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**Between Past and Future: Memory and Mourning in the
Stories of Okwiri Oduor and Ndinda Kioko**

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Dedication

To the memory of aunty Risper Awino

And for Palestinians

still struggling for a right to self-determination

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Abstract

This study investigates the literary activities of two emerging female Kenyan writers, Claudette Okwiri Oduor and Jacqueline Ndinda Kioko, both of whom are award-winning authors. Oduor won the 2014 *Caine* Prize for African Writing while Kioko bagged the *Wasafiri* New Writing Fiction Award 2017. It examines specifically how the writers deal with memory and mourning in negotiating between the past and future. I explore how their fictional and non-fictional narratives assist individuals and groups to confront loss, reconstruct new identities, and renegotiate belonging amidst personal and social upheaval. The fictional narratives at the centre of this research are Oduor's "The Plea Bargain" (2011), "My Father's Head" (2013) and "Rag Doll" (2014), and Kioko's "Sometime Before Maulidi" (2014) and "Some Freedom Dreams" (2017). The study explores the themes of mental illness, existential crisis, and fragmentation, and considers bereavement, queer relationships, cultural freedom, and social recognition.

The research further considers the active participation of these two writers in Kenya's contemporary literary-cultural conversations, which span different genres and various media platforms, including blogs, YouTube clips, online magazines, and social media networks in dialogue with other writers. I trace the significance of the literary-cultural link these authors have with their local, continental, and global counterparts in countries like Uganda, Nigeria, and South Africa. The link finds expression through their (in)direct association with some of the new online publishing outlets in Kenya like *Jalada Africa*, *Enkare Review*, and *Kikwetu*. More importantly, their shared participation in and association with such international awards and scholarships as the Commonwealth Short Story Prize, Kwani Trust Manuscript Project, and Miles Morland Foundation is integral in apprehending contemporary literary exchanges and multidirectional flows of publishing in Africa and beyond. I equally illustrate how mentorship of younger writers through local writers' organisations and collectives like AMKA and Writivism help in the formation of an alternative canon other than the mainstream. The study affirms that the authors seem to transcend the boundaries of production and circulation by fluidly moving between electronic and non-electronic platforms, thus mimicking the memory production of remembering, repeating, and working through.

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Chapter 1: Kenya's Digital Natives

The 'post-Binyavanga' generation

Kenya's emerging writers, or those I choose to call the post-Binyavanga¹ generation, are increasingly becoming digital natives in the sense that most of their literary production and circulation are happening within the cyberspace. Various factors have made this possible, as is repeatedly observed in the chapters that follow. However, the most outstanding factors have been the gradual drop in Smartphone prices and increasingly affordable mobile data,² leading to expanded access to the internet, especially among young people. These developments mean that as internet access becomes the norm rather than the exception in Kenya, a significant proportion of the youthful population will seek to publish and share their narratives online.³ The narratives are wide-ranging in subject matter, but, for purposes of this study, can be narrowed down to the personal and private on the one hand, and the collective and public on the other. Nevertheless, it is not easy to make clear distinctions between the private and public, as contestations around issues of subjectivity play out in relation to social identifications and globalised communication processes that complicate the ways in which individuals perceive themselves and articulate their aspirations.

The project seeks to situate some of the contestations and negotiations happening between individual identity and social identification within the broader context of memory and mourning. The digital revolution both increases the unsettling pace of social change and the rapid erasure of past forms of identification, and offers new ways of processing these changes and recovering, or at least rewriting, what has been lost. The thesis attempts to answer some of the questions that arise from these erasures and re-inscriptions. How does literature deal with the past in order to reimagine present and future time? What influence does the past have in shaping the present? How is the projection of the future important in comprehending the present and the past? What are the implications of recovering the past to make sense of a present characterised by pain, grief, marginalisation, precarity and vulnerability?

¹ Here I mean a group of writers that came of age after the 'literary renaissance' of the early 2000s led largely by Binyavanga Wainaina after winning the 2002 Caine Prize for African Writing.

² See for example this report: <https://www.jumia.co.ke/mobile-report/>.

³ The growing internet access should, however, be tempered with caution because a significant segment of the Kenyan population is still unable to enjoy the fruits of digital revolution. This is a challenging factor that hampers overall readership and creation of (digital) cultural material.

The study will focus on selected stories by Okwiri Oduor and Ndinda Kioko, who are both award-winning Kenyan writers. Oduor won the 2014 Caine Prize for African Writing while Kioko bagged the Wasafiri New Writing Fiction Award 2017. First published online, the stories are products of the many emerging digital platforms in the form of literary magazines, journals and blogs that borrow significantly from other pioneer African print publications in respect of their pan-African as well as international outlook. The new platforms also share similarities with older magazines in their experimentation with various artistic styles and the invention of radical cultural attitudes that challenge modes of literary production, circulation, and consumption.

The postcolonial condition and transgressive writings

The advent of literary magazines and journals in the continent dates back to the ‘golden age’ of *Black Orpheus* (1957) and *Transition* (1961) founded by Ullie Beier and Rajat Neogy respectively. These pioneer print publications quickly established a cultural niche in producing ambitious short-fiction, poetry, essays, and think pieces from largely black writers spread across Anglophone Africa and the Africa diaspora. The objective, especially for *Black Orpheus*, was primarily “to educate English-Speaking Africans about the rest of the black world, and secondarily to inspire and encourage young writers and teach them about African traditional cultures other than their own” (Benson and Benson 1986: 24). It is thus apparent that the recovery of cultural and political memory through artistic projects did not begin with the post-Binyavanga group but, instead, has been an endless struggle to make conscious that which was repressed through colonial violence, racism and, later, neo-colonialism. The above excerpt further helps us to understand how transnationalism and its dialectical component of the local are constantly in dialogue with each other. Like Beier’s magazine, Neogy’s magazine concerned itself with the act of recovery, which may be understood in the symbolic sense alluded by the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* when he speaks of permanent separation from the mother and the ensuing desire to recover the loss (1968: 203). The figure of the mother may be seen as a signification for the parent culture, with its rich traditions and customs, which was obliterated during the colonial conquest. The loss of the mother and her imagined plenitude may be irrevocable, but the sense of absence remains.

Lacan argues that “man’s desire finds its meaning in the desire of the other, not so much because the other holds the key to the object desired, as because the first object of desire is to be recognized by the other” (31). The notion of seeking recognition by another, whose loss

institutes desire as a permanent condition, is useful. The thesis investigates ways that the new-generation writers grapple with the question of desire in a society marked by the negations and renegotiations of the post-colonial context. The struggle for recognition in the postcolonial context is bound up with the desire to resolve the fundamental question of an identity crisis (fragmentation) triggered by colonialism and its repression of older forms of subjectivity.

Because of the geographical proximity and shared cultural histories of East African countries, Neogy's journal *Transition* (founded in Kampala, Uganda) can be used as a model in tracing the evolution of literary magazines in Kenya.⁴ The framework is useful in mapping contextual information of such publications as *Kwani?* (2003), *Storymoja* (2007), *Jalada Africa* (2013), *Kikwetu: A Journal of East Africa* (2015), and *Enkare Review* (2016), all of which emerged in the twenty-first century and continue to shape Kenya's contemporary literary-cultural scene. Oduor and Kioko have been directly associated with *Storymoja* and *Jalada*, where they have published short fiction and translations. Nonetheless, this does not discount the influence of other magazines (some of which are now defunct) in their overall cultural growth and artistic maturity. The two writers have also run personal blogs in the past – Oduor's *Soul Fool* and Kioko's *inkdrops.me* – but these are presently inactive.⁵

Unlike *Black Orpheus*, *Transition* established itself as a publication with an internationalist outlook, publishing aspiring writers, political leaders, intellectuals, and academics from varying cultural, ideological, and racial backgrounds.⁶ It prefigures the contemporary Kenyan magazines and journals that have also adopted a global perspective, such as *Kwani?*, *Jalada*, and *Enkare Review*, which are but a few examples of the diversity of these writers and the experimental nature of their art forms. The central motivation for establishing these publications was to reach out to a broad audience and also “have a creative space [where young

⁴ However, it should not be forgotten that Kenya's 1970s was marked by a proliferation of popular magazines that published short stories, poetry, and even comics by budding writers. Examples include *Viva* and *Trust*. See specifically Frederiksen's (1991) in-depth account of *Joe* magazine. Frederiksen, however, argues that despite the publication's early promise in expanding urban and popular culture in Kenya, it was forced to fold in 1979 because it was, interestingly, deemed “an African magazine” (1991: 137) thus unable to attend to European and Asian tastes, two groups that sustained the publication as main advertisers. This development underscores the underlying postcolonial tensions that would later birth *Kwani?*, *Jalada* and *Enkare* in the 21st century.

⁵ See this early blogpost by Ndinda Kioko: <https://myinkdropshere.wordpress.com/2016/06/20/to-the-girl-with-whom-i-might-have-shared-a-man/#more-307>

⁶ Neogy summed it as follows: “At the time *Transition* started, one of the things I had in mind was...that it was necessary to have a magazine of this kind where these young writers could, for the first time, be exposed in print; where they could feel the public reaction their writing was causing; [where they could] get away from the private exclusiveness of a lot of young writers in East Africa who just wrote for a few friends and so on” (1962: 106).

writers] could build the right support for the production of their stories” (Kiprop Kimutai 2017: n.p.). The issue of the right support should be understood within the context of mainstream publications such as newspapers, publishing houses, and university journals that rarely feature creative work. Inadequate government funding and unfriendly taxation laws meant that the local publishing industry had turned to the publication of texts books rather than fiction, which struggles to sustain economic viability (Bgoya and Jay 2013). This partly explains the sudden proliferation of small magazines in Kenya in the 1970s, which catered largely to those who could not access the mainstream market. Moreover, for Neogy, editor of *Transition*, the local popular press was largely dominated by narratives meant for Europeans instead of East Africans (Neogy 1962). In this way, economic interest and neo-colonial control coincided in marginalising local cultural expression.

However, apart from pioneer popular magazines like *Black Orpheus*, *Transition*, and later *Viva*, *Trust* and *Joe* in the 1970s; other important publications later emerged such as *Parents* (which offers commentary on gender), *Awaaz Voices* (that “critically examines the role of minorities both as communities in Kenya and East Africa”), and *Jahazi* (which comments on socio-cultural and political events in Kenya and Africa). These publications continue to play a pivotal role in shaping cultural conversations that inform how individuals and communities (re)negotiate their various identities.

