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Review essay on
"Dialogues on African Literature, Film and Theatre". *LIFT – The Journal of Literature and Performing Arts*, n° 1 (2019). Eldoret: Moi University Press.

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Introductory remarks

In a recent essay "Against collaboration – or the native who wanders off" (2019) literary scholar Grace Musila presents a lucid, Africa-centred critique of the homogenisation of knowledge production in the so-called international academia as a result of the concentration of power and resources in Northern-based institutions. As she writes: "With the knowledge production infrastructure and resources – research funding, research time, mobility, libraries, academic journals, academic book publishers – all heavily skewed in favour of Northern academics; and with Africa-based academics under pressure to publish in so-called international journals, the academy's mono-literacy and preference for largely homogenised modes of thought has created mono-epistemic publishing infrastructures into which African scholars must either fit or perish." (Musila 2019: 3) One recent initiative to counter this trend to academic monoculture and to take ownership of the knowledge produced in the field of African literatures and cultures comes from Musila's *alma mater*, the Department of Literature at Moi University in Western Kenya. In 2019 the editorial team around Tobias Otieno Odongo, Hellen Roselyne Shigali and Peter Simatei launched the first issue of *LIFT – The Journal of Literature and the Performing Arts,* a new journal taking on dialogues on African literature, film and theatre.

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Insights into the history of literary studies in Kenya

The journal opens with "A brief look at the history of literary study in Kenya since 1970" by Peter Amuka (1-8). In his contribution, Amuka examines the history of literary scholarship and criticism in Kenya from the perspective of a witness who, as a former student of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Micere Mugo and a long-standing expert on oral literature at Moi University, has experienced and shaped this history from its very beginnings. As he states, during Ngũgĩ's time as head of the Department of Literature at the University of Nairobi, literary studies were pluralistic, postmodernistic and much more progressive than in the years following Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's and Micere Mugo's exile. Amuka attributes the intellectual backlash and conservatism and the return to the Old British School primarily to Henry Indangasi, who reorganized literary studies in Kenya as head of the department. Amuka's article is a passionate plea for a postmodernism that acknowledges and fosters the plurality of knowledge and cultures and does not place one cultural expression per se above another. He saw this realized in the work of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Micere Mugo, Taban lo Liyong, Henry Owuor-Anyumba and Chris Wanjala, all scholars at the University of Nairobi who significantly shaped literary scholarship and criticism in Kenya. Interesting is also the author's mention of a lost article by Henry Owuor-Anyumba which Amuka had read in the former's office. Owuor-Anyumba was in 1968, together with Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Taban lo Liyong, one of the authors of the famous memorandum "On the abolition of the English department." In it, the three scholars argued for a reorientation of African literary studies that moves languages and literatures of Africa and the Diaspora to the centre. Well-known in the scholarship of African literatures, this memorandum has received fresh attention in recent debates on the decolonization of curricula across the globe. In the lost article mentioned by Amuka, Anyumba argued that each Kenyan cultural group had an oral literary tradition replete with terminologies in indigenous languages and that systematic research and investigation of these would produce an autochthonous literary culture. In Amuka's words: "This would in turn create a corpus of traditions that would imbue the country with a literary and cultural identity and not an imitation of other nations' traditions." (2019: 4) This emancipatory, pluralistic and decolonial approach to African literatures and cultures in Kenyan literary scholarship did not simply disappear with Ngũgĩ's and Micere Mugo's exile, but was, as becomes evident in Amuka's account, systematically eroded.

Amuka uses the "iron curtain" as a metaphor to describe the fundamental conflict between leftist and rightist positions in Kenyan literary and cultural criticism, which shaped debates in the 1970s. One who helped to navigate literary criticism and scholarship in Kenya through these ideological dead ends and to foster a culture of free and creative thinking was the late Chris Lukorito Wanjala, Professor at the University of Nairobi, who sadly passed away in 2018 and to whom this first issue of LIFT is dedicated. Amuka's essay is an important piece of academic history and cultural memory work and as such, a significant contribution to come to terms with what Amuka aptly describes as the "cold war" in Kenyan literary criticism and scholarship.

