

Nyerere's definition of Ujamaa (African Socialism) was very adamant about the role of land in both national consciousness and national development for two key reasons. Firstly, Nyerere, wary of the repercussions of land as private property, rejected the classification of land "as a commodity;" rather, he viewed contemporary Tanzanians as custodial recipients of an inalienable gift (Kamata 105). This meant that citizens had to perform caretaker duties and preserve land for their descendants, while the nation as a whole had to defend its land resources against foreign interests. Secondly, Nyerere put forth a 'moral appeal' to advocate for land as a public good (Kamata 108). Having just emerged from colonial domination, the Tanzanian state was keen to deploy the surplus of goodwill that came from its citizens—a people grateful for being liberated from European supremacy. In addition, Ujamaa was to depart "from earlier authoritarian methods of enforcing the implementation of agricultural development among peasants; rather, Ujamaa's rural planning would rely on persuasion, spontaneity and initiative" (Komba 39). However, TANU bureaucrats often fell far short of their idealized use of "the community's initiative, self-reliance and leadership for active and voluntary

participation” (Komba 33). The case of the Ruvuma Development Authority (RDA) is exemplary.

The RDA was a model of Nyerere’s “utopian vision” of Tanzania as “a nation of Ujamaa villages” (Edwards 101). RDA achieved voluntary membership and set about to create its own development agenda. As historians of this social experiment have pointed out, the endeavor succeeded mainly because it skipped the initial theoretical plans and morphed into practical reality. Ultimately, the project’s “responsibility lay with the villagers” and they had the final say on how programs were run (Ibbott 87). RDA became the source of internal wrangling within the ruling party. While Nyerere was “extremely supportive of the RDA,” grassroots level politicians sought to oppose the initiative in all possible ways (Edwards 102). The crux of this antagonism seems to have been based on the fact that RDA was “an autonomous organization receiving funds and personnel from abroad, and promoting a form of socialism which did not depend on a strong central party” (Coulson 271). That RDA members made independent choices, regarding the kinds of development to pursue, thoroughly unsettled regional politicians who foresaw their own positions of power and influence diminished (Ibbott 83). The autocratic modes of governance entrenched during the colonial era remained in many leadership models. This increased conflict between the state and Tanzanian peasants, rapidly eating away at the public good will that had initially welcomed Ujamaa. As I will demonstrate in the next section, the state’s heavy-handed approach towards the RDA experiment was replicated not only in the government’s interaction with student activists but also with Tanzanian authors, especially Ibrahim Hussein.

IV: Hussein's Oeuvre

There is an inherent contradiction between the fate of *Cheche*, a university of Dar Es Salaam student magazine, and the culture of intellectual freedom that Nyerere sought to build. Tanzania was famous in Africa for its tolerance of alternate mindsets, even those that were contrary to official policy. Unlike Kenya, Uganda, and Zaire, the intellectual environment in the country was characterized by a “free flow of ideas” and a high “level of tolerance” (Campbell 51). And it is precisely because of this that *Cheche*'s banning is such an anomaly. It stands out as the act of an autocratic government hard-pressed to accept dissidence. Because official policy afforded safe haven to writers who had been ejected from their own states, one can surmise that the order to break up *Cheche* must have come from very high up. Junior government officials would hardly have dared openly contradict the state. Karim Hirji, one of *Cheche*'s original editors, believes that although University of Dar es Salaam officials delivered the message for disbandment, the command came “from the State House ... [moreover] it infringed upon academic freedom and the right to free speech” (134). TANU's response to this student magazine shows that it was capable of muzzling opposition. The 1977 banning of *Cheche* was perhaps the beginning of a less inclusive era in the Eighties when writers and intellectuals who did not toe the party line were in danger of being sidelined. To a large extent, I argue, this was Ebrahim Hussein's fate.

In post-independence Tanzania, drama was an art form that aligned itself with the government. There had been strict colonial control of theater in the Forties and Fifties; as a result, by the advent of independence drama was far removed from the people and had ahead of it a long struggle before it could gain acceptance “as a relevant form of popular

entertainment” (Plastow 70). Immediately after 1967, a new art form, *Ngojera*, emerged as a way to spread the message of Nyerere’s *Arusha Declaration*. Essentially, *Ngojera* was a “state art-form serving the party and explaining the party-line on topical issues, with minimal critical analysis of government positions” (Plastow 133). The Seventies was the era of pro-Ujamaa plays and two playwrights emerged supreme: Hussein and Penina Mlama. Other university students who graduated fired up with zeal for Nyerere also joined in this endeavor. Penina Mlama’s *Hatia (Guilt)*, Ngalimecha Ngahyoma’s *Huka (Huka)*, K. K. Kahigi and A. A. Hgemo’s *Lengo Letu (Our Objective)*, Emmanuel Mbogo’s *Giza Limeingia (The Dawn of Darkness)*, Gervas Moshiro’s *Chama Chetu (Our Party)*, Ngalimecha Ngahyoma’s *Kijiji Mfanobora (A Model Village)* and G. Z. Kaduma’s *The Canker* all espouse positions that ideologically matched up with the government narrative.⁵⁷ In addition to praising the government, pro-Ujamaa theatre was united in its displeasure at such “bourgeois” ideas as love—despite numerous dramatic plots of sexual betrayal. Overall, the plays “often avoid the theme of love entirely;” the plays view love as a class anomaly that could not contribute to the nation’s efforts of creating a socialist state (Plastow 134). Humor, as it turns out, suffered the same fate and rarely features in works by Hussein, Mlama, Kaduma, et al.

If the Seventies saw the rise of pro-Ujamaa plays, in the Eighties dramatists exercised their critical muscle and began to push against official narratives. Once again, Hussein led the pack. And perhaps because of his trailblazing efforts, he more than other

⁵⁷ As Plastow explains, these plays can be broadly categorized into two groups: “The first four deal with poor people who are betrayed, usually sexually, by someone from the city, and end up seeking a new life in an Ujamaa village ... [while the rest address] the problems of corrupt and, at times, reactionary local leaders, who betray the ideals of Ujamaa and have to be either ejected or reformed before the village can function properly” (135-6).

writers has been sanctioned by the Tanzanian state. After almost two decades of the ruling party being the sole voice and initiator of public policy, it was reluctant to give up its role. Initially, rather than welcome criticism from citizens as moments for reflection and opportunities for improvement, the government reacted to dissenting voices by condemning them as “aberrant” (Plastow 184). The government was not only wary of artists who did not toe the party line but also of literature that could not be easily understood by the public.⁵⁸ Hussein’s capacity to write in obscure ways—experimentalism of style—and his open opposition of the “myth that all Tanzanian writers produce for the masses” did not sit well with official propaganda (Plastow 193). As a result, what have been termed his “more complicated plays” have neither had critical attention nor been performed on stage (Plastow 194). *Kaptula la Marx* (Euphrase Kezilahabi, 1978), for example, deploys “ridicule and satire ... to show that Ujamaa cannot work because as an ideology it is too idealistic and incoherent” (Plastow 194). For one year, as a university student, Hussein had migrated into an Ujamaa village; his sentiments about Ujamaa have thus to be read as the firsthand experiences of a Tanzanian patriot. His sojourn, however, left him bitter at both the incompetency of state bureaucracy as well as the inability for genuine grassroots socio-economic change. As can be imagined, such open criticism of Ujamaa, still the official story of Tanzanian development in the early Eighties, irked political elites. And, perhaps, this is more so because criticism emanating from Hussein is difficult to dismiss given his first-hand Ujamaa experiences.

⁵⁸ It’s worth noting that unlike other more authoritarian regimes, Tanzania did repeatedly incarcerate artists as a way to discourage dissent.

Hussein has consistently viewed the purpose of his work as examining “the conflicts inherent in capitalism, imperialism, and gender relations” (Mwaifuge 11). His 1977 play, *Mashetani*, focuses on “socio-political inequalities” in post-independence Tanzania, even as the country loudly proclaims its adherence to the edicts of socialism (Mwaifuge 7). More precisely, *Mashetani* criticizes the “neocolonial mentality” mythologized in Chinua Achebe’s *A Man of the People* (1966) (Philipson 268).⁵⁹ Both *Mashetani* and *Kinjeketile* share Hussein’s frequent deployment of Tanzanian history. Furthermore, these two texts demonstrate the author’s use of traditional symbols and his attempts to establish their continued relevance to present “socio-political reality” (Mwaifuge 11). Using indigenous religious beliefs, the author explores social tensions such as those between capitalism and individualism, as well as the relationship between individualism and “betrayal” (Mwaifuge 114). In *Kwenye Ukingo wa Thim*, (no date) Hussein discusses not only the “value of marriage in the African religious sense, but [also] the social motives of marriage inherent in those religious beliefs” (Mwaifuge 8). Love, in Hussein’s work, is not only subject to individual desire, but also to social norms and expectations. This thematic exploration is perfected in *Arusi* (1980). Despite minimal appreciation of Hussein’s writing from the Eighties onwards, nobody disavowed the mastery with which Hussein “manipulated language, plot and character;” if anything, many academic readers and critics disapproved of his “complexity” (Philipson 274). Thus, for instance, some of his work came to be deemed “morally questionable”—*Alikiona*—or “too abstruse”—*Jogoo Kijijini*—thus repelling highbrow readers (Philipson 268).

⁵⁹ *A Man of the People* is a key text in African letters for its criticism of the African postcolonial dystopia and the return of European domination through neocolonial means.

Criticism regarding Hussein's *Arusi* is accurate regarding the play's intricacy. In addition to frequent use of Swahili words out of vernacular circulation, Hussein deploys a form that requires several encounters before it can begin to unfold itself to the reader. However, while critics have responded to this intricacy with derision, I find richness and openness to multiple interpretations which makes the text a lasting gem of Tanzanian national culture. *Arusi* not only documents the state's failure to nurture equitable land rights but also suggests that this inadequacy results in a continuation of Tanzania's colonial-era dependence into neo-colonial spheres of influence. Hussein's allegorical discussion of land rights encompasses gender issues and uses competition between men and women to comment on the rise of individualism at the expense of communalist norms.

V: *Arusi*: Marriage as a Drama of Shifting Signs

Arusi, a Swahili play by Hussein, is a play-within-a-play centered on a wedding ceremony (*arusi* in Swahili).⁶⁰ The drama opens with the meeting of two lovers: Bukini and Mwanaheri. Bukini is about to embark on a long journey; we never learn the actual destination, but we get the sense that he is leaving Mombasa and going abroad for further studies. Mwanaheri is apprehensive that she will not lay eyes on Bukini once he leaves, although he swears to the contrary. To solemnize the occasion, Bukini asks Mwanaheri to stretch out her hand and close her eyes; when she does, he slips a ring on her finger. Mwanaheri, too, takes a ring offered by her fiancé and slips it onto his middle digit. The next scene, taking place in the play-within-a-play, begins with a group of women dancing

⁶⁰ Hussein's dramaturgy includes *Mashetani*, *Jogoo Kijijini*, *Ngao ya Jadi*, *Kinjeketile*, *Wakati Ukuta*, *Alikiona*, and an unpublished manuscript *Kwenye Ukingo wa Thim*. Other than *Kinjeketile*, none of Hussein's work has been translated into English. Although there is no information about Hussein's death, he does not appear to be writing and is famed for his aversion of interviews and other kinds of publicity.

and celebrating at Bukini and Mwanaheri's wedding. The festivities are a community-wide event causing, as Hussein demonstrates, deep anxieties. Mwanaheri and Somo prepare for the wedding. Somo instructs the bride on the value of discretion in love and marriage saying romance thrives when two people play with desire (*Arusi* 11). By the end of Act two, Kahinja—Bukini's brother—decides to escape from Mombasa, leaving behind his family and friends.

Soon after, we learn that Mwanaheri is pregnant. Her husband has been away for more than a year so the child is clearly not his. Bukini's aunt, with whom Mwanaheri lives, is keen on identifying the man who impregnated her nephew's wife. When Mwanaheri withholds the man's name, Aunty attempts to persuade her otherwise through physical violence. A neighbor responds to Mwanaheri's cries for help and is met by Aunty who lies that they just received long-distant news that a relative passed away, and Mwanaheri is taken over by grief. When Mwanaheri's parents learn of the physical abuse, they show up, accompanied by village elders, to warn Aunty to desist from such conduct. While Aunty hurls abusive words at Mwanaheri for her pregnancy, her parents point out that she got married to an absentee husband, indeed, a "husband in name only" (*Arusi* 27).

When Kahinja returns to Mombasa from his sojourn at a Tanzanian Ujamaa village, he is accosted by a neighbor who, after the initial exchange of greetings, updates him on village news—including Mwanaheri's pregnancy and Aunty's shame at the incident. After Kahinja learns that his friend Ali impregnated Mwanaheri, he attacks him at a bar. Ali wonders what will happen if Bukini returns—after Mwanaheri disappoints him by refusing to marry him. Mwanaheri postpones a solution to this conundrum

adamant that, for the moment, her heart is set on not marrying again. We then learn that Kahinja has been arrested for embezzling funds. A government official reads from a letter Kahinja addressed to his fellow villagers defending himself and contending that the money he reportedly misappropriated was in actuality past dues for working at the Ujamaa village. His compatriots, understandably, disagree and lament that Kahinja turned out to be a thief. *Arusi* ends with Bukini and Mwanaheri back on stage.

Mwanaheri appears shaken, presumably from what she has “imagined” since Bukini gave her the ring. When Mwanaheri takes off her ring and returns it to Bukini, the latter is completely perplexed. Mwanaheri does not elaborate for him, but the reader can deduce that as per the play-within-a-play, she foresaw a difficult life ahead for her if she further entertains Bukini’s romance.

Arusi documents TANU’s failure to cultivate land rights for indigenous Tanzanians. Although Tanzanian independence signaled a clean break from colonial injustice and inequitable land rights, Hussein’s text—and historical events related to it—both indicate a betrayal of these egalitarian ideals. Alain Ricard reads in Hussein’s play a “chronicle of defeat” (119); in other words, Mwanaheri’s repeated efforts at “winning her freedom” end with no success. In the arch of maturity from childhood to adulthood and the symbolic severing of the umbilical connection between child and parents, Mwanaheri is still attached to the womb. Unlike Bukini, who has cut all ties to the motherly skirt never to (re)turn back, Mwanaheri lacks the means to simulate similar flight. Given society’s gender expectations that predetermine her role as future wife, she is coerced into exchanging of one set of parental expectations and control for one that is even more

malevolent (that of her in-laws). A fellow villager who appears in Aunty's house in response to cries for help receives this false report:

Shangazi : Hakuna kitu
Tumepata habari tu
Kwamba jamaa yetu
Mmoja amefariki (*Arusi* 25)

Shangazi: Nothing's the matter
We just got word
That a distant relative
Passed away. (*Translation Mine*)

Aunty understands Mwanaheri's illegitimate child and its cause, the absence of men, as the manifestation of death. In particular, Bukini's disappearance and the resulting crisis of masculinity are both discussed using the language of loss and bereavement. In this new social reality, far-away men like Bukini can die, or people back home can lie about their deaths. Something fundamental that held the community together has been rent asunder and its increasingly visible effects can be seen in Mwanaheri's expanding womb.⁶¹ Hussein juxtaposes the future birth of Mwanaheri's child with the death of innocence. Mwanaheri's unborn child signifies that the unknown, the strange, and the bizarre has grown larger than life. Her pregnancy is a terrible betrayal of the chastity which marriage deserves; hence Aunty's outrage.

If we read Mwanaheri as representative of African nations, her continued dependence mirrors the shift from colonial to neo-colonial spheres of influence in African states. Self-rule and the coming to birth of African democracies merely signaled the

⁶¹ The sense of social fragmentation depicted here by Hussein is reminiscent to that memorialized by Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*. Though arising from dissimilar causes—colonialism in Achebe vs. breakdown of marital relations, migrant labor conditions, and the emptying of the rural village in Hussein's text—the two scenarios are paradigm shifting for the characters involved. In both texts, there seems to be a shared sense that modernity is calamity.

transfer of control from one group of elites to another. Maturity—defined as genuine political and financial independence—was a long time coming for postcolonial Tanzanians. Additionally, Mwanaheri's child borne out of wedlock brings to mind postcolonial ruling elites who betrayed the utopia of African self-rule. Aunty's use of images of death and mourning is an appropriate response to the post-independence dystopia. Mwanaheri's infidelity serves as allegory for the challenges borne in postcolonial Tanzania; in this way, the play highlights dangers inherent in equating female chastity with the nation. Such a political move unfairly burdens women with the duty of maintaining cultural "purity."

As it turns out, it is the Tanzanian political bureaucracy that delayed achievement of socio-economic equality. In *Tanzania: a Political Economy*, Andrew Coulson comments on an incident much reminiscent of the theft with which Hussein ends *Arusi*. Coulson relates a news report in which a man is accused of stealing an Ujamaa village's money (235; 244). This newspaper entry is significant in how closely it mirrors the tale at the end of Hussein's play. Ricard, while again noting that Hussein had indeed witnessed the embezzlement of Ujamaa funds, argues that Hussein's text demonstrates the failed "quest for a truly interior liberty" (127). In Coulson's narrative, the Ujamaa village disintegrates after the local official runs off with the funds. In Hussein's text, however, he leaves the conclusion open-ended as though forcefully willing for a different history to be written about this socialist endeavor to which he had seemingly offered so much of himself. *Arusi* is optimistic that Tanzanians will—like Mwanaheri—soon discard the neo-colonial shackles they donned at independence. Hence, in the way Arusi documents

the failure of Tanzania's postcolonial project—including, but not limited to, inability to achieve equitable land rights—the text is a political play.

Although Hussein's play explores the defeat of Ujamaa and post-independence euphoria, it maintains a largely allegorical discussion of land rights. In both *Arusi* and *Mashetani*, use of complex metaphors and figurative language has been viewed separately as either Hussein deliberately making his work difficult to comprehend or the effect of government control and official sidelining of his work resulting in self-censorship. The key to breaking the code of metaphoric poetry with which Hussein shrouds his work lies in his characters' instructions for a successful marriage. Much as the most important part of a couple's life happens after the wedding, so too does the most important interaction between the text and the audience happen after multiple performances. Hussein, through the voice of a traditional wedding counselor, advises Mwanaheri on how best to maintain romance between her and her groom. Somo, who acts as Mwanaheri's bride's maid, gives counsel to the effect that:

Mapenzi, somo yangu, hayataki/
 Bayana; yanataka siri. Maisha usifanye/
 Kuyadhihirisha/
 ... pendo/
 Halitoki katika ridhaa, linatoka katika/
 Sanaa ya kujitamanisha (*Arusi* 11)

Romance, my friend, does not thrive under scrutiny;
 it desires secrecy. Don't publicize your romance.
 ... Love
 emanates not from *ridhaa* (satisfaction) but from
 playing with desire. (*Translation Mine*)

Speaking through Somo, Hussein's instructions for a successful marriage can be read as coded instructions for a successful interpretation of his work. He too, like the bride, is

playing a game of hide-and-seek with the reader. Hussein occludes a facile understanding of his work, arguing that there might be more pleasure to be had from a text that playfully eludes obvious meaning—didactically political plays, for example, being notoriously boring. Hussein further contends that as a writer, “the goal is artistic expression, not political truth” (Plastow 193). I would argue, however, that his writing style should also be understood within the realm of self-censorship.

While the subordination of political expediency for aesthetic goals is surely the writer’s prerogative, the shift to complex language in Hussein’s oeuvre demonstrates a major transformation in his work. Robert Philipson argues that:

in the mid-1970s, Ebrahim Hussein broke ranks with the requirement of the general ideology that, theoretically at least, plays had to be written with a mass audience in mind. *Mashetani*, [a 1977 play] in its complexity of theme and style, had already strayed perilously near the forbidden regions of elitist art. (273)

Hussein’s turn to complexity might have been precisely because it was frowned upon—a way of resisting the government’s interference in aesthetic production. One consequence of this action, however, was the declining popularity of some of Hussein’s texts. Despite much state support for Hussein’s work earlier in his career, *Arusi* was met with much silence—so much so that the play has never been performed. Despite Hussein’s use of metaphoric language to approach a discussion on land rights, the political meaning of the play was legible enough that it might have garnered official disapproval. If in marriage, Somo advises Mwanaheri that tears are wonderfully complex signs whose meaning can either be joy or sadness, in the text, poetry becomes the obscure symbol that readers can interpret in many ways (*Arusi* 11). Tears, however, do not safeguard Mwanaheri’s and Bukini’s marriage; as we find out at the end of *Arusi*, the couple parts ways. This mirrors

Hussein's interactions with Tanzanian bureaucracy, the public, and literary critics. The author's ability to conceal meaning in poetry, as well as his use of marriage itself as political allegory, has garnered official and critical censure. There has been an almost deliberate aversion from his work by literary critics. The critical silence that met *Arusi* has been uniform—with a few exceptions—both in Tanzania and abroad. This phenomenon suggests that critics of African literature, globally, tend to mirror the hierarchies of literary value fashioned within African national public spheres—often characterized by political machinations. For one, ruling elites have retrogressive views on gender which *Arusi* and other texts by the author denounce.

Hussein's work is important due, in part, to his primary focus on issues of gender and their repercussions on social-economic justice, especially as pertains to land rights. In particular, his text engages with the question of women's role in private/public spheres of power and their ability to participate in local economies as subjects in their own right. The transition of marriage from the communal to the private realm is one pattern among many that signal the evolution of Tanzanian society. In particular, the tensions accompanying this change are much like those that follow the state's changing role in the national economy and Ujamaa's re-definition of private/public entities be they property, politics etc. In *Arusi*, therefore, the marriage plot is both a national allegory and an issue on its own terms. The exchange of a ring between Bukini and Mwanaheri occurs in seclusion, suggesting that this is purely a private affair. On the other hand, women's celebration dances—held out in public—signal the desire to re-claim marriage as a wholly communal event with no space for individual aspirations. These events are exemplary of a larger social tension: women's agency in public versus private matters.

The apprehension that emanates from this transformation of socio-cultural norms is best articulated by an unnamed female character commenting on the new/modern way of conducting marriages:

M'mke III: Basi tena wenyewe/
wamesha sikizana. Maana/
yake siku hizi mpaka/
wenyewe wasikizane./
Sasa wamesha sikizana basi./ (*Arusi* 4)

Woman III: Well, they have agreed amongst themselves,
Because nowadays they first have to agree.
Now they have agreed. (*Translation Mine*)

The speaker's emphasis on what happens "nowadays" suggests that very different practices were in place, historically. Furthermore, her conversation betrays anxiety at the need for agreement between the bride and the groom; again, she seems to suggest that such pacts were either overlooked or wholly unimportant in the past. The play seems to suggest that even though traditional gender roles did not empower women, the manner in which they are currently evolving is also problematic. While mutual agreement between both parties is to be emulated, perhaps making marriage a purely individual affair disenfranchises women in other ways.

Hussein's *Arusi* also discusses gender norms via its re-writing of masculinity. First, the text questions women's dependence on men—an idea that was also the undercurrent of Ujamaa policies. In other words, if Nyerere's philosophy argued for "self-reliance," it was always assumed that women's self-reliance would be achieved under men's authority. Men's role as providers seems permanent:

M'Mke IV: Basi we ukimuendea
 Ikiwa bahati yako
 Utapata ... Kwani huyu shangazi
 Arusi hii kaifanyaje?
 Si hivyo hivyo
 We muendee utapata
 Tu haja yako. (*Arusi 6*)

Woman IV: Go on and approach him,
 If you're lucky, he'll help you out ...
 How else do you think this wedding occurred?
 In the same exact way;
 You just go to him
 And he'll help you out. (*Translation Mine*)

If the village tycoon is depicted as the answer to old women's prayers, as such he is a symbol of continued male dominance. He plays a vital role in rural economies and without his aid women are at a great disadvantage. But the play questions these assumptions; rather than demonstrate ways in which women should be bound to certain cultural gender norms, *Arusi* suggests various moments during which women are independent household heads. Kahinja's aunt has overseen her own household as an unmarried woman. During that time she cared for and educated Bukini till he came of age, married, and went abroad for further studies. Rural economies are depicted as messy and complex networks with individuals, whether men or women, occupying varied positions on that strata. Secondly, masculinity is shown to be in crisis due to the sheer absence of men. Mwanaheri, though married, is effectively a maiden; hence the great tragedy of her sexual transgression. According to her mother, Bukini's absence is directly linked to the disaster that has befallen the household: Mwanaheri's pregnancy.

Mama Mwanaheri: Mume huyo-
 Mume jina. (*Arusi 27*)

Mwanaheri's Mother: That husband;
 A husband only in name. (*Translation Mine*)

According to his mother-in-law, Bukini is a husband only in title; he has not fulfilled his duties, but has left his young bride behind and disappeared. For Mwanaheri's mother, the sole cause of this tragedy is the absence of the one male figure to whom Mwanaheri has been offered—Bukini, her husband. In these series of excerpts that deal with gender norms, *Arusi* effectively questions women's participation in local/national economies primarily due to their relationships to men e.g. as mothers of sons, as wives, or daughters of their father. This is especially crucial for patrilineal communities where a woman's access to land was/is always determined by connection to a male figure. The severing of such ties—divorce or family estrangement between daughters and fathers—often results in loss of land rights. Mwanaheri's husbandless situation demands that she be able to act on her own capacity as an agential subject without the need for another male figure. The crisis surrounding such a quest represents Hussein's indictment of Nyerere's ideal—self-reliance—and the manner in which women were excluded.

The connection between transformed gender roles and novel economic relations under Ujamaa is exemplified by Kahinja's return. Hussein employs Kahinja's tragic end to depict a dichotomy between individualism and communalism. Ironically, the sense of duty to one's family that Kahinja acts upon is deemed individualistic and much opposed to the communal beliefs that are central to Ujamaa. More importantly, this irreconcilable difference results in further alienation of land rights for Tanzania's peasants:

Diwani: (*Anasoma barua*)
 Siku ile nilipotoka
 Hapo kijijini ... kwenda
 Mombasa kuwaona jamaa ... niliikuta
 Hali ya nyumbani mbaya sana
 Kwanza walikuwa wagonjwa, tena

Walikuwa wamo katika deni. Na
 Kama isingelipwa deni hiyo
 Nyumba yao, ambayo ni nyumba
 Wanayokaa na kupangisha ingezwa. (*Arusi* 44)

Diwani: (*Reading Kahinja's letter.*)
 When I left the village,
 My desire was to get to Mombasa, see my
 Folks and return immediately.
 When I got there however, I found them not doing well
 At all. Some of them were sick, and then they
 Were in debt. If this debt had not been cleared
 Their house, in which they live and sublet, would have
 Been auctioned, forcing them to live homeless on the streets. (*Translation*

Mine)

Kahinja's arrival at Aunt's home is met by worries about ill health, debt, and fear of homelessness. The possible loss of Aunt's domicile threatens to render the two women rootless, belonging nowhere in both social and spatial routes of mobility. Hence, financial resources are required to re-calibrate the balance upset by the risks of vagrancy. Hussein depicts the threat of Aunt's rootlessness as a social phenomenon that communal efforts cannot resolve; a sense of alienation that produces "reactionary" individualism.

Moreover, I read Hussein's text as threatening one of his characters with homelessness, and thus highlighting the plight of numerous villagers who were forcefully turned out of their homes and moved to ill-equipped government villages. Although this Kenyan urban plot is not simply allegorical of villagization, Hussein *is* suggesting that Kenya and Tanzania are perhaps not so different by inserting the Ujamaa plot into this scene of Kenyan strife.

Through Kahinja, Hussein critiques Nyerere's government. The *Arusha Declaration* was truly idealistic in terms of the leaders who could govern the country. It proposed that "every TANU and government leader must be either a peasant or a worker"

(Nyerere 36). However, Nyerere's intent to protect Tanzanians from corrupt officials was frequently subverted; Kahinja demonstrates one example of what peasants experienced at the hands of bureaucrats whose sense of leadership was geared towards self-interest rather than national service. Kahinja's depiction as an individual who does not toe the party line is valid for two reasons. On the one hand he represents Ujamaa leaders who misappropriated village funds. On the other, he confirms Tanzanian skepticism at the ideals of Ujamaa; by the Eighties this distrust had turned into wholesale bitterness, with citizens not only in open defiance of party dogma but also in search of alternative theories of socio-economic development. Though unethical, Kahinja's actions are understandable—the system almost makes it inevitable that corruption will happen. Kahinja's act of betrayal is emblematic precisely because, earlier in the play, he represents a generational search for a more ethical, communal way of life. His cynicism of the Ujamaa dream demonstrates to what extent the utopia of African Socialism had become morally bankrupt and wholly untenable. This disavowal of postcolonial African politics can also be deduced from B. M. Sahle Sellassie's *The Afersata*. Like Hussein, Sahle Sellassie indicts the state for its autocracy and inability to boost bottom-up socio-economic reform. An additional similarity is that Sellassie also deploys his critique using a motif of quotidian rural life: the hut.

VI: Land Rights in Ethiopian Political History

Up to the early Twentieth century there has hardly been a unitary form of Ethiopian land ownership rights. There were always multiple, and sometimes competing, ways of claiming land as one's own. For instance, legal tradition handed down in the classic text, *Fetha Negast*, confirmed a farmer's right to any formerly "unoccupied" land

that he cleared and tilled (Pankhurst 30).⁶² In addition to gaining land by right of first occupancy, land was available via “hereditary, inalienable, and inviolable” rights known as *Rist* (Wubneh & Abate 84). Three other systems of land ownership included “*Gult* ... ownership right acquired through a formal grant from the monarch or from the provincial rulers; *Semon* ... land whose ownership right was granted to the church in perpetuity [and] *Mengist/Madeira* [which] were large tracts of agricultural land owned by the state” (Wubneh & Abate 84). Especially in regards to one’s access to the corridors of power, class was a significant factor in determining one’s capacity to own land. The aristocracy, including Emperor Haile Selassie and wealthy landowners, enjoyed “special rights and authority over land” (Wubneh & Abate 151). Hence, for example, by delegating his rights to taxation, Emperor Selassie could create *Gult* land in any part of the country (Pankhurst 29). All the same, there were safeguards against excessive greed from the upper class. Although Ethiopian peasants would often remark that “everything belongs to the king” and “the land belongs to the king,” this should not be taken literally (Pankhurst 30). The autonomy of local communities demanded that apart from such government benefits as “rank, office and *gult*,” land in and of itself was inalienable and could not be confiscated except perhaps in the event of certain crimes (Pankhurst 30). In addition to class, the other important factor determining modes of land ownership was geography.⁶³

⁶² The *Fetha Negast* is an extensive legal document referring to matters as varied as the hierarchy of the Ethiopian Orthodox church and how widows should administer their late husband’s estate. It was the supreme law of the Ethiopian monarchy till the advent of a national constitution in the early 1930s.

⁶³ At the beginning of the last century, there was a significant difference between Southern and Northern Ethiopian land rights. “Ownership patterns in the south developed as a result of land measurement and land grants; following Ethiopian conquest of the region ... southern land was divided equally among the state, the church, and the indigenous population” (Wubneh & Abate 84). With landless tenants constituting about 75% of land holdings in southern Ethiopia while only a minority in the north, the zeal for “land reform” was largely in the south. Southern land politics were further complicated by the steep land lease fees

European invasion further problematized issues of land ownership through “unequal access to power and modern facilities;” the result of this colonial meddling was that Ethiopians began to ask far-reaching “questions about the meaning of ethnic identity and in turn the relation of ethnicity to nationalism and the nation-state” (Adejumobi 97). Ethnicity and its attendant claims on land rights was used by occupying Italian forces as a way to “divide and conquer” the country. The colonial power was only too eager to encourage “the resentment of the southern Ethiopian people towards the central government for its unfair appropriation of their lands since the late nineteenth century” (Abbink, De Bruijn & Van Walraven 103). Presumably, this made it harder for a national anti-Italian movement to take root—engaged as the people thus were, with inter-ethnic competition. The violence and alienation experienced by Ethiopians at the hands of Italian administrators was, however, not as traumatizing as a slow realization that the “myth of the divine Emperor” was inadequate for a modern state (Abbink, De Bruijn & Van Walraven 110). It was at this time that modernization truly came to be the mantra of change in Ethiopia, with various stakeholders who had been disenfranchised by the Ethiopian monarchy staking their claims for a different kind of Ethiopian nation. The events that culminated in the 1974 dethronement of Haile Selassie seemingly had their origin in the traumatic years of Italian occupation.⁶⁴ In fact, Emperor Selassie spent the decade before 1974 attempting to placate a population that was increasingly hostile to the monarchy. Ironically, the people often frustrated imperial decrees using official

peasants were obligated to make; often as high as 40-60% of the farmer’s produce, they created a vicious cycle of poverty from which even hardworking farmers could not hope to escape (Wubneh & Abate 85).

⁶⁴ A schism was created in the country. While a section of the population reverted to tradition as defined by Ethiopian “historical and cultural identity,” another saw Italian belligerence and the people’s victory at Adwa as an indication that the state should “move fully into the modern world,” perhaps even discarding the monarchy as a form of government (Abbink, De Bruijn & Van Walraven 113).

documents.⁶⁵ Ethiopia's peasantry had begun to re-assert an ancient form of autonomy that had more in common with modern forms of democratic governance than with absolute monarchies or European imperialism.