Remarkably, tension would later come to play when Binyavanga Wainaina, together with Billy Kahora and Parsalelo Kantai, founded *Kwani?*. Wainaina was specifically against what he deemed a rigid “aesthetic” that was dominating the cultural scene, especially “from the corridors of a university; or from the ministry of culture, or by The French Cultural Centre” (Wainaina 2003: 6). In his view, the philosophy and artistry of Kenya’s new-generation creatives would be predicated on individual efforts, but outside the confines of the traditional spaces of literary production and circulation. The notion of individuality (selfhood) was thus transformed into a metaphor of reimagining and rethinking Kenya’s cultural memory that had systematically marginalised various artists either because of their controversial themes or new styles of expression.⁷ Similarly, the valorisation of the self, as opposed to the collective, seemed to free the Binyavanga-generation from what had become the baggage of nationalist and anti-imperialist narratives (Adesokan 2012: 15). This preoccupation with individual anxieties,

⁷ David Maillu is the best example of the pioneer generation of Kenya’s popular writers who was criticised by academics and ‘committed’ writers alike for writing sexually explicit content and not being serious enough. See Chris Wanjala (1978, 1980). See also Maillu’s interview with Bernth Lindfors (2002).

revolving around issues of sexuality, marginality, gender and cultural alienation, was a way of finding an intersection with globalisation, facilitated by the increased access to the internet in the early 2000s, visible in the experimental art forms that the magazine published, including email chats, SMSs and family photographs, all of which signified a dramatic shift in cultural aesthetics that had been hitherto characterised by what I want to call the non-personal.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that the *Kwani?* collective did not have its fair share of contradictions from the beginning. For example, while it was one of the first print⁸ literary magazines to also venture into online publishing, it was still not inclusive enough to accommodate the many younger writers that were emerging. This third-generation had largely embraced aspects of digital production as demonstrated by their blogs and increasing involvement in social media networks like *Facebook*.⁹ In other words, there was an even further retreat into the private space where the authors could self-publish verse, book reviews, personal reflections, opinion, and other random anecdotes. Commenting on the transformation of African literature in the digital age, Adenekan (2014) has argued that “the internet” offers “an ideal platform” for these artists “to present their version of self and society” (133), which means that the internet becomes a testing ground for identity reconstruction at various levels.

It is within this context that the thesis situates the writings of the post-Binyavanga generation, exemplified here by Oduor’s “The Plea Bargain” (2011), “My Father’s Head” (2014) and “Rag Doll” (2014), and Kioko’s “Sometime Before Maulidi” (2014) and “Some Freedom Dreams” (2017). The narratives are important because of how the authors have exploited both mainstream and non-mainstream modes of publishing and circulation to comment on the themes of memory, loss, identity, and new ways of belonging. Their forays into other interactive digital platforms such as YouTube, where the writers have posted interviews,

⁸ It is significant to note that the entry of *Kwani?* and its online formats into Kenya’s dynamic and diverse cultural space did not mean that earlier print publications were necessarily old-fashioned and conservative.

⁹ The following blog links (started around 2010) offer a fascinating view into the artistic development of the authors in terms of their daring literary techniques and style; various non-conformist themes, and the mechanics of digital self-publishing, something that *Kwani?* had been unable to either anticipate or capture fully:

<https://thedrumsofshostakovich.wordpress.com/2019/01/01/1267/>

<https://lesleighke.wordpress.com/>

<http://michaelscrapbook.blogspot.com/2010/07/lorem-ipsum.html>

<https://sikuzijazo.blogspot.com/2012/08/august-must-read.html>

The above links of Clifton Gachagua, Linda Musita (Founder Lesleigh Kenya), Michael Onsando, and Amol Awuor, both who are/were associated not just with *Jalada* and *Enkare Review*, but other writer collectives like Storymoja and Hisia Zangu further explores the gradual evolution of Kenya’s literary and cultural space in terms of the partnership between digital and non-digital platforms.

literary engagements and readings, further demonstrate their innovative ways of transgressing the boundaries of cultural production, not just in Kenya but also in Africa.

Material culture and virtual relationships

The evolution of African digital publishing in Kenya has been characterised by the use of electronic media largely for shorter narratives and traditional publishing for slightly longer works. By this, I mean that the short story acts as a step toward the novel or novella, as increasingly has been the cultural trend among contemporary African writers in the twenty-first century. Nevertheless, works such as Oduor's "Rag Doll" and Kioko's "Sometime Before Maulidi", both published in the *African39* (2014) anthology, demonstrate the crucial role played by traditional publishing. It is a similar situation among other new-generation Kenyan artists.¹⁰ Moreover, there are earlier print publications worth noting, like the AMKA Kenya's collection *Fresh Paint* (2012) and Chris Mukasa's self-published poetry anthology *Power of Words* (2013). The fusion of print and digital reinforces what Santana (2018) has rightly observed as the interconnection of material and virtual networks of cultural production "that operate simultaneously at local, national, regional, pan-African, and global scales" (188). Networks that trace their history to *Black Orpheus*, *Transition*, and *Joe* illustrate the palimpsestic nature of cultural memory, showing how this memory is rewritten through the appropriation of older aesthetics to recreate new art forms. In this regard, intertextuality becomes an important device in reading the ways that Oduor and Kioko reconstruct reality in narratives that deal fundamentally with the themes of loss and nostalgia. These themes should be understood from the framework of the role narratives play in the reconfiguration of cultural memory. As argued by Arturo Arias and Alicia del Campo (2009), such narratives are linked to the concept of symbolic negotiation with a past that may not be compatible with the needs of the present and even the future.

For Oduor and Kioko, the future is negotiated through expanded collaborations, partnerships, and participation in regional and global literary prizes, awards, fellowships and scholarships. These include The Jalada Prize, Storymoja Fellowship, Writivism Short Story Prize, Miles

¹⁰ Here I am thinking of Oduor Jagero's commercially successful self-published crime novel *True Citizen* (2014) and later *the Ghosts of 1894* (2016). Jagero was long associated with Kenya's Hisia Zangu, a writers' collective started in 2010 that brought together aspiring writers to discuss and critique one another's creative work. Additionally, the collective occasionally partnered with other cultural groups like the *Storymoja Festival* to organize writing competitions. Some of the winners and judges of the competitions later co-founded *Jalada* and *Enkare Review* hence re-affirming the multidirectional flows and exchanges of cultural production among this generation. See, for example, this: <https://storymojafrica.wordpress.com/2014/09/15/2014-storymoja-festival-page-poetry/>

Morland Foundation Writing Scholarship, and the Caine Prize. Kiguru (2016: 202) has examined the intersection of some of these prizes and various local writers' organisations, and explained how these intersections contribute to an alternative canon formation on the continent. This is demonstrated in the anthologies of *Jalada* and *Enkare Review*, both of which boast an eclectic mix of experimental writing that is in conversation with a range of local and global cultural groupings and has resulted in the increased circulation of cultural value within diverse audiences and publics located in the cyberspace. The digital space has thus been turned into a site that not only contests the questions of cultural consumption but also as a critical platform that grapples with contemporary discursive practices. This differs fundamentally from *Kwani?* and earlier literary journals and magazines that relied largely on an assumed audience outside the sphere of digital media, which predetermined the readings and interpretations of such publications.

Memory work and mourning

The study investigates the various significations evident in the stories of Oduor and Kioko in relation to memory work and mourning. It argues that the multidirectional flows and exchanges that criss-cross the boundaries of physical and digital spaces mimic the complex work of memory through such dynamics as remembering and forgetting. It illustrates how, through cultural organisations, media networks and short story productions, individuals confront loss, (re)negotiate belonging, and attempt to (re)construct new identities amid social and personal upheaval, whether in fictional narratives, personal testimonies, commentaries or biopics. The study is interested in how the construction and reconstruction of identities are mediated by the popular art forms and new social media platforms that have recently emerged.

To this end, a psychoanalytic frame of interpretation is useful in decoding the representations of fantasies and desires that permeate the stories under study. More specifically, the concepts of mourning and melancholia as theorised by Sigmund Freud in "Mourning and Melancholia" (1962) assist in understanding the various manifestations of loss that emerge from the narratives. However, the study is interested in the interplay of identity formation at the individual level vis-à-vis its social construction. In other words, investigates the work of memory from the social perspective while simultaneously commenting on the construction of subjectivity. To this end, Jacques Lacan (1968) and Jean-Paul Sartre (1973) are significant thinkers in conceptualising issues of intersubjectivity and fragmentation insofar as the questions of recognition and freedom are concerned. The interpretative framework offers

insights not just in the reading of the narratives themselves but also in the complicated ways that they are produced, circulated, and consumed.

The theoretical origins of the contemporary field of memory studies can be traced back to Freud, who has argued that memory tends to select events it wishes to remember and those it wishes to forget. In his book the *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, he proposes the notion of a “concealing memory” (2006: 18) to describe the form of remembering that both reveals and conceals the past, especially in respect of certain childhood events the memories of which have been distorted to serve the narrative of the past recalled by the adult. It is this form of memory reproduction which is demonstrated across all the narratives that was the subject of my analysis. While Freud is concerned primarily with individual memory, Maurice Halbwachs in *On Collective Memory* challenges this individualistic perspective by arguing that individual memory occurs within the context of group relationships, where “collective memory” (1992: 38) constructs a sense of identity derived from the community. He contends that collective memory constructs individual memories and that the only individual memories that are not constructed through collective memory are dream images, by which he means fantasies. Nevertheless, he does acknowledge that individual memories do differ in terms of intensity and degree of recall. The distinction between individual and collective memory, and the interrelationship between them, is important in various ways. It helps to frame the heterogeneous discourse of imitation, appropriation, invention and innovation among the emerging writers, who inherit from the older generation a cultural legacy while simultaneously creating new art forms reflective of their fantasies, their inner, subjective processes of narrative production.