Dialogues on fiction and life writing

Tom Michael Mboya's article titled "'I don't believe anybody will be so unlike other people': irony and anxiety about the Nigerian nation in Chinua Achebe's 'Marriage is a private affair'" (9-18) presents a reading of a short story by Achebe rarely – if ever – critically discussed before. The short story is about an interethnic marriage not approved by the father of the groom. Mboya focusses on irony to reveal the layers of "ironic complications" in how the interethnic cosmopolitan Igbo-Ibibio couple of the story, and Nene, the female protagonist, in particular, navigate the tricky road between "exclusivist ethnicity" and a cosmopolitan citizenship in a pluralistic, multi-ethnic nation-state. I experienced several eye-openers in reading the article, which is, next to a fine discussion of the short story, a subtle discussion of the tension between "ethnic citizenship" and "state citizenship" in the modern African nation-state. First, the paper sympathetically opens up ethnicity in terms of "moral ethnicity", as being less about blood or some anti-modern, exclusivist mentality, but more about factual networks of mutual responsibilities, support and obligations (2019: 15). Second, as Mboya argues, ethnicity cannot adequately be dealt with if solely understood as an "instrument in the hands of manipulative politicians fighting over power and resources" (2019: 15); instead, it is also the "people" who participate in the reproduction of ethnicity, which – as Mboya shows – Achebe subtly captured in this short story. Third, irony helps both to reveal and to ease the tension inherent to interethnic relations and fourth – as Mboya points out with regard to Nene's manoeuvring into acceptance first by the Igbo villagers and ultimately by Nnaemeka's father – that ethnicity – understood as moral ethnicity – and cosmopolitanism do not exclude each other, or, in his words "the idea of cosmopolitanism [she embodies] is not antithetical to that sympathetically presented aspect of ethnicity. It is supportive of all the good things about ethnicity" to the effect that Achebe, through her, is "floating the idea that it is possible to construct a new pan-Nigerian ethnicity." (2019: 17)

One thing I would have liked to know more about is how Nene's gradual winning over of the Igbo ethnic group in Lagos worked practically with regard to language. Language seems key to me in how these competing citizenships are lived and realised. What is the language the couple communicates with each other and with their children? What is the language spoken at the exclusivist Igbo community meetings in Lagos through which Nene, ironically, "make(s) inroads in her quest for acceptance by Nnaemeka's Ibo people" (2019: 16)? If Nene gradually broke through some of the prejudice against her, made friends and gained respect for being recognized as a "good wife and mother but also a good human being" (2019: 16), what was the language in which she became recognized for these? Would the group switch to English with her among them? Did she learn Igbo as a way of entrance? Or, in case she did not, would not this be a factor of continued "not belonging"? What is the language the couple speaks with their children? Could the fear of not being able to speak to his grand-children be part of Okeke's resentments against the marriage? Does Achebe's short story give an idea of how language matters in the "ironic complications" of modern African citizenship and if he does not, what would this mean?

Christopher Odhiambo Joseph in his article "Is the 'post' in postcolonial the 'post' in postpone? A reading of dreams deferred in Peter Kimani's *Before the Rooster Crows*" (19-30) deals with the debut novel by one of Kenya's best-known contemporary writers, whose success came with his second novel *Dance of the Jakaranda* (2017). In his early novel *Before the Rooster Crows*, published in 2002, which has received few critical attention so far compared with his much acclaimed second novel *Dance of the Jakaranda,* Peter Kimani processed the story of a Kenyan female sex-worker, who was murdered by a white American marine in Mombasa in the 1980s. In the subsequent trial presided by a white, expatriate judge, the perpetrator came away with a ridiculously light sentence (2019: 21). Kimani in his fictionalisation of the story makes of the victim a female activist with the symbolically loaded name Mumbi – name of the mythical mother and ancestor of the Agikuyu people – and gives her a boyfriend, Muriuki, with whom she had left their village Gichagi for a better life, and who would later revenge her murder. Kimani's version makes, as Odhiambo shows, of the story a tale of nationalist struggle and betrayal, moving Muriuki to the centre of the narration and "elevating him to the pedestal of a national hero in the popular imagery" (2019: 29). Through his reading of the novel, Odhiambo takes issue with the marginalisation of ordinary village people in narrative and physical spaces, where Kenyan nationhood and modern citizenship is symbolically and materially shaped and affirmed.