VII: The February 1974 Revolution & the Advent of Land Reform

Historians generally cite several social events as key contributors to, if not actual causes of, the 1974 ousting of the ancient Ethiopian monarchy. Contemporary newspaper reports concur on the severity of the socio-political situation, the great need for reform, and perhaps a sense that the Emperor did not do enough for his people. A 1966 report by the Chicago Daily Defender argues that Haile Selassie's political reforms allowing the Premier greater autonomy were too little, too late (1966). Nearly a decade later, on September 14th 1974, the same newspaper identified the "Emperor's indifference" as well as the "traditional" disregard of the Crown towards Ethiopian poverty as key reasons for his "unceremonious dethronement" (Chicago Defender 1974).⁶⁶ A 1977 May Day information pamphlet prepared by the Ministry of Information notes that the Wollo famine that claimed more than 200,000 lives in the mid-60s was also a big contributor to the fervor of revolt (18). The apathy with which the monarch was seen to have reacted to the food shortage, in some cases attempting to save face by preventing international

⁶⁵ In 1966, for instance, Haile Selassie proclaimed the end of land taxes on all peasants who resided on land owned through *Gult* or similar systems. Perhaps in anticipation of this, for several years landowners had accumulated tax receipts that listed their names rather than the names of the tenants who presently occupied and tilled the land (Pausewang 47). As a result, tax documents became a primary form of evidence in disputes regarding land ownership. The Emperor's efforts to relieve peasants of their tenancy burden were frustrated by the very structure his regime depended upon for sustenance: tax collection. Taxation endowed onto all contributors, essentially landowners, "full" citizenship rights. This was in contrast to "craftsmen and other minorities and outsiders who did not hold land in their own right" and who were thus considered socially inferior (Pausewang 48).

⁶⁶ The *Chicago Defender*, a newspaper with wide circulation among North American Black readers, had previously portrayed the Emperor in very positive light. That the newspaper changed its script is indicative of the ill will Haile Selassie had garnered.

media coverage, outraged poor Ethiopians.⁶⁷ In 1970, four years before the actual event, citizens were already expressing their desire to disrupt the oppression they endured from imperialism and its local supporters, predicting a future when they shall “throw out the Americans and their Selassie’s and Kenyatta’s,” as a precursor for social equality (“Behind the Imperial Façade II”). There were already rumblings of an oncoming political conflict, and it would have boded well for the Emperor to heed these signs.

The groups that seized the moment and began to agitate for change were university students, the military, urban workers and of course Ethiopian landless and landholding subsistence farmers. The latter, especially, showed signs of “apathy and hopelessness” as though they had lost all confidence in the regime and had to take matters into their own hands (Wetterhall 1). There are numerous reports of peasant revolts in reaction to tax policies that poor farmers viewed as especially oppressive.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Between July 23rd and 30th 1970, an American newspaper sent Andy Marx to report on the social situation in Ethiopia; what he found corroborated earlier reports by the Chicago Defender. Marx described the streets of Addis as a “panorama of suffering: of lepers and cripples begging, of shoe-shine boys shining shoes, of prostitutes in such great numbers that the going rate is about ten cents” (“Behind the Imperial Façade II”). Much of this urban squalor had been caused by rural-urban migration as communities fled food shortages in the Ethiopian countryside and flocked its cities and towns in search of work. Furthermore, the relationship between peasants and the state had deteriorated to such an extent that poor tenant farmers demonstrated much hostility “toward any strangers, educated Ethiopians or whites, [and] city-dwellers ... most strangers who visit them are interested in one of two things, rent or taxes. The city and the government are from another world, a hostile one” (“Behind the Imperial Façade II”). There was great awareness of the level of wealth inequality between Haile Selassie and his subjects as exemplified by this statement from one of the peasants Marx interviewed: “the emperor has his palaces (76 of them across the country) and we live like slaves” (“Behind the Imperial Façade II”). With that in mind, it is no longer surprising that Ethiopians of a certain class satirized the Crown with such statements as “put the Lion of Judah in the zoo” (“Behind the Imperial Façade II”).

⁶⁸ In Northern Ethiopia, for instance, the early Forties witnessed such violence in the regions of Gonder, Tigray, and Gojam that Haile Selassie had to reverse his 1942 land-tax schedule to placate the rebels (Wubneh & Abate 29). Gojam especially was a hotbed of anti-government activities and continued in its treasonous efforts well into the Fifties and Sixties in opposition to “a new agricultural income tax that the people of Gojam viewed as a prelude to changes in their traditional land tenure system” (Wubneh & Abate 29). And it was not only against the central government in Addis Ababa that peasants mutinied; they were also prone to take violent action against local aristocracy. The French version of a propaganda booklet titled *L’Ethiopie Rurale*, describes how villagers in Guidao district “organized a violent attack against landowners” in 1960 in reaction to unfair tax directives (Min. of Info. 9).

These continuous battles between the Crown and its subjects gradually ate away at the reverence with which the Ethiopian monarchy was seen especially due to its claimed links to Kings David and Solomon of the Old Testament. Despite repeated agitation from peasants, Haile Selassie's government might yet have survived had other opposition groups not joined this wave of anti-Selassie activism. In the decade and a half before 1974, "a militant student movement, a politicized military, and an infant labor union" rose to become the main forces against Haile Selassie (Wubneh & Abate 36). Between 1950 and 1965, university students became increasingly politicized, a process which culminated in their first demonstration just when the Ethiopian legislature was deliberating on a land reform bill; students came out in support of the law with chants of "land to the tiller" (Wubneh & Abate 37). Using various platforms, including a student journal titled *Struggle*, students gained prominence prompting members of the aristocracy to ask the Emperor to quiet their demands for reform (Wubnet & Abate 33). By 1974, an umbrella organization of Ethiopian trade unions—operating despite a 1962 labor law seeking to prevent workers from organizing—had joined the students (Propaganda & Info. Comm. 11). University students supported labor campaigning by urban workers e.g. taxi drivers, who built upon a long history of Ethiopian workers fighting for their rights (Wubneh & Abate 38).⁶⁹ What the unity between students and workers did was convert employee grievances regarding better salaries into platforms via which to ask for socio-political transformation in Ethiopia (Wubneh & Abate 44). With such a potent mix of factors leading to February 1974, the revolution was now irreversible.

⁶⁹ For example, railway workers in the early Forties disrupted operations on the Franco-Ethiopian line, while other similar stoppages were witnessed at cotton, cement, sugar, and textile factories (Propaganda & Info. Comm.7-9).

If the people had hoped to install a grassroots form of leadership after their rejection of Haile Selassie's mandate, they were sorely disappointed. In *The Ethiopian Revolution: Tasks, Achievements, Problems & Prospects*, Senay Likke celebrated the revolutionary spirit of the people and sought to explain why a democratic government did not immediately appear. According to Likke, only the military and the police forces were sufficiently "organized" to take over, "lay a strong foundation for the transition to socialism," and "establish a people's democratic republic" (4; 7). In June of 1974, a committee composed of the armed forces, the police, and the national army – thereafter referred to simply as the Derg (Amharic for committee) – emerged as Ethiopia's most powerful political group. Within a year, the Derg proclaimed that all land in Ethiopia had been nationalized to reverse the parasitic "exploitation of man-to-man" (Likke 8).

According to social historians, and based on observations about Ethiopian food security, or lack thereof, land reform was of utmost importance. It "was considered basic to agricultural development and essential to improve the standard of living of the peasant" (Wubneh & Abate 93). However, more cynical analysis could see the Derg's interest in implementing land reform as one way to "destroy the feudal order [and as] determination to win support of radical groups who were agitating" for the restructuring of Ethiopia's agricultural sector (Wubneh & Abate 94). Finally, to cement its gains in the Ethiopian countryside—and also perhaps to send away an increasingly militant student body—the Derg created new administrative organs. Termed Peasant Associations, these new organizations took over from the fallen administrative structure of the ousted Emperor (Wubneh & Abate 95).

The land reform was a mixed bag of results. On the one hand, peasants in the south, who had suffered from land alienation in the late Nineteenth century benefited and reported “significant economic and political gains;” those from Northern Ethiopia, however, were not so pleased (Wubneh & Abate 98). In the regions of Sidamo, Gonder, and Gojam peasants rose in protest at the Derg’s directive to form cooperative farms as implemented by the groups of students sent out to the countryside (Wubneh & Abate 97). Such economic policies were, as in the past, seen to be overly autocratic and failed to attract any grassroots loyalty. State-run agricultural bodies bought peasants’ produce at a much lower price than was offered on the underground economy (Wubneh & Abate 100). Though the Derg was quick to point out that the standards of living for Ethiopia’s poor had improved in the years after the revolution, it also repeatedly repressed internal opposition as it sought supremacy in the political front (Likke 12).⁷⁰ A long tradition of protest against injustice existed among the peoples and it was invoked against Italian occupation, Haile Selassie’s reign, and now against the new military government. As we shall see in the next section, a significant part of this “culture of protest” can be traced in Ethiopia’s literary production.

VIII: Ethiopian Literature & its Role in Political Activism

In order to appreciate Ethiopian literature and its cultural meanings, it is necessary to unravel the country’s language politics. Geez and Amharic hold supreme positions in Ethiopia; the former as a language deployed in religious texts—and court documents until the 12th century—while the latter took over the role of royal chronicling in the 13th century (Demoz 17). The prominence of these two languages is set against a collection of

⁷⁰ In this regard, the Derg’s main opposition came from such political groups as the Oromo Liberation Front, and the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Party (EPRP), among others.

several hundred languages in Ethiopia as a whole. None of these tongues enjoy official status, and Amharic elites considered several of them were downright barbaric. While Amharic, and Geez before it, played the “instrumental” role of conducting official business, other languages became tools for battles of political supremacy in and out of the Ethiopian royal courts (Demoz 15).⁷¹ Despite rhetoric to the contrary, Ethiopia’s military government continued the language policies of the regime it had ousted, perhaps in fear of the country fragmenting if it adopted a less prescriptive approach to Ethiopian multilingualism (Demoz 33; 34). Given the prominence of Amharic above all other Ethiopian languages, except Geez perhaps, it is crucial to comprehend its socio-political role in the nation’s literary production.

It is worth investigating whether the art produced in Amharic simply perpetuated the hegemonic inclinations of its political elite, or if artists were able to subvert what was otherwise very close scrutiny and articulate protest. An additional concern is: did the use of Amharic carry a political message regardless of the content of the text? What emerges from a survey of Amharic letters in the last century is “a trend of increasing concern with social issues and problems” (Fullass 116). In other words, Amharic texts were attentive to the ways in which Ethiopian customs and traditions were changing and sought to faithfully record these processes of transformation. Narratives chronicling life “as they

⁷¹ Selassie’s government had a paradoxical approach to the “symbolic” function of language. On the one hand, all public discussions of language issues were banned, and yet each time a region rebelled or threatened to break away from the crown, it was appeased with permission to disseminate news in its local language (Demoz 18). As can be imagined, this encouraged constant insurrections in search of cultural recognition. The yearning for cultural autonomy was wholly self-indulgent; it was one form of protest against Amharic chauvinism. For instance, there are numerous insults directed towards “the inarticulateness or the heavy accent of the non-speaker or poor speaker of Amharic” (Demoz 27). One consequence of this derogatory judgment on language ability was that non-native speakers of Amharic would rarely disclose their ethnic heritage. Upwardly-mobile Oromos, especially if they lived in urban centers, would hardly ever use their mother tongue or admit to being Oromo (Demoz 28).

saw it” or “as it happened” inevitably contain within themselves subtle allusions to the writer’s sentiments about social change.⁷² Given the socio-political upheavals occurring in Ethiopia in the Fifties and Sixties, contemporary writers and poets were heavily engaged in marshalling public discourse via their writing. In doing so, these artists gave credence to the idea that imaginative arts are central to the work of nation building, as well as the importance of the intellectual in “the birth of the nation-state” (Ahmed 8).

Both oral and written literary production in Ethiopia has been political. *Tradition & Change*, a survey of Ethiopian literature, establishes that writers are keenly interested in “expressing protest and dissent” and have done so while carefully navigating extensive censorship rules (Molvaer X). By disavowing the argument of “art for art’s sake,” writers have sought to sway the future of Ethiopian society (Molvaer 1). Oral poetry, meanwhile, has been known to react to such events as food shortage and regime changes and has also been deployed to record transformation of the political and social spheres—for instance, the advent of Peasant Associations and the “superfluous speeches” their members make (*Unheard Voices* 339).⁷³ History, especially a re-telling of Emperor Tewodros’ political career, is a favorite topic for Ethiopian writers. *The Warrior King* (1974), one of the novels on Tewodros, was written by B. M. Sahle Sellassie and published in English; the text chronicles the rise of a young bandit from oblivion to the apex of Ethiopian power. A reading of Sahle-Selassie’s and other writers’ rendition of this aspect of Ethiopian history

⁷² Thus, for example, Amharic literature has commented on the fascination of Ethiopia’s elite with “European ideas and models” while some “student publications and underground literature had long demanded the overthrow of the political authority and supporting socioeconomic structures” (Fullass 116; 118).

⁷³ Reactions to these partly natural, partly man-made disasters include “anguish, insecurity, disillusionment, resentment, gratitude and tenacity” (*Unheard Voices* 339). Oral poetry chronicles the different phases of drought and famine, from the moment of plenitude in the last harvest, crop failure and reduced food supply, to actual undernourishment and the fatalities associated with that (*Unheard Voices*, 344).

has argued that these texts “conceal their social criticism and views on development under the form of historical” fiction (Molvaer 3). Writers discuss Emperor Tewodros in favorable terms in an attempt to influence government policies.⁷⁴ To achieve this without running a-foul of contemporary censorship rules, authors have mastered the art of “double entendre” (Molvaer 110). This has been especially useful when texts discuss Ethiopian land politics, an extremely volatile subject. In addition to double-speak, writers have managed to keep writing controversial ideas by prudent choice of language.

Sellassie has been at the center of language politics. He wrote his first short novel, *Shinyega's Village* (1964), in Gurage, a local language in Southern Ethiopia. Although the readership for the text was minimal, the writer thought it important for Gurage to have its first written literature. Sahle Sellassie's other pieces have been written in both Amharic and English. *The Afersata*, for example, was written in English. For one, use of English enabled the author to publish his book internationally at a time when Ethiopian censors were increasingly stringent regarding what could be marketed to Ethiopia's reading public (“Ethiopian Creative Writing” 40).⁷⁵ Thus, it is through judicious deployment of metaphorical and/or European languages that Ethiopian literature has become “more outspoken in attacking the way land was acquired and tribute exacted from the peasantry, and authors become more vociferous in defending the rights of the tenants” (Molvaer 34). These were all highly sensitive topics and their inclusion in a creative work of art often led to official censure. Ethiopian theater, especially that

⁷⁴ Tewodros II has come to represent vision, reform, and nationalism ... his attempts at unifying the country by breaking the power of the local princes, and at modernizing the country are significant aspects of what modern authors want for Ethiopia. (Molvaer 166)

⁷⁵ Given the contested nature of the Ethiopian linguistic terrain, English may also have appealed to Sahle Sellassie may have been attracted to English as a more “neutral” language. That is, a language which none of the Ethiopia's ethnic nationalities could lay claim to.

centered in the country's capital, Addis Ababa, also joined fiction and oral narratives in their attempts at politicizing the masses. The traditional connection between performance arts and the Ethiopian royalty proved to be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, drama attracted more state resources than were allocated other forms of artistic production, but at the same time, the continuous presence of the Ethiopian court resulted in repeated attempts to muzzle or censor what playwrights could do. This can especially be seen in Haile Selassie's last fifteen or so years in power.

In the Sixties and Seventies, following the banning of political activity by the Emperor, the Ethiopian intelligentsia turned to theater—writing and directing, though perhaps not performing—as alternate forms of opposition (Plastow 91). Theater, formerly a “vehicle for aristocratic glorification” was instead deployed as means of demonstrating “discontent;” in other words, the younger generation of intellectuals tested the political waters by imbuing their theatrical works with the socio-political criticism they could not dare express on the streets and other public forums (Plastow 94).⁷⁶ Censorship was no mere phantom; its presence was repeatedly emphasized by Haile Selassie's presence during play premieres and sometimes even during rehearsals. It is reported that the Emperor personally read the material that was submitted to the Censorship Board, and he

⁷⁶ Gebre-Medhin Tsegaye performed the greatest feat in this wave of political drama by overturning traditional disregard of the Ethiopian poor and other lower classes. He did this by centering several of his plays around “ordinary” folks; he demonstrated how drama's focus could be shifted to highlight the plight of the masses (Plastow 95). By questioning the course on which Ethiopia was headed, Tsegaye delivered veiled criticism at Haile Selassie's regime for his policies (Plastow 96). It is said that the Emperor walked out in anger from the play's premiere; later when more of Tsegaye's performances were prohibited it was evident he had touched a raw nerve very close to the center of power. Tsegaye, like several other Ethiopian writers, deployed the history of Emperor Tewodros to mask his critique of the contemporary government; he underlined the connection that existed between Tewodros and the people he led by constantly referring to him as Kassa, his personal name—contrasting this with Haile Selassie's perceived indifference towards his subjects (Plastow 98). Through his use of history and, later, his turn to English, Tsegaye displays the continuities that existed between various forms of artistic production in Ethiopia. Tsegaye also wrote in English to avoid what he foresaw would be official banning of his works especially due to their “abhorrence for religious and state bigotry” (Plastow 99).

was also known to amend play scripts (Plastow 92). Moreover, forcing writers and dramatists to turn to English, in a country where the majority did not speak the language, eventually led artists to “self-censorship and silence” (Plastow 101).

Haile Selassie’s power was predicated upon petty rivalries between politicians from various ethnicities. Theater, which threatened to sensitize the people on larger “supra-personal considerations” and hence encouraged the formation of interethnic alliances was a significant challenge to Haile Selassie’s leadership—hence his interest in seeing performances strangled (Plastow 92). In any case, before his more stringent suppression rules came into place, the theater had served as a space where students learnt about the reality of life for Ethiopia’s peasants as well as developing political ideas not otherwise freely disseminated in quotidian interactions (Plastow 93). Despite Haile Selassie’s close scrutiny of political activity in Ethiopia, or perhaps because of it, university students were among the crowds marching in Addis Ababa’s streets in early 1974 demanding a change of government. Like the 1965-66 demonstrations, land was often the protestors’ rallying cry and call to arms. Despite attaining supremacy on the wave of engaged drama and student activism, the incoming military government, however, soon resorted to censorship and attempts to muzzle free public discourse on issues of power. Indeed after less than a year, the Derg was already engaged in running battles with opposition groups in the capital. Eventually, the Derg sought to eliminate political engagement by sending university students out into the countryside under the pretext of setting up peasant associations and educating illiterate farmers. This state policy was not only about reforming the countryside but also about getting rid of militant students from urbanized areas. Student agitation was in line with themes explored by an

Ethiopian novella: *The Afersata*. In the next section, I will focus on how this text discusses land rights not only through the imagery of human shelter, but also using language that is mirrored by the political rhetoric of Ethiopia's post-1974 Socialist government.

IX: *The Afersata*

B. M. Sahle Sellassie's *The Afersata* has secured its place in Ethiopian writing for its bold discussion of land reform. Its significance, however, is complicated by the fact that the novel is written in English. This made it largely inaccessible to a section of Ethiopian readers—but perhaps less so now than when the novella first appeared in 1968—six years before Mengistu Haile Mariam's Socialist revolution. I'll provide a plot summary of the text before elaborating on the text's impact on land rights and their discussion in Ethiopia.

The Afersata is essentially a crime thriller. Its plot begins with a house burning down in the middle of the night and the rest of the novella narrates what happens in the months after as village members attempt to find out “who dunnit.” To discover who burnt down Namaga's hut, the community convenes a meeting—the Afersata—from which the text gets its title. It is of great concern that in addition to destroying Namaga's house, the thief dug underneath the clay floor to retrieve 200 dollars Namaga and his wife had put away “in case something happens” (Sellassie 68). Namaga's stolen savings, in coin currency to guard against ants and termites, had been buried in a ceramic jar, to be used for funeral expenses in the event of Namaga's or his wife's sudden death. In the aftermath of the crime, the village's Cheka Shum, a minor local government official, visits Namaga's homestead to offer his sympathy. The Cheka Shum suggestively directs

Namaga to visit him later so he can pen an official report that will bring the matter to Governor Gabre Mariam Belachew. Sellassie uses this opportunity to display the esteem with which literate folks were held at a particular time in Ethiopia. The Cheka Shum displays his literacy via colored pens stuck to his shirt front—benefits of which include the gifts of hard liquor that peasants bring with them each time they hope to have a report written on their behalf. In addition, the Cheka Shum sometimes accepts free labor on his own farm during the planting or harvesting season from farmers. True to his repute, the Cheka Shum's choice of words and stylistic ability urge Governor Belachew to do something about Namaga's loss. The governor orders the Cheka Shum to convene an Afersata—or community meeting—to get villagers together so they can investigate the crime.

The first Afersata meets under an oak tree in the village meadow. First on the agenda is the election and swearing in of seven respectable elders who will conduct the meeting. These seven men sit at a distance from the rest of the crowd, and one by one the gathered villagers walk to them and answer their questions. Each man—for only men are allowed at the Afersata meetings—is questioned on his involvement in the arson, or his knowledge of the person who did it. The investigations, however, cannot be completed on that day and another Afersata has to be set for mid-July, during which time absentees to the first meeting will be notified, fined, and ordered to make themselves available next time round. One of those who missed the meeting was Beshir, whose series of low criminal activities leads several villagers to suspect him of the arson. At the time of the meeting he has gone to Addis Ababa to ask his uncle, a civil servant, for some money with which he can pay that year's taxes. Melesse, Beshir's uncle, not only gives him

some money, but several weeks later appears at Beshir's home unannounced. The surprise visit increases Beshir's standing in the village since he is seen to have ties to the powerful administrative and commercial center of Addis Ababa. Melesse's and his friend, Tekle's, arrival in the village "boosted Beshir's morale and instilled in him a new feeling of confidence he had never experienced before" (Sellassie 50). As Melesse explains village life to Tekle who is from a different part of Ethiopia, he casually mentions that Ethiopia "will never become rich without a proper land reform" (Sellassie 53). The debate between the two civil servants over the best policies to encourage social mobility for Ethiopia's peasants lasts an entire evening and only ends when they go to bed. The following morning they depart back to the city.

The second Afersata would have been the last but rain clouds gathered and once it began to pour the meeting had to be adjourned till later. It was postponed till after the village Maskal festival—celebrating the end of the rainy season in this part of Ethiopia. The third time round, the meeting proceeds without any interruptions and all village men have finally been interrogated. Unfortunately, the seven elders who were conducting the investigations are none the wiser as to whom the criminal was. Not finding the culprit, the village policy of "collective responsibility" mandates that community members contribute personally to compensate Namaga for his loss. As the Cheka Shum tells his fellow villagers, "we are all responsible for the burning of Namaga's hut" (Sellassie 89). The author leads us to believe that the Afersata has been successful in maintaining communal harmony, even if it failed to solve the crime.

One of the main critical discussions about *The Afersata* regards Sahle Sellassie's choice of language: English. It was only in 1962—six years before *The Afersata*—that

Ethiopia published its first work in English (Beer 102). By 1996, when Tadesse Adera wrote “Ideology in Sellassie’s *Firebrands*,” English fiction in Ethiopia amounted to no more than ten pieces and Sellassie’s works made up almost half of that (127). In *Black Lions: The Creative Lives of Modern Ethiopia’s Literary Giants & Pioneers*, Reidulf Molvaer outlines the events that led Sahle Sellassie to publish the text in English:

When *The Afersata* was completed in its original form in 1968, he first considered publishing it in Ethiopia and went to see the chief censor about it, but he was displeased it was not written in Amharic; however, he said that a decision about publication would be made in a month’s time. But then Sahle-Sillase gave it to a friend in the censorship department to read, and he said that it would be a waste of time trying to get it published in Ethiopia – the censors would not permit it. So Sahle-Sillase sent it to the African Writers Series with Heinemann, and in about a month they wrote an encouraging letter. (371)

The need to evade censorship was a significant reason why the text came out in English. But so too were Sellassie’s positive experiences with writing from other African authors. The fact that some of this work was accessible in English meant that readers across the continent could participate in the literary conversation (Molvaer 371). The author’s language choice has been a debate much commented upon since the 1960s when Chinua Achebe, Gabriel Okara, Ngugi wa Thiong’o and other literary luminaries participated in a literature conference at Makerere University. That debate would conclude in multiple ways in the ensuing decades, one response being Ngugi’s, who turned to Gikuyu as his writing language.

Sellassie demonstrates how Ethiopia, too, was engaging the language issue in its own way. The stakes of using non-European languages in Ethiopia are not similar to those in other African nations. Because of Amharic, Ethiopian writers have access to a nation-wide language that side-steps the colonial ideologies which use of European

languages bring. In some ways, “European languages matter less in Ethiopia than they do in other parts of Africa;” notably, for example, there are more Ethiopian literary works in Amharic than in English, French, Portuguese or Italian, which is the reverse of most other African countries where literary production in European languages far surpasses that in indigenous ones (Kurtz 189). What makes a piece of literature “Ethiopian,” and by extension “African,” has been the cause of much deliberation. For some critics, the work in question “must be written originally in an African language;” Sahle Sellasie, however, argues that “a nation’s literature should not be defined by the language ... especially in a multilingual society” (Kurtz 193; 195). Instead, literary works should be judged by their content and subject, that is, the characters they portray, and their thematic concerns (Kurtz 195). Therefore, *The Afersata*, even though not written in an Ethiopian language, is still to be considered part and parcel of Ethiopian culture because it is mainly interested with the country’s peasantry and forms part of a national conversation.⁷⁷

Sahle-Sellassie’s choice of language seems to have been well received. Both of his English novels—*The Afersata* and *Firebrands* (1979)—sold well. *The Afersata* has gone through two printings, sold 15,000 copies, and garnered much criticism—though most of it was negative because critics did not agree with the author’s decision to discuss

⁷⁷ Ethiopian language politics are further complicated by Amharic chauvinism. Use of Amharic sends different signals depending on whether the writer has another first language or not. It has been noted that “the rich development of Amharic literature is concurrent with the underdevelopment of the literatures of Ethiopia’s other languages” (Kurtz 202). Furthermore, it raises concerns whether authors who are not native Amharic speakers can accurately duplicate the language or whether they may be “spoiling the Amharic language” (Kurtz 198). Some critics make the argument—and against evidence to the contrary e.g. Joseph Conrad—that there exists a direct connection between “the use of one’s mother tongue and literary quality, both in the writer’s ideas and in the skill and artistry with which those ideas are presented” (Kurtz 199). What is pertinent here is that non-native-Amharic speakers were metaphorically “shut out” from writing in Amharic, even if they spoke it. Other modes of defining national literatures have turned to the reader as the determining factor. Consequently, “African literature is what we get when Africans write for other Africans, and in that sense the actual language of its composition is a second-tier consideration” (Kurtz 201). The ideal situation, perhaps, is for writers to first create in their own language, and later on pursue translations into other national lingua francas e.g. Amharic, Kiswahili before finally publishing the works in European languages for other readers across the Continent (Kurtz 201).

issues of land reform in a novel (Molvaer 372). In this case, readers disapproved of the writer's attempt to discuss development policy in fictional form. *Firebrands*, on the other hand, was very successful both in terms of sales and reviews; this is despite the fact that it was banned in Ethiopia and could only be promoted abroad (Molvaer 375). *The Afersata* arose from multiple desires; firstly, Sellassie felt the need to contribute to knowledge about Ethiopia, especially for non-Amharic readers. Such sentiments would have been particularly strong in the heyday of Pan-Africanism. Secondly, the author attributes his inspiration to write about a cultural institution—the Afersata—to another Ethiopian literary work: the Amharic book, *Zikre-neger*, by Mahteme-Sillase Welde Mesgel (1948) (Molvaer 373). Criticism of the two texts has been rather dissimilar. *Firebrands* has been compared to Ayei Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful ones are not yet Born* (1968) in the sense that both texts have protagonists who “stand up for their principles” (Adera 128). *The Afersata*, on the contrary, has been criticized for its “direct authorial comment [which is] often imposed on the reader;” for some critics, Sahle Sellassie's discussion of land rights “makes *The Afersata* more often than not seem like social or political history rather than fiction” (Beer 108). Beer's critique is valid; aside from the historical aspect, what's most important about the text is that *The Afersata* manages to portray Ethiopian peasants in a more positive light. While some of the dominant narratives about poor farmers portray them as “unenlightened, impoverished, callous, and sullen” Sahle Sellassie provides an alternative view to peasant life as “highly communal and self-sufficient (Beer 107; 110). *The Afersata* is important to my discussion of land rights for its deployment of the hut as an image through which to comprehend Ethiopian society. Sellassie uses the language of creation and destruction in a manner that invites a reading that compares similar language

in Ethiopian political rhetoric. In regards to land rights, Sellassie's fiction portrays tenant/landlord exploitation and juxtaposes it with communal benevolence. Such contrasting relationships enable an argument regarding state-level socio-economic injustice and the lack of a bottom-up approach to land and/or other forms of socio-political reform. In my discussion of the text, I would like to focus on three aspects: Sellassie's deployment of the hut imagery as a synecdoche for land; his deployment of "demolition" as a symbol for political revolution; and finally, his representation of the tension between peasant communities and the state.

X: The Hut as Representation for the Ethiopian Nation

In Sellassie's work we encounter the hut as a symbol for discussing the Ethiopian nation-state.⁷⁸ In Ethiopia, and elsewhere, the ways in which the nation has been summoned up through images in literature are incredibly varied, although there are various common literary tropes. Each of the images through which the nation has been discussed has unique consequences for how citizens may relate to their leaders. First, there exist representations of the nation as "the body politic" which implies that "there is nothing much for the various members to discuss; there is only one will and all decisions are taken by the head" (Ringmar 59). This version of the nation-state is favored by autocrats, benevolent or not. Secondly, politicians invest in rhetoric which depicts the state as a "family unit;" leaders have found it "expedient to define themselves as 'fathers' of the countries they rule and their subjects as 'children' of varying ages and states of maturity. The father in the state, as in traditional families, is the one who makes the decisions" (Ringmar 60). The "Father of the Nation" idea has, for example, been

⁷⁸ In *Facing Mt. Kenya*, Jomo Kenyatta narrates a fable where he refers to the Kenyan nation as a "hut" for which colonial settlers—represented by wild animals—fight over rights of occupancy.

superimposed on contemporary attitudes towards Kenya's Jomo Kenyatta, Tanzania's Julius Nyerere, and South Africa's Nelson Mandela. Leaders as "fathers" rely upon loving, but if necessary, forceful power.⁷⁹ Clearly, there are dividends to be reaped for leaders who can persuade their subjects to accept particular arrangements and distributions of power. Metaphors feature in political rhetoric as ways of reacting to, or preempting, opposition. Nyerere depicted Ujamaa as war effort in preparation for the top-down manner in which the policy was implemented. Ethiopia's Mengistu Haile Mariam, on the other hand, repeatedly memorialized the 1974 revolution as a *demolition* of the feudal past. Several years before that, however, the same metaphor was also deployed in Sahle Sellassie's fiction.

A major thematic concern in *The Afersata* is to communicate the notion that land reform is extremely vital for Ethiopians to improve their living standards. Through the voice of two minor characters, Melesse and Tekle, the writer voices his misgivings about contemporary land rights and the unfair distribution of arable land. Using language that would later be echoed by Mengistu's military government, Sellassie identifies peasant exploitation as the main cause of poverty. "If the Ethiopian peasants could not improve their material life over the centuries it was probably because they could not enjoy fully the fruits of their labor," he writes (Sellassie 15). Despite his deep awareness of the problems that plagued his people, Melesse "was not important enough in the government to exert pressure to change the landholding system of the country" (Sellassie 33). The

⁷⁹ Other metaphors employed in contemporary understandings of the nation-state include the choir—where "participants who notice when people close to them sing out of tune or behave gracelessly ... are also the ones best placed to apply sanctions;" the machine metaphor—which "has no place for dissent ... [and has been] a long-time favorite with absolutist rulers;" as well as the cybernetic metaphor—which privileges the "forces of the economic and the political system" as the central way of resolving social conflict (Ringmar 63; 64; 65).

author sets up a scenario where the character, though well-versed in political economy and capable of identifying the evils of landlord-tenant relations, is impotent in the face of a centuries-old system. Melesse is acutely aware that “peasants are getting poorer while the absentee landlords are getting richer” and his conclusion is that “if the government does not distribute land to the peasants they will never be better off in the future” (Sellassie 52). Who then can execute this all-important change in Ethiopian society, the writer implicitly asks. If indeed, as Sahle Sellassie states, Ethiopia “will never become rich without a proper land reform,” whose mandate is it to accomplish such social transformation (53)? I contend that the author urges for land reform to occur from the bottom-up. It is interesting to note that Sellassie’s call for land reform echoes the student voices that marched in Addis Ababa in 1965-66 demanding that land be given to the tiller (Adera 132). This slogan seemingly inspired Sellassie to claim that “land reform must start with the redistribution of land to those who need it” (55). Writing three years after the student demonstrations and only six before the 1974 revolution, the author uses Melesse and his civil servant colleague, Tekle, to make an eloquent case for land reform in Ethiopia. It is also clear that Sellassie is heavily invested in determining whom among the various stakeholders with ties to land—Haile Selassie’s monarchy, landlords, or tenants—should be mandated to implement this much needed policy modification.