Referring back to Freud while keeping a focus on the social, Paul Ricoeur in “Memory and Forgetting” (1999) examines the work of mourning and melancholia in relation to memory and repetition respectively. His reflections are particularly relevant to the role of memory in situations of group conflict. Claiming that collective memory is not the only type of memory responsible for mediation between past and present, Ricoeur argues that the role of memory in reconciling warring groups can only occur when the memory is both acceptable and understandable to the individuals tasked with initiating such a delicate process. According to him, the healing of memory happens through narratives since they mediate between present, past and future. This means that creative writers potentially play a key role in articulating personal memory with social memory in popular culture. Arturo Arias and Alicia del Campo in the article “Memory and Popular Culture” (2009) analyse the different ways in which

cultural memory assists in overcoming historical tensions through its renegotiation in film, music, and literature. Novels and short stories, in particular, are seen as crucial sites of renegotiation insofar as they contest the “hegemonic interpretations” (9) of the past that are manifested in master narratives, and articulate the ideals and desires of ‘popular sectors’ who seek to recover an alternative history for incorporation into the collective memory of society as a whole. In respect of this study, the ‘popular sectors’ comprise Kenya’s emerging writers who constantly reimagine the past in their narratives through innovative literary techniques that keep evolving according to the demands of the digital spaces in which they publish and share their works.

In her framing of collective memory, Judith Butler in *Frames of War* (2010) considers selective mourning and violence against the perceived ‘other’ in terms of the existing norms of representation that determine the status of an individual as either recognizable or non-recognizable. These norms often entail the political as well as the cultural. The argument ties up with her theorisation of human precarity and vulnerability, both of which are analytically useful when read alongside the notion of cultural hegemony. Butler’s assertion is especially significant because its sense of a broad community of humanity challenges platforms of mourning that are exclusive rather than inclusive. It is precisely these forms of exclusion that writers such as Oduor and Kioko are grappling with and contesting at the same time. However, their contestation should be regarded with caution. Thus, while affirming that counter-hegemonic motives do inform online publishing, Dinah Ligaga in “Virtual Expressions: Alternative Online Spaces” (2012) does not ignore other motivations like the ease of access and efficient production and circulation that comes with such platforms. As mentioned earlier, the authors discussed in this study operate fluidly within electronic and non-electronic publishing spaces. Given its radical openness to new discursive forms, electronic publishing has the potential to disrupt hierarchies and gatekeeping, but it is not the only approach available in reimagining cultural memory.

Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge the immediacy and impact of such shorter narratives as stories, essays, and think pieces among the post-Binyavanga group, and to appreciate the proliferation of such art forms in online journals and magazines. The growing popularity of transnational forms of validation for these genres through prizes and fellowships means that for writers publishing on digital media, the benefits of their cultural labour exceed traditional forms of compensation like royalties. While these methods of compensation became conspicuous with the rise of *Kwani?*, the trend has increasingly become commonplace among

the group. Moreover, because the internet has expanded and democratised spaces of expression through its interconnected networks that span local and global imaginaries, readers' tastes and sensibilities of engaging with art have equally changed. Consider, for example, the fundamental ways in which the Caine and Commonwealth prizes now mediate transnational conversations happening in cyberspace via personal blogs and social media networks. Writing in defence of the Caine prize, Lizzy Attree has argued that because "Africa is becoming increasingly urbanized, the short story can be used to reflect the experiences of time-poor people who work in some of Africa's mega-cities" (2013: 43). This statement reflects the capitalist demands of the twenty-first century and its effects on individuals, and therefore, the need for writers to address such modern anxieties. This subjective immediacy has elicited criticism from certain quarters about the individualism of these contemporary artists, who are seen to ignore the material conditions of production under which they operate (Ikheloa 2013).

Loss and recovery

The five stories under analysis each feature a protagonist whose memory work entails experiences specific to their individual histories and material circumstances. Nevertheless, at the same time, the protagonists register the social and cultural contexts within which they are located. Their memory work is mediated through an individual consciousness which is both immanent and transient, and the stories are written in a style that is at once sensorial, and thus immediate, and metaphorical, and thus phantasmal.

In Oduor's "The Plea Bargain", the protagonist Samora imagines the death of his fiancé Wandia who turns out not to have died after all. Samora's fears of Wandia's death intersect with memories of his mother's suicide in a tale marked not only by remembrance but also by traumatic repetition. In his attempt to repress his past, to foreclose on memory so as not to remember, he projects his anxieties around loss onto Wandia. His dealing with bereavement thus manifests through melancholia as opposed to ordinary mourning. The obsessive nature of his grief becomes self-destructive and results in a state of existential crisis. Separation from the mother in the Lacanian sense alluded to earlier provides an interesting way of reading the protagonist's fears as an identity crisis precipitated by an emergent society in which women assert their personal freedom and safeguard their economic independence.

Oduor's "My Father's Head" is also about familial memory and the drive for personal and socio-cultural independence, but in this story, the gender roles are reversed. A young woman called Simbi, probably in her mid-twenties, is struggling to remember the head of her late

father, Johnson. Reproducing the memory becomes an arduous task that seriously disturbs her until the coming of a Catholic priest from Kitgum, Father Ignatius Okello, who fills the emptiness of her existence and helps revive memories of her dead father. Okello confronts her fragmented self and also helps her to reconnect with the cultural memory of her family with its ancient customs and rituals of burial. Simbi gets to reconcile with her past and present, as revealed in her imaginary conversations with her father at the end of the narrative. If the mother in “The Plea Bargain” stands for a crisis related to the loss of a sense of emotional intimacy, the father in “My Father’s Head” stands for a crisis related to the integration of a sense that is emotionally distant.

The most elusive of Oduor’s three stories examined here, and the one that most poignantly describes a condition of precarity, is the whimsical “Rag Doll”, which presents a past that has been so completely severed that the protagonist, Solea, seems to inhabit a world that is entirely fantastical and utterly divorced from reality. The story recounts the lives of Solea and her rag doll, Tu Tu, who seems to stand in for a child, perhaps the child that Solea herself, a young woman, cannot outgrow. Solea and Tu Tu, whom Solea treats as a real person, survive on society’s margins, but despite their marginal existence, they succeed in negotiating their way in a life full of wonder and joy. The narrative reveals how forms of familial and social loss are turned into a refusal to conform to societal conventions and an enactment of social deviance. It also suggest that society is governed by patriarchal oppression, and highlights the role women play in resisting such oppression, even if it means stepping beyond normative social behaviour. Like Wandia and Simbi, Solea is in control of both her life and her sexuality. In all three stories, the female characters embody what it means to have agency and to free up the future. Their lives resonate with Kenya’s emerging writers, who draw on the accomplishments of the older generation in charting new paths through innovative forms of cultural imagination. The study shows how the three stories by Oduor, as well as the two stories by Kioko, can be said figuratively to mirror the historical predicament of their contexts of production.

Like Oduor’s stories, Kioko’s stories explore situations of loss and journey into emotional regions that are haunting and obscure, but unlike Oduor’s stories, they focus not on the relationships between generations in a family but between partners, though generational relationships remain pertinent. In “Sometime Before Maulidi”, the protagonist, who calls herself “not Anah”, is trying to come to terms with the death of her husband Issa, who had recently been murdered by police in the streets of Nairobi. She finds herself in the liminal space of grieving the death of her lover while engaging in sex with a stranger in an attempt at

forgetting. The journey motif becomes a significant way of apprehending the competing desires and fantasies of the protagonist who, at times, is also the narrator in the story. Her flashbacks reveal other intimate personal memories, particularly that of her father and grandmother whom she has not seen for a long time. The narrative technique deployed by Kioko reflects how shifts in human consciousness affect the development of narratives that are not only personal but also social. The bereaved partner is conscious, for instance, of how she is watched by other people, providing a reflective awareness of her perceptions about self-identity and conceptions of loss. As in the stories by Oduor, the struggle for self-determination within a context of close social relationships can be seen to gesture obliquely and perhaps allegorically to the politics of the everyday in the stories of these emerging Kenyan writers.

Kioko's "Some Freedom Dreams" similarly deploys the motif of the journey and the theme of loss, interweaving these with the subject of dreams and the art of writing. Like Oduor, Kioko's creative imagination seems strongly influenced by psychoanalytical concerns. There is a similar sense in her stories of meanings that hover just beyond conscious grasp, and that straddle the personal and the social. The notion of the dream invoked in the title of this final story under study speaks to the psychoanalytic conception of the unconscious. Freud was the first to refer to dream as the "royal road to the unconscious" in his work *The Interpretation of Dreams* (2001: 48) and Lacan in *The Language of the Self* identified the mechanisms of dream-work that Freud called condensation and displacement as the metaphoric and metonymic axes of language, claiming that the unconscious is structured like a language (1968: 21). Thus, in this final story, the articulations of loss and desire explored throughout the earlier stories come together as the language of literary dreaming, a language that sets up a dialectic between what cannot be recovered but what can be reimagined, in relation both to individual life and social life. The unnamed narrator has dreams linked to her notion of freedom both as an individual and as part of a collective – largely of emerging artists attempting to resist the status quo through unconventional relationships and avant-garde productions. While the artist community seems removed from the broader society and its concerns, references to the conflicts in Congo and South Sudan rewrite the themes of politics and disillusionment with nationalism that preoccupied the pioneer generation of writers.

The digital revolution and the social sphere

The digital revolution has had a profound impact not only on personal and social existence but also on the politics of representation. In fact, the personal, the social, the political and the representational have become increasingly entangled in contemporary life. The digital space is

diverse and connective, a space where language moves freely between personal fantasy and social transformation, between material reality and metaphorical figurations. The stories examined in this study are a product of the digital revolution and demonstrate the ways in which the literary imagination is feeding into the changing social and cultural imaginary specifically in Kenya but also more generally in Africa. The study explores the layered meanings of the five stories. While loss and a sense of personal, social and cultural precarity are dominant themes in the stories, they also exhibit a sense of a world reimagined after the devastation of colonialism and the disillusionment with the failed postcolonial state. It is a world where new communicative circuits have created new circulations of meaning and new relationships between the subject and the world.

Chapter 2: Crisis in Okwiri Oduor's "The Plea Bargain"

Existence and meaning

Human beings seem naturally inclined to wrestle with questions of existence and to seek meaning and purpose in their daily social interactions. This becomes apparent when, in the face of anxiety and alienation, optimism is sustained in a universe characterised by despair and cynicism. Existential crisis signals a turning point in the life of an individual as it compels the self to contend with questions of identity and mortality. Freud's psychoanalytic theory can be said to be compatible with existential thought in terms of the relative freedom that it confers on human subjectivity and the construction of self-consciousness. According to Freud in *The Essentials of Psycho-Analysis* (1986), human subjectivity is directly linked to the conscious awareness of one's individuality. Nevertheless, the individual is not alone, and identity crisis and psychic turbulence are frequently traceable to psychological trauma caused by the death of a loved one, as evident in Okwiri Oduor's "The Plea Bargain" (2010), the story under scrutiny in this chapter. The concept of working through personal loss is examined here in relation to the actions of the different characters in the narrative.

