

How [not just] "Writing Back" and "Bringing Back" Characterizes the Nairobi Musical Theatre Initiative



Ndere Centre, Kampala Uganda. Home of the 6th edition of the Kampala International Theatre Festival.

“The domain of the stranger is always an elusive *elsewhere*.”

—Saidiya Hartman,
Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route

“...any search for a new social order within an African nation will have to address ‘the language question’...”

—Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o,
Penpoints, Gunpoints and Dreams: Towards a Critical Theory of the Arts and the State in Africa

I. *Elsewhere and English*

As I assume most theatre artists are, I am fascinated and vexed by language. And although my musings about language have swirled around my mind and shown up cursorily in the odd pieces I've penned here and there, it wasn't until I sat *elsewhere* that its elusiveness and gravity impressed upon me a palpability not easily ignored. This paper will examine the fraught relationship that occurs when language choice intersects with post-colonial play-making. I will first theorize the complex levels in which "the language question" burdens and confounds artists in a post-colonized context. I will then demonstrate how, through the "eventification" of two musical theatre performances at the Kampala International Theatre Festival in Uganda, artists broke through the oppressive power of a settler's language to liberate new communication codes and bound histories.¹ But first, present-day-ish Nairobi. As an invited observer at a workshop there in June 2018, I witnessed a fierce debate between Kenyans about whether or not to use English as the primary language for an array of new musical theatre projects. In Kenya, the "character" of English, an *elsewhere's* language, sits uneasily alongside the creative process as a seductive and contested vessel for storytelling. As a native English speaker, a curious amateur linguist (not to mention theatre artist), I did not want to miss this crucial conversation. But I also wanted to control how exposed I felt in this setting for representing the monolingual "universal" and ironically-positioned audience member to whom at least a few of the artists hoped their work would someday appeal.

¹I am using "eventification" here as defined by Temple Hauptfleisch (2007). His theory argues that a "festival's prestige can transform productions into significant events that resonate in the 'cultural memory of the particular society'" (as quoted in C. McMahon's *Recasting Nationalism Through Performance*, 82).

I choose "ironic" on purpose. The ensuing debate, my ability to take part in the conversation, and comprehension of the forthcoming musicals was most intricately dependent upon the artists' labors happening in English. Perhaps, as this was the first formal meeting with two New York University professors who had recently joined to advise on the project, English dominated so as to get them up to speed. Perhaps it was (unearned) deference to myself and the other non-Kenyan/non-Swahili-speakers observing so as to not exclude us from the conversation. But perhaps it was more a demonstration of the unspoken rule that English should be the primary (both dominant and first) language used in "intercultural" exchange settings in Kenya. This is representative of the heavy burden carried by an unwieldy social decorum that Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o angrily reminds in a series of 1998 lectures, *Penpoints, Gunpoints and Dreams*. "Quite frankly there is nothing so contradictory...in Africa and in the wider world, than the position of experts on African realities who do not have to demonstrate even the slightest acquaintance with an African language."² The frustration of the artists was tangible as they would begin conversations first in English only to code-switch into Swahili or Sheng (a slang language) and settle into the debate more comfortably. The dominant language no longer held the capability or form that these artists felt was vital. There was also a measure of embarrassed recognition, however, a sideways glance across the room for permission once their English started to give way. Or once they purposely gave their English a-way.

² In this reference, Ngũgĩ is discussing the irony that the requirement for African scholarship to be recognized on the global stage, it must be written in English, or French, or at the very least a European language. The very essence of the debate that was ensuing was about how these fledgling artistic works would be recognized as legitimate and *seen* as valuable. For more on this discussion of the handing over of African languages to European tongues, please see Chapter 4, "The Allegory of the Cave: Language, Democracy and a New World Order," in *Penpoints, Gunpoints and Dreams: Towards a Critical Theory of the Arts and the State in Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 93.

Seated squarely within the tension of the situation, a very limited Swahili and Sheng speaker myself, and a representative of the settler culture. (Even though I am American and not British, I am still *mzungu*.³) As in all things that both amaze and anger, I knew the character of language would not let me go nor could I release the vestiges of empire that English, and my presence, drags forward. This is a similar inescapability to how Laura Edmondson describes her own positioning in Central Africa observing "performances of trauma." "I believe that as a US national of western European descent, I carried empire with me, and I found new empires wherever I went."⁴ For generations, a central protagonist in similarly-themed arguments between African writers on the continent and across the diaspora, Empire-laden English with two capital "Es," sidled up to take space beside me during this now very contemporary conversation.⁵ Without hesitation, the complicated history of past attempts to decolonize English in East African literature reared its ugly head and waved the focus over. As both the common and colonizing language of Kenya, English forcibly pierced my protected outsider status and the myopic bubble I had perhaps inadvertently forgotten to leave at the door. The white westerner. The hypothetical "universal"

³ Although not the original denotation of the word, this is the Swahili word for "white."

⁴ This phrase is a variation of Guillermo Gómez-Pena's "I carry the border with me, and I find new borders wherever I go," from *The New World Border: Prophecies, Poems, and Loqueras for the End of the Century*. Edmondson quotes the original and her variation in *Performing Trauma in Central Africa: Shadows of Empire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018), 25. Edmondson comments in a footnote that had she been able to immerse herself for a considerable length of time within any of the performance projects in Uganda and Rwanda she was analyzing that perhaps she could have shed some of the trappings of the empire she carried with her. I wholeheartedly agree with this assessment from how my experiences teaching and immersing myself in creative projects in Kenya differed from being an observer in this particular workshop and why I believe this is an important positionality and perspective to lay bare.

⁵ For more information on the distinction between "English" and "english," and the acknowledgement that one term does not dispense less value than the other but can be perceived in that way, please see "Introduction" in Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, eds., *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London: Routledge, 2002), 8.

audience member of global appeal. The one who has historically without consent required the artistic laboring of the Other to speak (read: perform) in English so that I and others like me can comprehend. There I was. Sitting right there, guilty yet ever-present, in their midst.