My reading of *The Afersata* establishes that the author discusses the destruction of Namaga’s hut using images that invite a reading of the hut as a symbol for the nation. One of the most poignant images that Sellassie deploys to discuss politics in his other novel, *Firebrands*, is that of building and construction. This argument, quite popular among student activists and disseminated via several publications, concluded that “the

only viable solution to Ethiopia's problems was the ultimate and complete destruction of the feudal regime" (Adera 131). This is very similar to Sellassie's image regarding the demolition of Namaga's hut:

The thatched roof of Namaga's hut smoked, sagged and crumbled down. The leaves that made up the circular wall emitted red and blue flames, glowed and broke down to the ground. Every piece that was part of Namaga's hut except the central pillar turned into ashes. (3)

Two points arise that are worth pursuing. First, much like Namaga's hut was destroyed by fire, the Ethiopian feudal regime was also, supposedly, burnt to the ground by revolutionary students, farmers, and urban workers. Although this deviates slightly from the actual events of February 1974, it is the version that Mengistu preferred. In his 1978 four-year anniversary address, Mengistu reminded his audience that "the feudo-bourgeois system was defused and burnt by a revolutionary fire" (*4th Year Anniversary Speech* 8). In both cases, fire serves not only as a tool for destruction, but as the impetus for change and the advent of a new order. Secondly, the imagery of "dismantling" was very popular in Socialist Ethiopia as a way of interpreting the ousting of Haile Selassie. In his 1980 speech to a committee mandated with forming the Party of the Working People of Ethiopia (COPWE), Mengistu described the 1974 events as the masses "dismantling the government" (*Report to the First congress of COPWE* 30). This idea of revolution as pulling to pieces the former regime was also reiterated in public presentations in 1979—as part of a policy document on economic development—and in 1986—to the constitutional drafting commission. In both cases, in addition to detailing the "dismantling [of] the archaic system" (*Address to Constitutional Drafting Commission* 11) Mengistu also described his own regime as involved in "the construction of a new order" and hence the need to "lay the necessary foundation for a [future Ethiopian] socialist

society” (Towards Economic Development in Ethiopia 6). The parallels between initial destruction of an existing structure, by fire, and then its subsequent re-building are quite strong between Sahle Sellassie’s text and the political rhetoric in Mengistu’s Ethiopia.⁸⁰

Having demonstrated to the reader how Namaga’s hut was destroyed, and after explaining the loss of his property, the author discusses the construction of a new hut for Namaga and his family. Based on how Namaga receives compensation for his damaged property, we can glean information about Sahle Sellassie’s choice of stakeholders to undertake Ethiopian land reform:

A few days later a group of villagers were busy constructing a new hut for Namaga. The cylindrical wall was already finished, and they were now busy with the conical roof. The unthatched structure resembled something like a giant, half-open umbrella. The central pillar and the poles that fanned out from the central pillar to sustain the cob-webbed roof were like the handle, the ribs, and the screen of an umbrella. (Sellassie 25)

The open framework that is described in this passage is a sign of things to come; it signals much bigger, and better, shelter for Namaga’s family. Not only does the community undertake to help with building a new house, it also takes it upon itself to investigate the arson and accompanying theft. Use of the umbrella image signals the kind of overarching communal spirit that Sellassie hopes will inspire Ethiopian land reform. This manifestation of political power is embedded in an indigenous decision-making body that also upholds law and order. The Afersata “institution ... is based on the philosophy of collective responsibility (Sellassie 51). In other words, in the same way community members share food during local festivals, they also share misfortune—some form of a communal insurance scheme. While frequent redistribution makes it difficult

⁸⁰ In the novel, of course, arson is a crime that leaves a peasant homeless. In Mengistu’s rise to power, the Haile Selassie regime imprisoned many activists, and there was much death and destruction. Mengistu’s use of the imagery of fire and destruction seeks to revive and conjure the conception of a new Ethiopia from the ashes of the old.

for any one person to accumulate much wealth, it also means that no one is ever entirely destitute. Whatever little wealth is available in society is shared by all. As the local government administrator—the Cheka Shum—tells the village, they “are all responsible for the burning of Namaga’s hut, and [they] are all condemned collectively to compensate him for his loss, because [they] have failed to find out the criminal (Sellassie 89). Sahle Sellassie depicts local communities as best suited for the business of re-distributing wealth. He signals that at such grassroots levels, individuals know each other and relate in ways that privilege sharing over amassing. *The Afersata* pursues the image of collective responsibility and posits it as a viable alternative to the top-down bureaucratic nation-state. Local self-governance emerges as an effective mode of political praxis—one that is more attuned to the people’s needs and resists the allegory of revolutionary upheaval.

How the writer foregrounds the key role of peasant communities in reforms with important socio-economic repercussions goes against much of what the Mengistu government did. Not only did the Derg view peasants as former victims of the monarchy—and thus weak and powerless—it also mistook their illiteracy to mean they could make no meaningful contributions vis-à-vis national policies. These disparaging views eventually led to friction between poor farmers and the military government. In reality, such conflict was related to the dilemma Sahle Sellassie had posed in his work: who should be responsible for implementing land reform? Land reform marked a new phase in the interaction between Ethiopian masses and their government. The reforms:

created popular demands as to how taxes should be utilized – demands and attitudes unheard of during the imperial regime. The peasants ... started to raise questions such as ‘where does the money we pay as tax end up?’, ‘what do we get for our taxes?’ (Stahl 79)

If the later years of Emperor Haile Selassie’s reign were marked by increased repression of the opposition, this was only to mask what was a long tradition of peasants defying the central government. This resistance varied from outward resignation to violent rebellion. *As Ethiopia: Power & Protest* makes clear, “although peasants may appear quiescent or deferential outwardly, they defy obligations imposed on them by using tactics [such as] ... work or output withdrawal, pilfering, sabotage, deceit, banditry, flight or migration, and shift in patron allegiance” (Tareke 14).⁸¹ Farmers in the countryside, away from Addis Ababa and other urban areas, also resented the manner in which urbanites dominated government. I read the antagonism between peasants and the state as exactly what Sahle Sellassie hoped to avoid by allocating local communities the mandate for land reform and other attendant policy modifications. The author clearly favors a bottom-up approach; he asks that local infrastructure be left to deal with indigenous problems. As it turns out, the numerous problems experienced in the relationship between Mengistu’s government and his subjects vindicate Sellassie. They show that the central government was too far removed from the lives of those previously oppressed by Haile Selassie’s government.

There is a wide gap between Sellassie’s aspirations of grassroots governance and the autocracy that characterized the post-1974 Socialist regime. Although *The Afersata’s* relationship to the Mengistu government has been largely ignored by Ethiopian critics, it

⁸¹ Although extreme, banditry was an option that subjects deployed if all other means of seeking redress failed. Banditry was a sign of open rebellion; “to be a *shifita* meant to rebel against someone in authority or against an institution that had failed to render justice” (Abbink, De Bruijn & Van Walraven 95).

is worth pursuing for it sheds light on various aspects of political life, including the performance of power. Therefore, I will conclude this chapter with discourse analysis of the language deployed to communicate land reform by Mengistu Haile Mariam's from 1974 to 1991. While the Ethiopian state made use of metaphors of creation and destruction—much like Sahle Sellassie's fiction—this did not result in socio-economic reform. In fact, citizens became increasingly disenfranchised, vis-à-vis land rights.

XI: Political Rhetoric in Socialist Ethiopia

Mengistu rose to power in the aftermath of internal clashes amongst the soldiers who initially assumed power immediately after Haile Sellassie's overthrow. Mengistu's performance of power can best be discussed through an analysis of the discourse within which political change was disseminated to the people.⁸² Two observations emerge; one, despite much rhetoric to the contrary, Mengistu's regime maintained a notion of the Ethiopian peasant as backward and deserving nothing but contempt from government officials—this is a sentiment that had already been entrenched in Haile Selassie's reign. Secondly, Mengistu and his ministers were quick to paint Ethiopians in general as helpless victims and in this way depict the military government as the people's savior. In other words, the Derg was quite eager to re-write Ethiopian history and re-interpret it in

⁸² Discourse analysis attempts to shine light on “particular way[s] of talking about and understanding the world;” it is interested in any “patterns” that emerge from an appreciation of how talking about the world simultaneously influences our reality (Jorgensen & Phillips 1). In other words, discourse analysis is focused on unveiling the fallacy that knowledge is “objective truth” (Jorgensen & Phillips 5). Rather, discourse analysis as a way of studying cultural phenomena exposes the ways in which “reality is only accessible to us through categories, so our knowledge and representations of the world are not reflections of the reality ‘out there’ but rather are products of our categorizing the world” (Jorgensen & Phillips 5). A central tenet of discourse as an entity of knowledge is its open-endedness. Discourses are continuously being distorted through interaction with other discourses—a phenomenon called “discursive struggle” (Jorgensen & Phillips 6). Discursive struggle, then, is about the unceasing conflict between varied discourses as each seeks “hegemonic” supremacy and the capacity to “fix meanings of language” (Jorgensen & Phillips 7).

ways that depicted the junta in positive light.⁸³ The overall consequence of all these actions was that by 1991 when Mengistu's regime was finally ousted, Ethiopian peasants were nowhere closer to attaining the kinds of inclusive government policies and protected land rights they had wished for in the 1974 revolution.

Political discourses repeatedly borrow ideas and language, often tweaking these appropriated elements to support self-serving arguments. "Feudalism" was a politico-historical term that Mengistu and his propaganda team frequently invoked in order to depict a certain image of pre-1974 Ethiopia.⁸⁴ In the varied ways in which Ethiopian peasants have reacted against singular readings of their life by the Derg, they demonstrate how individuals relate with discourse not only as "products of discourse" but also as "producers of discourse" (Jorgensen & Phillips 7). In other words, as much as subjects are shaped by language, they too are involved in the shaping and morphing of language. Interpellation—a "process through which language constructs a social position for the individual and thereby makes him or her an ideological subject"—often occurs in contradicting ways (Jorgensen & Phillips 9). Scholars of Ethiopian political history have

⁸³ Mengistu's regime was invested in portraying the government that it had helped overthrow as wholly corrupt and lacking in any positive attributes. It became fashionable in socialist Ethiopia to denounce the failure of Haile Selassie's reign in ways that could not objectively aid the country's progress in its development goals. For example, Mengistu's government would equate the amount of infrastructural improvement it had undertaken in one year to that delivered by ten years of the former Emperor's administration (*Four Years of the Revolution* 5). This comparison was carried out in multiple ways including the production of tables to accompany propaganda material celebrating the ten-year anniversary of the Revolution.

⁸⁴ Feudalism, meaning particular kinds of relationships between a landed aristocracy and landless tenants, was used as shorthand while referring to the old monarchy. In some ways this term had veracity to it, especially in reference to Southern regions of the country where an absentee class of land owners extracted tribute in the form of produce to the tune of up to 50% of a farmer's harvest. This highly exploitative structure, however, was not entirely replicated in the North. Here, varied forms of land ownership including grants from the Emperor, hereditary bequests etc. required much subtler analysis than was available for political demagoguery.

identified ways in which the language that Mengistu used to describe his subjects betrayed much disdain.

Contemporary government documents, ranging from Mengistu's political speeches to institutional literature corroborate this view. The Derg was convinced that the peasantry it ruled over was "by nature a backward group incapable of understanding their own best interests" (Henze 5). With such an attitude in mind, the regime generally overlooked the people's demands. Lack of proper sanitation and appropriate farming technology were both cited as reasons why the peasantry was *indeed* backward. A 1964 government pamphlet titled *Awasa Community Development* noted that villagers needed to learn "the dangers of insanitary water (sic), flies, mosquitoes ... villagers have to be taught also how to guard against epidemics and how to prevent the spread of infectious and contagious diseases" (Min. of National Community Development 20). Although this document was produced during Haile Selassie's reign, the same image of peasants as dirty and disease-ridden can be found in government documents prepared under Mengistu. In *L'Ethiopie Rurale: Hier et Aujourd'hui* (Rural Ethiopia: Past & Present), the authors portray the Ethiopian nomad to be just as susceptible to disease as her flock. While the nomad suffers from Malaria, her livestock are ravaged by epidemics of Rinderpest (Comm. D'Infor. et Propaganda 40). In 1978, another report noted that Ethiopian agriculture prior to 1974 was characterized by peasants' use of "very primitive" tools (no page). With such descriptions and images about the Ethiopian peasantry circulating, it is no surprise that Mengistu's government disregarded the poor

and ignored their input vis-à-vis development—despite peasants being important stakeholders in Ethiopian development.⁸⁵

The rise of Mengistu, and his Derg colleagues who governed Ethiopia, brought with it wide-ranging failure to bring the decision-making processes of the administration closer to the people. Instead, the Mengistu regime engaged in diversionary techniques engineered to win it mass support. Rather than provide a more inclusive definition of the Ethiopian nation, including the reversal of Amharic hegemony as witnessed in Haile Selassie's time as Emperor, the Derg resorted to “populist slogans such as *Ethiopia Tikdem* (Ethiopia first) on the one hand, ... [and] the threat of extreme force on the other,” as ways to coerce loyalty (Adejumobi 120). In addition the Communist Party, from within which many governing decisions were made, was virtually closed to women, peasants laborers, and other marginalized individuals (Adejumobi 128).⁸⁶ This exclusivist government was based upon an assumed hierarchy whereby military rulers, as the people's saviors, ranked much higher than the masses they led.

There was an oft-repeated myth—that Mengistu and the Derg had liberated Ethiopians from Haile Selassie's chains of servitude—which generated acute elitism among the ruling class. Documents from the Ministry of Propaganda and Information, the

⁸⁵ In actual fact, this pattern of ignoring the views of Ethiopia's poor did not originate with Mengistu's government; rather, it was a continuation of some of the policies the Derg had expressly promised to change. In the twenty or so years before 1974, Haile Selassie's government had produced development mandates in five-year phases. As it turns out, however, these documents were largely “symbolic,” merely written to depict the regime as reform-oriented; indeed, the kind of “broad-based participation of local government, citizens, and special-interest groups, essential to planning implementation was unknown” in Ethiopia (Wubneh & Abate 80).

⁸⁶ Communist parties around the world have had a range of relationships with peasants. In China, for instance, after the CPC took over from the Guonmindang, it left in place the policy of hukou. Hukou restricted rural-urban migration and ensured that peasants did not share in the prosperity of China's urbanization for a long time. For more, see *Trade Unions in China: The Challenge of Labour Unrest* by Tim Pringle.

Ministry of Agriculture, as well as a 1979 speech by Mengistu—*Towards Economic Development in Ethiopia*—all perpetuated the idea that before the rise of the military government, Ethiopians had been enslaved by Haile Selassie. All three texts deploy an image of the 1974 revolution as having, finally, made Ethiopian peasants “masters of their lands” (Min. of Propaganda & Info. 11). The ubiquity of this representation of political liberation not only points to a regime that maintained close scrutiny on its missives and sought to coordinate them, it also indicates the ways in which *production of* these texts was often interconnected. In addition to writing texts for mass education, the Ministry of Information also had the task of creating an archive and memorializing the revolution. Thus the Ministry’s employees produced pamphlets to celebrate the one-year, four-year, five-year, and ten-year anniversary of the February 1974 revolt. In addition, it was tasked with printing numerous of Mengistu’s public addresses such as his May Day speeches in 1975, 1978, and 1984. In all these documents, the message was identical: Ethiopians should be grateful to the military government for freeing them from the chains of imperial bondage.

A complement to the argument that peasants were backward, unsanitary, and primitive was the need for their (re)education—especially in regards to their civic duties.⁸⁷ The result of civic engagement was an image of the country as a vast pool of

⁸⁷ To this end, the National Villagization Coordinating Committee (NVCC) was formed, and mandated with educating the peasantry on its civil obligations. Some of the Committee’s responsibilities included enabling Ethiopian farmers to nurture a “sense of community, self-help ... [and] self-reliance” as well as the community’s level of “consciousness” (NVCC no page). The unspoken aim of the NVCC and other similar programs was to liberate peasants from the invisible “chains of ignorance,” much in the same way the Derg had freed the nation from bondage under Haile Selassie. Civic education aimed to teach ordinary citizens how to excel as both warriors and farmers. The phrase “our economy by the plow, and our borders by the gun,” was meant to display the willingness of Ethiopia’s peasants to defend their national territory and their national economy valiantly. Furthermore, it was seen as vital to teach poor farmers how to stay united against such divisive tactics as the enemies of Mengistu’s government might deploy e.g. religion,

resources waiting to be exploited. Whether this meant human resources—for instance a fighting army with which Mengistu could meet insurrections in Northern Ethiopia or stem Somali invasion—or natural resources, Ethiopia was a bountiful chest of wealth waiting to be consumed. In classic nationalist fashion, Mengistu referred to the nation as a gendered object—the Motherland—which, much like Ethiopia’s women, awaited a strong hand to unveil its “real self ... [formerly] masked during the feudo-bourgeois era” (Min. of Info. 16). This image of “unveiling or disrobing” the gendered nation in order to reach the vast “mineral resources in the bosom of our Motherland” was also mentioned while invoking foreign expansionist efforts into Ethiopia as attempts to “violate the integrity of our Motherland” (Min. of Info. 16). In this missive the military regime not only underlined its role as liberator, but also invoked its right as sole progenitor endowed with the sacred duty of turning Ethiopia’s fertile, but as yet unyielding, lands (*and* mothers) productive. Mengistu’s political outlook, like that held by Haile Selassie’s regime, had seemingly accepted the myth that there existed “empty land” in certain parts of Ethiopia which could be offered to encourage loyalty. This is an erroneous view of land rights as understood by poor farmers and nomads who have unique relationships to the territories and environments on which they subsist.⁸⁸ Attempting to unilaterally nullify those multi-generational interactions—and judging them less valid than, for

gender, or ethnic nationalism (Comm. d’Info. & Propaganda 48). Finally, in order to properly build socialism, the government required every citizen’s effort; the “full mobilization of all the forces of the revolution” made it essential that peasants be educated on their important role in Mengistu’s dreams for the country (Min. of Info. 11).

⁸⁸ This view has been rather hard to shake off. In 1991, the incoming government of Meles Zenawi declared its openness to enabling private investors to acquire “open and fertile lands will be made available to private investors after ascertaining first that this will not result in evictions or affect the interests of peasants and nomads as well as those who practice shifting cultivation” (Ethiopia’s Economic Policy by Trans Gov’t., 25). As inclusive as these practices sound in paper, the reality has been vastly different. Ethiopia is now one of several nations that has leased large tracts of land to foreign conglomerates in controversial deals. In addition to possibly alienating communities from their land, these land leases do not have confirmed ability to contribute to the country’s food security.

example, state ownership of cooperative farmland—placed the state in conflict with its people.

Ultimately, both *Arusi* and *The Afersata* shed light on the competitive relationship between writers who discuss land rights, and the politics of land, and the state. It is clear from these texts that postcolonial African regimes seek to dominate the production of discourse, and the dissemination of tropes that deploy land as the central metaphor. Artists, on the other hand, attempt to wrestle the use of such allegories from central governments. Often enough, as I've demonstrated, this contest is resolved by the state's capacity to censor and muzzle critical voices. This chapter has been concerned with the post-Sixties transformation of land rights in independent African nations: specifically Tanzania and Ethiopia. The raising of national flags—to herald the end of colonial projects—was met with jubilation and high hopes for the future. As African masses soon discovered, however, post-independence regimes dashed many of those aspirations and drove their citizens to bitterness. Both *Arusi* and *The Afersata* critique African states for their incompetence at fostering equitable land rights. In the next chapter, Congolese Sony L. Tansi and Uganda's Monica Arac de Nyeko not only pursue an indictment of African nation-states, they also propose an alternative framework via which African peoples can achieve socio-economic justice: that conflict over land is often projected as physical violence against women and the marginalization of minorities.

Chapter 3: Violence & the Creation of Landed/Landless Subjects

This chapter continues my analysis of land rights by exploring the connections between ownership and possession of space on the one hand, and conflict and violence on the other. I am especially interested in the correlation between territorial-claims of land and trauma wrought on the body. My reading of Sony Labou Tansi's novel *Life and a Half* (1979) and Monica Arac de Nyeko's short stories, "Strange Fruit," "The Banana Eater," and "In the Stars" (2004, 2008, & 2003, respectively) suggests that insecurity of land tenure stems from the same political framework as political tyranny and gender inequality. In other words, Tansi's and Nyeko's writing—though disparate in time, place, and language—demonstrates that conflict over land often results in physical violence against women and the marginalization of minorities. The first half of my essay tackles Sony L. Tansi's *Life and a Half*, and discusses how his depiction of violence and trauma against the body is, first, achieved through use of the grotesque and the mythical; and second, enables our interpretation regarding the relevance of literary production in countering totalitarianism. Most importantly, Tansi establishes that writing about land under authoritarian conditions requires the deconstruction of the dictator's charm and superhuman aura. Tansi's fiction, unlike legal documents, is concerned with diversity—ethnic, gender, socio-economic, and so on—which national constitutions overwhelmingly elide. The second half of this chapter performs close readings of M. Arac de Nyeko's short stories; the value of this analysis is threefold. Nyeko's *oeuvre* anchors my examination of how female subjects are erased from debates about land rights, while also inviting an exploration of why claims of territoriality are often laced with ethnic prejudice. Nyeko's stories display varied conventions of asserting land claims in rural

versus urban spaces and the effect of such choices on socio-political life. Hence, her short fiction is a powerful cultural artifact and analytical tool for my discussion regarding narrative and its potential for resistance, the pastoral as a literary genre, and violence—especially as it is manifested on female bodies. Taken together, these thematic concerns lead to an examination of land rights. Finally, Nyeko’s “Banana Eater” exposes gender and ethnic marginalization vis-a-vis urban land rights and foreshadows a similar discussion in the last chapter of this project which examines work by Kenya’s Marjorie O. Macgoye and Tanzania’s M. G. Vassanji.

I: Sony Labou Tansi’s *Life and a Half*

Congolese writer Sony Labou Tansi’s *La Vie et Demie (Life and a Half)* begins with a powerful depiction of trauma inscribed on the human body; the corporeal boundaries of the characters have been invaded and compromised.⁸⁹ Set in a fictional African state, Katamalanasia, a long line of dictators—self-styled as Providential Guides—stand opposed to the liberation efforts by Tansi’s main characters, Martial and his progeny, Chaidana. We follow Martial’s resistance against the Guides, and because he dies at the very beginning of the novel, the text takes a turn for the mythical, with Martial participating in Katalamanasia’s events as a living-dead. In *Life and a Half*’s opening scene, we observe “blood flow in silent drops from the father’s throat” as he is accompanied by his wife and seven children, all bleeding and crying (Tansi 12). Fluids leak from bodies that have suffered physical trauma including beatings and other forms of torture. The ostensibly innocuous meal that the Providential Guide enjoys, raw meat, is

⁸⁹ Tansi (1947-1995) was a Congolese novelist, playwright, and poet.

Tansi's attempts to disrupt the mundane during times of war and conflict. Martial's daughter and his grandchildren battle on against political domination and the Providential Guides' political dynasties.

Throughout the text, citizens' right to life has been usurped by the ruling regime; the Guide's violence upon Martial's body using a "table knife," "revolver," "machine gun" and a "long, gold-sparkling saber" attempts to kill (Tansi 5-7). That Martial remains infuriatingly suspended in mid-air while "his dangling guts were bled white," wholly perplexes and angers the Providential Guide (Tansi 6). Chaidana, Martial's daughter, survives this horror and later in the novel seeks revenge on the Guide and the ministers in his government. Other evidence of the regime's homicidal streak include the execution of political dissidents in Katamalanasia, causing street protests; Colonel Obaltana de Kienzo, the Guide's assistant, gives "the order to open fire on a crowd of nearly thirty thousand men" seeking the cessation of extra-judicial killings (Tansi 33). Visibly, life in Katamalanasia is a precious commodity much cheapened; the sanctity endowed human life is lost to this oppressive regime. The plot ends with a description of a secessionist province of Katamalanasia, called Darmellia, which becomes embroiled in a war of independence with the rest of the country. This war is depicted by Tansi under the auspices of science fiction—complete with flies that "emit x-rays" and turn "whole cities into pure carbon" (Tansi 126). Rather than neatly tie up his novel into a utopian resolution, Tansi leaves the reader with a scene of chaos and confusion; after several decades of war, even the protagonists in the confrontation between Darmellia and the rest of the country do not remember why they have been fighting (Tansi 134).

The significance of Tansi's setting, the nation of Katamalanasia, is worth elaborating. Though fictional, Katamalanasia bears great resemblance to several central African states, at least in their 1970's manifestation. The title "Providential Guide," for example, was once used in reference to Cameroon's first post-independence leader, Ahmadou Ahidjo.⁹⁰ The cannibalism exhibited by Tansi's Providential Guides immediately brings to mind similar allegations made against Jean-Bedel Bokassa from the Central African Republic and Uganda's Idi Amin. Finally, the significance of the river in Tansi's *Life and a Half* supports the interpretation that he is, indirectly, speaking about the two countries that lie on opposite banks of the Congo River: the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Mobutu Sese Seko's Zaire or Congo-Kinshasa) and Republic of the Congo (Congo-Brazzaville). After achieving independence from France in the early Sixties, by the late Seventies both Congos had gone on to support similarly autocratic and megalomaniac regimes. Mobutu Sese Seko, having forcefully taken over from Patrice Lumumba, ruled over Congo-Kinshasa via a kitchen cabinet much akin to a personality cult. It was due to this political set-up that Mobutu was able to rely heavily on American support as part of the on-going global rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union.⁹¹ Congo-Brazzaville received foreign backing from the Eastern bloc, hence its much-publicized adoptions of Soviet-style political parties and scientific socialism. It is no surprise then that foreign support for otherwise autocratic regimes becomes a key motif in Tansi's novel. In *Life and a Half*, zones of *production* excite dictatorial dominance: cities—which inspire artistic creativity—experience violence against street-level political activism; the countryside—where food is produced—endures military

⁹⁰ Achille Mbembe, in *On the Postcolony*.

⁹¹ A more comprehensive history of Congo-Kinshasa can be found in Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja's *The Congo: From Leopold to Kabila – A People's History* (2002).

incursions aimed at defeating rebels; and finally, the female body—and its capacity to procreate—suffers the tyrants’ desire to birth political heirs.

II: Critical Scholarship on Tansi’s *Life and a Half*

One of the principal ways in which Tansi’s work has been received by critics is as a re-invention of both the African novel and the African writer. Tansi’s oeuvre, from *Life and a Half (LH)* to his 1995 *Le Commencement des Douleurs (Beginning of Sorrows)*, is quite deliberate about African literary production and its relationship to politics, governance, and other modes of power. According to J. K. Bisanswa’s “Life is not a Book. *Creuse: Literature and Representation in Sony Labou Tansi’s Work*,” it is in *LH*, however, that Tansi’s thoughts on the “relationship between literature and representation” are most clearly laid out (130). Bisanswa argues that Tansi’s work provided the foundation for an invigorated African novel that sought its own form, quite apart from the European model (130). Paradoxically, scholars have continuously misread *LH* and not credited it for its structural brilliance. Lydie Moudileno argues that foregrounding magical realism in Tansi’s work “generates a misleading reading” of the novel and wholly disregards the last half of the novel which is dominated by “a radically different genre ... namely, that of science fiction” (32). There is a clear transition in the second half of the text whereby Tansi’s writing “evolves spectacularly from the ‘reign of flesh’ to the ‘reign of science’” (Moudileno 35). In *LH*, Tansi provides competing depictions of the African continent. The first is

typified by the obscene and quotidian appearance of cannibalism, bestiality, atavistic cruelty, and fetishism accounted for by magical realism throughout the first half of the novel. Later, science fiction provides for a historicized Africa anchored in rationality and participating in the movement of modernity—an Africa whose past resolutely leads towards

the future—and this is the Africa that science fiction proposes as the novel concludes. (Moudileno 35)

While both magical realism and science fiction are genres that have had much success outside the African continent—magical realism, for example, is largely associated with texts from Latin America—Tansi deploys them in a bid to complicate the African novel. In addition, Tansi's use of irony in *LH* counters simplistic interpretations of African writing, especially ideas of Afro-pessimism, thus suggesting a novel motivation for African postcolonial writing.

By seeking innovative ways to use history in literature, the author re-defines the role of the African novelist—either as “journalist, pamphleteer or even poet” (Bisanswa 130). Eminent Congolese writer Emmanuel Dongala is quoted in Howard French's “The Golden Bough: Searching for Sony Tansi,” saying Tansi's *LH* “was a hurricane that liberated a whole generation of writers” (36). French argues that *LH*'s “real power was its almost dizzying language, full of neologisms and deliberate misconstructions” of grammatical French (36). By staying conscious of fiction's “dilemma . . . that is sandwiched between the *deja-dit* (the-already-said) and the *dire-quoi* (the-what-to-say?),” Tansi was able to undo what had become, by the late Seventies, “rules” of the Francophone African novel (Bisanswa 131). If texts had earlier served themselves up to “armchair readers,” Tansi does the opposite; he engages his audience “in the process of creating the text,” as a result, producing work that does not “pretend to close all the gaps” (Yewah 95). In comparison to the African social realist novel, Tansi's work is transparent about its limits and omissions; in fact, the author invites his readers to make connections beyond the fiction regarding, for instance, the region's political economy. In so doing, Tansi models an examination of Congo's socio-political challenges that connects global

hegemonic incursions to both undemocratic governance and citizens' insecurity regarding land tenure.

LH does “not easily lend [itself] to the kind of socio-ethnological, historical, and cultural readings that dominated critical approaches to earlier African fiction” (Yewah 95). Instead, the novel obliges greater attention to “the politics of writing;” Tansi subverts the figure of an “omniscient author” and instead highlights the “symbiotic relationship between the world of reality and that of imagination” (Yewah 95-97). These three elements: greater demands on the reader and disavowal of pre-packaged interpretation; highlighting the “politics of writing” at the expense of an “omniscient author;” and finally, foregrounding the influence of the real on the imaginary—coalesce to form a new genre in African letters: “*literature engageante*,” or engaging literature (Yewah 94). “*Literature engageante*” emphasizes “writing as a process, as experimentation,” and desires to raise the reader’s political consciousness (Yewah 94-95). Tansi demands that his readers interact with the text, not in a vacuum, but while paying attention to the demands of regional and global hegemony in the Congo. O. C. Diop’s discussion of Tansi’s work identifies silence and its salience in spaces of political oppression. Despotism, per Diop, seek “to establish political, cultural, and symbolic paradigms that will function as the unique and ultimate boundaries of thought and action” (65). Tyrants seek to circumscribe their subjects’ physical, and mental, activity.

As a result, resistance quickly takes the shape of language, and as Diop points out, one of *LH*’s central contribution to the genre of African dictator novels is to demonstrate “the importance of speech where tyranny tries to silence its victims” (66). In other words, the greater the tyrant’s pressure for his subjects’ complete subservience and muteness, the

greater the push by citizens to show noncooperation through language. This also applies to cases of physical trauma to the human body; “the tyrannical determination to silence the object of torture is met with indomitable subject of speech whose *I* articulates a discourse of defiance” (emphasis in original; Diop 72). Mokobia Jiff and Ogonna Nelson agree with Diop’s conclusion that in *LH*, “pain, instead of silencing its victims, empowers them” (72). Jiff and Nelson characterize Diop’s idea of suffering as a central motivator for African authors; for Tansi and other writers, they argue, the “pen becomes the only weapon to resist the evils and dangers of various political regimes” (256).⁹² As I will examine later, Tansi understands the significance of writing as a tool of resistance and permeates *LH* with moments when the pen rises up against the gun.

In Tansi’s *Katamalanasia*, as often happens in similarly despotic spaces, two languages emerge side-by-side: the one official and state-sanctioned and the other popular, unofficial, and street-sanctioned. Eileen Julien argues that in *LH*, “it is the more subtle and more pivotal role of language vis-à-vis political power and ideology that is at issue” (371).⁹³ “Le bruit—that alternative, subversive language of popular opinion’

⁹² Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s views in *Barrel of a Pen: Resistance to Repression in Neo-Colonial Kenya* (1983) holds similar ideas about the importance of the writer’s craft in standing up to tyranny.

⁹³ Julien describes the language that the regime disseminates as “one whose sounds no one comprehends or bothers to listen to;” on the other hand, there is “an alternative, subversive language of popular opinion, ‘le bruit,’ which correctly interprets the official nonsense as the justification of repression and brutality” (378). Both Diop and Julien foreground Tansi’s revolutionary writing vis-à-vis the emptying of political expression by leaders such as Idi Amin, Mobutu, and Bokassa. Their scholarship highlights *LH*’s revolutionary aspect and the author’s attempts to disguise political criticism by fabricating the text as a mere fable. Lydie Moudileno and Francis Higginson agree; furthermore, there is much benefit for Tansi if he positions his work in the fable genre: he gains “a means of outmaneuvering official censorship” (24). The opposition with which Julien characterizes the relationship between language and ideology is visible in *LH*’s simultaneous attempts to escape official oversight while also exposing the quotidian as itself “an elaborate fable institutionalized by the tyrant and characterized by transgression, excess and masquerade” (Moudileno & Higginson 24). Finally, Tansi’s desire to obfuscate his political commentary is somewhat similar to what Ebrahim Hussein does (see chapter two). Hussein, too, disguises his critic of postcolonial inequity—in this case, through the allegory of a wedding ceremony.

emerges in Tansi's work as co-creator of *LH*, the fable.⁹⁴ The author does not reserve absolute credit for the fable; rather, he posits its creation within the public realm and “shares his genius for invention with the entire community ... the people are not only a character but fully participate in the writing of the novel” (Moudileno & Higginson 30). In oppressive political spaces where state infrastructure is deployed to monitor dissenting voices, sharing creative responsibility with the public multiplies the number of nonconforming subjects.