Sartre's concept of existential freedom in *Existentialism & Humanism* (1973) is analytically useful in terms of the inter-subjective nature of affirming self-identity on the condition of another's freedom to do the same. The realization of self-consciousness is impossible without the participation of a consciousness directed outwards. Recognition of the other is a crucial concept in apprehending the various ways in which the protagonist, Samora, through his psychological and social conflicts, rediscovers himself when he reconciles with his fiancé, Wandia. The explores the notion of existential crisis and renewal in relation to the themes of memory and mourning in the story. The protagonist's memories, made available through flashbacks, are significant because they provide a window into the meaninglessness, cynicism, and the sense of fatalism that define his life. Unable to overcome the psychological trauma of his mother's suicide, he finds himself in an endless state of mourning, fixated to the object of his loss. Freud's idea of melancholia as a state of "painful dejection [and] cessation of interest in the outside world" (1962: 243) is vital in framing the argument.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, melancholia is a personal experience of loss derived from an absence in social relations. However, according to Svetlana Boym in her book *The Future of Nostalgia*, melancholia also has a political or cultural dimension, where it takes the form of

nostalgia for an earlier historical formation (2001: 48). The notion of a political or cultural form of melancholia resonates with the obsessive desire of the new-generation Kenyan writers to engage with the past and its hegemonic hold over the present. As outlined in the previous chapter, the production and circulation of the narratives of Okwiri Oduor and Ndinda Kioko have largely centred on the fundamental questions of contestation and negotiation of the old in order to create the new. In this regard, the concept of precarity, as theorised by Judith Butler in *Frames of War* (2010) seems to speak to the ambivalent experience of existential crisis in evoking both a sense of marginality and the possibility of renewal, and it is useful to keep the concept in mind in reading Kenya's cultural landscape as projected in the stories under consideration. While the stories explore the place of past attachments and understandings in seeking meaning in the present, the digital platforms in which they first found expression are ephemeral in nature. Ephemeral here signifies the various challenges that affect electronic publishing outlets like online journals, blogs, and magazines, which, like memory, can be interrupted and fleeting. A pertinent example would be the now dormant blog *The Young Writers' Project (Nairobi)*, where Oduor's story was first published. The dormancy of the blog stands in for the existential crisis that permeates cultural production in Kenya, where recuperation is sought but the resolution is elusive, not unlike Samora's nostalgic memories of a deceased mother whose ongoing significance animates but also arrests his life.

Choice, responsibility and complicity

Life constantly presents individuals with a series of dilemmas from which a choice has to be made. Such choices, however, are not without their baggage and are not easy. There is always a sense of responsibility for every choice made since the consequences do not just affect one person, but a group of people. I illustrate how choice and responsibility are integral in mapping out the fate of such characters as Samora and Wandia as they struggle to reconcile with the issues of loss, memory, grief and mourning. The chapter analyses Samora's traumatic past in relation to a melancholic outlook that shapes his relationship with others, especially when he meets his would-be fiancé. The protagonist's trauma at the loss of his mother, and consequent disillusionment with life, is examined from the perspective of male fantasies and desires that are inextricably tied to patriarchy. Finally, the symbolism of the narrative title, and its dialectic of guilt and reprieve, is unpacked.

Oduor's story portrays the life of Samora, who is a physiotherapist trying to come to terms with the 'loss' of Wandia. Narrated from the third person omniscient perspective, the narrative takes the reader on a journey of suffering, cynicism, despair, and, later, a glimmer of hope with the

miraculous re-appearance of Wandia. Other characters of note include Woki and Nyaera, Wandia's mother and workmate, respectively. The brief mention of these minor characters and the roles they play reinforce the psychological anxieties and tensions that permeate the narrative. Woki and Nyaera are also important narrative props because they reveal the complex questions of human existence and death. Woki, for instance, consoles Samora, who believes that his wife has died in a plane crash when, in fact, as subsequently disclosed, it is Nyaera who has perished. Wandia, an air hostess, was supposed to have taken the flight, but because of an earlier disagreement with Samora, her colleague offered to fill in for her on the condition that she would return the favour the following week. The conflict between the two partners, Samora and Wandia, is essentially the driving force of the narrative plot, and the collateral damage this causes raises deeply existential questions around life and death, remembering and forgetting, freedom and guilt.

In the story, Oduor deploys imagery that not only contextualises the conflict but also foreshadows the main character's fate of having to deal with a traumatic past and an unpredictable future. The narrator recalls how "rain drops spilled out of the sky and threw themselves like darts against Samora's window. They were unrelenting, fierce, as though they wanted to break the glass and spear Samora. Turning away from the window, Samora kicked the first thing before him, an oak coffee table" (2010: n.p.). The visual imagery in the excerpt is vital because it outlines the nature of Samora's crisis. In that fleeting flashback, it is as if he is at the mercy of the elements, and this indirectly projects his internal anxieties. The anxieties become manifest later as seen in his self-destructive behaviour; pressing shards of broken glass "harder against his palm, until he felt his skin crack" (2010: n.p.).

The narrative is set in different locations, some of which include Samora's house, as exemplified by the mention of the "oak table" and the room he had shared with Wandia three hours earlier. Other places alluded to are the physiotherapy ward, the road and, finally, a church where the two lovers unexpectedly meet and reconcile. The settings are symbolically important because they mirror the increasing fragmentation of Samora's identity, largely signified by a pervading sense of disillusionment and despair. Having heard of the aeroplane crash, he assumes, rather tragically, that Wandia is dead, and his consciousness is filled with tropes of violence, waste, and loneliness. He leaves his house in a state of helplessness in order to numb his pain and dejection, and it is on the road, where we witness his complete physical and psychic fragmentation. Outside, the rain had "thickened in intensity, *stabbing* the earth with its silver spears. Samora stopped by a *vandalised* booth and waited...stopped by an *emaciated*

Casuarina and waited...He embraced the rain, *the coldness* of it, the *piercing* wetness, the *empty* whirring it brought to his ears.” (n.p., emphasis mine).

The extract is revelatory in several ways because it frames Samora’s sense of fragmentation by bringing into sharp focus the intensity of his loss. He is on the brink of emotional paralysis. However, the previous events in his turbulent life portray a man whose life has been typically marked by resignation and disillusionment. On meeting Wandia for the first time, he is surprised by her bubbly character. This is because she is the antithesis of his gloomy world where no human has a right to be happy. Interestingly, that begins to change the more they meet and get to know each other’s deep-seated fears and hopes. It is at this point that he confesses to her about the suicide of his mother when he was fifteen. He harrowingly describes how “she walked away from me like I didn’t need her, like she didn’t care about me” (2010: n.p.).

The fatalistic tone of the above confession is an indicator of Samora’s ongoing work of mourning while, at the same time, unconsciously re-evaluating his life in relation to his traumatic past. The subject of death becomes a metaphor for reimagining his life. It raises fundamental questions of human existence. What is it like to be loved? What is the significance of care and compassion in a world riddled with despair and cynicism? Wandia’s increasing presence in his life transforms him as he gradually confronts his pessimism and fatalistic worldview. She is the embodiment of his possessive fantasy and fearful desire and, more importantly, the subject of his admiration. When, in a heated argument, she defies him by refusing to resign from her flight crew job, only to ‘die’ subsequently in a plane crash, Samora’s whole world crumbles. His mind reverts to the repetition of painful memories, and he constantly blames himself.

As the narrative progresses, the underlying symbolism of the title, and how this focalises the action and central themes of existential crisis and hope, become apparent. The symbolism points to the ongoing negotiation between opposing forces encompassing past and present, patriarchal control and female empowerment, pessimism and optimism. There is the bad (melancholia), the ugly (guilt), and the good (self-realisation). The notion of the plea bargain becomes a significant way of understanding how Samora needs to acknowledge culpability in exchange for a lesser sentence. In the narrative, Samora discovers that the repetition of the past is a form of avoidance, and to become human again he needs, instead, to work through the past, which can occur only when he accepts his complicity in the systems of oppression that curtail the freedom of others. He has the choice and responsibility to transform himself, to discover

his freedom, only when he confers this freedom on Wandia, and accepts that the world in which men turned their fiancés into objects of control to satisfy their patriarchal needs is now gone. This revelation, to a large extent, calls for a compromise. His predicament affirms Sartre's argument in *Existentialism & Humanism* (1973) that every personal choice also involves a choice for the rest of humanity. The crisis he confronts is not just about him and Wandia, but also about relationships in general in a context of patriarchal privileges and restrictions.

Interestingly, the motif of male control is not confined to "The Plea Bargain" but is also evident in Oduor's "My Father's Head" and "Rag Doll." The narratives are characterised by the recurring image of a male figure who consciously or unconsciously, positively or negatively, exercises a controlling influence on the life of a female. In these stories, the omnipresent male represents existential fantasies that are projected onto others. Samora's projection is best captured by his wish to "have reached over when he'd had the chance...[and] held her [Wandia] prisoner against her will" (2010: n.p.). The wider implication in the extract is that Samora unwittingly projects his despair and cynicism, which are manifestations of his psychological torment, onto intimate others, like his fiancé. His masculinist fantasies of control, traceable to an essentially infantile sense of loss, precipitated by the mother's desertion, point to the complex socio-cultural conditions that prevent women from defining themselves in their own terms. The inability of the woman to define herself in a man's world is most poignantly illustrated in "Rag Doll", where female disempowerment is coupled with poverty and class exclusion.

In confronting trauma and despair, a concession is required that entails an alteration of the worldview and an acceptance of responsibility. Haunted by the suicide of his mother, and later the refusal by his fiancé to quit her career, Samora undergoes an existential crisis marked by despair and cynicism. Then, presuming his fiancé to be dead, he undergoes a severe inner disintegration characterised by images of violence and waste that symbolize Samora's psychic degeneration after the erroneous belief that Wandia had perished in a plane crash. It is only when Wandia turns out still to be alive that Samora, having confronted his deepest fear, accepts the repressiveness of his actions.

Gender, precarity and renewal

There is a long history of patriarchal assumption of authority and responsibility, with the man either believing that the woman is unable to fend for herself or perhaps fearing her independence. The desire to exercise control seems to be powered by insecurity as if the woman

who walks out the door as Samora's mother had done will not come back. When, against Samora's wishes, Wandia leaves the house to go to work, and is then presumed to have died in the aeroplane crash, she comes to represent what Samora most fears and desires to control, the loss of the mother.