Where before I had perched rather comfortably, if not a bit guiltily in this posh space, a well-equipped recording studio in an upscale neighborhood of Nairobi, I now felt the sensation of being an uninvited guest, an uncomfortable stranger, elsewhere. Although I had been welcomed into this domain to sit at the margins, I was painfully self-aware of the bullying purveyor of capital "E" English presence who had strode right into the middle of a conversation. Through a misdirected white centrist lens, I (mistakenly) felt all eyes suddenly on me imploring me to speak for *all* of my fellow English-speakers. (They weren't.) What a frightening experience!! What a burden!!

What a (pause) realization.

Because this high-stakes conversation about language swirling around was so rife with importance, the character of English sitting beside me lanced its way through the protective membrane reserved for this usually somewhat sacrosanct domain of the "outsider listening in" and forced me to stay put, take notice, attend to something beyond myself. To make room, in that room, for how Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o refers to language "as the collective memory bank of a people's experience in their history."⁶ If I wanted to truly understand something vital about Kenyan "play-makers," their craft and code-switching, I had to sit silent, comfortably uncomfortable, and truly listen in the domain of a (past) empire and an others' elsewhere. So I did.

⁶ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Language of African Theatre* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 2005), 15.



II. *The language question*

What I heard repeatedly during this collaborative process was "the language question."⁷ A quintessential ask central to this initiative of great (trans-national) importance.⁸ The Nairobi Musical Theatre Initiative (or NBO-MTI) has grown from a casual conversation between several individuals to deep dramaturgical inquiry by 35 artists into 14 projects and a hoped-for festival of new works.⁹ Initiated by well-known Kenyan musician, Eric Wainaina, award-winning producer and Wainaina's wife, Sheba Hirst, and Roberta Levitow, an American artist-scholar whose connection with the East African arm of the Sundance Theatre Institute has repeatedly brought these individuals together in the past decade. I would categorize the creative trios comprised of a composer, writer, and lyricist as the "A" team of contemporary Kenya: the LAM sisterhood; Sitawa Nimwalie; the Too Early for Birds Collective; nationally known

⁷ See quote at beginning of paper.

⁸ Although this initiative is comprised of all Kenyan artists save one Congolese musician (who is a refugee living in Kenya), due to the contested definitions of "national" and "nation-state" and the role in cross-cultural artmaking practices in previously colonized East Africa whose borders were drawn by European treaties, I will use "transnational" to foreground this complicated history of mapping nationalism and culture. For more discussion on this, please see C. McMahon's *Recasting Nationalism Through Performance: Theatre Festivals in Cape Verde, Mozambique and Brazil* (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2014) and Patrice Pavis' *Theatre at the Crossroads of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1991).

⁹ The date originally set for November 2020 is now TBD as a result of the COVID pandemic.

musicians Tetu Shani, Chris Adwar, and Wanja Wohoro; John Sibi-Okumu who has been treading Kenya's boards for over four decades and on this project with his two sons; and of course Wainaina and Hirst, just to name a few. They are a diverse group, self-proclaimed not all come to musical theatre with the same experience or desire but do share complicated questions about writing beyond the central one on language: What stories do they want to tell? How do they want to tell them? Why invest precious time and resources--scarcities for most Kenyan artists--to this project?

Wainaina responds uniformly when asked The Why: "All due respect to Western musicals, no more *Grease* on Kenyan stages."¹⁰ A mantra central to the project spoken repeatedly by the artists is "*Kenyan* stories by *Kenyan* voices..."¹¹ A simple phrase weighted with a long history of enforced and measured erasure. Another Ngũgĩ admonishment: "...[the cultures of] Africa [only] exist in international treaties and European languages."¹² For indigenous Kenyan theatre, the resulting dearth is a chasm. Therefore, creative decisions loom large yet are not uniform across the trios as they hope to devise Kenyan musicals that do not look and sound "Western." (Many Kenyans already feel a bit betrayed that *The Lion King* is not recognized as their origin story.¹³)

Like the many mother tongues spoken by the artists themselves, form must adapt to aptly carry required content. Recalcitrant to mimic a limiting, perhaps oppressive

¹⁰ As qtd. from the introduction to NBO-MTI's performance of *Pani Puri* premiered at the Kampala International Theatre Festival, November 26-30, 2019 in Kampala, Uganda.

¹¹ My italics; this is a catchphrase used by many of the artists of the NBO-MTI. June 2018-present.

¹² Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Penpoints, Gunpoints and Dreams: Towards a Critical Theory of the Arts and the State in Africa*, 92.

¹³ I encountered questions and comments regarding the appropriation of *The Lion King* story in many formal and informal settings while living in Kenya, presenting at conferences there, and just recently on a panel about Art for Social Change sponsored by the U.S. Embassy in Nairobi. The general sentiment is that Kenyans have not gotten what they deserve from the success of the many modalities of *The Lion King* story, including in the most recent film version, not having any Kenyan musicians on the soundtrack. Yet still some Kenyan artists will refer to *The Lion King* as an example of a "Kenyan" musical when asked why there aren't any or many original works of this form attributed to Kenya.

genre, leaves these artists wrestling with choices about storytelling through a perceived uniform form, one they admit is both seductive (in its Western-ness) yet restrictive. Producer Sheba Hirst has a sort of bird's eye view of the process and describes what the artists are doing as *adaptation* due to the variety of pieces that are taking shape in relation to the Western form(s).¹⁴ I will argue below these adaptations aren't being contained by one primary structure and have given way to a more dynamic and ongoing trans-form-ation. At the root of variety is breaking a predetermined path for audience reception. "Before we decide *how* to tell them (read: in English or another language), we need to know *who* these stories are for. Who *are* these stories for?"¹⁵ Answers to this last question are multiple. Thus, the forms reaching them need to adequately carry (to and from) many voices.¹⁶

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, in *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, argues that "the question of audience settles the problem of language choice and the language choice settles the question of audience."¹⁷ This may at first sound logical but quickly becomes an inescapable loop for this previously colonized country: write new works in the settler's language of English in order to have a wider appeal? Or write in the cultural language of Kiswahili and speak to Kenyans, Tanzanians, a few Ugandans and a handful of others? Write for a broad, global audience

¹⁴ For an extensive discussion regarding adaptation of the Western musical form, please see "Creative Platforms Across the African Continent" on Howlround Theatre Commons [here](#).