The title in its ironical allusion to Kwame Anthony Appiah's question "Is the 'post' in postmodernism the post- in postcolonial?" is original and inspiring. Other than Appiah, however, Odhiambo does not deal with the question he poses nor does he develop and lay out the thoughts that went into the title. I found it hard to follow the author through the philosophical and theoretical framework he develops in reading the novel. He lays out many exciting threads, which, then, are not followed to the end. He repeats his argument instead of opening up and explaining it. After reading the article I feel that I have more questions than answers. There are profound thoughts in the paper – as, for instance, in taking up Kristeva's concept of the abject in order to make visible "abjection as a ritual of the everyday life" (2019: 24) of ordinary Kenyans in the postcolonial state – which would deserve to be more elaborated and developed.

With *The Last Villains of Molo* (2004) by Kinyanjui Kombani, Busolo Wegesa in "Representations of ethnicised violence in Kenya: the case of Kinyanjui Kombani's *The Last Villains of Molo*" (2019: 31-38) discusses the work of another fascinating contemporary Kenyan writer. Kombani's debut novel is considered to be the first novel to deal exclusively with the ethnic clashes that broke out in 1991 in the Rift Valley Province, when Kenya was due to have its first multiparty elections (see Mulli 1999). The novel thus represents an important piece of memory work by addressing and exploring the deeper causes and historical roots of the upheavals that have resurfaced and were even more aggravated in the election clashes of 1997 and 2007/2008. In Wegesa's words: "The novel deals with the reasons for the violence, the most crucial being that it was meant to vindicate the then President's assertion that multiparty politics was untenable in an ethnically diverse society such as Kenya. Kiliku (1992), and the U.S. State Department (1999), among others, report that by the end of the atrocities, between 700 and 1,000 people had been killed and 150,000 to 250,000 people had been rendered homeless. Houses were burnt, livestock killed, infrastructure destroyed, and lives disrupted and/or destroyed, leaving behind a terrified and deeply traumatised populace." (2019: 33) As he also states (2019: 32). "The fact that this novel emerged more than 10 years after the killings, coupled with the very muted reception it has received to date, suggests the existence of the twin notions of amnesia and complicity within the social fabric of Kenya as a nation."

Wegesa places the novel in a literary tradition dedicated to coming to terms with genocidal violence in East Africa, including Gilbert Gatore's *The Past Ahead*, Veronique Tadjo's *Shadow of Imana*, Goretti Kyomuhendo's *Secrets No More* and Tierno Monenembo *The Oldest Orphan*. In the article, the author gives an overview of the reports by human rights organisations and government commissions that investigated the conflicts. By way of completion, I want to mention the National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCK) report *The Cursed Arrow* on the politicised land clashes in Rift Valley, Nyanza and the Western Provinces (1992). In a brief, yet utterly concise paragraph Wegesa describes what he calls the "stylisation of trauma" as the "challenge to the novel form … to put to order something that the actual actors cannot verbalize." (2019: 34) Through discussing the trauma represented in the novel's characters and naming the concrete historical experience behind, Wegesa's article itself is a contribution to remember and to move beyond the potentially explosive pairing of amnesia and complicity. He concludes that "[t]he perspective from which the writer [Kombani, MK] chooses to reconstruct this narration is of significance to the whole project of healing a society. The writer also faces the daunting task of bringing together into one narrative the many discordant and opposed voices and for the work to succeed must move far beyond the creation of stereotypes and scapegoats. Each experience of trauma in each era and society is unique to that space, place and time and for writing to be realistic it must be able to walk the reader through the drama of their life without necessarily creating new antagonisms". I would have been interested to know whether, in Wegesa's opinion, Kombani in his novel succeeds to do so? At one point he suggests that the novel's ending is too romantic and leaves the reader with an unlikely harmony when the haunted protagonists eventually return to rural Molo to rebuild their lives (2019: 34f.) A potentially more complicated literary representation of the trauma of the 1991/1992 violence may be found in Rebeka Njau's novel *The Sacred Seed* (2003), when the protagonist Tesa is haunted by a vision of the atrocities. Njau, however, puts this deeply disturbing recreation of the event clearly in her narrative of the abuse of state power and the corruption and aberrations of the political and economic elite during the Moi regime.