The man controls the woman by influencing her life choices, restricting her to the domestic sphere, which forces the woman into the emotionally precarious state of either resisting such control or capitulating to it. However, it is not only women who face such predicaments. Men are also affected by patriarchal expectations that they provide for their families. These tensions, experienced by both the man and the woman, are bound to strain the unity of young families.

In "The Plea Bargain", it is not only Samora who grapples with fears brought about by an emotional crisis. Wandia too is a victim insofar as she both resists the demands of Samora and is unsure whether it is the right thing to do. She is worried because she loves Samora, but she is not willing to succumb to his threats. Instead, in a rather ironical fashion, she defies him and questions his narcissistic expectations of her. She retorts that "no husband of mine will ever make quit my job" (2010: n.p.). This dramatic conflict between the two is revealed through flashbacks that imitate the work of memory, showing how the unconscious persistently assails human consciousness, with repressed fears resulting in violent projections. Samora's desire to control Wandia stems paradoxically from his fear of losing her, but it also derives from his socialisation as a male in a patriarchal society. Hans Bertens observes that as humans "we need the response and recognition of others [...] to arrive at what we experience as our identity. [...] We become subjects – that is to say, ourselves – by way of the perspectives and views of others" (2008: 126-127). While Samora's social identity as a male is dependent on Wandia's submission to his authority, his primary identity as an individual is dependent on her recognition of him as a person deserving of her love.

The story draws attention to the family as the basic social unit in cultivating a sense of individual and collective identity and shows how intimate familial relations are vulnerable to neglect and accidents. In the physiotherapy ward where Samora works, babies are repeatedly described as victims of parental carelessness. The narrator recalls "how a child had been wheeled past them in the lobby, foaming at the mouth after taking a bottle of paraffin" (2010: n.p.). Another time a baby had suffered life-threatening injuries after an accident in the kitchen. For Samora, events such as these feed his fears and despair and act as a negation of the hope that underlies the narrative. But there is also a counter-narrative to Samora's paranoid pronouncements and negative outlook, with Wandia assuming a relaxed and friendly tone that

contrasts with Samora's cynical attitude. For example, she has a knack for turning painful memories into memorable tales, a trait that is vital in deflating conflict. Equally important, such capacity to reimagine the past by infusing it with fantasies of inventing the future mirrors the psychological shifts of the two lovers who, in the end, rethink their personal beliefs and accommodate each other. Wandia helps Samora "find meaning in what had been a meaningless existence" (2010: n.p.).

Wandia's attitude can be seen to be broadly representative of emerging new world order, and her determination to find meaning in a precarious existence resonates with the modes of cultural production and circulation among the post-Binyavanga generation. For these writers, electronic publishing has provided a dialogical space that gives life to narratives that could not, to a certain extent, have been published in pre-internet days. Like Wandia in Samora's turbulent existence, the internet facilitates exchange and reconceptualises local cultural imaginaries in relation to such global trends as transnational feminist aspirations. In this story, Oduor creates a relationship between a young man and a young woman whose intimate struggles stand in for the struggles of a new generation finding new modes of discursive production and circulation, new ways of entering into a conversation about relationships that are mutual and sustaining. Like Samora's fixation on the traumatic separation from his mother, Kenya's first and second-generation cultural practitioners such as Mugo Gatheru (first) and Meja Mwangi (second) tended to repeat the past by invoking fantasies of nationalist identities that perpetuated rather than resolved their cultural estrangement. The emerging generation of writers creates instability and ruptures "in hegemonic interpretations of the past" (Arias and del Campo 2009: 9) similar to Wandia's dialectical role in "The Plea Bargain" to instil sense in her fiancé's fragmented world.

Finding meaning through the dialectics of dialogue is also evident in Samora's desperate appeal to God towards the end of the story. The dialogue is symptomatic of his conflicted spiritual identity, which is an extension of the existential crisis that plagues him as seen in this plea: "'Lord, if you could surrender Wandia, I promised not to tell anyone about the miracle and you won't have to follow precedent. [...] I promise to visit you often, to not only bring Wandia to see you each Sunday but to stay during the service'" (2010: n.p.). More importantly, however, the biblical allusion reveals the nature of human mortality and the sanctified role Christianity plays in affirming that mortality. The church as the symbol of Christianity is a site where struggles regarding the questions of existence can be enacted and where dwindling hopes and fading optimism can be recovered. It is equally a place where those who have been spiritually

depleted can be nourished again like Samora through “some form of plea bargain” (2010: n.p.) with God. Religion here provides not an escape from the responsibility of freedom but a context in which the self opens up to what exceeds the specificities of family, society or nation and discovers a capacity for love that transcends it.

The story demonstrates how the entrenched ideologies of patriarchy and the monologue of control it repeats endlessly can be resisted and rewritten through the dialogical process initiated by a liberated woman like Wandia, a process that requires working through the insecurities that underpin masculinist positions. Negotiation between the lovers results in a situation where both can exercise their freedom and autonomy and points to a new order in which the battle of the sexes may be resolved in a sustainable way. While Samora and Wandia disagree on the fundamentals of gender roles, and while perceptions of differences in gender persist, they are also acutely aware that it is within their power to identify and contest the stereotypes in these differences.

Online collaborations and emergent identities

The thematic concerns and identity formations explored in the stories of Oduor and Kioko are markedly different from those that characterise the works of the early generation of writers like Ngumi Kibera, Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye and Abdilatif Abdalla. These emerging authors have embraced digital publishing as a strategy of contesting and reimagining Kenya’s cultural memory, using collaborations and partnerships with diverse cultural entities associated with the online world. The dialogic space explored in the relationship between Samora and Wandia parallels the dialogic space opened up by blogs such as *Babishawi Nawe* and *Storymoja*, both of which have been significant in rethinking modes of literary production and circulation not just in Kenya, but also on the African continent at large.

Like Oduor’s other earlier short fiction such as “The Red Bindi on Diwali” (2010) published on the *Storymoja* blog, “The Plea Bargain” first appeared in *The Young Writers Project (Nairobi)* blog as part of an anthology that featured a variety of emerging Kenyan writers,¹¹ including Tom Jalio, who later won the 2014 Babishai Niwe Poetry Award Contest, and Sheila Nyanduaki Okong’o, rated second for the same prize in 2015. These cultural recognitions, which have proliferated in the age of the internet, are significant because they illustrate the role of literary prizes in creating alternative canon formation and “mediating the process of literary production” (Kiguru 2016: 202), thus extending the visibility of the writers not just within the

¹¹ For a detailed overview of the blog see <https://theywpkenya.wordpress.com/>

continent but also around the globe. Moreover, the prizes affirm that cultural memory can be reconstructed and reimagined through online publishing as much as through print publications. Ligaga has lauded the role of the internet in disrupting “the information infrastructure that had been built around the nation-state” (2012: 4) and allowing more personal voices, that were initially trivialised and marginalised, finally to speak. In other words, the internet has made accessible a cultural landscape that had been largely exclusive and fixated on particular thematic concerns. As demonstrated by Oduor’s earlier narratives, new cultural identities have started to find bold expression on blogs and online magazines and journals.

Babishawi Niwe, a Uganda-based blog,¹² and *TYWP*, now defunct,¹³ are examples of the digital platforms that have been fundamentally important in disseminating cultural material that is wide-ranging in terms of form and content. The two entities have partnered and collaborated with diverse cultural organizations, especially within the East Africa region, thus increasing opportunities for production and circulation for the new-generation authors. Besides earning a handsome amount for his award-winning poem “There was once something special here” (2014), Jalio was also sponsored to attend the 2016 *Storymoja* Hay festival.¹⁴ Since its founding, the festival has been a meeting place of creative writers and other cultural practitioners. Such spaces frequently facilitate interaction between aspiring and well-known authors and establish critical networks with publishers. In Jalio’s poem, the speaker mourns a lost lover and, like Samora, is unable to overcome his loss, which becomes a fixation that leaves him scarred despite achieving a degree of closure. This is a common literary trope, but the difference between the situation sketched in the poem and the situation explored in Oduor’s story is instructive. In the latter, the experience of loss is historicised in relation to both Samora’s personal history and the history of patriarchal control. Moreover, there is also a sense in which the situation in the story alludes to the conditions of change with which the post-Binyavanga writers as a whole are grappling. In this regard, the story may be read as allegorical. Like other post-Binyavanga generation of writers, Jalio is involved in multiple cultural projects. He has co-edited a short story e-book called *Nairobi Grit* (2013) with Clifton Gachagua and Clifford Oluoch. The participation in several projects reinforces the significance of partnerships and collaborations between the artists while simultaneously demonstrating the multidirectional flows of literary production and circulation among this generation. A perfect

¹² For comprehensive information about this blog, see <<http://babishainiwe.com/about-us/>>

¹³ This brings into sharp focus the short-lived nature of digital publishing and problematics of online archiving.

¹⁴ For more about the festival, see: <<http://storymojafestival.co.ke/about-festival/history/>>

example is Master Publishing, which published Oduor's novella *The Dream Chasers* (2011) and Jalió's digital book project. Furthermore, collaborations forged within East Africa and beyond have led to the publication of diverse collections such as Beverly Nambozo's edited poetry anthology *A Thousand Voices Rising* (2014). The collection featured both aspiring and established poets across the continent and affirmed the ability of the new-generation writers to transcend borders of culture, gender and race.

The linking of modes of literary exchange to the concept of transcendence can be seen to feed into the notion of creating new identity formations by working through the loss of old forms of identification. Like Samora and Wandia, emerging authors are going through a process of self-recognition and self-realisation in situations of sudden and dramatic shifts of understanding. Borders that had previously constrained identities are now being crossed. Having reunited with his fiancé, Samora reflects that "[h]e'd never hated her [Wandia]; it was himself that he hated, for finding it in his heart to warm up to someone else" (2010: n.p.). Similarly, the closed borders of nationalistic identifications are opening up, painfully, to embracing others and otherness, to living with difference rather than erecting defences against it. Samora's re-examination of his identity, and his discovery of the capacity to love, is pertinent to how Oduor and other emerging writers engage with the complex question of rewriting cultural memory in Kenya, so that literary and other forms of cultural expression "become key spaces for the negotiation of cultural memory" (Arias and del Campo 2009: 7) through the cross-border collaborations enabled by digital platforms and collaborative cultural work.