The quotidian—in its manifestation as despotic violence—deserves relentless (re)interpretation (Moudileno & Higginson 31). Tansi demonstrates interpretation as continuous acts of resistance, and emerging scholarship on his writing foregrounds this. Serigne Ndiaye, in “Dictatorship and the Emptiness of the Rhetoric of Totalitarian Discourse in Sony Labou Tansi's ‘*La Vie et Demie*,’” argues that Tansi's work is part of Africa's post-independence writing which demands “an introspective critical examination” of Africa's cultural and political systems (112).⁹⁵ Hence, language in *LH* enables popular assertiveness, “despite the government's autocratic monopoly over the definition and interpretation of meaning” (Ndiaye 122).

⁹⁴ Tansi performs part of this camouflage by subverting the rules of French grammar. Both Dominic Thomas and Georges Ngal argue that Tansi's use of the word “Tropicalite” can be used to understand the manner in which the writer undermines official/grammatical French through his disregard of syntax (Moudileno 33).

⁹⁵ In this discussion, Ndiaye deploys the term “*littérature engagée*”—writing intent on depicting the dystopia that was African independence; in addition, it “reinforces the importance of the conceptual world by giving some autonomy to the text *without* disconnecting it from reality” (emphasis mine, Ndiaye 113). The corollary to “*littérature engagée*” is a “*homme engagé*,” a spokesperson for “the silenced, the repressed, and fighting for the downtrodden, the marginalized, [and] the dispossessed” (Ndiaye 112).

III: Physical Violence & Depiction of Land Rights

Tansi captures the reader's attention to highlight the extent to which despotic regimes claim, and maintain, a hold on their citizens' circle of life. Death, procreation, and the female body are all aspects of human life that Tansi's Guides have exclusive dominion over. The author's emphasis on the body, Pascale Perraudin argues, constitutes "the ultimate act of a visceral resistance and denunciation" (4). For Tansi, as well as for other African Francophone authors—e.g. Henry Lopes, Emmanuel Dongala, and V. Y. Mudimbe—representing violence becomes in and of itself, the "political act of intervention *par excellence*" (Perraudin 4). There is thus a dual division of labor: the author and the reader have specific roles to fulfil in the quest for political intervention. I read Tansi's use of a religious figure whose memory is celebrated by Holy Communion—partaking of the body of Christ—as a signal to his audience that bodies play an important (magical) role in this text. Martial's entrance into Sony Labou Tansi's *Life and a Half (LH)* is forceful and dramatic. Tansi announces the protagonist—who will animate the first half of the text, and whose progeny will play a leading role in the last half—using the famous words "Here's the man!" (5). This phrase is repeated twenty pages later and—in case any of his readers missed the Biblical reference—Tansi brackets the famed three words with the remark that "the news was good"—referencing the New Testament (Tansi 27). Tansi's hints of a correlation between Martial and Christ are not only numerous, but also explicit; two pages before his New Testament reference, Tansi writes that in Katamalanasia, "Christians said that they had seen Martial beside the bearded, long-haired one from Nazareth" (25). Since the use of these motifs is not accidental, how are we to interpret them?

Martial's foe, the Providential Guide, seemingly performs the Holy Communion act of commemoration when the two men first meet—the Guide partakes of an evening meal consisting entirely of “raw meat” (Tansi 5). My reading of *LH* demonstrates how despotic authority over the right to life is directly correlated to the regime's absolute control of land—especially in its capacity to produce food and sustain life. Secondly, Tansi suggests a rebuttal to this tyrannical hold on creation by enacting multiple instances of literary/artistic *creativity* as both an alternative to, and allegory of, biological reproduction. Zones of production incite authoritarian violence as Katamalanasia's regimes seek to assert absolute control. Urban areas—which inspire artistic creativity—witness violence as tyrants attempt to stamp out street politics and grass roots activism. Rural areas—sites of food production—endure military incursions to defeat rebels; finally, the female body becomes the target of the tyrants' efforts in ensuring a progeny to sustain their political dynasties. As this chapter proposes, insecurity of land tenure stems from the same political framework as gender inequality and tyranny.

The extent to which tyranny hijacks citizens' right to life is complemented by its capacity to dish out death. If the Guides hold the key to the end of life, they are also lords of its beginning: the moment of conception. The state's grip on the capacity to reproduce and its (ab)use of the female body go hand-in-hand—confirming the regime's supremacy over its citizens. The elaborate manner in which the Providential Guide impregnates fifty virgins in his efforts to ensure an heir demonstrates meticulous care. Tansi narrates:

The Guide spent his annual two weeks of uninterrupted meditation in the red room ... the room was readied with fifty blue comforters, fifty blue sheets, fifty napkins, fifty nightgowns, fifty pairs of flip-flops, fifty washcloths, fifty masseurs, and fifty tablets. Fifty virgins were ushered in ... undressed and laid on numbered beds. [Jean-Heart-of-Stone] finished his first round of beds in three hours, twenty-six minutes, and twelve

seconds ... thirteen months and seven days after ... the fifty virgins gave birth to fifty boys, each of whom weighed four kilos, one hundred grams. (102)

In this scene, the female body is posited as a mere receptacle: it is valued for its capacity to transform the Guide's reproductive liquids into fifty potential leaders. To further demonstrate its undisputable control over these women's bodies, the regime demands purity (virginity) in the women, while the Guide's previous carnal exploits are glossed over. To further underline the extent to which the dictator can set protocols of use vis-à-vis a woman's womb, the act of procreation is broadcast across Katamalanasia's TV network. This mechanical, and methodical, exploitation of the female body is complemented by sexual abuse visited on Chaidana, Martial's daughter. Chaidana's rape occurs over the course of three nights during which "she took in thirteen cascades of militiamen—the equivalent of three hundred sixty-three men" (Tansi 49). The extreme trauma that Chaidana's body undergoes and the coercion of fifty maidens into serving as the Guide's surrogate mothers are both key markers of Katamalanasia's grotesque violence towards women. They illustrate the extent to which the regime has stamped its power on every aspect of procreation in its citizens' life. What Tansi describes is reminiscent of the concept of biopower; in other words, the "historical process in which biological life ... ultimately emerged as the central object of political strategies" (Cooter and Stein 110). The Guide's scrutiny and surveillance over the biology of birth demonstrates great concern about individual lives and the countless efforts expended to assert control. Tansi's gothic depiction of the violence directs the reader's affective response towards sympathizing with the marginalized. The Guide's actions "bear witness to the central place accorded the body in the processes of *commandement* and

submission” (Mbembe 20). The (female) body *is* the locus of power and Tansi’s dictators maniacally fuss over it.

The obsession with which Katamalanasia’s political leaders approach conception, birth, and the female body is complementary to their systematic relation towards nature—especially land. Towards the middle of Tansi’s text, Chaidana Martial gets married to the Providential Guide and moves into his palace. Architectural modifications that follow to ensure Chaidana’s comfort shed much light on how the regime perceives land and water rights in relation to its subjects. What ensues is no less than bringing the *outdoors*, indoors. Tansi writes:

Lest Chaidana be cut off from the outside world, the room had been transformed into a mini-outdoors. There were three gardens, two streams, one mini-forest inhabited by a multitude of birds, butterflies, boas, salamanders, flies, two artificial lakes, one not very far from the bed and another between the two streams where crabs of every size and dimension swam. The gendarmes chattered under the dozen palm trees but what Chaidana loved best of all were the crocodile pond and the little turtle park—the rocks looked human over there. (12)

Creation of indoor parks decorated with rivers right in the Guide’s bed chambers signifies the extent to which political leaders have appropriated national resources into private property. The botanical gardens and the brooks represent, respectively, land and water spaces under the Guide’s influence in the rest of Katamalanasia. The manner in which access to these indoor areas is restricted by palatial guards who ensure no subject trespasses on the Guide’s privacy is representative of the Guide’s absolute ownership of land and water rights in all corners of the Katamalanasian state. Populating “three gardens, two streams, one mini-forest” with animals speaks to the Guide’s un-contested proprietorship of all resources that can be extracted from the country. Despite the Guide’s

control over rural and urban spaces, there is, however, one space that the Guide's megalomania has not been able to conquer and possess: the rain forest.⁹⁶

The forest, unlike other regions in Katamalanasia, has remained immune to the Guide's exploitative and extractive campaign; rather, it mocks human efforts at "taming" it. Martial's grandchildren, Chaidana and Martial Layisho, relocate to the forest to escape the Guide's murderous reach. It is here they witness how the wilderness scorns anthropomorphic intervention. The forest is a space where "the virginity of nature remained the same merciless source of questions to man, the same hollow fullness, the same argument in which everything shows you, with an invisible finger, man's solitude in the infinity of the unconscious" (Tansi 60). Human knowledge systems, which in Katamalanasia are epitomized by dictatorial systems of governance, have minimal effect here. Such ways of being neither open the forest for occupation nor do they have the capability to extract any benefits from it. Instead, repeated efforts in that direction are met by "such a huge hopelessness that leads to naming the nothingness and makes man nothing but an inventor of philosophies" (Tansi 60). As it turns out, those who live in,

⁹⁶ Likewise, there exists one aspect in the human circle of life that the Guide's regime of torture and physical abuse has proved incapable of surmounting and/or silencing: Martial's immortality. Although the Guide's power over life is absolute, it does not go uncontested. Martial stages the most powerful resistance against Katamalanasian tyranny by his mythical and inexplicable after-life. Despite the Guide's assault on Martial's body with forks, knives, guns, and swords, the latter, infuriatingly, still lives—even though just barely with the lower half of his body gone (Tansi 11). The Guide's plea "so what death do you want to die, Martial?" demonstrates the power of Martial's gesture; so too does the Guide's frustration when he adopts a beggar's pose, or alternatively "launched into a long fit of rage" (Tansi 7). The author reverses and parodies the dictator's death-granting power by pitting him against a political adversary who's equally relentless. Faced with political opponents who "refuse to die once and for all," the Guide is exhausted; he cannot fathom "how many times" he has to "kill" Martial, and sees in his foe a personality "more diabolical" than himself (Tansi 55; 11; 30). Martial's immortality becomes a potent gesture of resistance that circumscribes the dictators' alleged divinity. Martial's presence is further underlined by his absence, his afterlife by his "death," a lack of language which is itself speech. Tansi's "dictator fails to destroy Martial's language of resistance, the language articulating his and the people's will to live. ... Martial's language ... stands out as the ultimate language that allows him to win the psychological battle against his tormentor" (Diop 74). Martial's presence/silence is reminiscent of the vacuity that characterizes the rain forest in *LH*.

and with, the forest—the Batsoua community—approach their relationship to this space with almost religious awe.

Kapahacheu, a young man who befriends Chaidana and Martial during their sojourn in the forest, exemplifies the reverence forest communities bring to their interaction with this ecosystem. Kapahacheu’s community illustrate a notion of land rights based on sustainability and custodianship—very unlike the plundering possessiveness of the novel’s political characters. Kapahacheu points out the multiple uses of each plant, teaching Chaidana the wisdom that, presumably, has also been passed down to him. He indicates:

This leaf—you put it under your tongue to become a tree-man. This leaf—you chew so that game animals are not scared away by your odor. This leaf—you rub it so the snakes stay away from you. This leaf is to hold your breath. This leaf. This vine. This root. This sap. This plant. (Tansi 67)

Kapahacheu’s attention to flora minutiae—leaves, vines, and roots—is in stark contrast to the avaricious behavior of the Guide. Rather than amass birds, reptiles, and plants to populate a sequestered and individualized park, Kapahacheu and his community approach the forest as a life and/or ecosystem with inherent dignity. Hence, each item appropriated from the forest is received with respect and for a specific purpose.⁹⁷ Tansi animates the rain forest as a space that defies not only the Guide’s tendency to

⁹⁷ A similar attitude towards utility guides Batsoua funeral rites. When Kapahacheu explains that his people “bury the evil ones, the malefactors ... [but] hold on to the good men,” he means exactly that (Tansi 64). The bones and teeth of members of the community who were considered *good* are turned into household items and other useful tools. Only those who are *cursed* get buried in the ground; the rest join the forest ecosystem and cater to the resource needs of the community—be it a substitute for wooden bows, decorations for a walking stick etc. (Tansi 66).

appropriate—as demonstrated by gardens and lakes in his private bedroom—but also his corruption—especially its “tropical” variety.⁹⁸

The excess “tropical” greed with which Katamalanasian political leaders plunder national resources is in stark contrast to the Batsoua way of life which demands of the forest ecosystem just enough for sustenance. Tansi demonstrates that the politics of extraction—set up under European colonial regimes—continue to impoverish African communities. This makes it inherently difficult for nations to accumulate wealth. Entering political office in Katamalanasia elevates a leader’s public persona in two key ways: he acquires mistresses, and he amasses large sums of money. The typical life of a government minister was termed the “life of a VVVF”—meaning an existence dominated by the acquisition of Villas, Vehicles, Vino, and Females (Tansi 23). To finance this opulence, “a minister [was] developed with twenty percent of his ministry’s expenses;” such and other similar schemes served as opportunities for corrupt bureaucrats to siphon public monies into private accounts (Tansi 22). The precedent for such grabbing is set by

⁹⁸ Tansi deploys this word in such a manner that it acquires competing meanings. In the first case, Tansi’s “tropicality” seems to reference sexual appetite as seen in the following mentions: the Guide’s “tropical hard-on” (36); and, “maids of honor who were supposed to begin the dance, eat with the guide, and, when necessary, satisfy his tropicalities” (82). However, the meaning also seems to stretch and allude to the manner in which national policies are executed. Hence, for example, we read about “tropical methods the Provisional Guide often substituted for overly costly elections,” or even about “tropical communalism” (Tansi 41; 43). Furthermore, LH notes the Guide’s “tropical energy” as he condemns private militias in Katamalanasia, a “tropical welcome” for a visiting head of state, as well as foreign civil servants who come to see the Guide precisely to assess “if he has lost his old taste, his tropical flavor” (Tansi 48; 118; 127). Evidently, Tansi attaches multiple meanings to the word tropicality. It is important to note that the word has also been deployed to explain governmental corruption and tyranny in the global south; in other words, warm climates create conditions ripe for the germination of dictators and state collapse. In this thinly veiled racism, climate substitutes for race. Less problematic and more empowering uses of the word tropicality can be traced to Brazil’s tropicalismo music of the Sixties. Also known as tropicalia, this cultural genre generated resistance against the military junta in 1968, eventually garnering the ire of the authoritarian regime resulting in the exile of its two main proponents: Caetano Veloso and Gilberto Gil. See Mathew Moyer’s “Tropicalia: Alegria, Alegria!” *Library Journal* (Nov. 2009). As Judith Butler outlines in *Excitable Speech* (1997), it is sometimes possible for the marginalized to appropriate prejudiced language and deploy it towards empowerment projects. Hence, Tansi can subvert the racist meanings in the term “tropicality” and re-align them towards a political critique of tyranny.

the highest state official in Katamalanasia: the Providential Guide. The Guide fleeces his subjects through the national treasury which he deploys to collect innumerable taxes from his citizens. On behalf of the dictator, tax officials “demanded the body tax, the land tax, the child tax, the loyalty to the Guide tax, the economic stimulus tax, the travel tax, the patriotism tax, the militant tax, the tax to fight ignorance, the tax for land conservation, [and] the hunting tax” (Tansi 85). The Guide spends much of these levies on private luxuries; for example, “half the national budget” was one year poured into the construction of a new presidential palace (Tansi 110). Tansi parodies the Guide’s capacity to embezzle public funds and creates tyrannical characters with inherent corruption—it is a core part of their personality.

Of particular importance to Tansi is the stomach. Judith Sinanga-Ohlman notes that Francophone writers from Africa repeatedly return to the image of the *le ventre* (the stomach) as the ideal way to depict corruption (36). The stomach, as a repository of the body’s eating, becomes shorthand for corruption and megalomania. Corrupt leaders eat their country’s resources and their expanding bodies betray their otherwise private acts of financial embezzlement.⁹⁹ I argue that an appreciation of Tansi’s use of the grotesque and the mythical, in his depiction of violence and trauma against the body, enables an understanding of the politics of exploitation. Furthermore, such an analytical agenda facilitates a discussion on how Tansi denounces tyranny while writing about land rights and simultaneously manifests and deconstructs the dictator’s charm and superhuman

⁹⁹ *Wizard of the Crow* by Ngugi wa Thiong’o takes this image to the extreme via a corrupt leader whose body swells and explodes, spewing filth all over State House. Michael Syrotinski further complicates analysis of this imagery by pointing out that even though Tansi “is perhaps the most sensual, or visceral, of all African writers ... his texts are haunted by countless phantom presences that are not so easily recuperable in cultural or mythological terms” (95). Indeed, it is somewhat difficult to reconcile Tansi’s “ghostly apparitions” with his emphatic return to the body (Syrotinski 93-102).

aura. Tansi juxtaposes the stomach—and its role in consuming the fruits of the earth—with the land—the producer of all that is good. Tension between the abdomen and the soil mirrors socio-political challenges in Tansi’s Katamalanasia, and indeed in neo-postcolonial Africa.

LH depicts writing and literary production as appropriate responses against the fear, oppression, and economic injustice that characterize much of the global South.

Writing on the human body, unlike scribing on paper, transcends time and thus serves as an apt *modus operandi* against oppressive and long-lasting political dynasties.¹⁰⁰

Furthermore, it is also a spectacular form of writing that expresses Tansi's fondness of hyperbole; the author posits writing as a political manifesto created by “an engaging man” (3). This new subject—immersed in the reality of contemporary African politics and engaging with it relentlessly—is best exemplified by Tansi’s protagonist and his determination in endless encounters with the Guide. Moreover, Martial’s actions have a permanency about them. This durability is best seen whenever Martial writes; for instance, when he pens the words “you must leave” on his daughter’s palm, Chaidana soon discovers that even if she scrubs her hands so hard till they bleed, the phrase still remains (Tansi 17). Wherever Martial wrote, “the letters stubbornly stuck,” whether it be on Chaidana’s hand, or on the Guide’s forehead—eventually prompting the Guide to self-immolate to get rid of the offending letters (Tansi 29; 96). Martial-the writer stands in for Tansi himself; that Martial’s writing endures, seemingly forever, indicates Tansi’s hope for his own literary production. Tansi views the political dynasties that proliferate across central African in the Seventies as endemic, self-perpetuating, and long-lasting—hence,

¹⁰⁰ For the reader to better perceive how important writing is, the author introduces his text using a “warning” wherein he states that he writes “so that fear may possess” him (Tansi 3). Fear is met head on—much in the same way tyranny is not to be tolerated but repeatedly fought against.

deserving long concerted efforts in opposing them. To be appropriate for the job, Tansi's weapon of choice—writing—also has to transcend the limits of temporality. Tansi gestures towards cultural production that outlives humanity; his depictions of inerasable penmanship will survive the Guides.

This interpretation is further supported by Tansi's experiment with the plot's temporality. One of the key strategies through which fiction buttresses land rights is by invoking, and making comparisons to, long-gone epochs. The era during which *LH*'s plot unfolds is highly ambiguous; in other words, it is challenging to map out the passage of time in the text. Tansi begins the novel by stating that “time has tumbled. The sky, earth, things, everything. Totally tumbled. It was back when the earth was still round, when the sea was the sea” (Tansi 5). With this introduction the writer subverts his readers' confidence about the temporality of the plot: when does it begin; and when does it end? Although the text opens clearly anchored in the dystopia of African post-independence in the Sixties and Seventies, it seems to end before the written historical era. After noting that “time passed just as it always did,” Tansi describes how one Katamalanasian region, Felix-ville, experienced rain for “two months” (92; 131). What is to be noted about this deluge is that Tansi uses it to explain “how the Nile, that witnessed the births of all the pharaohs, was born, along with the Nyasa, the Victoria, and the lake region” (131). If the text ends when the geographic features of Eastern and Central Africa are being formed, when did it begin? Lydie Moudileno explains this seeming time warp by interpreting the text as science fiction; she notes that while in the first half of *LH*, “magical realism limited the representation of violence to the closed spaces of the city,” Tansi transcends this by morphing the last half of the text into science fiction (35). Science fiction may

indeed explain how the novel's temporality shifts so dramatically towards the end. For one, the suggestion of mechanical and technological advancement sheds greater light on this remark by one of Tansi's characters in regard to Katamalanasian history: "we don't say things like that anymore. We didn't live them. It was the time when we were dreaming. Ever since we chose reality, we have forbidden any talk about those things" (134). If indeed as Tansi notes earlier in *LH* that "hell corresponds to the death of life, to the death of liberty," then the novel begins and ends in hell (106). The beginning of *LH* is the hell of postcolonial tyranny, the ending being the hell of denial—of prohibiting any discussion of Katamalanasian history. During the last half of the text the Guides' tyranny is often meted out in scientific and technologized ways that are also characterized by excess.¹⁰¹

Meanwhile, the novel documents an overwhelming number of cultural artifacts all of which are geared towards political resistance. In regards to land rights, Tansi's fiction deploys a plurality which enables it to attend to geographic specificity as well as diversity in regards to ethnicity, ecology, gender, class etc. If the Guide maintains an immense hold over the power of life and death, Tansi arms Katamalanasian subjects with alternative means to exercise their creativity: numerous literary ventures. In the first instance, Katamalanasian youths descend on to the capital city and, at Chaidana's urging, re-write Martial's famous words on every surface: "I do not want to die this death" (Tansi 29). Later in the text the Guide's subjects, regardless of age, appear in the city to take part in "opinion night"—Christmas Eve, which has been chosen by the Guide as the only day citizens may fearlessly read tracts and pamphlets that express anti-regime sentiments

¹⁰¹ Of course, per Mbembe, extravagance and a lack of proportion are two aspects that define the *commandement's* postcolony.

(Tansi 101). The large number of posters and pamphlets that line the streets on that night suggest a great desire among the people for viewpoints other than the official one. Other literary work is authored by Chaidana. She creates what becomes known as Martial's literature, or "pass literature" or "Martial's Gospel" (Tansi 52). The titles that make up this highly clandestine writing include: "*Collection of Nonsense with Lipstick*," "*Memoirs of a Demon*," "*Words Cause Pity*," and "*My Father's Name was Martial*" (Tansi 51; 53). In addition, the reader is made aware that Chaidana "wrote songs, screams, stories, dates, numbers—a veritable universe where the solitude of being is the center of gravity" and even one-hundred page letters (Tansi 52; 104). The large quantity of literary production enumerated in *LH* though posing no physical danger to political leaders, still angers them immensely.

The reason behind this ire, of course, is that Providential Guides, as absolute rulers, circumscribe their subjects' intellectual and psychological lives. Any cultural artifacts that transcend such limits indicate the Guide's impotence. Due to the leader's weaponry and ability to command a large army, he much prefers to fight for power in the physical realm, not the intellectual one. As the Guide once exclaims, "if you want power, put a stop to these leaflets. Power comes from blood" (Tansi 54). Indeed, Katamalanasian hegemony depends on spilling the "blood" of its people; it maintains a veritable monopoly on the use of brute force. Power, however, is at a great disadvantage outside that realm. However, as a defiant Katamalanasian tells the despot, "when I speak, I define myself" (Tansi 68). Literary production, as a variant of "speaking," enables the creation of a community whose members are intent on deposing the Guide. In addition to serving

as an alternative to procreation—which the Guide holds absolute control over—“engaged literature” enables the proliferation of relations and networks.

Legal documents drawn by tyrants, on the other hand, appear vastly inferior in empowering communities to safeguard their wellbeing—especially rights regarding land. A contributing factor to this phenomenon is that while Katamalanasian literature is inherently democratic in nature—anyone can write and publish, albeit clandestinely—the (re)writing of a national constitution is highly susceptible to authoritarian manipulation. Per Tansi’s worldview, fiction is not susceptible to the same hegemonic subversion. Hence, while there is a proliferation of literary production, Katamalanasia’s foundational document is both singular *and* singularly authored. Nowhere is it made clearer that the Guide can manipulate the production of texts to suit his despotic style of leadership than in the revision of Katamalanasia’s constitution. The amendments further entrench despotism by outlining that “power belongs to the guide,” while a second article is written thus: “*gronaniniate mese botouete taou-taou, moro metani bamanasar karani meta yelo yelo-manikatana*” (Tansi 89). Although virtually all ballots cast in a people’s referendum about these amendments are in favor, the electorate has no idea what they just voted for. Tansi satirizes the mechanisms of democracy as he demonstrates the Guide’s ability to corrupt governance; there are competing interpretations of what the second article means. While some argue it is written in “the language of madmen,” others take it to imply “sovereign for life,” and still others maintain that it signifies “hell” (Tansi 89; 90).¹⁰² In any case, the law has no clear meaning and it is always interpreted by

¹⁰² Although proponents of biopower and the theory of biopolitics—Foucault, Esposito, Derrida, Hardt and Negri—argue that the figure of the sovereign has declined since the mid-18th century, Tansi seems to argue otherwise. Tansi’s use of the sovereign suggests that there isn’t a marked departure in 20th century expressions of political dominance—neither in the figure of an absolute ruler (sovereign) nor in this ruler’s

political leaders to their advantage. Tansi offers additional reasons why constitutional writing is inferior to art/fiction in assisting citizens to attain truth. After the amendment, the Guide ordered that this foundational document be inscribed on every door in the nation; paradoxically, those who were tardy in carrying out this executive order “watched elements from the Special Forces lay waste to their huts with rifle butts or blow them up with dynamite” (Tansi 90). The constitution, a founding document that should offer legal protection to citizens, becomes the cause of further misery and loss of property. Fiction, on the other hand, is not so easily corrupted. After the Guide ordered that tomes—both prose and poetry—be written in his praise, his subjects immediately saw through this ruse and reacted in either “laughter or anger” (Tansi 53; 99). I agree with Tansi's supposition that creative writing is not a space the Guide can intrude and expect his people to remain ignorant: within Katamalanasian literary production, tyranny and heavy-handedness cannot remain obscure.

My analysis of Tansi's work has been interested in his depiction of a ruler who not only considers the (mother)land to be his property, but also sees both the means of production and reproduction, land and women, as his to exploit. In the last half of this chapter I will be examining short fiction by Uganda's Monica Arac de Nyeko. There are several similarities in Tansi's and Nyeko's texts which warrant this juxtaposition. For one, both authors are concerned with the power of literature and the law to intervene in intensely material conflicts where land and bodies are simultaneously at stake. In addition, Nyeko like Tansi is concerned with bodily trauma wrought on bodies and the extent to which this complicates rights to homelands. Finally, both writers interrogate the

scrutiny and control over her subjects' life (biopower). See also Roger Cooter and Claudia Stein in their review of Roberto Esposito's *Bios: Biopolitics & Philosophy* with an intro. & trans. by Timothy Campbell and Nikolas Rose's *The Politics of Life Itself: Biomedicine, Power, & Subjectivity in the 21st Century*.

potential for literature to serve as a vehicle through which to transmit histories. Alternative, more inclusive, narratives are essential in promoting inter-ethnic rapport and preventing—if not resolving—conflict. My interpretation of Nyeko’s work argues that while the connection between ethnic clashes and the disruption of citizens’ right to home is readily transparent, that between ethnic chauvinism and narrative is not. Ethnic tension is not innocuous; it is often preceded by the (re)telling of stories which *other* and dehumanize future victims.¹⁰³ Nyeko’s writing upsets the link between conflict in Northern Uganda and prejudiced tales of savagery emanating from Kampala. In addition, her work demonstrates that human bodies and natural features—rocks, trees, and so on—are interchangeable as victims of conflict psychologically recreate peaceful homelands.

IV: Monica Arac de Nyeko’s “Strange Fruit,” “The Banana Eater,” & “In the Stars”

“Strange Fruit” begins with a dream.¹⁰⁴ The female narrator, Lakidi Sofia, conjures up her husband, Mwaka, as she sleeps, in apparent attempts to relive the happy days before he was taken away by Joseph Kony’s Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA). She remembers her mother’s desperate attempts to stop her and Mwaka from getting married, as well as her mother’s eventual, and reluctant, acknowledgement that Mwaka was a worthy husband for her daughter. This aspect of the mother-daughter relationship serves as the first of several conflicts that Nyeko weaves into the narrative. The other conflict around which the story revolves is the anti-government movement of evangelical

¹⁰³ For instance, Nazi propaganda before the Jewish Holocaust, or use of the cockroach image to dehumanize Tutsis in pre-1994 Rwanda.

¹⁰⁴ Monica Arac de Nyeko was shortlisted for the 2004 Caine prize in African Writing for “Strange Fruit.” She won the award in 2007 for another short story, “Jambula Tree.”

preacher-cum-rebel leader Joseph Kony. Kony's militia shows up in the narrator's Northern Uganda village and one of the men they take hostage to go fight for them is Mwaka, Sofia's husband. Months later, when Mwaka has risen in the ranks and is able to return to his home for a short visit, the narrator can smell how different a man her husband has become. She is shocked to discover that her husband had "tasted human blood, licked at it and smeared it upon his body" (SF 9). Mwaka eventually flees from the LRA and returns home one night; Sofia insists he take a bath and change into fresh clothing: a dress. The next day, however, members of Kony's militia find their way to Sophia's compound in search of Mwaka. They soon discover him hiding in an outdoor shed dressed in his wife's gown and after dragging him outside, they rain kicks and blows onto his body. Mwaka does not divulge the information his former comrades demand and he is consequently punished: hanged on his favorite mango tree. Sofia watches her husband dangle "like strange fruit, waiting to be plucked," as she is violated (SF 16). After Mwaka's murder, LRA soldiers rape Sofia in front of her daughter and drive off in laughter. Songs, from traditional dance music to childhood jingles, pop music, and sing-along songs found in oral literature litter the narrative. They are deployed by Nyeko to further hint at the connection between the story's title, "Strange Fruit," and the famous Billie Holiday song by the same title.

The second narrative I discuss, "Banana Eater" (BE), starts with the narrator explaining the beauty of her mother's flower garden in Kampala, and the guests it attracted. Many came to appreciate the garden's beauty but some, notably local market vendors, left it much worse. The first person to comment on the market sellers' rudeness is Brother Aculu; he has been romancing the narrator's mother for several weeks when he

finally acquires the courage to broach the subject. Red Devil, as the narrator nicknames Brother Aculu, suggests that the narrator's mother confront the market vendors who visit every afternoon, sit on the lawn and leave scraps of paper, "packets of milk and cardboard boxes, banana peels and maize husks" strewn all over (BE 2). When Ma attempts to eject the market folks from her flower garden—doing so by claiming ownership—she is quickly rebuked and reminded that she lives on government space. "No one came into the estates with any piece of land," she is told (BE 2). The flower garden, it seems, is public property—despite the private labor put into beautifying it. Government housing estates are contrasted to "Kampala's hills, where the houses were large and double-storied and there were dogs and long walled fences to keep people away" (BE 2). The text also explores prejudice, religious—such as that against Kampala's Jehovah's Witnesses—and ethnic—such as that held by the narrator's mother against the Baganda community, the Banana eaters (BE 4). The third piece, "In the Stars," reads like a letter to the editor. It is a fictional first-person narrative that humanizes the suffering in Northern Uganda. It provides faces for the rebel perpetrators—the narrator's uncles—as well as for the victims—the narrator's schoolmates, fellow villagers, and extended family members. What is clear is that the civilians of Northern Uganda have no one to turn to: neither government forces nor LRA militia. Both armies use their assumed civilian mandate to exert more agony on the very people they claim to protect.

Given Nyeko's use of natural imagery—alternating between urban versus rural spaces—her work, especially "Strange Fruit," is a powerful cultural artifact and analytical tool for my discussion. I read her fiction to explore narrative and its potential

for resistance, the pastoral as a literary genre, and violence—especially as it is manifested on female bodies. While Nyeko’s work is pastoral in how it “describes the country with an implicit or explicit contrast to the urban,” additional nuances of this genre deserve elaboration; for one, her work is keen on challenging “an idealization of the reality of life” in Uganda’s northern countryside (Gifford 2).¹⁰⁵ Nyeko exposes urban snobbery from Kampala which paradoxically imagines Kitgum (Northern Uganda) as both remotely idyllic *and* savagely violent. Her fiction critiques the pastoral convention; unlike earlier examples of this tradition, her rural communities are characterized by a “bleak battle for survival” as determined by political and socio-economic actualities (Gifford 3; 120; 128). Ultimately, her writing moves beyond the pastoral—lodging squarely in the post-pastoral. The post-pastoral recognizes an endless cycle of creation and dying, juxtaposes natural features as allegories for inner human psyches, and demonstrates that terrestrial exploitation and the undermining of land rights both stem from the same sentiment as marginalization of women and minorities (Gifford 153; 156; 165). Nyeko’s “Strange Fruit,” keenly attuned to the fallacy of a rural-urban divide, performs rhetorical labor against the myth of a pastoral idyll.