Intersections of ethnic patriarchy and the nation-state patriarchy are at the heart of George Obara Nyandoro's reading of Wangari Maathai's memoir in his article "Resisting ethnic and nation-state patriarchs as an organizing principle in Wangari Maathai's *Unbowed: One Woman's Story"* (2019: 39-50). Until recently, Wangari Maathai has been mainly known as an environmental activist. The recognition of her work as an inspiring public intellectual, author and essayist is an ongoing process. Nyandoro's work is a valuable contribution to this emerging scholarship on Wangari Maathai's intellectual work (as, for instance, Muhonja 2020; Graneß 2018; Presbey 2013).

Nyandoro bases his analysis on two theoretical considerations: first, that every autobiography is based on an organizing principle according to which the writing/narrative self organizes her or his life. In *Unbowed* this principle, the author argues, is how the narrating self resists the limitations of ethnic and nation-state patriarchal ideologies by transcending them and moving towards global citizenship. The second theoretical framework is Judith Butler's theory of the performativity of gender, which Nyandoro uses to explain role expectations and their subversion as reflected in Maathai's text.

I found illuminating how the author uses Maathai's life story to elaborate how "patriarchy sets up women to work against their own power to influence the circulation of public discourses" (2019: 41). Interesting also that Nyandoro rather speaks of "culturalist" and not of "cultural" values and norms in explaining the obstacles Maathai had to overcome in her divorce process, in salary negotiations at the university and other experiences. The author convincingly shows how Maathai – both the narrating and the narrated self – found the resources to expand her influence and her public performance as a gendered person through a cosmopolitan self-image and global networks, while at the same time remaining rooted and re-connecting to supportive local networks. In Nyandoro's words: "By forging a globalised cosmopolitan identity the narrator does not necessarily try to underestimate the importance of national and more local relationships of solidarity. Rather, she demonstrates that local identities such as articulated by ethnicity and race, relevant as they could be, can be transcended when other forms of the self are affirmed especially in the intensely interconnected contemporary world." (2019: 47).

The article could be stronger in defining some of its basic concepts. What is "ethnic patriarchy" and what is "nation-state patriarchy"? What distinguishes them and what makes them complicit in the modern African nation-state? There is a distinct absence of African and more specifically Kenyan feminist scholarship, which would have strengthened the author's analysis. I am thinking here, for instance, of the work of Amina Mama (1997), Mary Njeri Kinyanjui (2019) and Wanjiku Kabira.

Samuel Ndogo's essay on "Self-Determination and Resistance in Adversarial Contexts: A Reading of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary*" (2019: 51-68) focuses on how Ngũgĩ, representative of a whole tradition of political prisoners and especially writers, uses the experience of isolation and imprisonment to reflect on the self in a repressive regime and on the state as it is being reflected in the prison as one of its central institutions. This is a highly relevant issue. I am thinking here also of the extensive prison literature by African-American activists such as Assata Shakur (2001) in the US, or Piper Kerman's memoir *Orange is the New Black* (2011), which inspired the extremely successful Netflix show of the same name, and gives a lucid analysis of social stratification in the US viewed through the prison system. Unfortunately, in Ndogo's essay the "institution", the "state" and the "system" remain rather abstract notions. How did the Kamithi prison look like as a physical space? How are prisons run in Kenya, how do they work? Who peoples them? It would have been interesting to get some basic data on the subject. Instead, the article begins with an extensive bio- and bibliography of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, which is too detailed and not to the point of the article's scope. I miss the names of Wangui wa Goro, Ngũgĩ's congenial translator, without whom his writing in Gikuyu would not have been possible, in the bibliography, as well as Micere Mugo, co-author of *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi.* Also, the article could have done more in presenting its primary text to the reader. There are hardly quotations and throughout the whole section on the Kamĩrĩĩthũ Theatre Project (2019: 64-65) it was not clear to me whose voice was speaking: Was it Ngũgĩ's narrative? Or Ndogo's interpretation?