The idea of collaboration and partnership can also be examined from the standpoint of the *TYWP* blog where "The Plea Bargain" was published. The blog was founded with the aim of "bringing together young Kenyan writers from all ethnic, economic and social backgrounds, to write and discuss writing as a way of reflecting upon the past, present, and future" (The Young Writers' Project 2010: n.p.). Jackline Makena Onjerika, winner of the 2018 Caine Prize for African Writing for her short story "Fanta Blackcurrant", became one of the pioneer co-facilitators charged with curating content on the site. Such sharing of digital spaces reveals how collaborations shape cultural conversations by offering publishing opportunities for aspiring writers, and the project's objective to invite published authors (Edwin Mokaya) and those who are writer-publishers (Billy Kahora and Muthoni Garland) to mentor emerging artists is testimony to the ongoing conversation. Sessions such as these offer aspiring writers an insider's understanding of the mechanisms of creative writing, publishing and marketing, and points to what Kiguru describes as the "[t]he choice between informal and formal training for creative

writers” (2016: 209) who are interested in penetrating global cultural markets. Moreover, the work of *TYWP* has led to the emergence of other daring and ambitious magazines such as *Kikwetu Journal*, *Jalada*, and *Enkare Review*. The latter two have continued to push the frontiers of digital publishing, exemplified by their transnational and global collaborations. Overall, collaboration as a cultural act constitutes an innovative form of literary engagement among the new-generation writers as they grapple with marginal attention from mainstream publishers.

Having created an association between personal memory and cultural memory in relation to identity formation, and having related both personal and cultural memory to the process of working through loss, the implication is that cultural memory also involves the work of mourning. Like Samora, the post-Binyavanga generation of writers can be seen to exemplify the difficulties involved in creating new identity formations through processes that are balanced precariously between a melancholic adherence to the old and mourning that seeks to announce the emergence of the new through forging new relationships that break through restrictive boundaries of publications.

Transcendence and cultural freedom

Whether at the individual or the cultural level, transcendence is profoundly important because it expresses the desire of humans to extend themselves beyond their existing limitations. The need for transcendence can be triggered by conditions of precarity that may manifest as despair and cynicism. In such paralysing conditions, individuals devise methods of escaping their predicaments. The methods of escape vary and could include reaching out to supernatural forces. In this regard, the personification of wind in “The Plea Bargain” could be read as a metaphor of spiritual striving in dealing with an existential crisis. In line with the argument pursued here, the crisis and resolution portrayed in “The Plea Bargain” is at once a personal and a social experience. Moreover, given the conditions of production, the experience may also be seen to reflect on the existential and cultural situation faced by Kenya’s emerging writers.

The layered meanings of the story arise from its allusive narrative style, with its images having a symbolic resonance beyond what is explicitly stated. A particularly significant image, and perhaps the central image in the story, is the image of the mother and its associations with notions of nurture and care. The significance of the mother seems to extend beyond the physical person who abandoned Samora, pointing to a more general sense of loss. His obsession is expressed through compulsive remembering and repetition of past events that he also wishes

to forget because the memories remind him of rejection and the damage this has caused to his sense of self. In the image of his mother, he misrecognizes himself, resulting in a distorted self-consciousness that prevents him from entering into a reciprocal relationship with others, especially Wandia. When she comes to his life, he is a man already hollowed by a despairing sense of self-worth, which is why he thinks “[s]he would reject him” (2010: n.p.) despite his best efforts. He regards himself as unlovable. Interestingly, it is from that precarious psychological condition that he begins seriously to examine his life. Through his internal monologue, the reader is ushered into the mind of a man constantly seeking to belong after a traumatic past that has severed him from others.

The fact that Samora feels a general sense of detachment from others might suggest that motherhood symbolizes a larger polity like a nation or community, the loss of which endangers her citizens, leaving them adrift like Samora. Perhaps this is the significance of the many references in the story to children and their vulnerability, their need for care. This generalised feeling of alienation indicates the need for a new way of thinking about relationships, a yearning that leads Samora to the Sacred Heart Shrine, where he hopes that God will grant him mercy, and miraculously bring Wandia back to life if he promises to change his attitude towards her desire in wanting to pursue a career and ensure her own independence. While Wandia is a believer and attends church, Samora is indifferent to religious belief until this crisis. The story does not present this event as a dogmatic affirmation but suggests that the role of religion is to take the individual out of their self-obsessions. Aside from referring to Samora as “Dr Sour Puss”, on account of the fact that he is unable to smile or laugh spontaneously (2010: n.p.), Wandia accuses him of being selfish. He is preoccupied with himself and his own pain and despair. On the other hand, he recollects how easily she is driven to laughter and tears, which indicates that she, unlike him, experiences empathic human emotions. Whereas he holds himself back, she reaches out to others.

As ~~will~~ it becomes clear in my subsequent discussions of “Rag Doll” and “My Father’s Head”, Oduor has a keen sense of spirituality, of which Christianity is only one expression. In “The Plea Bargain”, the wind acts as a symbol for a powerful spirit that imbues individuals with supernatural hope. This interpretation of the wind as spirit is substantiated by the reference early in the story to “tongues of fire”, which is a direct reference to the Holy Spirit. But the association of the wind with spirit is not confined to Christianity, just as the story does not confine itself to a Christian sense of spirituality even though the climax of the story occurs in a Catholic Church. When Samora encounters Wandia in the Church as if in answer to his

prayers, she is wearing a “grey afghan” (2010: n.p.), which is predominantly worn by Muslim women, meaning it is a symbol of Islam and not Christianity. The wind itself is significant also in “Rag Doll”, where Solea relies on the goodwill of the dust devil to survive, and where the significance seems animistic rather than Abrahamic. Oduor’s “The Daily Assortment of Things” (2016) is similarly preoccupied with the themes of the supernatural and animism.

The three belief systems invoked in Oduor’s stories find an intersection that transcends the boundaries that separate them. The transcendence reflects a freedom of choice with regard to spiritual needs, as observed in the lives of Samora and Wandia, who exercise their spirituality in different ways. This openness to different religious beliefs mirrors the situation in Kenya’s contemporary cultural scene, where the emerging writers navigate the mainstream and non-mainstream spaces of publishing and circulation, struggling like the protagonist to find a definitive centre. The existential dilemmas that characterise “The Plea Bargain” may be seen to represent the broader cultural dilemmas that the new-generation authors in Kenya confront and seek to resolve through transnational publishing ventures, as exemplified by Oduor’s “Swear Not to Look” (2014), which was published in the *No Tokens*, an American online journal.¹⁵ The narrative is anchored on the broad themes of memory and mourning through its sharp portrayal of the loss of childhood of three young girls, Chibwire, Sarah, and Kadogo. Similar to “The Plea Bargain” and “My Father’s Head”, this story grapples with a personal way of processing and working through grief, but uses modern forms of communication like radio and television, rather than religion, to mediate the grief and transform the personal into the public.¹⁶

‘International’ magazines symbolize a break from normative interpretation and reading of Africa’s contemporary literary spaces and cultural products. Kate Wallis has warned against the idea of “perpetuating binaries between African literary production” in Africa and Euro-American cities because it risks downplaying some of the domains of value and multidirectional flows “involved in the creation, production, and circulation” (2018: 180) of such literature. Nevertheless, while her assertion is valid in relation to the need for authors to widen their literary networks abroad, her argument ignores the influence and control of global

¹⁵ For more details, see: <<https://notokensjournal.com/mission/>>

¹⁶ Others published outside the continent comprise Richard Oduor Oduku (a *Jalada* founding member) in the *San Antonio Review* for his poetry and Alexis Teyie (*Enkare Review* poetry editor) in the *Anthema: Spec from the Margins*, a Canadian blog. These examples affirm the adaptability of the new-generation writers when it comes to fluidly shifting between an increasingly interconnected cultural landscape..

publishing firms and cultural institutions in the West that still exert much influence on how African literature is validated and accorded cultural value.¹⁷ It means that while the multidirectional flows of digital production continue to thrive, the scales of cultural capital remain tilted in favour of the West, which might explain why contemporary African authors are increasingly getting published abroad. In other words, the opening up of international spaces of publication may be liberating but also, in another sense, co-opting.

The flows of digital production and circulation include the sharing and circulation of readings and interviews on YouTube. These video clips are important indicators in assessing the transformative nature of the internet insofar as the role of the public is concerned, as they provide real-time feedback. The latter is significant because it speaks to modes of reading that are facilitated largely by acts of viewing, and this leads the post-Binyavanga group to philosophize their works and worldview in a way that differs from the previous generation. Moreover, they reveal the constant reconstruction of cultural identities through experimentation with various art forms among the new-generation authors. Of particular relevance here is the interview uploaded as “Okwiri Oduor, Caine Prize on Arise News” (BlackRook Media 2014: n.d.), which offers the writer’s reflections on “My Father’s Head” and discusses her literary influences. Oduor’s reflections are slightly extended in Wilkine Brutus’s (2015) clip uploaded as “African Literature: An Afternoon with Okwiri”, where she comments on the need to create more “cultural freedom...and artistic liberation” (n.d.) in terms of publishing in African languages and sustaining inter-regional collaborations between writers. Other clips demonstrating the interactive possibilities of YouTube include Kenyan writers affiliated with *Jalada* journal, as in “Jalada Mobile Festival – Rwanda, Kigali” (2017) and “Jalada Mobile Festival, Kampala and Kabale” (2018: n.p.)¹⁸.

Second thoughts

The videos essentially reinforce Oduor’s concept of cultural freedom expressed through transnational festivals in the Eastern African region, and they outline the importance of seeking new cultural networks that are vital in reimagining Kenya’s cultural memory. In line with how the argument has sought not only to analyse the personal crisis depicted in “The Plea Bargain”

¹⁷ See Pucherova’s (2011) nuanced argument on the ‘politics’ of the Caine Prize and why it is not helping grow African literature.