¹⁵ A version of this statement in the form of a question was posed by moderator Mr. Fred Kiggundu Musoke at the NBO-MTI Roundtable Discussion, Friday, November 29th, 2019, Ndere Centre, Kampala, Uganda as part of the Kampala International Theatre Festival (KITF). Most of the NBO-MTI artists responded and with an array of answers from the perspectives of their respective pieces. Some of this testimony is addressed later in the paper.

¹⁶ For a detailed discussion of code-switching prevalent in theatre practices as a manifestation of post-colonial heteroglossia, please see Marvin Carlson's Chapter 3 "Postcolonial Heteroglossia" in *Speaking in Tongues: Language at Play in the Theatre* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 105-149.

¹⁷ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Language of African Theatre* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 2005), 44.

and capitalize on language imposition, following suit of Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe in a 1964 speech titled "The African Writer and the English Language," who asked, "Is it right a man should abandon his mother tongue for someone else's? It looks like a dreadful betrayal and produces a guilty feeling. But for me there is no other choice. I have been given the language and I intend to use it."¹⁸ Or stand on post-colonial principle (or precipice) by deliberately not using the settler's linguistic tools to construct new houses?

The debate for contemporary artists indubitably moves to the past: shouldn't they write in their local vernaculars, like countryman Ngũgĩ did in his playwriting for the Kamĩriithũ Community Education and Cultural Centre? Employing only Gĩkũyũ, the most widely spoken indigenous language of Kenya, he believed that only native tongues can carry their cultures forward inside them. Without written preservation and proliferation, their cultures disappear, already barely holding on due to colonization. Ngũgĩ's deliberate choice still left room for others to translate his works if they so desired but he was no longer doing the linguistic labor for the overculture. Nor are these modern-day artists willing to do so as historical precedents have been set in Kenya and on other parts of the continent. Yoruba dramatist Ola Rotimi champions what Homi Bhabha would call a "hybrid tongue," carving a third heterogeneous linguistic space between the dichotomous African or European binary.¹⁹ "The real issue should not be why an African writer resorts to perpetuating a colonial tongue. Rather, for the debate to be worthwhile, it should bear on how the writer uses that tongue to express the

¹⁸ As qtd. in Thiong'o, *Decolonising*, 7.

¹⁹ Homi Bhabha continues to define a "hybrid tongue" as a "difficult, knotty, many-textured" language that "speaks not just with two discourses, but with many" referenced in *Decolonizing the Stage*, 112.

conditions and yearnings of his linguistically diverse peoples."²⁰ What Ngũgĩ would call "linguistic engineering" shows how artists already have the tools to build structures that withstand the weight of many languages.²¹

Yet this "hybrid tongue" or conscious scaffolding resulting from linguistic engineering still requires some sort of translation or adornment for the non-vernacular speaking members of the audience. Those who don't have the linguistic mapping index need a guide. So, if not literal translation, then what? On this June day in Nairobi, artists of a new generation discussed how depending predominantly on translation is a fraught, unbalanced act as it significantly changes the meaning of the narrative and relinquishes artistic control to audiences burdened with their own linguistic "gapes and gaps":

The gap which opens between the experience of place and the language available to describe it forms a classic and all-pervasive feature of post-colonial texts. This gap occurs for those whose language seems inadequate to describe a new place, for those whose language is systematically destroyed by enslavement, and for those whose language has been rendered unprivileged by the imposition of the language of a colonizing power.²²

In a return to Ngũgĩ's audience reception feedback loop, perhaps contemporary artists who have only known English as their "national" yet inadequate language *should* employ a combination of the above-stated approaches. A new, trans-cultural form of sorts, which takes over when English reaches its limits, similar to the code-switching I

²⁰ Ola Rotimi, 'The Trials of African Literature', lecture given at the University of Benin, Nigeria, 4 May 1978; quoted in *Decolonizing the Stage*, 108.

²¹ Ngũgĩ wa Thiongo, *Penpoints, Gunpoints and Dreams*, 82.

²² Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, eds., *The Empire Writes Back*, 9.

witnessed at the workshop. Christopher Balme, in *Decolonizing the Stage*, argues for borrowing a kind of "syncretic theatre" from religious discourse. This practice would utilize forms from both indigenous and European cultures in a creative recombination of respective elements,²³ by which discovering *new (theatrical) codes* in an innovative mapping of an artistic elsewhere. Language becomes just one of the many indefinable, elusive and *ephemeral* characters of the narrative. This is theatre after all.

There has been a tenacious, gnawing longevity to "the language question." Almost 40 years ago, Salman Rushdie wrote similarly to Ngũgĩ and Achebe in his essay, "The Empire Writes Back with a Vengeance" published in *The London Times* on July 3, 1982. Rushdie argued how peoples from previously colonized nations could re-appropriate their cultures by writing literature in indigenous languages rather than those of the colonizers. This practice, Rushdie believed, characterized not only the revolutionary act of writing but also the "righting" of histories wrest from their collective memory banks. This worked to reshape the reception of target audiences by *creating possibilities for connection and identification previously denied by using colonizing linguistic forms*.²⁴

"Writing Back" bled into the concept of "Bringing Back," or the re-presenting of "traditional" cultural practices in art, such as dance, certain ritualistic performances, and qualities of sound, that may have been discarded, devalued, or on the other hand, externally appropriated by settler nations for elevating their own cultural "street cred." The exploitation of the many African cultures and their art has had this deplorable impulse at its base. However, in "Towards a National Culture," Ngũgĩ would ultimately

²³ For a detailed discussion and examples of "syncretic" theatre and its effects on decolonizing the stage, see Christopher B. Balme's *Decolonizing the Stage: Theatrical Syncretism and Post-Colonial Drama* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

²⁴ Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism, 1981-1991* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991); my emphasis.

have refuted what Rushdie purportedly put in motion. "There are people, honest people who confuse culture with irrelevant traditionalism; it is surely not possible to lift traditional structures and cultures intact into modern Africa."²⁵ One cannot bring back what no longer exists.