V: Critical Scholarship on Nyeko’s “Strange Fruit”

As a self-reflective writer, Monica Arac de Nyeko has contributed to some of the critical conversation concerning her short fiction. Nyeko’s view of writing is that it is both a “vocation” [and] “a calling” (Ava-Mathew 1). As a member of FEMRITE, the Ugandan Women Writers’ Association, Nyeko envisions a social role for herself and

¹⁰⁵ In Terry Gifford’s *Pastoral*, he notes the log history of the genre stretching from Greek poetry, Renaissance drama, and ultimately novels (1).

other authors; hence for example, she has commented on gender-based violence. In a 2005 piece titled “Ugandan Monologues,” she decried the government’s ban on the staging of the renowned feminist play, *Vagina Monologues*. Citing possible moral corruption, the Ugandan State Minister of Information Nsaba-Buturo, refused to issue performance licenses for the production (Ugandan Monologues 101).¹⁰⁶ Nyeko described the injunction as “tantamount to silencing women’s voices” even as she underlined the drama’s potential in shifting public discourse about sexual abuse (Ugandan Monologues 101). The writer points out the manner in which survivors of sexual assault are twice victimized: “first by the perpetrator of the violence and then by the common view that they have become ‘defiled’ and unacceptable for marriage” (Ugandan Monologues 101). The advocacy with which Nyeko approaches issues concerning the female body in these journalistic pieces also serves as an undercurrent in her fiction. Female bodies, as I shall examine later, appear repeatedly in Nyeko’s stories; women’s torsos are a motif that assists the author to explore Uganda’s socio-political challenges.

Apart from feminist activism, Nyeko sees literature as a potential vehicle for transmitting (hi)stories—especially collective memory. In an interview conducted by Molar Wood, Nyeko noted that she also wrote to better comprehend herself, her contemporary, “the things that have come and passed, and those that are yet to come” (1). Here Nyeko outlines a trajectory that excavates the past while also making major intrusions into the future. For Nyeko, however, such narratives need not be linear and/or singular; she catalogues her own subjectivity in multiplicity rather than singularity—

¹⁰⁶ Nsaba-Buturo is described by Str8talk Chronicles as a “minister who is known for fighting graft, homosexuality, immorality, and prostitution” (Letter from Kampala). The online news outlet is run by Str8talk Africa Initiatives, a Canadian-based NGO concerned with participatory development, women’s education etc. Its board of directors includes professionals from Uganda, Tanzania, and Canada.

simultaneously manifested as “Arac, a woman, Acoli, Ugandan, a daughter, an aunt, [and] a sister” (1). Understandably, Nyeko is adamant that “there are still so many stories, so many viewpoints, so many discussions, so many emotions that have to be captured in fiction” (Quoted in Patel 2). As an artist, Nyeko is acutely conscious of the proliferating possibilities for narrative and equally anxious as to whom the “narrator” will be—multiple stories, multiple tellers. Even as Nyeko lobbies for Uganda’s yet-to-be-written histories, she is unequivocal that “politicians should [not] be the only pacesetters of [the nation’s] past, present and future” (Patel 2). Much like Tansi in the earlier section of this chapter, Nyeko privileges fiction for its capacity to one, unpack big and complex social issues; and two, costume “collective memories [with] a human and much more intimate face” (Patel 2). Art’s capability in bringing closer that which was initially viewed as distant is best exemplified in “Strange Fruit,” a story into which the author weaves the struggle of Black peoples in the American South.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ According to a 2007 *Washington Post* article, Nyeko confesses to listening to several versions of the song “Strange Fruit” whose title she borrowed for her own narrative. As Donna Bryson writes, “music is threaded throughout” Nyeko’s stories; “Strange Fruit” opens with lyrics from the Billie Holiday song of the same title and Arac de Nyeko listened to Holiday’s and Nina Simone’s versions while writing (“Ugandan Wins African Writing Prize”). As such a central motif in Nyeko’s story, this single deserves some contextualizing. Billie Holiday first recorded “Strange Fruit” on April 20th, 1939 but had been performing the song at New York’s Café Society for several months before that (Nicholson 113). “Strange Fruit” soon became Holiday’s signature, and her iconic recording inspired a spectrum of reactions from the American public. Holiday once had a woman confront her backstage and scream that Holiday stop performing the song; as it turns out, the woman had once witnessed an actual lynching and the memory must have been overpowering (Greene 60). At the same time, Holiday’s single was modified by its listeners such that its “erotic nature—the folk pornography—trumped the violence described in the song” and made the song less protest-oriented and more palatable to Northern sensibilities (Sakashita 111). Versions of the song have also been released by several other black female artists including Nina Simone, Diana Ross, and Abby Lincoln. However, just like Nyeko, Holiday was merely borrowing from another artist. It turns out that a poem titled “Strange Fruit” had first been published in *New York Teacher* magazine in January 1937 (Greene 59). Abel Meeropol, the poet, was a high school English teacher later involved in the infamous Rosenberg trials. Ethel and Julius Rosenberg were charged in 1951 of Communist activities, including treason, and sentenced to hang. Meeropol subsequently adopted the Rosenberg children. Evidently, “Strange Fruit” as a cultural artifact has had a charmed life. It is associated with multiple histories of communities seeking justice: through Meeropol to the political oppression of the Fifties in the USA; through Billie Holiday to the suffering of Black communities in the American South, and finally through

Critical studies of Nyeko's short story foreground love and its enabling capacity for subjects to transcend conflict and victimhood; that is, the business of loving in rural Uganda *is* political. Sofia Ahlberg, for instance, examines "the potential of women's love stories to resist, and sometimes resolve, conflict" (407). Ahlberg reads the romance that Nyeko weaves into "Strange Fruit" as one route towards "self-determination, a way out of victimhood and torment ... [and more importantly] a powerful means of political and social change" (Ahlberg 409). In other words, Ahlberg argues that the choices Nyeko's narrator makes to love, to trust, and to create a family are as political as Joseph Kony's anti-government war. Furthermore, activism is not limited to the character's actions; Nyeko's act of creation—as an artist—is also an example of resistance. For Ahlberg, what authors do is simultaneously "an act of love" and "a struggle for peace" (409).

Targeting women's romance is vital because Nyeko's deployment of the post-pastoral motif enables her to expose the misogyny upon which nationalist narratives are often founded. The post-pastoral is an effective tool for Nyeko to deconstruct several concepts: one, the "separation of the urban and the rural;" two, the idea of the "rural as a privileged and mythologized location;" and three, the depiction of the rural as a space void of "terror and political violence" (Ramlagan 99; 100; 103). By refuting "a politics of space" that splits the urban from the rural, Nyeko exposes the pastoral fallacy that the countryside is "apolitical" (Ramlagan 99). As per Nyeko's stated desire to wrestle national history from the monopolizing hands of the state, "Strange Fruit" serves as "an alternative historical account" of Northern Uganda's conflict and "exposes the dual oppression of rural Ugandans in Kitgum by both militia forces and the national military"

Nyeko to the war-torn region of Northern Uganda. In addition to this trans-national movement, it has permeated across genre boundaries—from poem, to song, to short story.

(Ramlagan 104). As my previous discussion of colonial photography in Kenya demonstrated, hegemonic discourse viewed rural Africa as a wild space lacking western domestication. Nyeko not only writes back using the pastoral's arcadian view of the countryside—contending that the rural is wholesome in its own right—but also transcends and exposes the genre's shortcomings. Her fiction also reveals the ethnic and gender chauvinism underlying nationalist imaginations of the pastoral. Nationalist theorizing of the rural overlooked not only ethnic competition, but also the gendered labor that was required to maintain rural productivity.

Nyeko rewrites the Ugandan countryside in more inclusive terms. Her work seeks to rise above the histories of violence that have been inscribed onto the region's landscapes—both geographic and human. Andrew Armstrong, while discussing the writing of Goretta Kyomuhendo, contends that “survival is often in the act of speaking/writing” (1). Furthermore, he identifies writing as “a political move” and in Kyomuhendo's case, a mechanism to empower victims while concurrently disarming the perpetrators of violence (Armstrong 2; 3). Most important for Armstrong, however, is fiction's power to “serve as a phantom for a lost presence;” it is this that enables the narration of traumatic events and initiates the victims' path to transcendence and, possibly, “healing” (4). There is a similar desire for a renewed and empowered existence in Nyeko's work. In “Strange Fruit,” the protagonist re-conjures her abducted husband as she attempts to survive trauma by recalling and narrating (Armstrong 9). “Strange Fruit” has been performing the labor of memory across varied temporalities and cultural contexts. Abel Meeropol's poetic version and Billie Holiday's musical rendition both mythologize African American suffering at the hands of white supremacists. In

particular, these two artists focus on the black male body and its parallel hyper-sexualization and liability to physical assault.¹⁰⁸ The poem and the song refuse to let go of the nightmarish scene of numerous “black bodies swinging ... hanging from the poplar trees” (“Strange Fruit” Holiday). In the way violence against African Americans in the South was, at once, about capitalism, commerce, race, citizenship, and disenfranchisement, it was also about land. Specifically, it was about what “kinds of spaces” were conducive to black communal life. The image of “poplar trees” in the song is, after all, not accidental; reference to Southern flora serves as a short hand invoking the pastoral idyll. In the next section, I will examine how land, space, and a scrutiny of ethnic-based claims to territory form the backbone on which Nyeko’s short fiction is formed. While this is much more apparent in “Strange Fruit,” as the recent scholarship demonstrates, similar threads can also be traced in Nyeko’s “The Banana Eater,” and “In the Stars.” Across her oeuvre, Nyeko is interested in land for its productive potential. What the land yields, especially food crops such as bananas and fruits, is of extreme importance.

VI: Spaces & Territoriality

In two of her short pieces of fiction, the author provides her audience with a clear link between prejudice and interpersonal friction. My reading of both “Strange Fruit” and “The Banana Eater” exposes ethnic chauvinism and connects it to respective moments of misunderstanding, or even worse, inter-ethnic war. I examine Nyeko’s interest in how food—the fruits of the land—can be used to prop up thinly-veiled ethnic discrimination.

¹⁰⁸ In “The Politics of Sexuality in Billie Holiday’s “Strange Fruit,” Fumiko Sakashita explores the voyeurism that white audiences enjoyed as they observed Holiday—a black woman—perform a fictional rendition of Southern lynching incidents. Sakashita complicates critical readings of the song by demonstrating its erotic aspects, *in addition to*, its deployment as a protest tune.

In addition, I contend that urban snobbery about the countryside is one instance on a spectrum of bigotry whose logical end point is the destruction of lives and property visible in Northern Uganda, and the attendant loss of rights to one's home. The narrator's mother in "Strange Fruit" (SF) attempts to superimpose false partitions between rural and city folk. As Sofia narrates, her mother was "always going on and on about the city and how different people from the city should be when they come to the village" (SF 2). When faced with the violence that takes place in Kitgum, the "othering" of rural populations serves as one way to help the narrator's mother shield herself from the suffering. By then, of course—with her daughter deeply involved as the wife of an abducted husband/soldier—her attempts are largely frustrated.

Alongside urban conceit, cattle-rustling is another mark on a continuum of Ugandan intolerance. In this case, breaking another's constitutional rights regarding personal property is, apparently, sanctioned by mythical beliefs about ethnic history. Nyeko informs her audience that Sofia's husband, Mwaka, had a large herd of cattle which was stolen from him by "notorious Karomojong rustlers who believed all cows in the world belonged to them" (SF 7). The corollary to the raiders' conviction—all livestock belongs to them—is that *other* communities have no mandate to claim ownership. East African communities that trace their last millennia of recent history to the Nile valley—collectively called Nilotes, of whom the Masai are best known—have stories of origin which cite cattle as a divine gift. Nyeko highlights one interpretation of this communal narrative and displays its potential to not only keep a people together—the Karomojong, based on a common "origin"—but its capacity to "other" and consequently serve as a basis for inter-ethnic conflict.

“The Banana Eater” also contains moments of inter-communal bias and explores how such sentiments complicate interpersonal relations. Given the importance of food in this narrative—the title “Banana Eater” highlights this—it is no surprise that meals become a synecdoche for entire cultures. To begin with, the narrator’s mother is highly skeptical of anything from outside her local space. Ma, we are told, “saw no point in learning cuisines whose ingredient names were so foreign they could have been strange illnesses” (BE 1). The strangeness of imported dishes conjures images of sickness; that which is foreign inspires imaginings of infection and disease. As it turns out, the alien includes Ugandan cultures other than one’s own. The narrator has a playmate, Naalu, whose father her mother abhors. Ma disliked Naalu’s father for three simple reasons: “he was Catholic, like the unforgiving nuns of her schooldays; he supported the Democratic Party; and he was a Muganda . . . Ma said it often that Baganda treasured money over loyalty. They would steal your hand if you turned away. The Baganda were banana eaters” (BE 4). Once again, food—in this case bananas—becomes a focal point for hatred. It is with much disdain that the narrator’s mother adds the last statement to her appraisal of this community, “the Baganda were banana eaters.” The dish in of itself has nothing to do with religion, politics, or betraying one’s country, the three reasons given for disliking the Baganda people. However, closing this statement of ethnic chauvinism with the community’s staple food indicates that bananas have come to symbolize everything the narrator’s mother hates.

As it were, the mother abhors the Baganda for eating bananas, *and* she hates bananas because they are eaten by the Baganda. For the mother, bananas are a “strange fruit;” they serve as an icon onto which she can project her ethnically-based chauvinism.

The narrator's mother deflects her anger against the Baganda, and the power struggles that ensue between them and the northerners, onto the banana. The nutrients a community consumes take on a much larger significance; hence, the mother is elated when she sees Naalu try, and appreciate, a meal made from millet. Viewing this as a triumphant moment over Naalu's father—and the Baganda community in general—she commands the girl thus: “tell that to your father ... tell him you eat millet these days, not bananas!” (BE 4). As often happens, Naalu's father reciprocates the prejudice. In his case, he “thought northerners were to blame for every single thing that had ever gone wrong in the country—the coups d'états, the bad roads, the hospitals without medicine, the high price of sugar, his addiction to nicotine, and the fact that the country was landlocked” (BE 4). Clearly, Nyeko is intent on satirizing ethnic biases; that Naalu's father blames northerners for Uganda's geographic disadvantage at having access to the sea is absurd. At most, Naalu's father could blame the haphazard imperial desires of nineteenth century European nations. In any case, both Naalu's father and the narrator's mother rely upon the oversimplification of distant cultures to nourish their prejudice.

The symbolism associated with geological features in Nyeko's work denotes a violent countryside much unlike the paradise depicted by nationalist pastorals. After her husband's abduction by the LRA, Sofia mourns her spouse as though he were confirmed dead. Having embarked on the grieving process, she is eager to fulfill burial requirements—no matter she does not actually have her husband's body. Instead, Sofia turns to her immediate environment; by finding objects she may use to substitute for Mwaka's missing corpse, she makes rocks and human corpses analogous. She decides “to lay four large stones in the cemetery to evoke Mwaka's spirit back home to rest with his

ancestors under the big *kituba* tree” (SF 8). This stone-body motif is also repeated in Nyeko’s “In the Stars.” Having lost her son, the narrator’s grandmother “laid four large stones to show where we should have laid [my uncle’s] body” (ITS 1). It is unclear why the number four recurs in both cases; one speculation is that it suitably represents all four cardinal points on a compass, and hence can help re-orient a relative’s spirit from wherever it may be presently lost.

Nyeko’s fiction deploys natural motifs—rocks, water, and trees—as sites of memory, strongly connecting her work to cultural production in the African Diaspora.¹⁰⁹ Billie Holiday’s image of black bodies strung from branches not only became the rallying cry for Civil Rights politics, but also served to generate an African American culture of resistance. In both canons, natural vegetation serves to critique pastoral rural-scapes that exploited women—and additionally in the American South, African American minorities. Nyeko seemingly borrows even more from this tradition of black struggle. Like Toni Morrison and George Lamming who—in the aftermath of the Middle Passage—have depicted the sea in their attempts to discuss grieving and loss, Nyeko’s work deploys rivers and similar water bodies as depositories of family history and communal memory. This is the case, for instance in her description of the Aringa River in “Strange Fruit.” Indigenous myths about the waterway note that “during those days before the war ... [the Aringa River] did not house so many troubled souls under it. The river was not filled with too many leeches like it is now. Lost souls did not cry out in the night begging for rescue” (SF 8). The armed conflict between the LRA and the Ugandan state has turned the river into a repository of death, loss, and unvoiced mourning. The Aringa’s

¹⁰⁹ For instance, the silk cotton tree in the Caribbean is sometimes viewed as the final resting place for ancestors’ souls.

continuous movement from source to mouth is an apt allegory of the constant untethering of bodies in Northern Uganda. Bodies float in and out of Nyeko's fiction and appear in many unexpected ways. For instance, childlike male bodies appear in place of soldiers, with some so young they seem "weighed down by the size of their guns" (SF 6). Also, body parts are applied onto other bodies; hence, Sofia can tell from her husband's breath that "he'd tasted human blood, licked at it, and smeared it upon his body" (SF 9). The local community has focused its sorrow and bereavement on flowing water. In the absence of the victims' bodies, relatives project their sense of loss onto the river. The water becomes at once a reminder that the cycle of life includes birth and death—however painful the latter may be—even as it houses organisms—leeches—that are appropriate metaphors for military activity in Kitgum. Nyeko's text reduces both LRA militias and the Ugandan armed forces into blood-sucking vermin that has drained the life out of Northern Uganda. This has occurred either through the abduction of older male relatives—and the subsequent breaking up of families—or through the abduction of young boys and girls—hence jeopardizing the community's continuity.

Nyeko's work examines African land rights by exposing the emptiness of nationalist and militarist pastorals and their disregard for women's and minority agency. Unlike the pastoral, where trees and streams are doorways into innocent childhoods, Nyeko's post-pastoral fiction emphasizes the violence enclosed within rural spaces. Consequently, death is perpetually an arm's length away, haunting the land and filling it with ghostly apparitions. In two of Nyeko's pieces, "Strange Fruit" and "In the Stars," Kituba trees are known to serve as resting places for souls. After the death of the narrator's uncle, a second uncle also joined the war and "combed Kituba trees where they

say spirits live . . . to fight the demons of his brother's death that haunted him" (ITS 1). Unfortunately, such efforts end in failure; there are neither spirits to be located in local flora, nor is there peace in the very act of searching. Consequently, Kituba trees remain in the local imaginary as sites of memory where unnamed, *and* unseen, victims may be mythologized. Additionally, the production of memory invades the individual psyche, especially the realm of dreams, seeking to fulfill the quest that was earlier frustrated. Noting that "memories of nights in rain and gripping fear creep to our dreams," the narrator demonstrates how the trauma of trying to survive, and the guilt of surviving, continuously assault any attempt at nocturnal repose (ITS 1). That "sleep should be the one place where there is no worry. It should be dreamland, hopeland" immediately makes the reader aware that sleep in Kitgum *is not* any of these (ITS 1). More importantly, readers can anticipate the narrator's desire that in addition to finding one's "dreamland," and "hopeland," the residents of Kitgum should also be able to inhabit their "home/land," yet they do not. Therefore, it is quite appropriate that "Strange Fruit" begins with Sofia's dream—a reverie in which she sees Mwaka although he was abducted by the LRA months before. Locating her husband in her mind's eye enables Sofia to re-create the family that was broken by Kony's militia, thus completing Sofia's and Mwaka's *home* for their daughter.

The desire to find a home—widely defined as a space that enables the full articulation of one's subjectivity—is also a key quest in Nyeko's "Banana Eater." More specifically, competition between public and private concerns causes friction between urban communities. Unlike in the two previous tales, Nyeko explores how characters' desire for "home" is achieved in the urban environment. The pluri-cultural nature of

Ugandan cities makes an already complex pursuit even more mystifying. In “Banana Eater,” we witness a re-negotiation of the terms “public” and “private” as they apply to Kampala’s real estate. The narrator describes how her mother’s garden served as a haven for market women who conducted business in the city. “Our backyard was a place to forget about the market and its unsold sacks of potatoes and bananas, a place to gossip, a place to laugh out loud at anyone, including our distinguished house guests” (BE 1). Market sellers choose this particular garden because of its attractive flowers and easy access. Once they invite themselves there, they are impossible to dislodge. The narrator’s mother experiences this difficulty as she attempts to evict the men and women of the market who visit her garden, trample on flowers, litter, and generally destroy the private labor that has been invested into beautifying the plot. Retailers told off the narrator’s mother saying,

no one came into the estates with any piece of land on their heads. They called my mother a whore. They said she was a husbandless slut, a fanatic Christian, a sex-starved bitch who should migrate back to the north of the country where people were uncivilized and lacked manners. (BE 2)

As the sellers correctly point out, the narrator and her mother live on City Council of Kampala property; their home has been *rented* from the government and hence can only be classified as *quasi-private*. However, as the vendors contend, quasi-private really means public, regardless of private efforts and resources invested. Since nobody brought land with them to the housing projects, the traders assert, all land in that part of the city is up for grabs, for public consumption. Additionally, the vendors make comments that demonstrate the narrator’s mother—as an “uncivilized Northerner”—has misunderstood what should be private and what should not. While land should be public, female sexuality should not. They admonish the woman as someone who freely offers her body

in the public sphere—hence she is a loose woman. Of particular concern, it seems, is the fact that the narrator’s mother has no man in her life; this fact unnerves the vendors who see her attempts at creating romance with a fellow churchgoer as clear indication of her immorality.

Demarcating spaces and deploying borders, it turns out, are also effective ways of differentiating public from private. Mama Benja, one of the narrator’s neighbors at the estate, demonstrates the use of fences against public invasion of *quasi-private* gardens. Mama Benja’s “plant fence was high, thick, and threatening enough to keep the vendors away. It was said that her backyard was host to a family of cobras which she kept tamed and nourished. If anyone ever tampered with her, she sent the cobras after them” (BE 3). Nyeko’s tale does not provide clear evidence that Mama Benja truly had domesticated reptiles that she used to settle her vendettas. What is clear about the rumors—for whom we have no absolute originator—is that they associated Mama Benja’s fence with malevolence. The crowd from whom the narrator quotes this gossip about Mama Benja cannot explicitly accuse her of the social crime that truly irks them: their inability to invade her backyard. Instead, they fabricate accounts about her possession of snakes and use that to discredit her. There is the same impetus at work that derided the narrator’s mother as a “savage from the North.” In both cases, urban social mores recruit neighborhood gossip in order to discipline members who have contravened rules of cataloguing the public versus the private. Demonstrably, ethnicity and gender are crucial identity markers amidst negotiations for land—a scarce yet essential source of livelihood in both the rural and urban spheres.

Nyeko turns to legal language to resolve this urban conflict. Her discussion, however, raises concerns regarding the positioning of center versus periphery, within a state and internationally, and the political repercussions. Thus, while city council ordinances successfully adjudicate over urban space, the Ugandan constitution is contravened in Kitgum by the LRA. Nyeko deploys city council by-laws to help discipline unruly market sellers and frustrate the proliferation of the “public” at the expense of the “private.” Through this motif, Ma achieves some respite from the onslaught of people daily trampling her garden. As it turns out, the salvation comes from her sworn enemy: Naalu’s father, the Baganda man. Naalu’s father explained to the market operators:

that the market and the estates were two different entities. It was irrelevant that they were both owned by Kampala city council. If the men wanted to use such flimsy arguments, he said, we should as well go and camp at the state house and tell the president it was our right as citizens. (BE 4)

He then enacted a new law, in his capacity as estate manager; the following day a novel edict “was erected right next to Ma’s newly planted red euphorbia fence: Anyone caught crossing over to the estates would be fined twenty thousand shillings” (BE 5). This is a positive application of the law which has immediate benefits for those aggrieved; the same, however, cannot be said of the foundational document ratified in Kampala’s National Assembly to govern the country in its entirety—including the smallest hamlet in the north. Kitgum’s residents have no legal recourse to turn to; unlike Ma, who lives at the center of Uganda’s power structure, Kitgumians reside at the periphery. Nyeko’s description of their plight—especially their inability to safeguard their rights to a home—demonstrates that communities in Northern Uganda are *inferior* citizens in comparison to others much closer to Kampala and the seat of government.

Nyeko further complicates the effectiveness of using the legal arm to resolve conflict by demonstrating the successes and failures of different levels of law: local versus international. The local council ordinance regarding private plots in Kampala's housing estates seems quite appropriate in mediating between the competing interests of the narrator's mother versus those of the market traders. It is an example of *functional* law. However, international human rights law does not have much success in creating solutions to the Northern Uganda war. In other words, such statutes are merely fictive. The victims of this conflict continue to suffer amidst "treaties signed by important men;" furthermore, they remain ignorant of terms such as "*universal declaration of human rights*" (ITS 2). Once again, Kitgum is depicted as a region impenetrable not only to the constitutional gaze emanating from Kampala's House of Representatives, but also from Geneva's International Court. This narrative displays the emptiness that seemingly significant trans-national protocols—for example the Geneva Convention—have when they are applied to actual conflict situations. The lofty ideals set by such documents fall short of the terror that affected communities endure. Like Tansi, Nyeko is skeptical about international legal agreements and the extent to which they can empower marginalized communities. Nyeko's work critiques constitutions for their association with authoritarian neo-postcolonial regimes; furthermore, she indicts international human rights edicts not only for their misunderstanding of the specificities of trauma in distant corners of the globe, but also for their connection to transnational hegemony. Ultimately, neither national constitutions nor human rights charters buttress the land rights of women and minorities—that task is best performed by post-pastoral fiction or the kinds of grass-roots decision-making organs I examine in chapter two.

As the narrator describes, a war that began back in 1986 mostly as “a joke,” has gone on to destroy the Acholi tribe, accompanied by media reports that “the war will end real soon” (ITS 1-2). In the almost three decades since the beginning of the conflict, the region has learnt not to place its hope in the government, or on international humanitarian societies. Each stakeholder has their own sinister motives for getting involved, and for posing as though they hold the key to its resolution. For example, “low-ranked government soldiers, who are sent to protect us, run and hide in their brick-walled barracks to protect themselves when the rebels come ... [then] return when it’s calm to rape our grandmothers [and] light our huts for pleasure” (ITS 2). High-level government officials, on the other hand, embezzle foreign funding allocated to those affected and use it for personal gain: to “buy banks, government property and own the entire nation” (ITS 2). With all realistic options seemingly exhausted, victims have resigned their dreams and hope for a miraculous end to the conflict in “the immortal stars” (ITS 2). The utopian vision that aid will come from celestial powers, coupled with Nyeko’s use of environmental features—rocks, trees, and rivers—as repositories of communal memory, complements the narrator’s allusion to the “night sky” as the only source of salvation victims of land conflicts can rely on (ITS 2).

Tansi and Nyeko poignantly show that gender is inextricably enmeshed within discussions of land rights. Tansi depicts a ruler who not only considers the (mother)land to be his property, but also sees both the means of production and reproduction, land and women, as his to exploit. While Nyeko demonstrates how women who are trying to live off the land are subject to the violence of authoritarian men in resource conflicts, she further complicates this picture by bringing in ethnic distrust and the competition

between city and country. “Writing on the Soil” is concerned with the power of literature and the law to intervene in intensely material conflicts—where land and bodies are both at stake. As the final chapter in this project will demonstrate, these categories have even more acute repercussions in African urban areas. My reading of work by Kenya’s Marjorie Macgoye examines her female protagonist’s maturity as an urban denizen and the extent to which the nation’s coming of age is connected to this. On the other hand, Tanzania’s M. G. Vassanji historicizes Indian immigration to East Africa and investigates the community’s ability to integrate and claim citizenship in a land that—generations later—still regards them as foreigners. In both texts, in the absence of actual ownership rights to urban spaces, subjects enact transgression and trespassing to perform their identity and underline otherwise tentative postcolonial citizenship.

Chapter 4: Belonging & Mobility: Urban Land Rights in East Africa

I

Urban spaces often serve as fertile ground for the (re)invention of culture; in this regard, African cities have a long history as vital sites for new social formations. The following are some examples of novel cultural artifacts that fundamentally re-designed the aesthetic underpinnings of Africa's metropolitan artistic production. In the Sixties and Seventies, for instance, readers in Accra, Lagos, Nairobi, and Johannesburg helped create and sustain the publication of photo novels in South African-based *Drum* magazine. A hybrid of James Bond and similar Hollywood crime dramas, the photo novel "African Film" was a home-grown action thriller that entertained readers across the continent.¹¹⁰ Nairobi's cityscape has spawned a literary tradition best represented by the gritty and visceral urban fiction of Meja Mwangi, David Maillu, and Leonard Kibera.¹¹¹ Furthermore, there has been a vibrant Nairobi music scene—not only in *Sheng*, the sassy and combative vernacular of Nairobi's inner suburbs made from English, Swahili, Hindi, and French—but also in indigenous languages. Nameless, Size-8, and Nonini have released albums in *Sheng*, while Murimi Wa-Kahalf and Queen Jane are representative of artists working with an indigenous language: Kikuyu. The Kenyan capital's

¹¹⁰ See Mathias Krings' "A Prequel to Nollywood: South African Photo Novels & their Pan African Consumption in the late 1960s," for more information.

¹¹¹ Rashmi Varma's work on the postcolonial city has identified two key metaphors through which Nairobi is signified: "as a parasite on the body of the nation and ... as a prostitute, a degraded body in itself" (95). The prostitute—as an allegory of the city—not only establishes a discursive framework opposed to "mother/land" but also signifies "moral decay, social decadence ... and the disruption of traditional structures of masculinity, family and community" under the threat of black women's sexuality (Varma 95). Representing Nairobi "as a parasite renders eating as a symbol of corruption, an especially poignant image in a context of poverty and underdevelopment in which food is scarce and often adulterated;" overall, depictions of postcolonial cities and their "stinking back alleys, ramshackle dwelling, jobless youth, floating waste, corrupt officials, alcoholism, thievery and juvenile delinquency" has generated critical discussions about the "excrement vision" with which African postcolonial writers critique post-independence dystopia (Varma 95). In Kenya, Meja Mwangi's earlier fiction in the Seventies is an apt representative of this genre.

transportation network has also produced its own cultural praxis—*matatu*(ism)—named for the shared taxis that ferry passengers locally. These practices are a collection of hip styles, informal employment, and the repeated subversion of authority—including the “policing” of language. This linguistic transgression is a vital source of Sheng.¹¹² The “hipness” is shared across the border in Tanzania, where artists such as Zanto produce music that is self-aware in its novelty and modernity. Slightly farther afield, Kinshasa as an urban space has given rise to a phenomenon called the “proximity report.” These are in-depth television exposés that highlight the plights Kinshasans encounter. Very often, these broadcasts end with a plea to the Congolese government and/or President Laurent Kabila to intervene.¹¹³ What these cultural phenomena have in common is sustained interest in the use of “performance” to disturb established power dynamics and to enable a review of East Africa’s socio-political scene.

I discern similar concerns in fiction by Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye and Moyez G. Vassanji, especially how these two writers have imagined Nairobi and Dar es Salaam, respectively, as locations that problematize discussions of space/place, citizenship, identity, and ultimately, land rights. Despite Mike Davis’ eloquent discussion of how urban poverty is tied to loss of rural land rights, current discussions of land and land rights often exclude urban spaces. In “Planet of Slums,” Davis urges a re-consideration of urban squalor and the extent to which this is intertwined with land politics in the

¹¹² As Mbugua wa Mungai and David Samer discuss in “No Mercy, No Remorse’: Personal Experience Narratives about Public Passenger Transportation in Nairobi, Kenya,” the transgression of language rules as exemplified by Sheng is synonymous to how the *matatu*—a passenger service vehicle—often transgresses traffic laws and is generally viewed as a menace on Kenyan roads. A Feb. 19th 2013 article in Kenya’s leading newspaper, *Daily Nation*, further demonstrates the antagonism which *matatu*-ism often encounters: “Sheng [is] vile and useless ... and “must go.”

¹¹³ See Katrien Pype’s “Visual Media & Political Communication: Reporting about Suffering in Kinshasa,” for more information.

countryside. For one, he complicates the definition of urbanization by pointing out that “it must be conceptualized as structural transformation along, and intensified interaction between, every point of an urban-rural continuum” (Davis 7). In other words, the formation of African cities is complex, often characterized by a “hermaphroditic countryside,” half-urban, half-rural; to better comprehend the phenomenon of “partially urbanized” geographies, I marshal both space *and* land as concepts through which to discuss African cityscapes (Davis 7).¹¹⁴ While privileging space, I repeatedly bring in a discussion of land to fully acknowledge the gender, migrant, and ethnic complications in land rights that are otherwise often overlooked by nationalist and/or nativist approaches.¹¹⁵

Space is an acutely scarce commodity in cities around the world, and more so in the Global South. After the onslaught of IMF/WTO neo-liberal policies in the Nineties, there was a rapid increase in urban populations and it is estimated that more than three quarters of city dwellers in the developing world occupy space illegally (Davis 15). This is a consequence of Bretton-Woods’ Structural Adjustment Programs that not only accelerated the migration of excess labor to informal settlements, but also reversed any “urban bias” in postcolonial social welfare policies (Davis 10; 18).¹¹⁶ Subsequently, cities have become key stages for disenfranchised urban dwellers on which they improvise varied forms of ownership—or belonging—to compensate for the lack of actual land tenure.

¹¹⁴ While land refers to the physical terrain—in other words the geography on which cities are built—space gestures towards the metaphysical architecture that emerges and how citizens navigate it. Hence, we can speak of communal/public space versus private space.