¹⁸ See other Jalada Mobile Festival tours in Tanzania and the Democratic Republic of Congo in the following links, respectively:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=81oO9FYXfSk>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZVm-hRiL3iA&t=13s>

but also to use this crisis as a platform to explore the cultural state of Kenya, it might be said that experimentation with digital platforms is an existential act of transcending the self (the Kenyan cultural identity) in order to enter into dialogue with others (continental and global cultural identity). Insofar as this argument is valid, the significance of Wandia agreeing to give up her job as a flight attendant and agreeing to find another job can be seen as ambivalent on several levels. In the first place, Wandia accommodates Samora's emotional insecurities to some extent, which could be read as a negotiated settlement but also as a capitulation. Samora's fear for Wandia's safety comes across as rational in the light of the aeroplane crash, but this seems more like a rationalisation than a reason. Wandia agrees to the terms of his plea bargain not because her job as flight attendant seems unsafe, but because she feels guilty about the death of her workmate Nyaera, who had stepped in to take her shift: "It should have been me on that flight, not Nyaera. She's dead because of me. What did I do, Samora? I killed her" (2010: n.p.). In the second place, Wandia's job as a flight attendant can be seen to mirror the internationalist aspirations of the emerging writers. Like these writers, she uses modern technology to connect with the world at large. In agreeing to give up this job for a more domestic job that will not take her out of the country, she seems to compromise on her internationalist aspirations.

The story is infused with ambivalence. Samora vacillates between love and hate for Wandia, and Wandia's face is described as having "sad lines and worry lines and laugh lines all smudged against each other" (2010: n.p.). This ambivalence extends also to gender roles and patriarchal control, with Wandia agreeing to give up her job as flight attendant despite her desire for independence. If the story is also an allegory of the situation in which the emerging writers find themselves in Kenya, then there is also ambivalence in the aspirations of these writers to connect with the wider world. Clearly, the world that is opening up for these writers provides an opportunity to cross boundaries, but such transgression is not achieved without second thoughts and even guilt.

Ambivalence is the preeminent characteristic of dreams, and the notion of the dream will feature prominently in the next chapter. But the notion of the dream is also relevant to this story. In a sense, Samora enters a nightmare world when he believes Wandia to have died. The descriptions of his violent response in his room, his flight onto the streets where disconnected scenes play out as if in a dream, and his communication with God in the sanctity of the church building have a dream-like intensity. Moreover, it has been argued that the images in the story

can be seen to mirror the way dreams are overdetermined by multiple meanings, as explained by Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (2001).

Chapter 3: Displacement in Okwiri Oduor's "My Father's Head"

A portrait of the deceased

What would you do if one day you were suddenly unable to remember the image of a dead family member? Let us say, your mother, a sibling, or even your father. Do you seek refuge in the family album to marvel at their old photographs? Or do you watch home videos if those are available? If the two fail then maybe you could simply try to draw a portrait of that family member as you remember them. And if a portrait emerges that faintly resembles the deceased, what do you finally do with that image? These are some of the fundamental questions that Okwiri Oduor examines in her 2014 Caine-Prize winning story "My Father's Head" (2013).¹⁹ The protagonist Simbi is struggling to remember the image of her deceased father Johnson, who had died in a tractor accident a few years back. She works in an old-age home in Nairobi, Kenya, living a single life, yet constantly thinking specifically about her father's head and the implications of his reappearance in her life.

The narrative is characterised by dream-like scenes where Simbi, who doubles as the narrator, invites us into her unconscious with its various fantasies of her father, and what she believes he looks like. The reader essentially encounters a mixture of what resembles dream-thoughts and dream-contents, which are both brought to reality through drawings. By dream-thoughts is meant the raw material from human consciousness that constitutes the dream (the images) during sleep, while dream-content involves the concealed significance of the dream.²⁰ In other words, dream-content is about the symbolism of the dream and its meaning for an individual like Simbi. Of significance, too, is what the image of Johnson symbolises in the overall context of the story. The discussion will link symbolism in the story with the style of narration as both offer insights into the question of subjectivity and its construction.

Narrated from the first-person perspective, the "I" is significant insofar as it reveals how the principal character defines herself as an individual through her father. She recounts that "[I]t was not my father I was mourning. I was mourning the image of myself inside the impossible aura of my father's death" (2013: 14). In a newspaper interview explaining the inspiration for the story, Oduor corroborated the idea of mourning oneself by observing that "I was grieving the loss of childhood" (Kamencu 2014: 19). This invokes the notion of desire and how, upon

¹⁹ The story was first published in an anthology that I will examine in the chapter analysis.

²⁰ See Freud's (2001) detailed investigation in *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

gaining self-consciousness of our role in society, or what Lacan (2018) calls the symbolic order, we discover our unending lack, and thus our dependence on others to affirm ourselves. This is the fate of Simbi. Her father symbolizes a myriad things to her with which she readily identifies, such as the comfort of tradition and community. On the other hand, she is exiled from that world. This results in a tension between not only the old and the new, past and present, tradition and modernity, but also the collective and the individual, as well as the unconscious and consciousness, as the discussion illustrates.

Freud's concept of the uncanny, described in his essay of that title (2004) is instrumental to this study because it captures the idea of a "double", particularly in respect of Simbi. She believes that she perfectly understands herself and has a stable identity, yet she is simultaneously trapped in the image of her father in a process of what Freud calls "doubling, dividing and interchanging [of] the self" (425). A similar experience can be said to characterise a section of Kenya's new-generation writers, who are implicated in the country's cultural memory but, at the same time, seek a new aesthetics of literary production and circulation. Like Simbi, who is enthralled by the image of her dead father, these writers both identify with and separate from their literary ancestors. Simbi is in a liminal space where a border exists between her and her father. She desires to overcome this split and accommodate the father in her life through the work of mourning that seeks to recover repressed memories.

The analysis explores how the work of memory and mourning in response to loss relates to broader issues of displacement and exile, examine the process of working through loss, and link these concerns to the ways in which Kenya's emerging writers use alternative media outlets and involvement in cultural organizations as means of reconstructing cultural identity. The shift from a sense of displacement and exile to a sense of reintegration helps to rethink contemporary literary conversations that have remained trapped in an imaginary unable to transcend the fantasies of the past and to cultivate a new cultural consciousness.

Memory traces and restoration

Attaining any form of consciousness of the self requires the ability to contend with the significance of memory traces and fragments. This means finding ways of recovering whatever is repressed in the unconscious and converting it into something useful within consciousness for the individual. This chapter outlines the efforts of Simbi to recuperate the image of the dead father in order to construct her subjectivity. It examines how remembering and forgetting work simultaneously in a complex process that imitates the construction of individual memory and

collective memory. The analysis explores the symbolism of the setting in relation to the various tensions that characterize the narrative, including the tension between the old and the new, Christianity and tradition, childhood and adulthood. The setting is read alongside the narrative voice, which adopts the pronoun “I” in signifying an ongoing identity formation that seeks dialogue with others.

Set in an old-age home and in the narrator’s house in Uthiru in the outskirts of Nairobi, Oduor’s story centres on the life of a young woman called Simbi who is strangely intrigued by the head of her deceased father, which she tries to bring to life. Events that trigger her desire and the work of mourning begin on a Thursday with the arrival of a new priest from Kitgum, Uganda, who is called Father Ignatius Okello, and shares with her father the trait of filling his mug of tea to the brim. Her work of memory begins at this point, but she only manages to retrieve traces and fragments of the father and aspects of his lifestyle. She recounts: “I thought about the millet-coloured freckle in my father’s eye and the fifty cent coins he always forgot in his coat pockets.” (2013: 12). This excerpt illustrates the difficulty she has with creating a complete memory. When she begins to reproduce dream-like scenes in the form of drawings of her father, it becomes apparent that recovering the repressed is indeed a challenging task, as Simbi is unable to recall the father’s head.

The narrative setting reinforces the sense of a somewhat unreal existence. Most events happen in the old-age home, where life is characterized by endless routine, on the part of both Simbi and the elderly people for whom she cares. For the elderly, the routine involves a life of resignation and pretence, demonstrated by some of their actions, like offering the priest fake smiles that “melted like ghee, and that oozed through the corners of their lips...after the thing that was being smiled about went rancid in the air” (2013: 11). These events symbolize a stagnant consciousness that has closed itself to acts of spontaneity that would enable cognitive functions such as creativity and imagination to thrive. It is within this unreal and non-living context that Simbi attempts to remember, and thus bring to life, the image of her dead father. Significantly, her efforts to recall only begin to make sense to her the more she shares them with her colleague, Bwibo, a cook at the old-age home. This supports Halbwachs’s argument that individual memory only occurs within a collective framework because humans are social beings. He notes that “each impression and each fact, even if it concerns a particular person exclusively, leaves a lasting memory only to the extent that one has thought it over – to the extent that it is connected with the thoughts that come to us from a given social context” (1992: 53).

Importantly, even as the social and the personal intersect, especially via the first-person narrative perspective, other significant themes emerge, like the tension between Christianity and tradition seen in the contradictory responses of the old people. For example, while the priest reminds them of the teachings of the Gospel about loving one's neighbour as one loves oneself, they are, instead, wondering whether "Bagisu people were savage cannibals" (2013: 11). This indifference to Christianity, which recurs throughout the narrative through juxtaposition, demonstrates the overall contradictions between the new and the old. Ostensibly, lines are blurred between the doctrines and belief systems of Christianity, which represent a new epoch, and tradition, which is associated with the old prejudices and tribal divisions. As far as the old people are concerned, identity formation is a process that is constantly interrupted by forgetting and other forms of memory lapses. They accept Christianity as a new identity formation, which entails an act of forgetting, but in the very process of forgetting they are compelled to remember. This mimics the act of mourning and is repeated in the way Simbi recalls the image of her dead father. Memory and forgetting are dependent on each other just like the human unconscious and consciousness.