Long have Kenyans and Africans on other parts of the continent wrestled with the politically resistive properties of language and cultural forms in popular performance. So it is not surprising that Kenyans today involved in any kind of discursive act of producing original performance work are still debating the value of using English as their main syntax for performance. A fellow countryman, Ngũgĩ would see this as a betrayal to the proliferation of authentic cultures, always containing with it an assimilationist characteristic to the work. But as I sat silent and listening in the Elephant Studio back in June 2018, with the needling character of English at my side, and a dynamic "A-team" who have only known this empire-bound tongue as their national language, an inquiry as whether or not to employ English gained new purchase and carried on. A final note of (non) arrival at the answer of "the language question" urges the issue painstakingly forward. From Eunice S. Ferreira who has probed similarly when analyzing the Creolisation of theatre performance on West Africa's Cape Verde: "With increasing attention focused on globalisation, what is the efficacy of language, then, in locating a place for oneself on the global stage?"²⁶ I'll extend this further: where

²⁵ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Homecoming: Essays on African and Caribbean Literature, Culture and Politics* (London: Heinemann, 1972), 12; my emphasis.

²⁶ Eunice S. Ferreira's "Crioulo Shakespeareano & the Creolising of King Lear" in *African Theatre 12: Shakespeare in and out of Africa*, Banham, M., Gibbs, J., Femi Osofisan, F., Plastow, J., & Hutchison, Y., Eds. (Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2013), 130.

is this efficacious site in which conscious and decolonizing linguistic play-making can truly take place? In Nairobi? Or elsewhere...?



III. *Trans-formation in (the) Place-Making of the Festival*

One of my most telling realizations didn't happen "there" in Nairobi but when I saw four of the pieces performed at the Kampala International Theatre Festival (KITF) a year and a half later. Started in 2013 by the Sundance Theatre Institute, KITF, some might argue, is a prestige-raising "eventification" and a global stage for play- and place-making. As my curiosity had been ignited many months prior, I wondered how much English would I hear? And how much would a non-East African audience member understand? So this is where my story begins, or actually, continues. In the *elsewhere* of the festival--Kampala, Uganda, November, 2019. When before the musicals were no more than germinal seeds for stories and perhaps an anchoring song or two, many if not all of the writing trios were adamant about not primarily using the settler's language. A year and half later, in another country colonized by Britain, all but one was

predominantly in English. The second part of this paper will analyze two of the pieces that were performed in Kampala where writers made very conscious, although distinctly different *yet* similar decisions about how to decolonize English by uplifting other languages and codes in their multivalent, heteroglossic storytelling forms. They articulate in dramatic fashion how to best write back, bring back and push against by carving an arc towards a transnational, transformative artistic experience that took me somewhere else entirely.

Kabaseke--the character of [the language of] music becomes the story.



The piece that employed the least amount of English is a musical about the forced migration of a Congolese man and the continual violence inflicted on his black body as he fled countries and traversed borders in an attempt to find a safe home. Co-composed by Tetu Shani, Paul Peter Kades, and Vinny Ngugi, *Kabaseke* follows the protagonist on a cyclical journey which begins and ends in a Kenyan prison. Within this cycle of violence, the first flashback shows Kabaseke narrowly escaping abduction to be a child soldier in the Congolese Wars (which one is unclear). He then flees to Uganda with his

sister, Lovelie, and after is forced to migrate alone to Kenya where he is imprisoned. The songs and their heterogeneous polyphony track his chronological crossing in the virtual past and anchor audiences in an existential loop of his violent present.

Audiences first meet the fictional Kabaseke incarcerated and in despair. What audiences at KITF didn't know, however, is that the story is based on a nationally renowned and world-class musician who lives free in Kenya. What they/we didn't know at this particular juncture was that the real Kabaseke sat on the stage playing guitar during the performance. This masking of his persona's "play-in-the-making" was important to the writers who wanted to foreground the duality of the mimetic and real: this is both a story and not a story about the main character, transcending specificity of place and reaching out a message of survival beyond historically-dense boundaries of contrived African nation-states.

The end of the musical arrives audiences back at the beginning with Kabaseke clinging to the slimmest hope for freedom. A brutal guard taunts him that he will either die there or soon after in the streets of Nairobi. This theme is an unfortunate reality in Kenya, combining state-sanctioned violence influenced by late colonial holdover detention camps heavily populated then by rebellious Mau Mau fighters and a modern condition for many refugees. Young men who barely getting by in Nairobi's informal settlements find themselves disproportionately imprisoned rather than resettled due to poverty, homelessness and displacement.²⁷ But in this "true to more-than-one-life" story, audiences are unexpectedly rewarded at the curtain call. In a toppling of the

²⁷ For more information on incarceration rates and police brutality for Kenyan and refugee men, please see African Prisons Project, Halfway Home, Human Rights Watch and CrimeSiPoa. Also, Graeme Harper, *Colonial and Post-Colonial Incarceration* (New York: Continuum, 2001).

musical's fictional power system, Shani who played the tyrannical guard, calls back to the musician sitting in low light on stage right. "Ladies and Gentleman, it is my pleasure to introduce the real life Benjamin Kabaseke. Give a round of applause. (pause) This is his story." The audience began to murmur to each other: "Is that really him? Did he get free? Did he survive?" The "real" Kabaseke walked almost sheepishly into the light, as if only then recognizing the rarity of the moment--he *did* actually survive. He then joined hands connecting with the other men on stage and quietly took a bow. A collective sigh of relief and loud cheers erupted from the crowd.

This may seem a melodramatic moment to a naïve Westerner's perception but is in reality deeply connected to a Central African tale of trauma. Foreshadowed in the narrative, Kabaseke is literally saved by his "go-to" language, his "mother tongues," and the unexpected empathy music eventually draws from power. In flashback, a conflict over his corporeality ensues between his father and a recruit. His father reminds him that he doesn't have the heart of a soldier, to take his destiny (his music) in his hands and run. "You have a weak heart, custom-made for singing. Take your guitar..." The recruit threatens a different path. "Forget this guitar, take this gun." If he doesn't, his countryman says, he will negate those parts of his body that could save him. "I will cut off your hands. How do you want them? Short-sleeved or long-sleeved?" This may seem an exaggerated moment for theatrical effect. But the guard's threat invokes a long-documented history of formerly known Zaire; amputations represented in visceral detail and pictorial agony can be found in a plethora of museums and textbooks on the brutality of the Congolese wars. Against the backdrop of an inescapable history, Kabaseke miraculously gets away with his body intact. A first step towards survival.