¹¹⁵ As Mike Davis notes, nationalism has been unable to resolve the challenges of urban poverty due to its contamination with either aspects of patriarchal, feudal-like “clientelism” or “ethno-religious” bigotry (29).

¹¹⁶ Informal settlements, or slums, are characterized by “overcrowding, poor or informal housing, inadequate access to safe water and sanitation, and insecurity of tenure” (Davis 13).

To complicate this project's overall understanding of land, and rights, I pursue a definition that includes claims to space in the city in terms of belonging and mobility. Urban areas serve as crucibles for the re-negotiation of power, hierarchy, and subjectivity through the navigation of the rights to place. My investigation differs from earlier discussions of African urban literature in that I will examine the city as a cultural space and, simultaneously, as a geographic space. Urban dwellers respond to these two aspects of the postcolonial African metropolis with a particular kind of political resistance: reassertion of their agential power—often manifested as trespassing and transgression. My analysis of Marjorie Macgoye's *Coming to Birth* (1986) in the first part of this chapter entails a discussion of land rights through acts of transgressing, trespass, and performance. For instance, Macgoye's protagonist asserts belonging through her position as a city dweller; I argue that her characters react to social and physical barriers that seek to keep them out of certain spaces with deviance and disobedience. In this way, they have repeatedly re-inserted their presence in the very spaces where it had earlier been evacuated. Unlike fiction encountered in earlier chapters of this project—for instance *The Afersata* which discusses the issue of land possession head-on—Macgoye approaches the subject tangentially by depicting the city in textual descriptions that mimic photography.¹¹⁷ Furthermore, she deploys women's artistic production to demonstrate the value of city-dwelling women forging spaces—whether cultural, political, or material—for themselves. In this way, the author addresses women's concerns as they pertain to postcolonial systems of wealth (in)equality—a prominent theme in texts by male and

¹¹⁷ Evans Mwangi's work on "verbal pictures" in African writing provides an additional lens through which to understand Macgoye's work. Macgoye's depictions, however, are not analogous to the kinds of visual texts I discussed in the first chapter of this project; for one, the colonial photographic archive was consumed, primarily, visually, while Macgoye's text demands attention to its written form—even as it conjures images in the minds of its audience.

female authors in this project overall. The second half of the chapter features an examination of M. G. Vassanji's *Uhuru Street* (1991). He too addresses urban land rights via the twin lenses of trespassing and transgression. Vassanji's work not only demands that a comprehensive appraisal of African land rights include an appreciation of inhabitation and mobility, but that we should also consider, as fiction does, both private and public spaces as political terrains where power struggles are repeatedly played out. In other words, physical terrains also shape political conflicts; geographies either provide the subject for the rivalries, or become the space in which these skirmishes happen. Finally, by focusing on the plight of East Africa's Indian diaspora, Vassanji brings to fore questions of ethnicity and demonstrates how cultural and political struggles could also potentially shape physical spaces.

II: *Coming to Birth*

Marjorie Macgoye's novel enables a more expansive definition examination of urban land rights. *Coming to Birth* is a narrative about the rural-urban migration of Paulina, a young woman from the shores of Lake Victoria. She initially moves to Kenya's colonial capital at the height of anti-British politics in the mid-Fifties. The tense political situation is reflected in the novel by Paulina's numerous encounters with the anti-independence efforts of British colonialism, including barbed wire, police patrols, and home searches by belligerent security personnel. Her exodus, however, is not unidirectional. She returns to her natal village either to bring in the harvest or simply to create some space between herself and Martin—her husband—with whom relations swing from friendly to violent as his temper dictates. Macgoye's text traces Paulina's life

alongside Kenyan political history and there are strong allusions that the two are often intertwined—for example, when Paulina loses her only son during public riots that historically occurred during President Mzee Jomo Kenyatta’s visit to the lake-side town of Kisumu. Furthermore, there is a strong sense that Paulina’s maturity—from a wide-eyed sixteen-year-old bride to a cosmopolitan urban citizen—is mirrored by Kenya’s own political coming of age. The story ends with much hope that Paulina—and Kenya, metaphorically—will “come to birth” and send forth much-awaited progeny.

Current attention to Macgoye’s narrative has been keen on expounding the issues of gender politics and female agency. Scholars have argued that Macgoye “privileges the female figure” and emphasized how her work can “empower women” (Barasa 1).¹¹⁸ Critics have also foregrounded the manner in which *Coming to Birth* invites a discussion of women’s exclusion from urban areas, and the presumption of the city as men’s space (Barasa 79; 157). If women in Macgoye’s text eventually discover the urban as a space that is important for their “emancipation”—as the protagonist does—they do so against men who connive to create a “dichotomy between public and private spaces,” aimed at coercing women into silence (Barasa 59; 81).^{119, 120} Central to such tensions between the

¹¹⁸ Barasa goes on to identify how Macgoye deploys motherhood not only as a mark of fertility and life, but also as a source of feminist power (67). As female characters resist male incursion into their circles of personal freedom, it is by reclaiming their sexuality that they “can liberate themselves” and fully benefit from the “power” that the novelist offers her female characters over their bodies (Barasa 74-75). While Barasa’s work on the text correctly identifies the importance of “girl child education” she stops short of critiquing the fact that most colonial education for Kenya’s female population is geared towards improving their performance in the kitchen. Thus, in some ways, education, while offering women an entry into modernity, *also* restricts their choices; in keeping with presumed gender norms: the girl child is still restricted to the hearth, but a slightly more modernized one!

¹¹⁹ Petra Bittner argues that the city—as the setting for Macgoye’s work—is significant due to colonial aspirations that by independence, Kenyans must abandon “ethnic ideals in favor of a national perspective” (84).

¹²⁰ Similarly, in an afterword to Macgoye’s novel, Valerie Kibera points out that the “chaotic new world” of towns and cities into which the text’s female characters journey was multiply a “literal, psychological,

status of the rural and urban spheres, are assumptions that depict the rural as the space of immaturity and/or backwardness as well as colonial privileging of the urban over the rural.

Joseph Slaughter attends to the demarcation of space in Nairobi from an urban planning perspective. Colonial infrastructure was aimed towards “civic cognitive mapping;” in other words, the belief that urban planning could play an instrumental role in the “development of a civil [African] subject” (“Master Plans” 37).¹²¹ This manner of planning colonial cities intends that “Nairobi’s urban *geography* becomes Paulina’s personal *biography*” (“Becoming Plots” 129; emphasis in original).¹²² Slaughter’s work laid the foundation for critical studies that have firmly established *Coming to Birth* within the *bildungsroman* genre. The narrative reveals the complicity of the traditional “idealist” *bildungsroman* to the incursions of imperialism and the European “civilizing mission”

and symbolic” fracture with their customary norms; this migration deposited the women into a limbo that served as the genesis of either their empowerment or disenfranchisement (159; 163).

¹²¹ What’s crucial in Slaughter’s critique is his conclusion that “the nation and its urban expression precede the development of a subjectivity that would desire urbanism and the nation” (“Master Plans” 47). Colonial cities, as “performance” spaces, were built to accommodate the “drama ... of individualism, of discrimination, of differentiation, and civic affiliation;” British tutelage did not work towards a colonial citizen who could determine the course of her own urbanization but rather pre-planned Nairobi and sought to mold the colonial citizen so she could fit in (“Master Plans” 44). Slaughter’s discovery of the ways in which the urban Kenyan was “expected to be a tinged copy of the urban Englishman” comes as no surprise; to this end Nairobi underwent a “modernist arrangement of space” that was aimed at creating citizens who would—by the culmination of Nairobi’s urban planning—desire the very same objectives carried out under this urban development (“Master Plans” 39). The plan foresaw its own demise—which would also be the beginning of its eternal perpetuation by the “new” Nairobians.

¹²² This conflation of colonial “civilizing” goals required that Africans undergoing “modernization” have an “observer” who could supervise “the ‘-isation’ of the ‘-isms,’” – for example the Africanisation of capitalism – and led to the misplaced belief that post-independence Africa merely involved the implementation of systems of governance that had already been “tried and tested” in western Europe – and thus could be applied universally (“Master Plans” 33; 35). Slaughter describes this fallacious belief as “fiction that the nation-state and the *bildungsroman* are neutral and natural technologies—that modernization is simply a bureaucratic matter of filling universal democratic forms with local content” (“Becoming Plots” 133).

(“Becoming Plots” 95).¹²³ An extension of this analysis establishes that unlike customary “coming of age” novels, *Coming to Birth* features multiple protagonists—a key one being modernity. Macgoye’s innovation of the *bildungsroman* genre produces a poignant connection between Paulina’s personal life and Kenya’s national history. The development of postcolonial state infrastructure—and governance through democracy—becomes a key part of the novel’s plot; hence “maturity in *Coming to Birth* is not primarily the result of successful assimilation to dominant social and cultural values ... [instead, Paulina’s] maturity can be measured in the degree to which she becomes aware of the national-political context and her ability to insert herself into that sphere” (“Becoming Plots” 131; Bittner 75).¹²⁴ Macgoye navigates and occupies both the city and the *bildungsroman* to try and create more room for black female agency. She not only resists the colonial city’s impulse to produce colonized subjects—civilized and yet docile, temporary visitors—but also the *bildungsroman*’s complicity as a western tool for producing coherent subjectivities.

¹²³ Slaughter further argues that the *bildungsroman*, like human rights law, “positions the nation-state as the highest form of expression of human sociality and the citizen as the highest form of expression of human personality;” consequently, colonial citizens could only attain their freedom after successful European instruction and “only upon their completion of a successful socio-civil apprenticeship” after which—presumably—they would “quit barbarism” (“Becoming Plots 94; 122). See also Jed Esty’s *Unseasonable Youth: Modernism, Colonialism, and the Fiction of Development* (2011).

¹²⁴ Bittner’s examination of the novel indicates that from Paulina’s arrival in the city “her private life follows the script of Kenya’s national story;” while she thrives during moments of national “well-being ... setbacks to the independence movement impair her growth” (76). Valerie Kibera attests that Macgoye deploys similar techniques in her other works of fiction. In *The Present Moment*, characters’ “valiant attempts to maintain personal identity in the face of [colonial] forces mirror the larger society’s efforts to forge a nation out of an arbitrary creation named Kenyan Colony;” thus, “the personal and public are fused as one ... [and frequently, both] women and [the] nation struggle, often against great odds to ‘come to birth’ by finding an identity” (Kibera 157; 160). Additionally, Paulina’s liberation, as Slaughter argues, “is coded as a triple *uhuru*, simultaneously the liberation of a woman, of the Kenyan nation, and of black Africa” (“Becoming Plots” 125). In other words, her maturity has significance outside her own personhood—her growth is indicative of wider socio-political transformations—a sentiment echoed by no other than Kenya’s Ngugi wa Thiong’o on the back cover of *Coming to Birth*.

In British East Africa it was accepted that land—especially under the control of European urban development—held the potential to alter (African/indigenous) individualities. The colonial city—organized around the marginalization and abjection of black people—was designed to produce certain forms of subjectivity. In fact, as I discussed in chapter one, urban centers were founded upon racial hierarchies—Europeans at the top and Africans at the bottom—and which assigned political power accordingly. Macgoye’s representation of Nairobi questions “gendered (post)colonial urbanism” and challenges the racialized manner in which “full stinking latrine blocks, and the stale air of housing complexes” are starkly opposed to “European order and affluence” (Varma 108; 112).¹²⁵

Additional analysis on how *Coming to Birth* represents space notes that Nairobi becomes a site where characters can articulate “global identities” while they simultaneously de-link ethnicity and nationality as ways of self-identification (Varma 113).¹²⁶ This suggests that the colonial city did not manage to produce the African subjectivities it was designed for; instead, the effects of urbanization were chaotic, complex, and indeed bred new subjectivities that were oppositional to colonialism. This background raises a crucial question: what subjectivities were/are produced in the (post)colonial city? The extent to which independent nation-states have re-fashioned postcolonial versions of African cities is therefore crucial to my argument regarding

¹²⁵ Rashmi Varma’s scholarship extends Barasa’s discussion by showing that women—repeatedly depicted as the “unhomely” women of Nairobi—can no longer be understood as “unauthorized, temporary residents of the city, but as [actually] belonging to it;” in all this, however, the city “paradoxically, provides the space of self-making while foreclosing certain elements of intimacy and tradition and a sense of the past” (119; 116).

¹²⁶ What emerges from this process is Nairobi as a “space where the easy distinctions of city and country, tribe and citizen, sexual and wage work, organic seasons and manufactured news are troubled through and through;” furthermore, class distinctions become fluid as residents consume the products of a capitalist economy – one key step in the process of becoming a “modern citizen” (Varma 113; 115).

identity, sense of belonging, and rights of ownership. While the post-independence city inherited much of the preceding colonial structure, postcolonial urban dwellers have fashioned novel ways of being citizens.

III: Metafiction, Visual Representation of Urban Space, & Land Rights

My discussion of Macgoye's *Coming to Birth* seeks to make a critical intervention by foregrounding the writer's style. First, I use Evan Mwangi's concept of metafiction to discuss the "verbal pictures" that Macgoye presents in her work; these textual, yet uncannily "photographic" representations display the author's investment in how characters navigate, occupy, and inhabit the (post)colonial city (171). The visibility suggested by Macgoye's use of the photographic manifests the novel's interest in an examination of land rights centered on the tripartite phenomena of transgression, trespassing, and the performance. Mwangi's notion of visual representation in African literature is anchored to his discussion of metafiction—an "aesthetic practice" he describes as "that form of African literature that is self-conscious, self-reflexive, and self-referential" (6). Similarly, *Coming to Birth* demands that its audience pay attention to its disruptive use of the European novel, as well as its characters' self-awareness in the colonial urban landscape. Socio-cultural shifts accompanying the economic dominations inherent in the colonial and neocolonial moments have provided much inspiration for African writers; consequently, "novelists exploit self-reflexive techniques to signal changing circumstances in society" (Mwangi ix).¹²⁷ Macgoye's work is especially useful

¹²⁷ Mwangi's *Africa Writes Back to Self: Metafiction, Gender, Sexuality* further argues that due to "growing suspicions of the grand narratives of national unity" propagated from the Fifties through the Seventies, African authors sought other means to express themselves; metafiction emerges as one such narrative technique (8).

for its capacity to “defamiliarize” and “demystify” (Mwangi 15; 16). In this vein, *Coming to Birth* has the potential “to offer an aesthetic means of staging a new politics”—primarily seen in the novel subjectivities that its characters deploy (Mwangi 19). Furthermore, by invoking photography, Macgoye demands that we bear in mind the circulation of photographic representations of African cities—either those created and deployed by colonial bodies such as the Kenya Information Office, or those produced by postcolonial artists.¹²⁸ Overall, the novelist’s juxtaposition of the photograph next to the novel is one way of connecting literature to a variety of art forms. In my own analysis of Macgoye’s work I discuss her use of photographic representational techniques while also seeking to establish how *Coming to Birth* foregrounds space.

Among the many skills Paulina learns after she moves to the city, it is her ability to crochet that can be read as an artistic practice. I contend that Paulina’s creative inclination enables her to re-imagine herself as an urban denizen with the pre-requisite rights to assert her sense of belonging. Macgoye depicts the production of decorative art work in a manner that privileges women’s creativity and their ability to generate novel cultural products. After her protagonist first migrates to Nairobi, Macgoye notes that:

Paulina had begun to learn to crochet when she was in Gem and she practiced hard as soon as she could persuade Martin to buy her thread and hook of her own, so that by the end of the first year she had white lacy covers for the table, the suitcases and the top of the cupboard, and they were sufficiently admired by other people to get her requests to make more, so that she was able to produce thirty or forty shillings each month by making cloths to order. (Macgoye 30)

¹²⁸ Ultimately, metafiction enables a blurring of artistic categories—accelerating the collapse of boundaries between “verbal and visual genres”—and invites a comprehensive evaluation of artistic production and its discordant relations to the present (Mwangi 165).

The protagonist's actions invoke commentary on art's role in the economy, as well as its connection to the processes of migration. Sometime later, on her return from Martin's natal village back to Nairobi, Paulina occupied herself on the train journey by "crocheting industriously" (Macgoye 33). Macgoye's representation of Paulina's handiwork invites us to think through the process of artistic production. Paulina's actions as she completes a "lacy" table cloth mirror Macgoye's own work as a writer. Paulina sets up an art movement complete with artist, audience, and finally an appreciative clientele that demands more production. This is an art circle that is self-sufficient and that spurns colonial attempts at civilizing the African. Crocheting, like the novel, is a European form re-deployed for African purposes. In this way, *Coming to Birth* is repeatedly aware of its own production, and its own existence as representation of "something else." It is this quality that firmly establishes the text as an example of metafiction. More importantly, art production is juxtaposed with the fabrication of narratives—especially those have to do with identity and belonging. Paulina's migration to Nairobi demands that she re-configure her identity—from maiden to wife, and from country girl to city-dweller. Her capacity to fulfill these demands is directly tied to her ability to weave new stories about herself that anchor her in the colonial urban space. Macgoye's use of the metafictional provides a glimpse into the production of selves as individuals enact movement from the countryside to the city-space.

The other way in which *Coming to Birth* displays its concerns with the production of novel subjectivities in the city is demonstrated by the author's re-enactment of folklore. Macgoye poses a metafictional moment revolving around the narration of a story to two children that Paulina baby-sits. She begins the story by saying:

Once upon a time, in the northern part of the coast where magic is very strong, there was a whole village haunted by djinns. There were so many of them and they alarmed the people so much that the whole village at last decided to move, and they built a new home on the opposite side of the river. (Macgoye 103)

The story is significant for several reasons, especially the fact that it is interested in migration. The community in the tale, like Paulina, is forced to migrate in reaction to a calamity that has befallen them. Just as Paulina abandons the rural to join her husband and “keep house,” the recourse to “magic” and the supernatural suggests that the community—like the colonized peoples from whom Paulina emerges—struggles to comprehend what has turned their world upside down. The “haunting” depicted in the story is quite evocative of the repeated peregrinations that Paulina and other colonized Kenyans make in search of a “new” home after their “old/indigenous” one has been disrupted by the forces of imperialism. Each of these journeys ends in failure and merely inspires another; Macgoye’s characters do not fulfill the quest they set out for.¹²⁹

Although my two preceding examples of the metafictional in *Coming to Birth* suggest that the metaphorical “work” of storytelling is as equally fulfilling as the

¹²⁹ There are two other significant ways in which Macgoye’s text is keen on expressing its self-reflectivity. Firstly, she describes a moment when Paulina and Martin, her husband, go to Nairobi’s National Theatre to see a play. The author takes us into Paulina’s mind where we find her pondering on a critique of the performance she is watching; the protagonist, eventually, gave “up the effort of finding a story in the play, there seemed to be new things ... things that had never effectively existed in one’s life. ... She did not mind dealing with the new things, but there was an emptiness where some of the old things ought to have been” (Macgoye 118). In this incident, Paulina nostalgically identifies the great transformations that have taken place in Kenyan society; she can be seen as a literary/art critic, one who can make conclusions about the socio-political milieu from which a work of art emerges. Secondly, Macgoye depicts Paulina’s husband as a critical reader, one who is interested in the politics of writing and reading. In *Coming to Birth*, after Ngugi has been detained, Martin buys a copy of *Petals of Blood*—a key text from one of Africa’s most politically-engaged writers and with much symbolic significance. Macgoye mentions that Martin “had almost stopped buying books and was skeptical even of newspapers,” alluding to the fact that since there no longer existed any relation between Martin’s lived reality and what was presented to him textually - in fiction or the country’s dailies - Martin had stopped consuming textual representations of Kenya (Macgoye 144). However, Ngugi’s detention by a government that repeatedly assassinated dissenters proves that his work, unlike that of others is much closer to the social-political context within which Martin lives—and hence is worth reading.

“physical” labor of crocheting, Macgoye seems to magnify the latter over the former.

This subtle preference is significant when we consider the political atmosphere of postcolonial Kenya and how Macgoye deals with such issues as land rights. Crocheting, it seems, enables Paulina to reflect on the gender divisions about labor and productivity. Her conclusions are that there is something uniquely rewarding about what she does that is otherwise lacking in what Martin does:

Perhaps women’s work was like that – the word for creation was the one you used practically for knitting or pottery. Men’s work was so often destructive – clearing spaces, breaking things down to pulp, making decisions – and how often did the decisions amount to anything tangible? She was glad that a lot of her work lay in making and mending things. (Macgoye 129)

That which is “tangible” is valued more than that which is cerebral or otherwise ephemeral; politics, for example, and its dependence on men “making decisions” is in an inferior position in comparison to pot-making or sewing.¹³⁰ Women’s labor, and its ability to make or mend “things” is superior to corresponding efforts by men, who unlike women, are better suited at destruction. The political impasses of the immediate post-independence moment in Kenya suggest a reading that Macgoye is implicitly critiquing male-driven political change and its failed attempts to enact the promises of *Uhuru*. In other words, men have not been successful in “mending” Kenya’s social fabric after its traumatic encounter with colonialism. Repeatedly, Macgoye presents the reader with picture-like vistas—or verbal pictures—of Nairobi’s city center and central business

¹³⁰ Overall, this passage in Macgoye’s novel re-orientes our focus onto modes of artistic production that have suffered from neglect; for instance, her work can be used to re-evaluate both “traditional arts erased by colonialism and the modern arts denied Africans by missionary education” (Mwangi 166). Women’s production of such domestic items as baskets, pots, fishing nets etc. was repeatedly overlooked by colonial anthropologists in their quest to document “African traditional art.” This disregard was despite the fact that each category of art represents indigenous forms of collecting knowledge and thus deserves appraisal for its wisdoms. More importantly, however, each group of artists represents “constitutive subjects” who should be seen as more than “objects of an anthropological colonial gaze” (Mwangi 177).

district, its posh and leafy suburbs, its transportation infrastructure, and finally, its “informal suburbs” with under-served infrastructure where the colonial government shepherded black workers.¹³¹ These panoramas—through their cinematographic depictions of how characters act—demonstrate the postcolonial subject’s ability to navigate Nairobi, to defy colonial prejudice and occupy (non)-urban spaces, to create their own style in response to (post)colonial modernity, and finally, residents’ capacity to shape the city, just as urban infrastructure dictates social interactions. The visibility suggested by Macgoye’s use of the photographic suggests that *Coming to Birth* is interested in a system of land rights centered on the tripartite phenomena of transgression, trespassing, and the reassertion of presence.

While transgression alludes to the breaking of laws and mores—intangible boundaries that are nevertheless just as difficult to escape—to trespass has connotations of physically jumping over barriers set in place to restrict one’s movement. Together, acts of transgression and trespassing form a dual assault on colonial efforts to circumscribe indigenous freedom through law and urban planning. Consequently, these two forms of protest transform the African into a haunting presence in the European colonial mind. The colonizer has always to monitor the colonized to ensure they break down neither social codes, nor physical barricades, that seek to demarcate the oppressed versus the oppressor. Overall, I perceive Macgoye as demonstrating the ubiquity of discussions about land and resultant peregrinations as her characters search for home; in other words, the land is always present.

¹³¹ In his discussion of the opening passages of both Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* and Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *The River Between*, Mwangi notes that both texts are evocative for their “photographic verbal representations ... in which actions and topographies are described in an intense attempt to reproduce them on the printed page as verbal pictures” (171).

The pervasiveness of concerns about land demands a distinction between abstract land rights and vividly-depicted material places and spaces in *Coming to Birth*. This discrepancy influences power relations between the electorate—who persist in generating fresh urban subjectivities—and politicians in postcolonial Kenya. When Paulina is working for Mr. M., a member of parliament, she hosts a “delegation of [rural] squatters asking for someone to take a case about their land rights” (Macgoye 143). In this rare moment of direct reference to land issues, the author displays the interdependence between land rights in the countryside and politics—at least as “practiced” in urban areas. In the rest of the text, Macgoye focuses on the “tangible” immersion in urban spaces by her characters; her focus is on the nuances of (post)colonial subjectivity and how citizens gain agency in the face of neocolonial hegemony. And it is in this endeavor that characters’ ability to trespass and transgress—as displayed in “verbal pictures” of Nairobi—gains significance.

As Paulina’s first solitary tour of the city demonstrates, there is much “to be frightened of in Nairobi,” and Africans have to exercise their land rights via subtle transgression of urban space (Macgoye 17). As a newcomer from rural Kenya, Paulina does not yet share the city-dweller’s knowledge of how to navigate the urban area without overtly contravening (un)spoken laws about Nairobi’s space, but rather only doing so with much tact. The author describes Paulina’s walk from the King George’s Hospital where she was admitted after a miscarriage to her husband’s rented house thus:

From the railway line she came to an open space which was the site for the Baptist Centre and from there a line of solid brick houses bordered the road down the valley up and down again, with the more ragged outline of Pumwani beyond. . . . The houses looked respectable and she came upon a little Korani school where curly-headed boys in white robes and caps sat

reciting round their *maalam* and rubber tyres lay about for recreation. At the top of the hill the other side looked more familiar, not like homes exactly, the buildings were too big and close together for that, but like a market in the country with a petrol pump, a shoe repairer, but further along the barbed wire reappeared and the notices on which one could always make out the big letters, KEM, KEM. (Macgoye 17)

Although the drive to the hospital took Paulina and her husband just a few minutes, her return journey takes her several days because she repeatedly gets lost. Macgoye, however, means more than Paulina losing her sense of direction when she notes that the protagonist “knew for certain now that she was on the wrong road” (14). The road which “bordered” brick residences in the passage above, in addition to the barbed wire, displays the ominous side of Nairobi to Paulina: barriers restricting one’s movement. Increasingly, she is becoming aware of the fact that despite her fatigue, “all Nairobi in those days was full of barbed wire ... [and] everything was designed to keep you out” (Macgoye 14). The KEM bill boards she sees on her walk-about complement the barbed wire and act as visual reminders—mostly to members of the Kikuyu, Embu, and Meru communities, but generally to all Africans—that Nairobi was a space under siege and one had to navigate it with care.

Despite the city’s knowledge demand on its black residents, Paulina—at the onset of her residence in Nairobi—is still very ignorant. What the novel suggests is that as a result, Paulina cannot exercise her right to occupy the city; her own spatial illiteracy acts as a barrier. In other words, Nairobi is a collection of symbols that she is yet to learn how to decipher. For one, she could not fathom the sheer size of the colonial capital, much less “imagine that it would take a day to walk across from edge to edge” and be practically “impossible” to recall all she witnessed along the way (Macgoye 11). Not fully comprehending the magnitude of the space she has to navigate, she is emblematic of

rural folks who are yet to learn “the town capacity of moving from one place to the next without returning home” (Macgoye 13). Her countryside innocence is clearly legible on her face. For instance, on her train journey from Kisumu she was easy prey for hawkers and pickpockets, and once in the city she is mistaken for a fugitive and locked up in a police cell (Macgoye 6; 19). Later, when Paulina suggests selling vegetables at the market, her husband’s barb—that she’d get herself “marched off to police again or to mission again or to bloody holy brothers and sisters again before ...[she got] ten cents for a twenty-five cent bunch of carrots”—while unfair, seems an apt description of Paulina’s “middling ability,” closer to that of a class eight pupil than of the urbanized wife Martin desires (Macgoye 25; 26).

There is much for Paulina to learn before she, too, can comfortably weave in and out of colonial mechanisms of control and truly claim Nairobi as her own. Although she achieves this by the end of the text, she is initially quite oblivious when compared to Martin and other men who have picked up vital skills to guarantee themselves a safe residence in the city. For one, her husband is noted as possessing a “mastery” of the city that was sure to overwhelm Paulina (Macgoye 2). This expertise can also be seen in a group of bus drivers who during their nightly walks from work “deliberately talked loudly in Swahili to show that they were on lawful business, with passes, and had nothing to hide” (Macgoye 9). Paulina’s spatial literacy is not only imperative because of the city’s gendered expectations—as noted above—but also because of her class and racial affiliations. These two markers of identity not only disenfranchise her but they also hinder her ability to develop into a complete Nairobi resident—with both rights and responsibilities. The city’s demarcation upholds class division and hence “the official

quarter is always up and the laboring [district] down” (Macgoye 12). In addition to class barriers, Nairobi places racial classification as another hurdle to frustrate the practice of one’s land rights. As the author notes, “a curfew meant . . . at times, workers walking to work between cordons of armed European boys lining the road – so young and helpless the boys looked, you wondered how they could possibly know who to shoot at if the occasion arose ” (Macgoye 27). Thus, Paulina is thrice prohibited from the city: due to her gender, her class, and also her race.

The colonial directives that had—early in Britain’s occupation of Kenya—created exclusively European rural areas known as the White Highlands, were later mirrored in the period leading up to independence. The second time round, these commands attempted to re-create the city as a largely white space. As a result, black bodies were repeatedly evacuated from Nairobi especially through police swoops—after which anyone arrested without an employment pass was returned to their “home area”—but occasionally through trespass laws.¹³² Successful resistance against this legislation depended upon the resident’s knowledge. In *Coming to Birth* we accompany the protagonist as she acquires the necessary know-how and becomes more comfortable in the city.

As a new émigré, Paulina was alarmed not only by Martin’s small rental room, but also its lack of privacy as demonstrated by the sounds from her neighbors, which came “into the room across the partition floating through the bare rafters below the

¹³² There is historical evidence that Nairobi’s urban planning in the Fifties looked to South Africa as the model to emulate in creating spaces for white minorities living amongst a black majority. To the extent they could, Nairobi’s European settlers instituted their own form of racial segregation, complete with a “color bar” that dictated where black/brown/white could (or could not) go.

patched tin” (Macgoye 5). This sense of discomfort, however, soon began to wear away as the young couple explored the city together. This is demonstrated in a trip Paulina and Martin take to some of Nairobi’s cultural spaces:

They went to the museum on a Sunday afternoon and saw real leopards and giraffes, only dead and standing up, and birds and butterflies and implements from different tribes. She enjoyed it and begged to go again. They also strolled through the town gazing into the windows of the big shops, where a dress could cost more than a month’s wages and a man’s suit half a year’s. They went out to Ruaraka by bus to visit a friend who lived at the Breweries, and she got a feel of a country district different from their own. They walked in City Park and out among the big houses where people like Martin’s employees lived and ladies strolled in soft tissues scandalously bare at the waist. (Macgoye 29)

There is a common thread of “enjoyment” that Paulina demonstrates as she alternately occupies various urban spaces: the museum, the clothing displays on the city’s streets, and the park. In each of these locations, she adds to her know-how of the city and it is suggested that this encyclopedic exercise will soon include comparisons not only between rural and urban spaces in Kenya, but also between unique rural regions. This weekend trip epitomizes the text’s take on land rights; there is, simultaneously, transgression of social norms and the presence of black bodies in spaces they “should not be.”

The city museum, in its association with colonial forms of collecting knowledge—anthropologically classifying it, and recording it for posterity—was a space that relied on African absence. In Macgoye’s passage above, Africans were more often imagined as sharing space with “real leopards and giraffes”—part of the spectacle—

rather as members of the audience viewing this fauna.¹³³ Furthermore, the couple's window-shopping experience, as well as their walk through City Park, suggests the kind of leisure that was a preserve of European settlers in Kenya, not their black domestic and farm laborers. Macgoye foregrounds her protagonist's right to occupy and move through space and later demonstrates Paulina's comfort within the cityscape by depicting her emotional response on another visit to Nairobi. A decade and a half after her original journey, we see Paulina marveling both at the urban infrastructure and how sophisticated the city had become. "There was something of the same excitement now that she had felt fifteen years before on seeing the city for the first time – the pleasant sunshine, the continuous change of spectacle, the bustle and the hard-learned possibility of belonging" (Macgoye 90). The writer's mention of Paulina's "marvel" and "excitement" is quite apart from the discomfort she felt on her first trip to the city; back then, there was nothing "pleasant" about Nairobi, and if Paulina noticed the capital's "hustle and bustle" it was with much trepidation. In the time since, Paulina has matured into a woman who "enjoys" being in the city, in spite of—or perhaps precisely because of—colonial regulations which make such movements transgressive.

In addition to the physical trespassing that we see above, *Coming to Birth* is equally interested in moments—both in time and place—when characters enact cultural transgression. Macgoye deploys verbal pictures to represent parts of Nairobi where residents have cobbled together a novel culture from multiple ethnic strands. This cultural borrowing and sharing, much in contrast to colonial efforts to sanitize white from both

¹³³ Martin Heidegger is one proponent of the "Africa has no history" attitude. For example, the Enlightenment assumption that Africa had no history led many a museum to assign ruins, such as those of Great Zimbabwe, as the work of non-indigenous non-African peoples who had built "European-like" civilizations before mysteriously disappearing.

black and brown, enables characters to further stake their claim to land rights within the city. Paulina nervously enjoys visiting Cross Street, a section of Macgoye's imaginary Nairobi where pedestrians see "every little shop front spawning new business, enterprises taking shape on the pavements, [and] the young and strong thronging corners, seeking a way to employ their overflowing energy" (Macgoye 130). This is a district that is itching to expand; it has much energy, talent, and time to expend on its various economic pursuits and the participants of its business activities are targeting growth. We can easily imagine these small-scale traders overrunning the rest of the city in a frenzy of selling and buying their "gobbets of raw meat, the repetitious rows of the same watches, the same transistor radios, the same suitcases and schoolbags" (Macgoye 130). Furthermore, we get a description of "letters stenciled, here and there reversed, on the insides of shop windows, shirts flung open to the waist, babies tasseled berets or cut-down ladies' felt hats on bejeweled young men, platform soles and wedges strapped like fetters on girls' feet" all of which seek to offer the reader a clearer picture of the space. Without a doubt, Cross Street serves as the cultural equivalent of the blacksmith's forge—it is where new forms are created, inspired by Kenya's ethnic heritage. In fact, Cross Street is adept at importing cultures from elsewhere, hence the "Hindi or Congolese" music and/or the multilingual dialogues that Paulina overhears as she strolls past shop fronts (Macgoye 130).