What I found illuminating is how Ndogo reflects on Ngũgĩ's changing connection to his hometown Kamĩrĩĩthũ. It was, as Ndogo points out, a connection from which the imprisoned self drew strength and healing such that "[r]emembering Kamĩrĩĩthũ becomes a therapeutic process for Ngũgĩ." In Ndogo's analysis, this connection is not imagined as a homogenous gesture, as a one-dimensional connection to a village home or to origins stable in time and place; rather, “it is characterized by heterogeneity” (2019: 65). Ndogo compares the kind of connection to a net with multiple beginnings and ends: “Connection does not really entail tracing ‘origins’ and then looking forward to destinations or ‘endings.’ This is because, once the web has been created, it becomes difficult to trace its genesis. As such, there is no beginning and no end, in a poststructuralist sense, since meaning cannot be tethered on one point. Rather it exists in multiplicity of interpretations.” (2019: 65) This is a beautiful and powerful image. Not only does it help to understand the kind of connection that Ngũgĩ later re-created in his childhood memoir *Dreams in a Time of War* (2011); it may also help to understand the heterogenous and changing connection to places called “home”, which, in an age of increased – forced or voluntary – mobility, has become a defining experience for so many people across the globe.

A Freudian reading of Luo women’s oral culture

Opondo in her article on “Orality and sublimation of repressed desires: the renaming of everyday phenomena by the Luo women of Kenya” (69-80) uses the Freudian notion of sublimation to bring forward a fascinating reading of expressions that Luo women use in oral culture. She defines sublimation with Freud as socially necessary repression of urges and socially unaccepted desire and their channelling into socially accepted cultural creations. To this end, she first presents a dynamic concept of (Luo) oral culture (2019: 70) and of ethnic group as a shared identity resulting from “fluid social interactions that nevertheless exhibit a distinguishable general trend” (2019: 70). Her analysis shows above all the potential of oral culture to shift frustrations, grief and lack through acts of naming onto objects that have no immediate connection with the source of these emotions. Names thus become a socially accepted expression of these suppressed emotions and experiences. The examples Opondo gives in her analysis are amazing. She organises her body of analysis into, first, concepts that express the "woman's marginalization in patriarchal economy" and, second, concepts that subvert manhood through orality.

Examples for the first are, for instance, *chuoraochaya*, translated as "my husband has no regard for me", meaning "a measurement of cooking oil wrapped in polythene paper" of less than an eighth of a kilogramme" (2019: 73). A *chuoraochaya* is bought as the smallest unit for the preparation of a meal, "leaving the next cooking to providence" (2019: 73); *alotabuka pier*, translated as "vegetables are the colouring for the buttocks" used for the staple diet of vegetables (2019: 74); *kibritonyumore epi*, translated as "the matchbox has fallen into water", to say that there is no fire for cooking in the household, a phrase “used to refer to short periods of or prolonged hunger” (2019: 75); *oloyoriyo*, translated as "it is a better choice than staying without (the commodity) a whole day”, used for a small unit of measurement for sugar; or *oromo mier*, translated as "the homesteads have had enough / the people in the homes are fed up with it" a term given to the dark all-purpose bar soap, which is used equally for dishes, personal hygiene and laundry.

In the second group of texts, namely expressions “subverting manhood through orality”, Opondo discusses for instance the term *jodongotetnikaidhootanda*, translated as "the old men tremble as they climb onto the bed" used for large fish lacerated before being deep fried in oil. As she explains, "[w]hen the lacerated fish is held up, it gives the impression of a wobbly living thing and the way it is laid in the frying pan gives the impression of one being laid in bed, flat out (2019: 78); *chuo mielkendgi*, translated "men are dancing alone (without the company of women)" for a kind of small fish which is often looked down upon as poor people's food (2019: 79). The first category of names represent, as Opondo argues, a discourse among women on men who do not fulfil their role as providers, while the expressions of the second category reveal a discourse on female sexual desire, albeit expressed in negative terms, through non-fulfilment. Because, as Opondo explains "[e]xpression of sexuality for the woman is largely culturally forbidden as she is to be the object of desire and not its subject. She is to be wanted and not to want.” (2019: 79)