This flashback scene mirrors the virtual present. The guard has been beating Kabaseke and the other inmates, diminishing their physicality through a repeated, accumulated gesture. The motif of how violence has followed him is represented by a presentational hitting motion while the guard says “Fimbo!” This means cane, like the prison guard’s stick. “Chapa!” the men respond in unison, meaning to beat or strike, as they collectively sustain the blows. So normalized is the violence written on these male bodies, it is picked up by the actors, audience members *and* Benjamin Kabaseke at the curtain call in an ironic and somewhat surprising community building moment.²⁸ Yet, during the play when pausing the symbolic beating to try to find something he likes on the radio, the guard accidentally tunes into a station playing Kabaseke’s music unknown to him. Narrative time stops. The guard is rapt and the prisoners enjoy themselves by basking in Kabaseke's infectious sounds. For this brief moment, the other body site who commits the violence freed Kabaseke's voice into his imprisoned (fictional) world and into the outside (real) one where the audience sat. The mimetic act gave us hope as the music filled both places entirely. 1) Actor/singer Vinny Ngugi belted out the lyrics of Kabaseke's "in-scene" songs; 2) Peter Paul Kades performed the character in dialogic moments, and 3) the real Kabaseke played the accompanying music from the shadows a few feet away. (The bifurcated/trifurcated narrator who fulfills significant and differing functions in this musical will also be discussed in the other piece.)

The subject matter is dark. Through the music, through parceling out the play-making onto multiple bodies, Kabaseke's singular trauma is not commodified and packaged but shouldered by more than one. Alternating between the severity of the

²⁸ [Please see *Kabaseke Curtain Call* here.](#)

situation and the levity of the music, between the Blues and the Rumba Lingala, between “his” world and ours, this eclectic musical is strung together by a polyglottal, polyphonic form that has been shaped to carry its prolific burden forward. Not one body but two bear the weight of Kabaseke's past “in-scene.” Then a third body saves us, the audience, from succumbing to despair in the joyous moment when fiction becomes real and Kabaseke walks into the light. Another step closer to his survival and a counter-narrative to the normalized fate for many black male bodies. This, Tetu Shani who ironically plays the guard, says is ultimately what drove the writing of the piece. “Their” story is the important one to fictionalize and preserve.²⁹ The presence of Kabaseke's music carries hope forward from the darkest of spaces and escapes languages trapped on the surface--those of the colonizer's tongues, local vernaculars and institutionalized violences that the fictional piece so recognizably employs.

Director Karishma Bhagani said in an informal conversation at KITF that the musical was first driven by the songs [for survival] that “real” Kabaseke wrote during his exile and in prison. His eclectic sounds capitalize on the many lyrical modes, rhythms, instruments, sounds and cultures through which he had traveled. Now the writers are finding the form that best knits them together into one fictional piece.³⁰ The central music hearkens from multiple places—Rumba Lingala from the Congo representing memories of Kabaseke's lost childhood; Benga music from Kenya to bring together his fellow inmates in times of misery; a folk inspired song about leaving his sister behind in Uganda; distorted electric guitar and blues riffs for memories of his darkest days in

²⁹ Video transcript, NBO-MTI Roundtable Discussion, 11/29/2019.

³⁰ Interview transcript during the day of the premiere of *Kabaseke*, Friday, November 28, 2019, at the Ndere Centre, Kampala, Uganda.

prison. The songs include English and French, but are mostly in Kiswahili, Lingala, Luganda, and the mother-tongues of the actual musicians. Multiple voices sung from the many black bodies of East and Central Africa.

A conventional, western musical *this is not* as the music defies any kind of unified sound, genre or locale; however, the sounds map the experiences of exile and forced migration across contrived borders and the effects of colonization marked on the multiple bodies of Kabaseke. Place-making through play-making, these songs migrate his audiences across the “roots and routes” of the Sub-Saharan continent.³¹ Sounds not traditionally "African," not something "Western," but something syncretic, all mixed together become a re-ordered landscape with language, craft and path to carry us forward. The play-/place-making constructed a way for the audience's arrival: to unite us with the real protagonist of the story, combining his dynamic experience and code-switching for survival with the ever-shifting places of his somewhere, finally landing in an else-where he could call home. Tetu Shani acknowledges its artistic conundrum. Not only does this story need to be told, he says, it defies the possibility for translation.

Referencing James Baldwin, Chinua Achebe wrote what was possible when language transforms with a new context. It allows one to "bear the burden" of that experience.³² Although I quote a few lines of the musical above in English, very little of it was. The dialogue between the prisoners and guard, which alternated between Swahili and Sheng, bookended the songs to build the spine of the story. As an audience member,

³¹ For more about the common catchphrase "roots and routes" and its prolific use in analyzing from a transnational standpoint the influence of the colonial era, the manifestations of localized adverse conditions in East Africa (roots) and understanding their entrenched complexity through traversing geographies in a global context (routes), please see Laura Edmondson's *Performing Trauma in Central Africa*, specifically Chapter 1.

³² Chinua Achebe, *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (New York: Doubleday, 1975), 62.

I was forced to distance from these moments, to try to glean what was happening with limited codes. However, when a new song began, each with its sound unique to when and where it came from, I was welcomed back into the narrative. Moving from feeling at “home” to feeling displaced to home again gave me a glimpse into Kabaseke's perilous journey. The first song, "Take Me Home," was eloquently sung in English as if to provide the international audience a moment of respite and a ray of hope in a recognizable world that would quickly disappear. Soon audiences were immersed in an others' land where languages were foreign and sounds were unsettling and new. Even if we didn't know it at the time, we'd be given an anchoring refrain to carry us back "home" from the domain of elsewhere. By returning to this common English phrase throughout the piece, we could just bear the imminent aftermath of being set adrift.