This space is unrecognizable as the orderly colonial city that photographs from the Kenya Information Office sought to conjure several decades before this; in fact Cross Street shares very little with the "good order of the residential districts, where ... a servant's shack under the trees, a shrub in flower or the high painted gates of an

embassy” betray the very demarcations of black vs. white, and rich vs. poor that Cross Street decries (Macgoye 130). Even as the author is interested in the smells, sounds, and tastes of Cross Street, she clearly privileges the visual. Hence the whistles that call after Paulina as she walks along suggest the omniscient male gaze reacting to her, or another woman’s body; at the same time, “the ochre-haired moran or cloaked Turkana watchmen with their intricate ear-rings who were always gazing haughtily into windows of electric torches or stripped socks” indicate that Cross Street is not wholly transparent—it is not openly visible to everyone (Macgoye 130). The fringe on which both the Masai and Turkana morans find themselves in relation to the rest of Cross Street is similar to the periphery that Paulina, Martin, and their friends reside in—in relation to the colonial cityscape. While Martin, Paulina and others seem to have overcome this marginal position through acts of transgression, and hence partially re-claimed lost land rights, the text suggests that it is through engaging with capitalism—buying flashlights or socks—that pastoralist Masai and Turkana communities can achieve the same kind of transcendence or belonging.

Physical and cultural transgressions aside, Macgoye uses visual (re)presentations of the cityscape to underscore land rights through the idea of performance. In other words, the writer paints “scenes” in which her characters “perform” various acts of civic duties and it is these very actions which help to accentuate characters’ claims to Nairobi. Paulina’s interaction with government bureaucracy is a good example of this motif:

She had learned how to deal with the big city shops. Government offices in the old provincial style were familiar to her – sentries more or less on guard outside the old colonial buildings, whitened stones, trees, long, cool staircases, desks set in ordinary rooms with high ceilings and green or brown paint like a schoolroom in town or a police station, files that were a

long time coming and receipts written tediously by hand. The new officialdom of towering buildings, all lifts and windows, did not exactly frighten her: it belonged to another world, one she had hardly glimpsed, collecting a form, perhaps, from the passport office or delivering a note for her boss to someone whose telephone was out of order. But a bank, that was within her compass and yet outside her experience. (Macgoye 120)

In the passage above, state offices are represented in language that foregrounds the positional relationship between objects and subjects. The list of objects that make up colonial bureaucracy—stones, trees, staircases, desks, ordinary rooms, files, and receipts—evokes the set directions for a play. Macgoye’s description, though detailed, suggests that the items are not significant on their own; rather, they are only important due to what they enable occupants to do. I find the anticipation that emanates from this sketch quite similar to the expectation that a playwright’s directions produce in theater. With the dramatic stage set, Macgoye proceeds to inform the reader of the various parts each of her character’s play: Paulina acts with familiarity, while government clerks are charged with being slow and working “tediously.” Each character excels at what they do suggesting that they have long rehearsed and learnt their respective roles. Through words such as “familiar,” “tediously,” “frighten,” “glimpsed,” “collecting,” and “delivering,” we get the sense that this “picture” captures a routine that Paulina has executed before. She is in her element, as it were, despite the basic ominous characteristic of the colonial state machinery. Subsequently, we can read Paulina’s appointments with various government departments as performativity of her citizenship; in other words, she is mor’ Kenyan by going to the bank, passport office, or any other government building. Her transgressive actions, as well as her presence in financial and bureaucratic spaces, help to underscore her rights to space in the colonial city.

The performativity of this kind of urban citizenship has positive benefits for other parts of city life. This is best demonstrated in the following description which points out that:

in Nairobi you get dressed whether you have clean clothes or not, you eat whether you know where the next meal is coming from or not, you do work, whether work is a compulsive progression from dustbin to dustbin, from one employment office to the next, or whether it is a ritual with scales or paper clips to dress out someone else's fantasy. In Nairobi you withdraw when someone threatens your personal space, you manipulate the calculations necessary to crossing the road almost without accident, you recognize by a shrug or a lifted eyebrow the appropriate stations of men and gods. (Macgoye 106)

Macgoye reveals a city whose dwellers have crystallized their sense of belonging into several daily rituals. This permeates not only the realm of the domestic—and attendant decisions about sustenance or clothing—but also the social sphere where one has to determine power hierarchies and act accordingly. The suggestion, by the end of the text, is that Paulina—once a starry-eyed sixteen year old—meets all these demands of the city with much adroitness. With time, about two decades to be precise, Nairobi is now a space “she could actually live in ... instead of treating it as a place of refuge” (Macgoye 97). The implication that Paulina was, initially, a refugee in Nairobi—culturally, at least, if not in terms of nationality—only serves to underscore that she has, finally, gained full rights of belonging. She is no longer stateless, but rather has undergone her socio-civil education, excelled, and has been rewarded with permanent residence in Nairobi. The fact that she can envision herself making a home in the city means that she has acquired rights to land and habitation that she did not earlier possess.¹³⁴

¹³⁴ Paradoxically, her husband undergoes the reverse process. By the end of the text he is a beleaguered Nairobiian barely surviving and waiting to go back “home.” While Martin had begun his marriage as the

Urban areas in Macgoye's text have unique attributes, in part due to their pluri-cultural population, that homogenous rural areas lack. *Coming to Birth* advocates for the city's plurality over the insularity and chauvinism that the countryside engenders. In addition to Martin's home district—which cannot truly cater to Paulina's development—we get another example of this in Macgoye's description of the region where Paulina's father works. Thus, while the text depicts the fulfillment of land rights for some characters in urban spaces it presents the frustration of similar quests for individuals in the countryside. In relation to Paulina's father and his occupation, *Coming to Birth* notes that he:

never seemed to make much money out of this tedious work, month after month, with few stories or excitement to tell about when he came home on leave. It sounded to be a bleak place, close-built, mean little houses, one shop on the plantation, church services in the rudimentary school-room, now and then a wandering musician to gather the Luo people together, nodding to the song and throwing pennies, or Kambas gathering for their mysterious, exhausting dance, up and down, up and down, up and down, with football whistles endlessly screaming. (Macgoye 61)

The unnamed district above offers a measly life: it is “bleak,” “mean,” and “rudimentary.” In contrast to the stage that Macgoye presented in *Cross Street*, Paulina's father's workplace has little vibrancy and the employees' attempts at music and festivity are not rewarding. Hence, it lacks the very thing that makes *Cross Street* a beneficial

sole provider, Paulina is soon independent of his generosity, or lack thereof (Macgoye 46). Paulina, the “new woman,” is contrasted to Martin, “still in essence the Luo boy” who yet “hoped and prayed for freedom – no, not freedom, *Uhuru*, which everyone knew in Swahili, but for *loch*, self-government, something he understood” (Macgoye 51; 139; 77). While he had once been able to display “his urban dignity right up to Kisumu” by purchasing a second class train ticket, in the later years of his life he increasingly saw himself “as deprived of the chance of maturity, a childless man who could not keep a wife;” this disappointment caused him to withdraw and his outlook “shrunk” (Macgoye 52; 78; 101). By the end of *Coming to Birth*, roles have changed; Martin no longer suggests cultural outings to museums and the like; instead, this role has largely been taken over by Paulina who was the “one demanding to grow, to get out, to do things” while Martin spent his efforts in complaining about such minutiae as “the price of vegetables, the behavior of Mrs. M's children, the weather or the quality of fish” (Macgoye 112; 101).

location: cultural blending. It is clear from the passage that Luos and Kambas have not merged; each holds onto their own customary heritage without any cross-pollination and the possibility of novel cultural artifacts. Small wonder that Luo music, so far away from home, sounds dour and lacks life and even the musician who has risked much by venturing to entertain his compatriots is rewarded with nothing but passive nods and pennies. At the same time, Kamba traditions remain opaque to Luo speakers; the dances are an emblem of senselessness. Even though they continue for what seems an eternity, they remain “mysterious” and offer nothing to the homesick Luos but screams and inexplicable “up and down” movements. Cultural narrow-mindedness is a principal element of rural colonial spaces—whether in the White Highlands or in regions primarily designated for indigenous communities. Towns and cities, however, provide the colonized population with opportunities to battle prejudice.

Furthermore, as Macgoye elsewhere demonstrates, there is a certain spirit in urban forms of cultural production that is entirely lacking in this abortive exchange between the Kamba and Luo communities. Hence, in addition to lacking models of cultural mingling, non-urban areas are also wanting in the kind of flair one can see in Macgoye’s depiction of the city—twice dooming the countryside as a space for unrealized rights to land. To underline the organic nature of urban elegance, Macgoye presents it through the city’s unwanted: its beggars and transient population. In describing a homeless man, Macgoye writes that:

Someone had given him a cigarette and he was smoking it with a flourish between two fingers, like some of the university visitors ... He might have been challenging the young layabouts to snatch the fag out of his hand. Style, he was saying to them, is important if you are to make the best of

what you have, and that was the lesson they were learning from this old beggar who did not look under-nourished or humiliated either. (125)

We witness the same stylishness in “the panache with which a teenage turnboy hung out of a matatu or a country bus ... [and] the rakish angle at which a barefoot parking boy put on the tattered remnants of a hat picked up from some gutter after a fight” (Macgoye 125). These are all expressions of the urban performativity that places residents in a space of agency, and perhaps some sections of the city’s population are better at it than others. As the author notes, “the theatrical bow with which an urchin had once offered her a seat before jumping off the city bus warily ahead of the conductor’s demand for a fare” seems to suggest that boys are “better at it than the girls” (Macgoye 125). A paradox appears: while Macgoye is clearly interested in how the lower classes manage to stare back at life with such grace and poise, she still concludes that “only the most leisured and wealthy had time to cultivate the seeming spontaneities of style” (125). This inconsistency can perhaps be resolved by noting that boys—regardless of their socio-economic background—as long they inhabit the city have a fair chance at developing their unique personalities, down to their peculiar mannerisms of holding a cigarette, wearing a hat, or bowing to a woman. Girls, on the other hand, need more than proximity to the cultural hubbub (Nairobi); they also require enabling economic resources otherwise their creativity remains untapped and undeveloped. As a result, they lack the freedom to perform their personalized style in public. This conclusion brings us full circle to Paulina’s venture in decorative crocheting. Perhaps it is this form of artistic practice that enables the protagonist to nurture her own individuality.

Paulina, as we have seen, is repeatedly cast by Macgoye in the role of a performer/artist. This is also the case when she converses with an old friend, Amina. At

the end of their exchange, Paulina seeks to encourage Amina by saying “we have learned to take what comes and make the best of it;” but, as Amina points out, it is the reverse (Macgoye 146). Amina’s restatement of this colloquial expression, unlike Paulina’s, places emphasis on women’s agency, and creativity. Paulina *does* what Amina says, but she is not articulate enough to *summarize* her own motto. Amina says that they both learnt “to make what comes and to take the best of it;” keeping in mind that Paulina earlier made the connection between making, mending, and creating, Amina’s statement means that women have learnt to create what comes and preserve the best of it (Macgoye 146). Amina’s wisdom places women’s destiny in their hands, suggesting that transgression and/or trespassing—in their physical or cultural manifestations—are tools available to Nairobi’s female population for deployment towards achieving empowerment.¹³⁵

My discussion of Marjorie Macgoye’s *Coming to Birth* has privileged a discussion of land rights through acts of transgression, trespass, and performance. My argument is that Nairobi’s residents have reacted to social and physical barriers that seek to keep them out of certain spaces with deviance and disobedience. In this way, they have repeatedly re-inserted their presence in the very spaces where it had earlier been evacuated. Furthermore, through acts of cultural transgression, Macgoye’s Nairobians challenge the kind of cultural policing—colonial and postcolonial—that is founded upon gender, class, or ethnic boundaries. Often, such barriers complement physical ones that

¹³⁵ We also get a good sense of Paulina as a performer in Macgoye’s description of her wardrobe; the text notes that Paulina was “wearing a neat dark dress, flat-heeled shoes and, of course, a watch. No working woman could be seen without a watch” (121). The watch is the key symbol of her role in Nairobi’s performance space; it helps to identify her to other actors so they may better know how to respond to her presence.

restrict characters' movements. Overall, then, it is possible to demonstrate ways in which the cityscape has influenced its residents' personality. In reverse, one could also map instances when the people have left an impact on the city, its infrastructure, its scenery etc. This transformation is best documented in *Coming to Birth* following the assassination of Kenyan politician J. M. Kariuki.¹³⁶ One direct consequence of Kariuki's death was that "between poor and poor a barrier had been broken down ... the force which had become personalized in this man's death was not enmity between tribe and tribe" (Macgoye 108). That the writer uses the language of barricading is significant and further validates my reading of the text as not only literally *but also* metaphorically engaged with issues of land rights. However, even more important is the newly-found unity between communities which inhabit the lower economic strata; this suggests a new force that could potentially alter Kenya's socio-political landscape. Moreover, the political tragedy leaves in its wake a new breed of children; children whom one can describe as infrastructure due to their potential to effect change. The text's characterization of the youngsters is especially focused on what they did *not* do. These children:

were of the age to have been shot in Kano or Patel flats, children who did not shy away from the sight of a gun or hold their noses against white smoke from a bonfire, children who had been conceived after their fathers had come back from the camps, after the squatters had missed their chance to buy up the white farm settlements plots, after the land titles had been written, children who did not know the eerie stillness of the forest or the KEM prohibited signs. Children of the New Method, who knew John

¹³⁶ Kariuki, famous for describing Kenya as a state with "ten millionaires and ten million poor people," was murdered in 1975. The Kenyatta state was somehow involved given that Kariuki was initially arrested and taken to a police station, only for his badly mutilated body to be found thirty miles from the Central Business District days later. A government Commission of Inquiry did not uncover much that either absolved the state, or satisfied the public's grief, anger, and disbelief.

Wayne and the Aga Khan and Bruce Lee and Charlie Chaplin by sight.
(Macgoye 107)¹³⁷

This is the second direct mention of issues of land that Macgoye makes in *Coming to Birth*; it evokes the great human re-settlements produced by conflicts over land rights. Her reference to squatting and lost chances to “buy up the white farm settlements” is filled with the disappointment that many a soldier in the anti-colonial Kenya Land & Freedom Army encountered after independence. These fighters and their progeny had been left out at the sharing of the fruits of independence; not only had they missed the chance to buy land, defined by the colonial state as terrorists and disturbers of the peace, they had effectively been shut out of the colonial *and* postcolonial economy.

Understandably, there was much angst regarding this betrayal aptly captured by Macgoye in the passage above by her discussion of how the children show no fear in the face of violence. These youngsters have inherited a heritage that equally transgresses from the East—the Aga Khan and Bruce lee—to the West—Charlie Chaplin and John Wayne. Hence, they have made up for their ignorance of “the eerie stillness of the forest” with a global cultural outlook. It is perhaps as a result of this that they bring such gloom to the scene above. Macgoye ends the description above with a poignant “even those terribly sharp children did not tumble to it,” suggesting that there is some expectation these new breed of Nairobi citizens have not fulfilled (107). The author’s characterization of the progenies suggests much likelihood they will alter the cityscape in the coming days. That the kids “did not tumble” suggests they did not perform certain acts of their citizenship after Kariuki’s death. Hence, paradoxically, their “performance” is one of

¹³⁷ At the height of Kenya’s anti-colonial struggle—especially in the late Fifties—there was a proliferation of warning signs that outlawed the Kikuyu, Embu, and Meru (KEM) communities from numerous public spaces due to security concerns.

“non-performance.” This means that the next generation of Nairobians—unlike Paulina, Martin, and their friends—is envisioning novel ways of claiming their rights to the city; ominously, urban youths have the dual potential to tear down and/or re-build—inspired, it seems, by their global cultural consumption.

IV: *Uhuru Street*

In the second half of this chapter, I focus on M. G. Vassanji’s *Uhuru Street* (1991). My discussion of the text seeks to: one, engage with issues of land rights from Macgoye’s perspective of transgression and trespassing; and two, demonstrate how Vassanji complicates claims to land by foregrounding the Indian diaspora’s propensity for migration and “double migration.” The presence of Indian migrants vexed the simplistic racial binary established by colonial powers in relation to citizenship and subjecthood. Indians were not only too black to be white, but also too white to be black; they simultaneously spanned the dual categories of settler and native.

Uhuru Street has been described as a “short story cycle” (Davis 8). Vassanji’s text is a collection of sixteen pieces of short fiction which memorialize Tanzania’s Dar es Salaam as it looked in the Fifties through the early Eighties—serving as a fruitful juxtaposition to Macgoye’s *Coming to Birth*. Vassanji focuses not only on the political changes that the city and the nation undergo, but also on how these alterations are reflected in the daily lives of his characters. As one review of the short stories argues, what Vassanji offers his readers is a “slice of life” as Dar es Salaam’s Indian diaspora experienced it; this representation is served with a “swirling underlayer of violent desire” varyingly emerging as murder or sexual relations (Persky 1). Beginning with “In the

Quiet of a Sunday Afternoon,” Vassanji explores commerce and domestic routines especially within Dar’s South Asian diaspora. Both diaspora and immigration are key threads that tie the stories together, appearing multiply as characters reminisce on moving from India (“English Lessons”) to moving to Europe (“Refugee” and “What Good Times we Had”) and eventually returning to Tanzania (“All Worlds are Possible Now”). In Vassanji’s text characters appear in more than one story—especially the child narrator, whose family configuration morphs as the stories progress. The short story cycle enables a back and forth re-working of complex ideas and serves as an apt metaphor for the (re)negotiation of identities (Davis 8). In addition, the organizational structure of the tales ensures they emerge as “simultaneously independent and interdependent;” often, there is the reiteration of themes from multiple perspectives helping to not only unify the whole series, but also individualize each story (Davis 8). Finally, there is a great sense of characters occupying Dar es Salaam—offering a crucial link to Macgoye’s text and to my overall argument about land rights in the city. Ultimately, Uhuru Street—which offers the text its title—becomes an urban enclave where residents try on multiple (and novel) subjectivities.

Studies of Vassanji’s collection of stories have been interested in his depiction of East Africa’s Indian diaspora, the text’s relationship to its socio-political context, and finally Vassanji’s representation of space—either that of the street or that of the domestic sphere. Given Vassanji’s interest in the fate of Indian immigrants to Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania, scholarly attention has also, rightly, often begun with this historical event. In addition to centuries of trade and economic exchange across the Indian Ocean world, there was definite presence of non-African peoples from the early colonial period in East

Africa.¹³⁸ By the 1900s the region received tens of thousands of Christian Goans, Gujarati Jains, Bohra Muslims, among others; for many, the railway line from Mombasa to Kampala was their main occupation, but others soon set up trade in the frontier towns and emerging cities (Younger 201).¹³⁹ South Asian immigrants formed close-knit communities based on shared cultural heritage; this “self-segregation” is especially visible in the numerous religious establishments that served minute segments of this otherwise large Indian diaspora. To their African hosts—especially in the post-independence era—this pattern of settlement resembled “a racial divide to maintain economic dominance,” and Vassanji’s fiction seeks to disturb such readings by disrupting the fiction of “one unquestioned history or an originary identity” (Younger 203; “Hybrid Identities & Cultural Pluralism” 161).¹⁴⁰ The diaspora’s desire for insularity produced tension in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam—postcolonial cities that were both attempting to re-define themselves as essentially plural.

Vassanji’s oeuvre opposes exclusionary stories of belonging in the African (post)colony. For one, it rejects colonial policies of “divide and rule” that sowed discord amongst various subjugated people. In addition, it engages with post-Sixties African nationalism that advanced East Africanness based on racial criteria, and finally disavows contemporary forms of western imperialism that portray Africa(ns) in the unitary light of

¹³⁸ Archaeological evidence has shown presence of Indian Ocean trade routes that took advantage of the annual monsoon winds to traverse from what is presently Mozambique, Tanzania, Kenya, and Somalia to India’s western coast. In Zanzibar, Omani Arabs had established their headquarters to better monitor trade in slaves and ivory coming from the interior. This lucrative commerce was a big cause of contention when European influence began to expand in Africa—starting with Portuguese expeditions in the 1490s to British occupation in the last half of the Nineteenth century.

¹³⁹ By the early Sixties when most East African nations gained self-rule, this number had risen to just over 350, 000 Africans of south Asian origin (Younger 201).

¹⁴⁰ Peter Simatei’s “Hybrid Identities & Cultural Pluralism in East African Asian Writing,” goes on to classify *Uhuru Street* as a “post-national” text that is interested in heterogeneity of social formations, as well as “hybridization and political plurality” (161).

poverty, war, and disease. *Uhuru Street* is about Vassanji's desire to "record;" it is the expression of his belief that Africans "need to tell their stories" and demonstrate that the continent is not one "homogenous" entity (Nasta 72; Desai 195). Vassanji remarks at the incredulity of contemporary news production whereby outsiders "who do not know the language, let alone the language nuances, do not know or understand the culture, cannot sit down and banter with its people, become the interpreters of that place" (Desai 196).¹⁴¹ Land rights, like other aspects of a nation's socio-political traits, are specific, determined by a people's history, and not easily generalizable. The author is clearly interested in who gets to (re)tell African narratives and expresses his frustration at the repeated "hijacking" of histories; thus, in other texts such as *Book of Secrets* and *Gunny Sack* Vassanji has interest not only "in re-telling the past but also in the way that past is remembered, or in the form it takes as memory" ("Voyaging on the Mists of Memory" 29).¹⁴² The writer wields as critical a pen in response to postcolonial nation building by African states and the manner in which it handled the "Asian question."¹⁴³ Furthermore, Vassanji's work with the history of the Indian diaspora and his contribution to their memorialization is reminiscent of the use of folklore in chapter one of this project—Ogot's *The Promised land* and Ogola's *The River & the Source*—where oral narratives have been deployed to stake a community's belonging and claim to land rights. Indeed, for Vassanji, "writing becomes a process of remembrance" and "is itself an attempt to uncover connections to

¹⁴¹ Harold Barratt further extends this idea to show how Vassanji's sense of African "self-respect" is tied to the continent's ability to self-mythologize through fiction and the arts (445).

¹⁴² Vassanji's commitment to multiple histories is especially evident in *Gunny Sack* where he deploys the gunny sack as a motif to free acts of "remembrance and hence of narrative itself, from the strictures of teleology and closure, something which allows the stories to originate from multiple sites and times without losing their connectedness" ("Voyaging on the Mists of Memory" 30).

¹⁴³ Vassanji's rallying for the writing of African stories is similar to Monica Arac de Nyeko's efforts to get more female narratives, retold, written, and published in Uganda.

histories of resistance that get suppressed when the stereotypes of Asians as collaborators of colonialism are amplified with the official discourse of nation building” (Gifford 177; “Diasporic Memories” 56).¹⁴⁴

In his quest for “those dynamic, multidirectional, and revolutionary histories of the national people,” Vassanji’s work on the East African Indian diaspora invites comparison with other fiction which seeks to lay claims of “Africanness” on behalf of communities with Asian heritage (“Diasporic Memories” 57). The South African political landscape offers examples of how an Indian diaspora has attempted to integrate itself within the host community. In *Afrindian Fictions*, a text focused on “on how different *nonwhite* constituencies interact *with each other in non-western* geographies,” Pallavi Rastogi suggests “an Africanization of Indian selfhood and an Indianization” of African selfhood as a way to resolve cultural hang-ups produced by the presence of an Indian diaspora in South Africa [Emphasis in original] (2). In addition to coining the term “Afrindian” to accommodate the heritage that each group brings to the union, Rastogi documents how Indian South African writers navigate their identity(ies). There has been a variety of responses, such as Fatima Meer’s foregrounding of “community” as a key component in the nation’s fight against apartheid, just as other authors display the Indian diaspora’s “rootedness and belonging” in the African soil (Rastogi 1; 18).¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ Simatei argues that in response to this form of nation building—and its attendant “assault on the Asian spaces of freedom guaranteed under colonialism”—the Indian diaspora in East Africa began to pine for the British Empire of yesteryears (“Diasporic Memories” 59). Vassanji seems to indicate that “nostalgia” for this colonial history—“long projected as absolute and inviolable”—quickly leads to panicked “departures” of the Indian diaspora towards the United Kingdom and North America (“Diasporic Memories” 59; 60). Thus, Vassanji is also critical of the more conservative political tendencies in Asian East African communities.

¹⁴⁵ The South African experience, of course, is still more complex and writers have been meeting some of these challenges head-on as evidenced by the “direct and determinate relationship between politics and

Aside from attention to the overt issue of Tanzania's Indian diaspora, critical work on *Uhuru Street* has sought to better understand the text's connection to the socio-political milieu from which it emerges. There is a segment of critical work on Vassanji which has examined his illustration of East Africa's socio-political context in an attempt to comment on the author's depiction of space and how his characters occupy and relate to it. The writer himself invites commentary on how the Uhuru Street he writes about is both a metaphorical and geographical space and to what extent it can(not) be located as "a place in the world of fiction" (Vassanji xii). The street is "both a physical place and a construct with imaginative life in the hearts and minds of those who began life there;" furthermore, it functions doubly as "social structure and a configuration of consciousness and memory, subject to historical change and psychological disturbance profoundly affecting those who live there, those who leave, and those who return" (Davis 10; 11). In other words, there are two ways of looking at urban space: one is in the relationship between real material space and its symbolic life in the minds of its inhabitants; the second is the question of a diasporan writer's relationship to a place he left—one that is also a space of memory and nostalgia for a whole community. Both of these iterations complicate a diasporan ethnic minority's relationship to an African city and the extent to which the community can embody land rights within such a socio-political context.

identity in South African Indian writing" (Rastogi 9). For one, unlike the New World where both African and Indian diasporas were part of a diverse system of migrant labor, in Africa, the black community is indigenous; this results in "two dispossessed groups grappling with each other's presence in a land that historically belongs to one community" (Rastogi 8). As can be expected, attempts by the Indian diaspora to stake claims to that land were highly problematic for African communities who now felt twice victimized—first by the European, and again by South Asian peoples. Additionally, in the fight against multiple forms of white domination, the "specificity of Indian identity was often erased" in attempts to create a "grand narrative of the freedom struggle that sought to incorporate all nonwhite people under a singular 'black' identity" (Rastogi 4). But as *Afrindian Fictions* points out—and this applies to East African Indian writers, too—taking to task the postcolonial state and holding it "accountable for the failure of its promises, then, makes Indians more South African, not less" (Rastogi 18).

In the diaspora's typical longing for home, Uhuru Street morphs into a multiply significant zone for the realization of dreams—either those of the first generation who arrive in Dar from the Indian sub-continent, or those of the third and fourth generation who return from the west after brief sojourns. Like in Macgoye's *Coming to Birth*, walking the urban space is of great import to the characters; critics have argued that the short stories invite readers to take a “stroll from house to house” and meet the Indian inhabitants of Uhuru Street (Obradovic 327).¹⁴⁶ The author supports such a reading by noting that his text attempts to turn a “bulb” on and off “so each short story would be a flicker of light and then you would have a whole street emerging” (Nasta 78).¹⁴⁷ Along the way, the short story collection focuses on the home—“conceived as an inviolable private domain, to be defended from the strange world outside”—as well as an open air ground called Mnazi Moja, which served as a “cordon sanitaire” between African districts and those where Europeans and Asians lived (“The Pleasures of Knowing” 44).

Extending the metaphorical discussion of *Uhuru Street*, scholars have pointed out how domestic space becomes larger-than-life in the imagination of the Indian diasporic community. In other words, the “hearth” is accorded symbolic significance seemingly out of proportion to its intrinsic value; so too does the female form. In *Uhuru Street* the kitchen and the woman—often depicted as complementary motifs—represent a cultural purity whose “transgression” represents the “cardinal threat” to sustenance of

¹⁴⁶ Dar es Salaam and Nairobi—cities in two different countries, and inhabited by communities with no similarity in points of origin—demonstrate similar experiences vis-à-vis space and land rights.

¹⁴⁷ The interpretation of *Uhuru Street* as interested in ideas of light and dark has also been discussed in relation to Vassanji's depiction of “darkness” in ominous terms, and usually in reference to “African beggars, criminals, mystics and lunatics” (“The Pleasures of Knowing” 52). Dan Ojwang reads the darkness in a number of ways including: a depiction of Africa as “ready for cultural enlightenment,” or as a region that “resists all such attempts to illuminate it” (52). Alternatively, light and darkness helps the text “provide a [sharper] contrast between an alleged African aggression and Indian victimhood” (“The Pleasures of Knowing” 53).

“Indianness” in Dar es Salaam (“The Pleasures of Knowing” 44).¹⁴⁸ Commenting on this tension surrounding the female figure in Vassanji’s text, Stephanie Jones argues that the author betrays “reluctance” towards the “brutal reduction of the woman to a public symbol and symbolic sacrifice of the Asian community” (178; 180). For example, in the stories “Ali” and “Breaking Loose,” the decision against young Indian women marrying black men is made by the mother—suggesting a sustained communal barrier against interracial forms of love (Jones 179). Because of this prejudice by the Indian diaspora against members of its own community, Dan Ojwang argues that the typical Vassanji hero has much psychological angst against both himself and his ethnic group. His description, keyed in as it is on the issues of social acceptance and emotional security, is worth reproducing in full. Vassanji’s hero is:

the man who embarks on a humanist, cosmopolitan quest for an existence much more expansive than his own narrow upbringing in traditional surroundings. By straying from rigid definitions of identity that obtain in such contexts, he hopes to join a wider community of human beings who would act as a recompense for his loss. Invariably, he is rebuffed by the others he seeks to join through such a renunciation. He is thus forced back into the familiar surroundings that he had earlier abandoned. Nonetheless, this return to his group, and the belated acceptance of the demands of kinship, does not really resolve the restlessness that inspired his exilic quest in the first place. His skepticism about the demands of the group are only muted by his fear of the out-group, and his loathing of the demands of kinship therefore remains shallowly buried beneath his calm exterior. (“Exile & Estrangement” 540)

As the critic notes, the Indian diaspora in Vassanji’s work is steeped in “narrow” definitions of self, gender, and community. It is no surprise then that forward-thinking

¹⁴⁸ Discussing another of Vassanji’s text, *The Gunny Sack*, Ojwang notes that for the Indian diaspora young women are “charged with the responsibility of guarding the shame of” their parents; they are “vigorously defended” and continuously viewed as “war potential war booty” in the black-brown struggle for supremacy (57; 58). On the other hand, “African women, and the whole African world, are seen ... as sexually licentious” and available for the men to “enjoy,” or “possess” (“The Pleasures of Knowing” 57).

members of such groups repeatedly find themselves on the margins and inevitably leave the herd in order to form a new family. Tragically however, their own upbringing—as well as the national spaces from which they emerge—makes it difficult to find common ground with individuals outside their cultural spheres. Consequently, it is with “deep nostalgia” that the hero/ine returns to Uhuru Street—only to discover that after their global peregrinations, the space is now too “small and dirty” for their comfort (Obradovic 328).

V: Transgression & Performance as Commentary on Land Rights

In Vassanji’s *Uhuru Street*, as in Macgoye’s text, readers encounter moments of transgression that aid characters to assert their claims to certain spaces. This is especially so because of Vassanji’s interest in the plight of the Indian diaspora—a community at once too black and not black enough in East African (post)colonial history. That Dar es Salaam’s Indians are foreign to the city gets repeated attention in *Uhuru Street*. There are certain locations in the city, and on Uhuru Street in particular, where they are unwelcome. In response to this socially-sanctioned exclusion, members of this group constantly venture into and trespass invisible yet taut social barriers. Mnazi Moja grounds are one such space. Though “quite lively” during the day, and occasionally festive—for example during Eid or football matches—Mnazi Moja also had the potential to be ominous; as the narrator in “The Sounds of the Night” points out, during the early hours of dawn “an oppressive and sinister darkness lay over it. The ground at our feet dropped off into blackness at every step, soft breezes like cold fingers of evil brushed past our cheeks” (Vassanji 68). Evidently, there is “evil” lurking at Mnazi Moja and it is

associated with that which is black/dark. Unsurprisingly, in “The Beggar,” a homeless African revels in the memory of how in his youth he bullied Indian men “walking home nervously across Mnazi Moja Grounds” (Vassanji 31). The nervous men are reacting to their transgression of the unspoken racial barrier which vetoes Indian presence on Mnazi Moja. As the characters’ emotional tension displays, Mnazi Moja is not a space amenable to claims of land rights via trespass. This moment of transgression is unsuccessful given the many pitfalls Indian subjects risk in the undertaking. What is significant, however, is that both Africans and the Indian diaspora read the act of transgression in the same way and acknowledge its significance in asserting an Indian presence in Dar es Salaam. In fact, it can be argued that the very possibility such forms of resistance might succeed is the cause of the (African and Indian) unease we see represented here.