With some examples chosen for the first group – as *oloyoriyo* and *oromo mier* – I could not fully follow how they are being traced to the (insufficient) male as (invisible) signifier/signified. Opondo further declares that these acts of naming “exhibit underlying contestations of western feminism by the modern Luo woman” and reads them as subversions of “western feminism” (2019: 69). This is an interesting statement, but it is not explained to the reader in how far this discursive strategy of Luo women subverts western feminism. To follow Opondo on this, one would need to understand her and Luo women’s idea of “western feminism”. One aspect mentioned briefly, which I would have liked to learn more about, is how these phrases, which Opondo locates in specific rural environs, are being circulated and discussed on ethnic

Luo social media group sites (2019: 73). The same kind of creative sublimation that Opondo observes in Luo women's oral culture can be found, by the way, in some of her own expressions, for instance when she explains the small measure unit for cooking oil as follows: "This is often bought in the rural areas by those who are economically challenged and who happen to be the majority." (2019: 73) Or when she explains the expression *alotabuka pier* with: "The insinuation here is that eating too much of these vegetables makes the person evacuate dark matter, thus 'colouring the buttocks'". (2019: 74)

Explorations into theatre and film

The last third of the journal is devoted to theatre and film with one article dealing with the South African playwright and director Athol Fugard, one with the short film *The Hangman* by South African filmmaker Zwelethu Radebe, and two articles focussing on the work of John Ruganda, one of Uganda's and East Africa's best-known playwrights.

In his essay "Self-exile within the community: Athol Fugard's psychotherapist solution to his characters in his film plays *The Guest*, *The Occupation* and *Marigolds in August*" (81-90) Otieno Tobias Odongo deals with the psycho-pathological dimension of Apartheid as a system which dehumanises everyone living under it. His approach moves beyond a realistic-materialist critical reception that has sought to identify typical representations of either black or white South Africans in Fugard's plays; instead, he proposes to read all characters as neurotic aspects and extensions of a (white) self, which struggled with the monstrous system of apartheid, looking for loopholes and ways to outwit it in order to "thus point the right direction to both the whites and non-whites, on how to successfully live in the system through avoidance of the entire community - that is - in total self-exile". (2019: 90) Bii K. Cosmas' "Trans-generational apartheid pain in Zwelethu Radebe's film *The Hangman*" (91-96) is a short piece about a short film. *The Hangman* was released in 2017 and has since won Best Foreign Film at the Oscar-qualifying LA Shorts Fest, Best South African Short Film at the Durban, Jozi and Shnit film festivals, and Best African Short Film at Zanzibar International Film Festival. In his film, the young filmmaker, who lived through South Africa's transition as a child, explores the wounds of the past through a black prison warder in the Gallows Pretoria near the end of apartheid, who meets his long-disappeared father as prisoner at the eve of his execution. While the film has been mainly promoted as a tale about family secrets, Cosmas starts his discussion from how the film leaves the audience with “the feeling of a deep sense of pain, trauma and betrayal that still hangs over the South African society” (2019: 92). He argues that the film, in the way it works with absence, ellipsis and silence, actively challenges the audience to actively fill the gaps based on their own knowledge and experience. Thus, as Cosmas argues, the generation that experienced apartheid would understand scenes and allusions differently than the later-born: "This achievement by the director individualizes the story in the sense that an individual viewer feels that they not only own the story or lived it as part of their life but also feels that they are obligated to and are actually telling the story to an audience of which they are part of. [...] The story transcends from being a South African story into a human story, a story about a dark part of humanity or human history whose consequences all of us live with irrespective of whether you are South African or not.” (2019: 93)