A roundtable with the NBO-MTI artists at KITF formally launched what Christina McMahon would call a festival's aftermath. This potent space, she believes, functions as a verb. “Aftermath” is about “tracking a performance’s ‘remains’ through its future trajectories...” Thus, the gathering of transnational creatives and audience members provided a heteroglossic platform for the trios to hail past processes and articulate future hopes. But a performance’s aftermath is also a noun. “The cultural tensions that arise in the wake...new questions about collective identities or the frustrations that accompany intercultural collaborations.”³³ Inevitably, participants inquired about how decisions were made on content and form including, of course, the contestable language question. "Transnational arts networks," like festivals are an outgrowth of the continent being divided along linguistic lines forged during the colonial period, McMahon

³³ McMahon, 26; 7.

believes. "When [universal] language replaces race as the main criterion for transnational connections, new analyses are needed that take into account colonial legacies in Africa and their cultural repercussions in the global era."³⁴

This categorizing condition contrasts a definition that suited W.E.B Dubois in *Dusk of Dawn* when writing about Africans and people of African descent: they share a common history, have suffered a common disaster, and have one long memory of that disaster.³⁵ Therefore, evaluating the use of (no) English should not be seen as a capitulation to the unyielding pressure of past empires and must be considered as inextricably bound to the "roots and routes" of that shared history. A metaphor for the DuBois definition is Kabaseke's forced path of exile and his aftermath of survival. So when asked how *Kabaseke* could be accessible to audiences with so little English, Shani adamantly responded with frustration about the real effects of manufactured racial difference. "English is where we started but not where we ended up. In the piece there are many languages. I do believe this is still a story that would speak to others *somewhere else*, like African Americans, because this is a story about a long history of black men being terrorized by police and inequalities of power, so what do you change? What do you compromise for access? Because as soon as you've changed the language, you've changed the music, you've changed the real story."³⁶

What seems an obvious statement about not wanting to adapt the musical to fit an audience's "gapes and gaps" gestures back to where we began *this route*: at the fundamental, deeply historical and annoyingly ever-present "language question." How

³⁴ McMahan, 16; my emphasis.

³⁵ Referenced in Stuart Hall's lecture, *Race: The Floating Signifier*, Media Education Foundation, 1997.

³⁶ Video transcript, NBO-MTI Roundtable Discussion, 11/29/2019; my emphasis.

will audiences experience empathy, the ultimate artistic goal of the theatre, when we all don't speak in the same tongues? Eric Wainaina believes this is a golden opportunity to learn each other's languages.³⁷ Maybe so but probably unrealistic. So I believe something more possible happened for an ephemeral moment during *Kabaseke's* concluding song, "Break Through Coming," in the form of no language at all. The guard has both denied Kabaseke's optimism by telling him, "You'll never be free," and betrayed that sentiment by inadvertently releasing Kabaseke's music into the imprisoned space, as discussed above. This act carved the smallest site of resistance which is then pried widely open when all of Kabaseke's voices and those of his fellow inmates flood through. They joined each other in a joyous, infectious song with no recognizable words.

[\[Please see video #1.\]](#)

Hopefully, you get the idea. This concluding moment brought audience, performers and story together as people kept singing a non-word chorus of "bababas" long after the real Benjamin Kabaseke was revealed. This "no language" built in unison a transcendent community of connection rising beyond the mimetic borders and the linguistic systems of power that had fractured Kabaseke's lived bodies on stage into parts (in two parts). *His* breakthrough, and more importantly, whether or not there can be "break-throughs-coming" for many black men across the globe is the central piercing question of this piece. Here Kabaseke *has survived* and is in Kampala playing music for us. But his isn't the only body represented. That he withstood the state-sanctioned violence waged against his black body in the DRC, Uganda, and Kenya is the true power of the piece in its hope for an-other. He and those he represents move a small bit forward into a future

³⁷ He states this specifically in the panel discussion, "Creative Platforms Across the African Continent" found on Howlround Theatre Commons [here](#).

for survival, jubilantly riding a song-filled vessel with (no) words, words that will not be tied to any singularly spoken language system and the powers that wield them.

Weaver Bird--the character of [the colonizer's] language claims her ability to speak.



The second musical I will analyze is *Weaver Bird*. Written by Laura Ekumbo, Ann Moraa, and Aleya Kassam, or the LAM Sisterhood as they call their female artist collective, this story exposes another part of “the language question,” that preoccupied Achebe, Ngũgĩ and other African writers: “How best to make the borrowed tongues *carry the weight* of our African experience...?”³⁸ Similar to *Kabaseke*, this fundamental question sits at the core of this work. For something to be able to carry is to adapt the form of the container. Weight is mass and needs structure to hold and transport it. The vessel that brings forward “borrowed tongues” for the artists' use must be malleable and accessible, durable and adaptable. As introduced above, this is how Sheba Hirst collectively defines the processes that are yielding such a diversity of musicals. (All four

³⁸ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind*, 7; my emphasis.

pieces I saw were very different; yet all are musicals and do share some common traits of form.) However, adaptation implies taking an already written/already present text and altering it for a different cultural context. Adaptation implies an arrival. Full stop. This denies that the pieces are "plays-in-the-making" in motion from place to place. From Nairobi to Kampala and back again, iterations on top of iterations, reaching from there to over here to where I sit writing this and then beyond. *Ellipses of artistic pieces, to be continued, in the aftermath of a yet to be found and formed elsewhere.*

Rustom Bharucha uses the image of a pendulum to describe the motion of evolving intercultural performance, pulling down from each upswing and moving through an undeniable force in the center. "The weight suspended from a pendulum is akin to the product of an intercultural encounter, as it swings between its two source cultures."³⁹ This echoes the sensation of weight invoked by Ngũgĩ and adds to it a perpetual state of becoming (something else). Never ceasing, always carving and shaping the form that borrows and discards from one another. A trans-form-ation between/within the two points of culture creating a new trajectory that can carry with it/in it/within it the weight of experience. One that is "still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit new African surroundings,"⁴⁰ always changing, never static, never just one or two languages, shifting back and forth through the binary set of codes found at the borders.

³⁹ From Diane Daugherty's 'The Pendulum of Intercultural Performance: *Kathakali King Lear* at Shakespeare's Globe.' *Asian Theatre Journal* 22 (1) 2003: 52–72. As quoted in McMahon, 202.

⁴⁰ From Chinua Achebe, quoted in *Decolonising the Mind*, 8.