Equally illegible is African presence in Dar es Salaam as a colonial city. Their existence in the urban area, in the face of colonial regulations that demand all unemployed Africans head back home to the reserve, is fraught with danger. *Uhuru Street* describes how:

at regular intervals green government trucks suddenly appeared in the main streets at night and a general chase ensued, policemen jumping out and checking African pedestrians for their cards. Those who couldn’t produce them were carted off to the police station, and if not claimed by their employers the following day were sent off to their villages. (Vassanji 30)

It is clear in this story that black bodies in urban Tanzania are under constant scrutiny from the British government. Moreover, these Africans are only permitted to live in the city as long they are gainfully employed, lacking which they should hastily depart. The use of identity cards, rather than underline the characters’ claim to Tanzanian citizenship,

actually makes them more vulnerable: without them they can be forcibly relocated. In this general melee, Uhuru Street becomes a stage where oppressor and oppressed play a game of hide-and-seek with the latter group hoping to evade capture. Within this binary, Indian-Tanzanians are simultaneously cast as colonizer and colonized; they occupy a middling ground that is threatened from both sides. Vassanji depicts a power differential in which the presence of one group in a space they should not visit is reconciled through the handover of some token—money in the case of the beggar who accosts Indians on Mnazi Moja, and ID cards in the case of government soldiers chasing after African workers. Furthermore, that such campaigns occur at night, under the cover of darkness, adds to the threatening aura that all things dark/black hold for the city's Indian diaspora. Hence, the diasporan community operates under siege conditions; the Indianized Uhuru Street is the refuge from which Asians alternately engage in—or retreat from—the larger urban land struggle.

When the narrator in “Leaving” and his family move from Uhuru Street to a different part of Dar, it is implied that this household has strayed far from its comfort zone, surrounded by other Indians, in Uhuru Street. The narrator's description of the new district, Upanga, is filled with apprehension:

After the bustle of Uhuru Street, our new neighbourhood seemed quiet. Instead of the racket of buses, bicycles and cars on the road, we now heard the croaking of frogs and chirping of insects. Nights were haunting, lonely and desolate and took some getting used to. Upanga Road emptied after seven in the evening and the sidestreets became pitch dark, with no illumination. Much of the area was as yet uninhabited and behind the housing development there were overgrown bushes, large, scary baobab trees, and mango and coconut groves. (Vassanji 71)

This relocation of the domestic sphere from Uhuru Street to Upanga comes at a great cost. The continued threat that darkness portends is palpable in the loneliness and desolation of the nights in Upanga. While the nocturnal activities registered by transport infrastructure—public transit and bikes—demonstrate the presence of culture, frogs croaking and insects chirping point to culture’s absence. The flora, too, is disturbing—ergo the “overgrown bushes,” and the “large, scary baobab trees.” The illumination produced by motor vehicles is contrasted to the dense darkness of the shrubs and thickets, just as that which is African (nature) is opposed to that which is Indian (culture). This description of Dar es Salaam’s peri-urban region indicates that there exist more absolute racial hierarchies in rural settings. The mixing and contestation that accompanies cultural transgression in urban areas is wholly lacking in the countryside; in this regard, Vassanji raises an argument quite similar to Macgoye’s in the latter’s depiction of Nairobi’s Cross Street.

In the text’s contemporary, because space outside the home’s threshold is so fraught with danger—as evidenced by the Indian men who have to “cough up their coins” as they cross Mnazi Moja—the interior spaces of the house gain extreme import in upholding the Indian diaspora’s sense of self. This is especially so for the men, even the younger ones, whose weakness outside the home is compensated for by autocracy within. Male members of this community have learnt to exercise their control of any interior spaces they occupy, and we get a good example of this in “For a Shilling.” In this vignette, the narrator presents us with Ahmed, a teenage boy who is not only “strong,” but also “a bully, a fighter, [and] a loafer” (Vassanji 38). Furthermore, Ahmed is not afraid to use his physique to terrorize others. “The staircase was his domain. He would sit

sideways on a step near the bottom, his feet stretched across it, daring you to jump over. Sliding down a balustrade he would call out names (Vassanji 38). Ahmed—depicted as a menacing figure—has a personality whose presence none of the other characters can ignore. Moreover, he is adept at staking his claim to various spaces within the community, even if this occasionally means ousting other members of the Indian diaspora. This, then, is an apt example of friction within the close-knit Indian diaspora that nevertheless introduces itself to outsiders as much more cohesive.

There are times when interior spaces can be just as ominous as those outside the home, and in this case, the female body becomes a symbol on which to re-inscribe male dominance. We get a sense of how dangerous the domestic scene can be when Ahmed invites the narrator into his house. The first person narrator notes that he followed Ahmed:

into the cave that was their flat. I had never been behind those doors before and I did so then with some trepidation. I looked behind me nervously as I entered. Inside, it was strangely quiet, and dark. The windows there, except for one or two of them, were always kept closed. Some of them boarded up with boxtops and plywood. The curtains were drawn that afternoon and light was barely visible through them. (Vassanji 41)

It seems as though in this particular incident, the lurking danger that has been pursuing Vassanji's Indian diaspora from Mnazi Moja through to Uhuru Street and the Upanga quarters has finally found its way home. This evil, as it is referred to elsewhere, is represented by the darkness in Ahmed's apartment. It elicits the same nervous reaction displayed by Indian men paying their way across Mnazi Moja. This gloomy interior signifies the intrusion of the outside world into the inner sanctum of Vassanji's Indian community. As a result, it is vital that the two young boys, as representatives of future

generations of male household heads, identify an appropriate alternative on which they may exercise their right to rule: the female body.

Ahmed's sister provides the two boys with a substitute space on which they may lay claim and possess. The homo-social bond between the two boys holds stronger than the blood ties between Ahmed and his sister and he willingly offers her up to the narrator. In fact, Ahmed organizes the terms under which this symbolic possession will take place. It is Ahmed who elicits a shilling out of the narrator in exchange for the spectacle of his sister's body, and it is he who leads the narrator through to the sister's bed, and asks that she cooperate. The narrator describes what she did:

She gave a grunt of annoyance and drew back her legs, bending them at the knees. He let her dress slip back and parted her legs further. Then he lighted a match and handed it to me. Shadows moved on the walls as he did so ... I moved in with the flame. The darkness between her legs had disappeared to reveal fleshly brown thighs and a panty-less crotch covered lightly with a black fuzz. On her face was an anxious look – wild eyes, open-mouthed. (Vassanji 41-42)

On the young girl's body, the Indian diaspora has finally been able to chase off the haunting presence of Africa, and the African. It is on the female body that the symbolic battle between African and Indian—light versus darkness—is won. The role of the woman in this struggle is merely to provide a stage for the actions to take place, apart from which she is expected to stay silent—evidenced by the gaping mouth Ahmed's sister offers her brother and the narrator. In both gestures, the open mouth and the open legs, Indian women are depicted as unable to fend off invasion and/or penetration, perhaps suggesting that the Indian male's presence will always be necessary to provide protection. In "What Good Times we Had" we get justification for this male security. The author ends this story of an Indian woman seeking to bribe an African government

official so she can purchase a plane ticket for her emigration to Canada with her murder. She is found “three days later, naked and abused, hanging by her feet from a tree branch. Her head was in the dirt, and her black hair, now caked with dust, spread out from it in a circle” (Vassanji 95). This homicide seems to justify why male members of the Indian diaspora should exercise absolute control over their female counterparts; it seeks to reaffirm the ominous threat of darkness by demonstrating the danger black/dark elements can wield. In these two vignettes, Vassanji upholds a race/gender hierarchy whereby brown triumphs over black, just as male conquers female. In the power contest between black and Indian men, the female Indian body is disputed territory—war booty available to whoever emerges victorious. The absence of scenes that counter this binary suggests that the collection of short stories implicitly consents to this misogyny. Conversely, Tanzanian land—read metaphorically as Mother Africa—is the site for black vs. Indian male struggles for supremacy. Answers to crucial questions about belonging—who is Tanzanian? Who is African? Who is an outsider?—dictate which men get to allegorically copulate with Africa’s (female) body and be productive. It is worth noting that the incestuous sexual violence indicates the dangers of insularity, balancing the murder of the Indian woman by a black official which cautions against cultural amalgamation. Hence, there are dangers both to mixing, and not mixing; ultimately, however, female bodies are the violated terrain on which conflicts between men are resolved.

Overall, this incident invites commentary not only on its complementary role to earlier allusions of Indian male dominance over women, the violation of the Indian woman by African males, the defenselessness of the Indian woman, but also on *Uhuru Street’s* metafictional narrative technique. Although Ahmed’s young sister and the

unnamed female murder victim mentioned above seem to form a continuum of female helplessness, Vassanji's short stories also disrupt such a reading. Through two moments of performance, the author suggests that the depiction of women in the Indian diaspora as weak—as they are portrayed by their families and friends—ignores the complexity of their personalities. First, in the events leading up to the murder of the would-be-Canadian émigré, she glanced at the African bureaucrat who would eventually kill her and:

the hatred she saw there she had never seen in a pair of human eyes before. And she thought of all the black men she had presided over almost all her thirty-seven years with scorn. The houseboys, the tailors, the customers, the hawkers, who came with the dawn, subservient, and disappeared into the night. (Vassanji 95)

Because of the unfriendly terms with which this lady has interacted with black men, it is also clear she is by no means simply a victim. By merging class status with race, the text implicitly suggests the woman “deserved” the attack. The victim previously had enough agency to preside over the various forms of black labor that appeared in her Indian suburb at dawn and disappeared with the dusk. Evidently, male assumption that she lacks power is not wholly attuned to the complex ways in which she exercises her identity in the intersection of gender and race. Here, the Indian female body is less an object subject to occupation by either side—black or brown—in a racialized contest, and more an agential participant in that struggle.

I would like to argue that performance emerges as a fundamental tool through which Vassanji's Indian diaspora exerts its claims on Dar es Salaam. There are several examples throughout the text when residents of Uhuru Street perform their interest in spaces—interior and exterior, private and public. Such moments invite the reader to re-examine the nature of *Uhuru Street*, especially its connection to the socio-political milieu

from which it emerges. Ahmed's younger sibling offers one such example of performativity. More importantly, she exerts her own claims regarding public space in a way that challenges her other depiction as a helpless body on which masculinity—Indian or otherwise—may write its authority. The narrator in “For a Shilling” notes how:

She swept in through the doorway, trailed by her two youngest siblings, making emphatic gestures with her fat arms, thumping along from wall to wall, glaring at us. Then she came and stood in front of me, arms akimbo, eyes fiery. The message was clear: this was her territory. (Vassanji 38)

It is important that the author describes the incident in the language of land occupation; both “trails” and “territory” suggest and allude to the register with which African spaces were discussed half a century prior during Europe's Scramble for Africa.¹⁴⁹ Ultimately, these domestic scenes, and the gender conflicts enacted therein, demonstrate how conflicts for space—the need to inhabit, practice mobility, and belong—unroll in public and private spaces. Vassanji's work not only suggests that a comprehensive look at African land rights must include an appreciation of inhabitation and mobility, but that we should also consider, as fiction does, both private and public spaces as political terrains where power conflicts are repeatedly played out. There exists a continuum of female disempowerment not just in domestic spaces, but also in the streets and the market place.

¹⁴⁹ Another moment when a character seems to stand in for the European settler occurs in a classroom setting. In this case, an English teacher who is also described as an Anglophile, Christian Goan, whose “mission in school was to civilize” brings order to an otherwise chaotic space (Vassanji 60). The narrator in “English Lessons” describes Mr. Stuart's arrival at which point “conversations broke in midsentence, yells got stifled, and chairs rocking on hind legs landed firmly on all fours. A few stray characters quietly slipped back into their chairs and the remaining titters and murmurs from the less controllable quarters in the back rows finally petered out” (Vassanji 57). Once again, the author alludes to the manner in which the colonial state is capable of establishing order in spaces where it is absent. Mr. Stuart's *mission civilatrice* seems to succeed only momentarily and one can imagine the fervor of activity that will descend in this class as soon as he exits. Perhaps this is not surprising, given the jungle-like nature of the class with its “yells” and allusion of things going “on all fours.” The author's commentary on colonial education in this passage is disparaging at best, and suggests that its effects are merely fleeting.

Vassanji demonstrates the Indian vs. African struggles for supremacy in his depictions of a public auction on Uhuru Street. The writer deploys narrative techniques that privilege the visual aspects of the city as well as his characters' capacity to perform their multiple identities on the streets, and sidewalks, of Dar es Salaam. In this way, the text comments on issues of race, public space, and ultimately, land rights. In describing the Mnada—Swahili word for auction—the narrator in “The Relief from Drill” notes:

It was a square bustling with activity, uproarious with catcalls and jeers and bargains being struck, festooned with brightly-coloured cloth and lit up in the night with the yellow light of kerosene lamps. It was packed in on three sides by rows of mud houses and accessible on the fourth by a short alley. (Vassanji 43)

Mnada is the stage *par excellence*: not only because of its “uproarious catcalls and jeers” but also due to its “brightly-coloured cloth” and being “lit up” at night by numerous kerosene lamps. Such a description seems equally befitting the space for a theatrical production. Readers get a clear sense of the expanse and beehive activity that takes place at the Mnada; there is evidently a lot of trade going on and high volumes of good and services being exchanged. On the other hand, “catcalls and jeers” suggest ways in which female bodies are on display—if not explicitly on sale—in Dar’s commercial spaces. Vassanji suggests a reversal of the kinds of agency Ahmed’s sister was striving for in the domestic sphere. By mentioning that “the Mnada was not a respectable place to shop in because of the type of people believed to hang around there – jobless Africans from the districts, and thieves”—the narrator betrays prejudice against the auction space (Vassanji 44). The Mnada’s association with Africans, and its location in the poor part of the city, both make it a dubious site to shop; for the Indian diaspora that does venture out here, there is a performativity to which they must be attuned, least of all being the capacity to

bargain and haggle prices down. Such acts of trespass must also take caution in “missing potholes, avoiding banana and orange peels and other rubbish, [and] giving right of way to carts of fruit and other wares pulled by men with impatient voices and straining backs” (Vassanji 43). While the Indian diaspora seeks to assert its presence on a land that is decidedly African—and that has yet to welcome its South Asian “Other”—indigenous Tanzanians are preoccupied in their attempts at legal residence in a colonial city that magnifies their business activities in the hopes of uncovering presumed theft and other forms of crime. Moreover, the African cast has to negotiate their racial classification and newly-found “Otherness” in relation to the colonial settler. All these, as the vista above notes, make for a cacophony of sounds and sights, during which routines are imagined, rehearsed, performed, and perhaps duplicated, modified, or discarded. And to be sure, these processes take place at a dizzying speed as *characters* try on novel masks, roles, and identities.

I would like to end my discussion of *Uhuru Street* with a discussion of the *back stage* area that M. G. Vassanji offers his readers. Like all theatrical stages, Vassanji’s also has a backdrop: Uhuru Street. This emerges as the border within which the Indian diaspora’s novel urban experiences are played out. Uhuru Street serves to demarcate not only the *safe zones* in Dar es Salaam, but also the *cultured* areas. Outside of the protective cordon laid out by Uhuru Street the Indian diaspora is nothing—either because of the ominous black/dark presence that haunts the entire text, or due to lack of common cultural currency with which characters may establish their worth. In the midst of the diaspora’s “outsider” status and general disenfranchisement in Dar es Salaam, Uhuru Street is a space the community can claim ownership to. Furthermore, the space becomes

a pilgrim's path for those who emigrate momentarily to Europe and North America; when they return, it is almost with religious reverence that they re-visit the same streets they once walked before.

It is easy to see how Uhuru Street becomes larger than life in the minds of those who frequent it. The space functions as shorthand for multiple cultural exchanges, each of which has the potential to undermine earlier forms of self-identification. This famous street is described thus:

The acacia-lined avenue cut a thin margin at the edge of town, it looked out at the ocean a short block away, black and rust red steamers just visible plying in and out of the harbor. Behind it was crammed the old town, a maze of short dirty sidestreets feeding into the long and busy Uhuru Street, which then opened like a funnel back into the avenue. From here Uhuru Street went down, past downtown and the Mnazi moja grounds into the interior: the hinterland of squat African settlements, the mainroad Indian stores, the Arab corner stores – in which we contemptuously sniffed, suppressing a vague knowledge of our recent roots there. (Vassanji 104)

Even as Uhuru Street seeks to mark the margins and edges past which certain elements of Dar es Salaam should not creep, it also brings together a cultural plurality steeped in African, Arab, and Indian influences. Additionally, there is the sense that a global “out there” exists, as indicated by the steamers moving to and fro the harbor. Each of these seafaring vessels holds its own unique addition to the cultural space that is Uhuru Street, further complicating the simultaneous policing of boundaries and inevitable mixing that ensues. Mention of the “ocean,” the “old town,” and “recent roots,” however, points towards a history that citizens of Dar es Salaam may wish to forget. In the same way that the Indian diaspora in East Africa has been accused of conniving with the European colonial project, the Arab diaspora has been accused of benefiting from the sale of African bodies in the slave trade. The old Arab towns in cities like Mombasa, Malindi,

Dar es Salaam, and Lamu hold much of this history which, understandably, many of the residents attempt to wish away. The vibrant “black” and “rust red” colors in the horizon, however, suggest that this will not be so. The blood spilt at such spots as Bwagamoyo in Tanzania—the loading harbor for slaves captured in the Tanzania/Congo hinterland—seems to re-emerge. So too do the black bodies to whom this blood belonged. Selective suppression of memory and the past will not succeed here, Vassanji seems to suggest; rather, residents should be prepared to make inroads—as deep as Uhuru Street itself—into this city’s past. And in the process, the city’s residents must re-evaluate what each community has contributed to Dar’s cultural soup. The narrator’s walk down Uhuru Street, past downtown and into the interior, sounds like a rehearsal of the cultural catalogue that such historiographic projects of Dar es Salaam will uncover.

As the global socio-political scene morphs, Uhuru Street is now assaulted by new influences. This time round cultural importation comes in the guise of returning students, on holiday from various European capitals. These youngsters—eager to distance themselves from the provinciality of Dar es Salaam and their parents, in favor of the metropolitan’s elegance—bring with them cosmopolitan values they then proceed to show off. From Vassanji, the reader receives a heady mixture of the urbane in the guise of performativity and a photograph in words:

We still went back for holidays then and we formed a rambunctious group whose presence was hard to miss about town. We were the London-Returned. For two or three joyously carefree months the city became a stage for us and we would strut up and down its dusty pavements parading overseas fashions ... We sported flashy bell-bottoms, Oxford shirts and bright summer dresses. And fat pinkish-brown thighs below the colourful mini-skirts of our female companions teased the famished adolescent eyes of our hometown. Come Saturday morning, we would gather at a prearranged rendezvous and conscious of every eye upon us, set off in one

large and rowdy group towards Independence Avenue. There to stroll along its pavements a few times over, amidst fun and laughter, exchanging jokes and relating incidences in clipped, finished accents. (Vassanji 104)

In the bell-bottomed and mini-skirted teenagers we meet the cast that performs in front of the acacia-lined back drop discussed previously. *Uhuru Street* notes that the students consciously came “to watch and to be seen,” and armed with this knowledge, the youngsters promenade about town intent on catching other people’s attention (Vassanji 105). That the students are on display, especially to show off their tastes in fashion, is highly reminiscent of capitalist consumption, in line with the metropolitan ethos they have picked up. Indeed, in storefronts along Independence Avenue “imported goods were displayed in all their glory” (Vassanji 105). What is more, the students’ audience is jealous of their outfits as well as their diction, two attributes of their style that set them apart from those who have yet to taste the cultural sweetness of the mother colony. The imagined value of visiting London enables these Indian-Tanzanians to occupy, inhabit, and perform in spaces that would previously have been more or less off-limits. These *been-to*’s are on Uhuru Street precisely to act out their newly-found metropolitan identities and they successfully do so by calling to bear cultural capital acquired from brief sojourns in Europe.¹⁵⁰ This form of traversing city space—unlike that practiced by Paulina in *Coming to Birth*—is not merely about claiming belonging in the (post)colonial city; it is also about asserting privilege to mobility beyond the space of the city and postcolonial nation-state.

¹⁵⁰ Paradoxically, of course, the students’ journeys to and fro Europe simultaneously mark them as “less” African. For one, their performance hinges on the rural-urban contrast. It seeks to echo the idea that rural spaces, unlike towns and cities, have little or next to nothing in terms of culture. Rather, it is urban areas where one can view communities expressing their creativity, be it in commerce, fashion, speech, weekend leisure, etc. Underlying this supposition is the idea that the African generally occupies the countryside, while the diasporic Indian reigns supreme in the cities.

Uhuru Street ends by depicting assertions of Indian claims to space in African cities as momentarily triumphant; however, we are left with no doubt that the struggle for supremacy between the two communities will continue. As I have shown throughout this chapter, Vassanji's text depicts much unease over the spatial transgression of Indian or African characters in various parts of Dar es Salaam. In addition, I've demonstrated how (young) men in Tanzania's Indian diaspora hyper-focus on the interior domestic space as well as on the female body in attempts to compensate for their own disenfranchisement outside the home.¹⁵¹ However, as both Ahmed's younger sister and the unnamed lady en-route to Canada demonstrate, masculinity's desire to dominate the female subject is often frustrated. Women repeatedly enact their identity—especially in the intersection between race and gender—in ways that problematize a simplistic characterization of female victimhood. Finally, I've examined how both *Coming to Birth* and *Uhuru Street* deploy the use of performance and verbal pictures to discuss land rights and claims to space in terms of trespassing and transgression. Both writers privilege an understanding of urban land rights that has much to do with belonging as well as the practice of mobility. One key difference between Macgoye's and Vassanji's texts, however, is the latter's interest in diaspora and the practice of transnational mobility. In the next chapter—which concludes my project—I'll offer a reading of David Adjaye's photographic representation of African urban areas. The four chapters that make up this dissertation have demonstrated the importance of gender in postcolonial discussions of African land rights as well as power contests that cities engender. As a result, my examination of Adjaye's

¹⁵¹ However, as suggested by the experiences of Indian students vacationing in Dar es Salaam from London, the politics of representation and acceptance outside the home are more complicated.

work will not only be concerned with female agency, but will also serve to demonstrate a novel direction that future studies of the African (literary and visual) canon may pursue.

Conclusion

Thus far, “Writing on the Soil: Literature’s Influence on African Land Rights” has pursued debates regarding African lands from a variety of platforms, including but not limited to African gender studies as well as African visual studies. In regards to the former, I began with Ngugi’s fiction, examining the manner in which his aesthetic preferences have shifted over the course of a career spanning several decades. Gender concerns form a significant segment of work by Grace Ogot, Margaret Ogola, Ebrahim Hussein, Monica Arac de Nyeko, Marjorie Macgoye, and Moyez Vassanji. The corporeal, and its implications for gender norms, is multiply explored by all writers included in this study. In addition, social norms regulating masculinity or femininity come under close scrutiny. On the other hand, I’ve made the visual studies approach a primary mode of reading texts, textual or otherwise. The colonial archive that comprises one segment of the documents I read in the first chapter enabled an assessment of archives—bodies of knowledge that have been deliberately constructed in order to reproduce certain forms of knowledge. That archives are as indicative for what they contain as for what they *omit* is an idea potent enough to validate repetition in this last segment of my project.

I’d like to sum up “Writing on the Soil” by bringing to bear the theoretical frameworks I’ve deployed so far. Discussing photography, I bring the entire monograph full circle, concluding—like I started off—with an analysis of visual texts. My target is David Adjaye’s collection of photographs, published in seven volumes under the title *African Metropolitan Architecture* (2011). Adjaye, a Ghanaian architect who grew up in Tanzania and Britain, offers his readers an ambitious survey of infrastructure as it has

been constructed, preserved, or neglected in the continent's capital cities. Adjaye trains his camera on the urban landscape to capture details on the use and control of space, location of public and private institutions, as well as the division between the two. As Ebrahim Hussein, Sony Labou Tansi, and Monica Arac de Nyeko have demonstrated, hegemonic aspirations are not a colonial monopoly; contemporary African nation-states offer multiple examples of social groups that seek supremacy over all others.

Conservative masculinity attempts to control female bodies, while nationalism silences opposition to dominant stories of belonging. Misogyny and nationalism both appropriate several mechanisms of subjugation from past colonial administrations; for instance, they both invest in a visual economy to disseminate, and make more palatable, their message.

I would like to first read the "creation of control" in David Adjaye's photographs of Nairobi, especially the series he titles "Civic." The photographs in Adjaye's *African Metropolitan Architecture* invoke "vernacular" modes of artistic production; moreover, the accompanying parataxis: critical essays, maps, facts and figures on the population of each city as well as a short summary describing the "essence" of each metropolis help the reader to engage each location in multiple ways. In each image, the viewer can discern Adjaye's careful choices regarding camera angle, direction, composition, framing, focus, depth of field etc. to conclude that his thoughts and aesthetic expectations permeate the work (Walden 7). Adjaye is invested in re-imagining, and re-imaging, Africa. His work enables us to adopt a "new way of seeing" the continent; one that does not merely focus on the production of images that fuel the twenty four news cycle (Walton 21). Adjaye invites his audience to experience Africa as part of the modern world, not apart from it. Adopting a realist approach, Adjaye's body of work is interested in "what exists in front

of the camera” (Savedoff 116). It is as if his images are proof of the Africa he seeks to display to his readers. Nonetheless, his photos are far from touristy; he does not seek to consume Africa, merely to explore its diversity. Urban Africa is treated in one of two ways by global visual culture: it is either exorcised for its pathology—for instance the proliferation of images which highlight shanties and informal structures in Kibera, Soweto, Lagos, or Cairo—or it is wholly shunned in favor of a more “real” Africa—this includes rural landscapes, wildlife, and geographic features. Adjaye’s text contains neither of these. Even when he includes images from Kibera or informal settlements in Addis Ababa, he problematizes the “supposed objectivity [and] the illusion of reality and factuality” that journalistic photography purports (Vogl 2). The veil of objectivity that surrounds image production regarding Africa is a major reason why the recycling of prejudice has been so successful. Viewers often forget that “the manner in which a subject is presented in a photograph is almost always to be referred to a choice on the part of the photographer who is showing us the scene from this perspective for a reason” (Davies 178). Instead, visual texts are read for “truth” they communicate. As David Davies suggests, a more productive encounter with such texts would take into account the photographer’s aesthetic choices as well as visual techniques and their effect on the photo’s message. Instead Adjaye is interested in “hybridity, impurity, [and] intermingling;” his text explores the “transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs” (Allen 24). *African Metropolitan Architecture* complicates circulation notions of what Africa is, or is not, by providing counter narratives regarding urbanization and contemporary negotiations regarding space. As suggested by Sarah Nutall and Achille Mbembe, Adjaye

in regarding to the African modern innovative research should work “with new archives—or even with old archives in new ways;” the African metropolis is one such archive which could greatly benefit from a re-evaluative look (Mbembe and Nutall 9).

The mausoleum dedicated to Kenya’s first president, Mzee Jomo Kenyatta, is part of Adjaye’s observation of Nairobi and his artistic rendering of the structure offers much to a deeper understanding of state control. After Kenyan independence in 1963, political elites re-deployed British propaganda about Kikuyu politics to justify a kleptocratic form of government. Kenyatta ruled through a small clique of Kikuyu followers effectively setting up a clientele mode of leadership. Kenyatta’s 1978 death was an occasion to re-affirm the dominance of Kikuyu political elites—supremacy not only over poorer members of the community, but also ethnic chauvinism vis-à-vis other ethnicities. Adjaye positions the camera such that the flag poles lining a path leading up to the mausoleum seem to be *actually* planted in the structure itself. First, this gives an impression that the flag—as a symbol of the Kenyan nation—is growing out of the body of the first president. The rise of a nation is linked to one individual rather than to all the women and men whose labor has contributed to the country’s socio-economic wellbeing. Obviously, this “big man” theory of a nation’s history is dangerous; it encourages the deletion of such stories as women’s involvement in Mau Mau anti-British campaigns.¹⁵²

Secondly, since the flag poles tower over the government buildings in the photo’s background, the actual chain of command in the administration is not immediately clear. Did the president’s personal style of leadership override democratic institutions? Or did the people have the power to demand accountability from Kenyatta’s administration?

¹⁵² Muthoni Likimani and Wambui Otieno have written to educate Kenyan masses on the forgotten narrative of women’s anti-colonial struggles.

Recalling that the Kenyatta regime ruled through a political circle riddled with patronage, Adjaye's sense of proportion seems particularly apt. Finally, Adjaye frames the shot to include a well-manicured fence and thick-barred iron-gate. Clearly, the mausoleum is not open to intrusion by Nairobi's pedestrian population. The mausoleum, as a representation of political hegemony, is closed to all but a select group of individuals. In a similar manner, Kenya's halls of power are barred shut to keep out those not from the "right" class or ethnic group. Even as the closed entry, on the surface, protects the public monument from desecration, it also serves a secondary purpose; underneath, it polices entry into Kenya's ruling circle.

Jomo Kenyatta's mausoleum marked the end of an era and the advent of another. Daniel Arap Moi's succession to the presidency changed one key aspect of Kenyan politics: State House was now associated with the power of the Kalenjin community. Other than that, the clientele state set up by Kenyatta and his ministers stayed intact; accordingly, the monument was titled "Nyayo monument" from the Kiswahili phrase "Fuata Nyayo" which means "to follow in the footsteps of," in this case, Kenyatta—Moi's publicly declared intent. Parallel sentiments to demonstrate the economic and political supremacy of Kalenjin elites also emerged and Moi's ruling circle moved to construct a national monument crowning their rise to power. Adjaye includes a photo of the Nyayo monument in his collection. It is a 2inch by 3inch color photograph appearing alongside several others to form a montage. The Nyayo monument appears in the middle ground of the picture, the foreground occupied by an unkempt fence, and the background by commercial buildings. The monument itself is located at Uhuru Park, a public recreational space popular with Nairobi employees on their lunch break, peddlers who

trade food and street preachers. The hedge in this particular photograph is one of the stark contrasts when compared to that depicting Kenyatta's mausoleum. Though the reader cannot fully make out the details, the barbed wire seems loose and unable to keep out pedestrians. This intrusion of Nairobi's populace onto the monument is visually chronicled many times a day as rural visitors pose in front of, or even on top of the monument, to commemorate their visit to the city.

The symbolism in such gestures is almost fated when read against the former president's recent experiences. Moi, and at least one of his sons, have been dragged to court for charges ranging from land grabbing to failure to pay child alimony. While neither legal proceeding has been successful, the one against Moi's son in relation to child support resulted in a warrant of arrest. The legal immunity, and impunity, that Moi's family enjoyed during his regime is long gone. His use of state infrastructure to enable control over his wealth, and protection for his heirs has ceased. It has been replaced, instead, by unprecedented intrusions into his "peaceful retirement." The broken fence surrounding the Nyayo monument is an appropriate representation of Moi's inability to keep at bay an electorate that is out to seek justice for past wrongs done.

Adjaye's artistic technique distances and shields both monuments from closer scrutiny. The reader cannot make out intricate detail about either monument, lending both structures an ominous sense. However, the fact that the Nyayo monument is dwarfed by commercial buildings in the background suggests that Adjaye is disarming the propaganda material and subverting its full persuasive potential. In addition, both photographs are grainy—taken perhaps by a small digital point-and-shoot. As a result, the shiny finish of each mausoleum is lost to the reader, once more reducing the structures'

capacity to impress and inspire awe. Adjaye's decision to place multiple photographs side by side and present them as a montage is very effective in representing the hectic nature of Nairobi's landscape. Even as public monuments battle to catch the reader's, and the pedestrian's, attention numerous other activities and sights make it difficult for a viewer to focus for too long on the political propaganda. The photomontage successfully gives a feeling that Nairobi is a constantly evolving space and that even the state's attempts at control have to compete with other aspects of city life: fashion, religion, commerce, education, leisure etc. Finally, none of the photos that Adjaye includes have any identification material; there are neither dates nor pictures accompanying any particular photo. Other than the category titles, Adjaye's work is seemingly addressed to an audience that is *already* familiar with the objects and structures represented. This is hard to reconcile with the fact that the seven volume collection costs about \$100, two or three times what some of the pedestrians who feature in Adjaye's street photos of Nairobi make in a month. One additional challenge that the lack of temporal information poses is that readers cannot gauge the rate of change that Nairobi's spaces have undergone. This is especially crucial in regards to the erection of public monuments. Since 2008, one key monument has been installed in Nairobi: that of slain politician Tom Mboya. Mboya was assassinated in broad day light in 1969; he was from the Luo community and the 2011 installation of such a statue seemingly had a lot to do with the state's desire to provide an inclusive story of national belonging.

Ultimately, concerns raised by the writers who feature in the main chapters of this project still stand. There is a dearth of public recognition for female leaders; so far, not even Kenya's only Nobel Prize winner, Wangari Maathai, has been honored. This

suggests that apprehensions by Ngugi, Ogot, and Macgoye are still valid and worth rehearsing. Furthermore, Vassanji's work which seeks to reconcile Tanzanian nationhood with the presence of an Indian diaspora finds valence in Kenya. Nairobi's political and physical landscape—as depicted by Adjaye—offers minimal space for the cultural development of ethnic minorities. In fact, aside from a few streets named after prominent Asian personalities of the early Sixties, there is minimal acknowledgement of the century or more during which Indian migrants have been contributing to the potpourri that is East Africa. “Belonging,” is a social imaginary that still vexes the simplistic narratives repeated over the last few epochs, colonial or otherwise.

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