Memory as the key for the individual and the community to move beyond the wounds left by dictatorial regimes through human rights violations, torture and violence is the focus of Caroline Sambai’s article. “Memory, the return of the repressed and healing in John Ruganda’s *The Floods*” presents an analysis of a play by John Ruganda dealing with the atrocities of Idi Amin's regime. The setting of the play is a lake which was used as a dumping site for dead bodies. It is divided into three parts called “waves” in the play. In their metaphorical sense, as Sambai explains, “floods” and “waves” allude to the massive bloodshed, to the displacement of people from their homes, to different forms of violence at different levels ranging from physical, structural and psychological violence. In its literal sense, “waves” mean "the rise and fall [in a large mass of water] when there is lack of calmness" (2019: 99). This image may also stand for the mental processes that Sambai is interested in, whereby her article, similar to what she states for the play, "shifts from what we would call the 'spectacle' of violence in order to trace how characters struggle with remembering and forgetting”. (2019: 99) In most cases where “the oppressors are guilty of committing violence”, as she further notes, “there is always an attempt to institute amnesia” (2019: 101). Sambai contrasts this forced and repressive amnesia with a beneficial forgetting which can only set in when the traumatic experience is allowed to be remembered, narrated and historicized. While she presents a narrative analysis of Ruganda’s plays, Evans Odali Mugarizi in his approach to “Navigating the worlds of John Ruganda’s *The Burdens* and *Black Mamba*”

(107-116) fully exploits drama as an art form. Next to a discussion of the particular plays, his contribution is a beautiful philosophical reflection of theatre's potential to lead the audience to an experience through the "layers of presentation and representation that reveal different worlds both spatially and across time" (2019: 108).

On black intellectual tradition

The volume closes with a fragmentary, yet rich piece by Peter Simatei on "Pre-texts of black intellectual tradition" (2019: 117-121). His discussion of some of the essayistic oeuvre of Chinua Achebe, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Toni Morrison reads like a sketch for a larger, philosophical project. One would very much like to have his idea of an "oppositional subjectivity", which is less interested in "an endless engagement with European supremacist ideologies" than it is suspicious of "how the production of knowledge has been used and can be used to legitimate hegemonic structures of power in general", more explicated (2019: 120). What I found particularly illuminating in this regard is Simatei's response to Toni Morrison's deconstruction and critique of hegemonial whiteness in her reading of the American literary canon in *Playing in the Dark*. As he suggests, "what Toni Morrison is uncovering here is the ambivalence and hybridity of the American literary canon, not its monolithic purities, and the reason for doing this, I suspect, is not so that she can insert the African presence into the mainstream American culture, but rather so *that she can redefine this presence away from the entrapments within categories of racial domination*" (2019: 121, italics MK).

Summary

Reading through *LIFT*'s first issue is a rich and fruitful encounter with (East) African literary and cultural debates and an absolute gain for someone who is working on Kenyan and East African literatures and literary scholarship. The journal crosses conventional disciplinary boundaries through its mix of engagements with different genres – fiction as in Mboya's, Odhiambo's and Wegesa's essays, life writing as in Nyandoro's and Ndogo's essays, oral culture as in Opondo's essay and drama and film as in Otieno's, Cosmas', Sambai's and Mugarizi's essays. I particularly appreciate the critical engagement with the lesser known works of well known authors as in Mboya's discussion of Achebe's short story, Odhiambo's discussion of Kimani's first novel, and Otieno's discussion of Athol Fugard's film plays.

Reading through the journal opens a perspective on the lesser considered sites of African writing, without losing sight of the grand and established narratives in the studies of African writing and the arts.

Interestingly, many of the contributions take psychoanalytic approaches and refer to Freudian concepts, as in Opondo's, Odongo's, Wegesa's and Sambai's essays. Meeting Freud was not something I expected in the first instance when walking into this exposition of literary and cultural research from a university in Western Kenya. Moreover, psychoanalytic approaches have not always been welcome in African literary studies and have been discredited in postcolonial debates as Eurocentric and un-African. This makes it all the more interesting that an independent, local reception of Freud can be traced through the contributions, which thus also bear witness to the successful transfer of a school of thought deeply rooted in Western intellectual tradition and the bourgeois (Jewish) urban culture of European modernity to an Africa-centred theory of culture and literature. One thing that particularly impressed me is the way the authors bring across complex and complicated theoretical approaches in concise and accessible language, without losing on their complexity. This is the case, for instance, when Busolo Wegesa explains the dialectics of the literary representation of trauma (2019: 33-36), or when Akinyi Opondo opens up the Freudian concept of sublimation to a reading of oral culture. As a whole, the journal reflects the postmodernist approach laid out by Peter Amuka in terms of respect for the plurality of knowledge and cultural forms.

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