It was in the "where" of Kampala witnessing *Weaver Bird* that I truly saw this something "else," a monumental force of static silence weighted between two cultures. This moment wasn't ultimately about English but about the perpetually in motion codes we as theatre artists use to recreate an ever-changing reality, so exemplified in this story. Whether the spoken or even sung language was English or not wasn't the point of focus for expression and empathy-building in this trans-national, trans(form)ational work weighted-in-between. What one of the writers suggested was merely a mass of "something to begin with and then push against," English with a capital "E" was the resisted place from which to launch a vessel used to arrive *elsewhere*, at a cessation of language entirely, as it gave way under its own weight.⁴¹

Ekumbo, Moraa, and Kassam have never known a time when capital "E" English was not the national language in Kenya, embraced by the repressive patriarchal education system in which they were forced to participate. In an act of defiance and liberation, these Kenyan women decided that this story would not be for everyone, although they tell it and sing it mostly in English. From Moraa, "Like the novel *Kintu*, I knew the whole time I was reading it, that this story wasn't for me....it was for Ugandans."⁴² She went on to say that it was beautiful, that she took a great deal from it, but she was hyper-aware Jennifer Makumbi didn't have her in mind when she wrote it. She was a stranger in the domain of the author's elsewhere. The LAM Sisterhood wanted something similar for *Weaver Bird* as Aleya Kassam adamantly said at the KITF roundtable. "This story is for women. And only Kenyan women. No apologies."⁴³ But

⁴¹ Video transcript from NBO-MTI Roundtable Discussion, Friday, November 29th, 2019 at the Ndere Centre, Kampala, Uganda.

⁴² Video transcript, NBO-MTI Roundtable Discussion, 11/29/2019.

⁴³ Video transcript, NBO-MTI Roundtable Discussion, 11/29/2019.

like *Kabaseke*, where the most powerful choice for language transcended specific place-making in performance, creating a new connection between lexicon and play, a similarity occurred in *Weaver Bird*. The choice for no language at all.

Weaver Bird dramatizes the story of Muthoni wa Kirima, a retired top-ranking female fighter from the Kenya Land and Freedom Army (the Mau Maus) whose insurrection against white settlers began in the 1950s. The war for Kenya's independence was fought until 1963, although many would argue that their freedom was bought with betrayal. The main character of this "historical imagination" story, and the person she is based on, is one of them.⁴⁴ Through an enacted dramaturgy that exemplifies historiographical inquiry, the LAM sisterhood sought out Muthoni in central Kenya to hear her untold story and shape it into the musical. After seeing an earlier version of the piece (which wasn't yet in musical form), Muthoni told the women writers that when independence came, she vowed not to cut her hair until Kenya saw true liberation. This became a recurring theme in the writing of the musical's narrative, a motif of this "memory poem" as fellow NBO-MTI artist Sitawa Nimwalie terms it. When not tied up in a scarf, her dreadlocks, which were symbols of freedom for the Mau Maus, reach her ankles.

The colonization of Kenya's peoples, especially the Kikuyu who the Mau Maus hailed from, as well as their connection to land, culture and language is woven throughout *Weaver Bird*. So is being a woman. Few saw actual battle. Muthoni is the only woman to have reached Field-Marshal status, a rank which she shared with two other men, Dedan Kimathi and Musa Mwariama. The first song is a beautiful embrace of

⁴⁴ Christina McMahon defines "historical imagination" as "a fusion of the on-the-ground research and dramatic license in order to explore colonial histories" (32).

Kirinyaga, the Gĩkũyũ (language of the Kikuyu) word for Mt. Kenya. The forest surrounding the mountain is sacred land and where the Mau Maus staged their rebellion from. Field-Marshal Muthoni has come back to Kirinyaga to die. But not before she tells her story, on her own terms, of which she doesn't have proof. All that exist are memories, "...woven in my hair and in my bullet wounds."⁴⁵ This tale is of the trials she endured being a woman and a revolutionary in Kenya: surviving childhood trauma, sexual assault, being wounded and then forgotten. She carries with her a heavy burden of shame--not only due to surviving a battle in which the rest of her fellow soldiers died but she also struggles forward the daily weight of not being remembered by a country that owes her. Kenya has erected monuments and named streets after male freedom fighters, like the famed and now embraced Dedan Kimathi, and for leaders like Jomo Kenyatta and Daniel Arap Moi, who rose in power because of the independence fight she gave her blood for. In one of *Weaver Bird's* scenes, Muthoni laughs wryly that President Moi named a Nairobi thoroughfare after himself only four days from taking office.

She, however, is not memorialized in any word or form (until now); nor are any of the Kenyan female fighters who have been all but forgotten by dominant monumentality narratives and the collective memory bank that upholds their historical absence. This deliberate erasure is echoed by a lyric in the concluding song written and sung by well-known musician Wanja Wohoro, "A leader and a woman: history doesn't like that much." In a country where gender roles are still quite rigidly defined and violence against women can be multiple and normalized, the fierce female voices of the

⁴⁵ Lyrics from the video transcript of *Weaver Bird*, performed at KITE, November 28, 2019, at Ndere Cultural Centre in Kampala, Uganda.

Mau Maus have been silenced. This is a story that tarries in those wounds. Past and present injuries shout into deafening emptiness and are viscerally performed in this musical of historical re-imagination.

Weaver Bird is named for the industrious female of the species; the strategist that builds elaborate, delicate homes in which to procure a mate and carry on birthright. Field Marshall Muthoni has come home in a desperate race to build her own legacy. Similar to *Kabaseke's* bifurcation/trifurcation and his violent past, this main character is split apart into three “in-scene” selves. One of the producers of NBO-MTI stated, “the idea behind this was that we would hear from her [Muthoni] at different stages of her life. Not only would this highlight the different phases, but also would bring to light the fact that her entire journey was devoted to liberation – even if that meant losing her self,” her one-ness.⁴⁶ The central self, played by Laura Ekumbo, is Field Marshal Muthoni; her middle-aged character, played by Kassam, is called only Muthoni, as if shame has wrest her ability to say her full name. Thirdly is her warrior self, sitting on the razor-thin precipice between the life and death that she must imminently face. It is in the face of her death self that she seems guilty for not having welcomed her sooner.

Two scenes stood out in regards to this disregard. The first, in a stark representation of her erasure, a not too sober Muthoni tells of a group of young boys who first will not help and then cheer for her after she singularly hoists a sack of oranges on top of a matatu, the means of public transportation in Kenya. “They clapped for me, imagine, sons of surrenders, if they only knew who I was, would know who I was...”⁴⁷ Shame has forced Muthoni into silence--to say nothing in response to their jeering--and

⁴⁶ Written in an email including Bagani’s notes on an earlier version of this paper, 9/30/2020.

⁴⁷ Anne Moraa, Laura Ekumbo, and Aleya Kassam, *The Weaver Bird*, unpublished.

to no longer emblazon the Field Marshal nomenclature with pride. She hides her disgrace in a bottomless cup of *muratina*⁴⁸ and sings a duet with her Field-Marshal self about the glory of days gone by ("Do you remember when...?"). Refusing to kneel any longer on the sacred lands of Kirinyaga, "they remember when" they shouted "Shoot us!" at the settlers gathering in Ruringu Stadium unwilling to hand over Kenya's independence. Now all Muthoni has are those memories hidden under the scarf on her head and the way she uneasily lifts the weight of humiliation.

Field Marshal Muthoni has a possible moment for reckoning in the final scene, one about resisting the "colorless people" and their imposition of language.⁴⁹ She knows that once she dies, her unfinished story will be lost forever by those who don't understand. So her retelling capitulates to the primacy of English. Her "warrior self," played by Wanja Wohoro, interrupts her recounting how as a sick child she learned the names of colors in English based on different medicines she was taking. Wohoro scoffs at Muthoni. "You speak as if we didn't have words for colors," implying that her having a voice was only made possible by an elsewhere's language. Her long denied fighter/death side gives Field-Marshal Muthoni a last chance to tell her story accurately with the "right" words: the ones that embrace who she is as a woman *and* a fighter, a Kenyan *and* a Kikuyu. The true story of the wounds that the Mau Mau uprising brought to her people *and* the even more detrimental ones that colonialist violence has indelibly marked upon female bodies across her land.⁵⁰ Yet when Muthoni says that she is not

⁴⁸ A staple alcoholic drink of the Kikuyu community in central Kenya.

⁴⁹ Anne Moraa, Laura Ekumbo, and Aleya Kassam, *The Weaver Bird*, unpublished. "Colorless people" is the term the writers use to describe the settlers who stole the lands of Kirinyaga.

⁵⁰ This enduring violence was represented in an earlier scene, when a granddaughter of Muthoni (or Muthoni at a young age; it is unclear) recalls the humiliation of an elderly Kikuyu woman by the colorless people. At a popular restaurant for *wazungu*, they forced the woman serving them to remove not only her gloves but also her blouse after she accidentally spilled one of their drinks on it. She stood naked from the

ready to speak in her mother-tongue despite English's offenses, her warrior self strips her ability to talk and takes over the telling through song.

The explosion of drums and chanting that had underscored the battle of two selves abruptly ceased and what followed was a gaping expanse of nothing. An entire minute of a furtive, futile and deafening silence passed on stage while Field-Marshal Muthoni tried desperately to speak and couldn't.

[\[Please see video #2.\]](#)

Full disclosure: this part brought me to my knees. Maybe it was jet lag; maybe it was a surge of the complex feelings I have in East Africa. Or maybe, it was me being the worst cliché of Robin DiAngelo's "white women's tears."⁵¹ But I was not the only one. The audience was as rapt and silent as the words that never again came from Field Marshal Muthoni. As "no language" poured forth from Laura Ekumbo's mouth, with tears streaming down her face, I couldn't stop them from spilling down mine. The wounds that had torn through her body--the literal bullet she took in the shoulder and the deeper more painful gash representing not only Kenya's but many black women's fights for freedom--raged at me from her mouth, frustrated and gasping. Because isn't this the kind of connective empathy we as theatre artists ultimately hope will happen? The deep, raw language of the theatre? A visceral connection to audiences, transcending specificity and geography of codes? Her tears, my tears. My lived experience in the audience; her performance lived at the borders of her bodies bringing a past, to present, to a remembered future found only on stage. Our collective memories made in the moment

waist up as they laughed and as the mortified narrator watched this public shaming from the shadows. Muthoni's warrior self declares she will no longer contain the rage that this dehumanizing assault and the many more like them have built up in her.

⁵¹ For further reading, please see Chapter 11 "White Women's Tears," in Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018).

of reviving Kenya's lost histories by preserving something new, said differently, together. Helping her to finally *say all of her names fully* into remembrance when at first she couldn't and then when she no longer can: Muthoni Wa Karima. Mau Mau. Fighter. For Freedom. For Liberation. For Death.

Field-Marshal Muthoni.

Say. Her. Name.

IV. *An ellipses of artistic pieces, to be continued...*

This story may have not been for me: the white, western, English speaker ever-present in all of their midst. But I could take something from it. That something was horrible and haunting and valuable because the women writers exposed fractured selves of Muthoni--her wounds *and* theirs--without handing audiences a default language that moved safely beyond pasts and parts yet to heal. Wanja Wihoro admitted in the roundtable discussion that English will never suffice or appease the inner demons that they as Kenyan women feel. But it gives them something to push all that rage against. Like in *Weaver Bird*, (or like not in *Kabaseke*), the NBO-MTI creatives might ultimately use mostly English in final iterations: to appeal to a wider audience, to make them more accessible, or more importantly, to arrive at other forms of language altogether. Or none at all. That question remains to be answered. Wainaina cautions that this part of their process has been about bypassing definitive answers to "the language question." "We decided to write first and then answer the questions after. We still don't have all those answers."⁵² Perhaps they will come in the shape of creative acts of defiance, or decolonizing the stage, or simply a transformation of sorts. And perhaps they will not.

⁵² Video transcript, NBO-MTI Roundtable Discussion, 11/29/2019.

The Nairobi Musical Theatre Initiative is escaping colonizing codification by a heteroglossic transnational and transcendent process of plays-in-the-making of place. Through many voices speaking (or not) at once, layers upon layers of the different languages that make up Kenya's global importance are being woken up, swung high, weighted down and finally preserved through adopting, adapting and then enthusiastically transforming the musical form. By pushing against an empire-laden capital "E" English, they have discovered languages that can't be sung in an oppressive tongue and must be heard through nonsensical rhythmic sounds of being silenced and experienced through communal acts of empathy. The ride casts an arc of the pendulum. The vessel carries a precious cargo of collective passions to have Kenyan voices on Kenyan stages telling Kenyan stories. I for one can't wait to sit again on the sidelines of this future elsewhere, observing, listening and perhaps weeping silently for what these artists "write back," "bring back" and (don't) say. To be continued, sometime after 2020...



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