The style of narration reveals Simbi coming to terms with her subjectivity, beginning with what Lacan describes in *The Four Fundamentals of Psycho-Analysis* (2018) as the transition from the imaginary to the symbolic order. The imaginary comprises an entrapment in fixed forms of past identifications, such as the old ways of existence and superstitions that fascinate the old people. On the other hand, the symbolic order involves acknowledging that while nostalgia is inescapable, the anxieties and challenges of an open-ended form of identification need to be embraced, with the subject not tied to the fixed forms of the past but understood as a subject in the making. This is not simple and involves a life marked by memories that do not define the future but assist in constructing it as a question. In other words, it is always about rewriting a past to ensure a future that is not inert but alive and being alive means being subjected to uncertainty. Father Ignatius triggers Simbi's memories, yet what appears in her mind is at first a caricature. Like the dream scenes of the unconscious, Simbi's father is described as a "marionette" resembling "scenes in a theatrical display" (2013: 12). This way of apprehending her father is a testament to the estrangement and displacement she has to endure in the process of finding herself through her father and symbolizes the contradictory relationship between fantasy, which is a fixed form endlessly repeated in different modes, and reality, which keeps changing its form. The entire narrative structure of "My Father's Head" is designed in such a way that the reader is uneasily positioned between fantasy and reality. Johnson indeed comes

back, but we cannot visualize him as a normal human being. He remains headless most of the time, and when his head does appear, the narrator is not fooled by it. She confesses to Bwibo that “even if my father had had a head, I would not have seen it: people’s heads were not a thing that one often saw. [...] But what was there to draw one’s eyes to the banalities of another’s head?” (2013: 13). In other words, there is more to the head than a frantic search for it. So why is she still searching? To answer this question, it behoves us to revisit Samora’s pursuit of closure after the death of his mother. While the circumstance of his loss is markedly different from that of Simbi, the incidents share certain similarities. First, both involve the sudden and violent loss of a parent. Second, both affirm the idea that identity formation is an ongoing process. Third, both intimate that past is alive in the present and cannot be wished away only worked through.

However, transition into an autonomous sense of mature selfhood in any society with its changing symbols and discursive formations requires an individual consciousness that differs from that of childhood or from that of the past. Society demands that the individual see beyond the seductions of the imaginary, where the self is unable to transcend the narcissism of its static image. Simbi’s rhetorical question in the aforementioned extract poignantly reinforces this battle even as the subject enters into dialogue with others. The dialogue in this regard is not just literal but metaphorical insofar as the work of mourning is concerned. It is a dialogue not just with the literal father, but also with what the father stands for, which is the symbolic or the social law. In Lacanian terms, the dialogue is not with the ‘other’ but with the ‘Other’.²¹ As demonstrated in *Using Lacan, Reading Fiction* (1991), Lacan explains that to be in dialogue with the ‘Other’ is to be in dialogue with the law of the symbolic, which is written into the unconscious. It is to give up an imaginary identification with the other in exchange for what the Other has to offer.

The fact that Simbi works in an old-age home is significant, not only because it is here that she meets Father Okello who activates the memories of her father, but also because it is in this place where the past is meeting its end, literally. The old-age home signifies the dying of the old. The care that Simbi provides to the elderly points to the way in which she respects the past and seeks to incorporate it into her future. This past concerns her father in the first instance, but also the beliefs, prejudices and behavioural oddities of the elderly. It also concerns the

²¹ I am using this Lacanian concept deliberately to signal the entry of Simbi, who is the conflicted subject in the narrative, into adulthood, and indeed, the society with its laws and a new language of existence that differs from that of her childhood, when everything revolved around her.

traditions of the past, as in the burial rites performed by Father Okello for her father, even though he exhibits a degree of venality in wanting to extract money for his services (2013: 20). Indeed, what this demonstrates is that the past, and the beliefs and traditions associated with it, are not some idealist construction. The past, like life itself, is flawed, but this is no justification for rejecting it. The past is what it is, and the subject is called upon to make peace with it, however imperfect it may be.

Fantasies and new consciousness

According to Freud in his essay “Mourning and Melancholia” (1962), humans tend to love instant gratification of their immediate pleasures and desires irrespective of the conditions. In the long-term, this invariably becomes counter-productive because the individual discovers the lack can never be fully satisfied. Such a discovery triggers a series of new fantasies in a never endless cycle that unless controlled through a new consciousness, could render a person perpetually in need. As I explain in the next paragraphs, food plays a critical role in the narrative because it symbolizes the narrator’s various emotions like loneliness and nostalgia. The latter two are vital in terms of redefining one’s reality as we see with Simbi. She adopts a reflective approach to her past life and the image of her father assumes a new meaning that jolts her to self-awareness that she had never experienced before. Simbi does not just embrace reality, but she confronts her double, which is emblematic of old fantasies of her father.

Therefore, I want to posit that food plays a metaphorical role illustrating the sense of loneliness and intimacy that permeates the plot. The narrator who lives alone in Uthiru recounts her daily habit of buying “an ear of street-roasted maize” which she would chew “one kernel at a time” before drinking “a cup of masala chai” (Oduor 2013: 12). Maize and tea provide a fascinating insight into the protagonist’s contradictory life because they foreshadow crucial events. On the one hand, it is from the street vendor where she buys her maize that the reader learns of her ongoing internal conflict with the ghost of her father. Ostensibly, she has been living a lonely life as a young woman with no one to love her. It is after the prompting of the vendor that she accepts her father inside the house. The full acceptance of the father symbolizes the reconciliation with her past as well as the present. She gains a form of individual consciousness that is tempered with the reality of life. However, there is also the symbolism of tea which Simbi associates with her father, Johnson, after seeing “the way Father Ignatius filled his mug – until the tea ran over the clay rim...and soaked his canvas shoe” (Oduor 2013: 12). Tea is a symbol of apprehending that which meant so much but is now lost and irrecoverable. Therefore, there is always a propensity to repeat the fantasies, as a process of working through

the loss. In other words, eating as a basic need becomes an act of invoking what Svetlana Boym has described as “reflective nostalgia”, whereby “the past opens up a multitude of potentialities” (2001: 50), which includes a new future.

The invocation of food in the narrative is often marked by a shifting tone that moves from playful: “smiles that melted like ghee” (2013: 11) to sentimental signalling of the pervading nostalgia that defines Simbi’s overall life. The shift also centres nostalgia as the motive informing the narrator’s work of mourning and the way she interacts with the elderly at the old-age home. However, the past is never that blissful and it could even turn out to be a different thing altogether. The appearance of Johnson as a ghost is a testament to this shock because, after all, his head is disgusting when Simbi finally examines it closely. But the shock is foreshadowed by the change in the narrative voice that adopts the second-person perspective of “you.” For a moment, the narrator departs from her world of fantasy and into reality. It is as if her double is addressing her: “Let me tell you: one day you will renounce your exile, and you will go back home” (2013: 17). I want to speculate that this is a turning point in the narrator’s life because she begins to view herself from multiple perspectives. She acknowledges her fragmented personality and begins to discover that the fundamental questions of life like identity and belonging are never guaranteed. Her new sense of self-awareness is integral because it puts into perspective the central themes of displacement and exile that define the lives of Father Ignatius and the old people.

It is after the above revelation that the image of her father transforms into a real human being. He resurrects from the dead and joins her in life. It means he is no longer the earlier unrecognizable drawings or any of those dreamy sketches that she imagined at night. To demonstrate Simbi’s excitement with the change of events, the author reveals her new-found obsession through the use of parallelism: “*My father* was slung over the wicker chair in the veranda [...] *My father* had a head. [...] *My father* had been a plumber” (2013: 18 emphasis mine). The parallelism in the excerpt reveals the narrator finally embracing reality and re-evaluating the image of her father not as an object of fantasy, but an individual with various contradictions. The image of a contradictory father, in the broader context, is reflective of the limitations of any symbols of authority in society. The metaphor of the father (whether it is Johnson or Ignatius), therefore, could mean either a return to the old or new, tradition or Christianity, the past or future and vice versa depending on the social context, for example. Contrastingly, for such emerging authors as Oduor and Kioko publishing and circulating most of their narratives on digital platforms, the symbolism of a new father involves contending with

a different cultural landscape with its set of rules. This often requires a different form of cultural consciousness or exile from the old ways framing cultural identity that has been synonymous with the older writers such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o in his earlier novels, where cultural identity is tied restricted to ethnicity.

The analysis has explored the implications of pleasure principle insofar as fantasies and nostalgia are concerned. It has singled out the metaphorical role of food in apprehending the contradictions in Simbi's life. The discussion has considered the symbolism of the new father that is different from the narrator's previous dreamy images and how it ushers her into a different reality in society. Moreover, the thesis argued that through tonal shift and change of narrative voice, the reader can witness the transformation of events via the main character's new language in reference to her father. Simbi is able to redefine her father in completely different terms because she understands what he represents. She begins to discard her earlier idealised image. It further dawns on her that life is full of contradictions and that ways of belonging and rejection go together. Insofar as Simbi stands in for the writer, and possibly also for the new-generation writers, this implies constantly rethinking Kenya's cultural memory by defying the old aesthetics of literary production and circulation.

Cultural memory and freedom

The idea of literary freedom in the twenty-first century means several things to Kenya's emerging writers. It signals a different way of inscribing their narratives into the existing cultural memory via the use of digital technologies. The subsequent literary freedom heralds imaginative modes of alternative canon formation that include active participation in continental and global prizes that I will shortly talk about. "My Father's Head", for example, was first published in 2013 by *Short Story Day Africa* blog²² in their food-themed anthology, "Feast, Famine & Potluck" and later won the 2014 Caine Prize. This made Oduor the third Kenyan author to win the award after Binyavanga Wainaina (2002) and Yvonne Owuor (2003). Later Makena Onjerika bagged the prize in 2018 for her short story "Fanta Black Currant" which was first featured in *Wasafiri* magazine. This demonstrates the various ways in which these writers are increasingly exploring online platforms of publishing to circulate their fictional narratives. This project argues that publications like *Jalada* and *Enkare Review* which were influenced by *Kwani?* remain fundamentally important in reimagining Kenya's cultural memory even as they struggle with funding issues.

²² For a detailed list of the prize, see: <<http://shortstorydayafrica.org/the-ssda-prize/>>

Before winning the *Caine* “My Father’s Head” was shortlisted alongside Kenya’s Billy Kahora’s “The Gorilla’s Apprentice”. Kahora was the long-serving managing editor of *Kwani?* which is famed for publishing a generation of writers renowned for their highly experimental works. *Kwani?*’s early success triggered essential questions regarding the rationale for those “who” decide which literature is publishable and accepted as part of the canon, and which is not. To answer the question, the magazine, through The Kwani? Manuscript Project²³ organized in 2012, featured several ‘unknown’²⁴ authors who have since been published alongside Okwiri Oduor on different platforms. Clifton Gachagua who was longlisted for his manuscript *Zephron* has appeared in *Jalada Africa* and “Africa 39”. The latter published his highly experimental science fiction piece, “No Kissing the Dolls Unless Jimi Hendrix is Playing” (2014). There is also Nicholas Orem Ochiel, whose draft novella *The Haggard Masturbator* was longlisted as well, and, who has written an incisive critique²⁵ of the *African 39* anthology.

Kiguru has observed that writers’ organizations such as Kwani Trust play a central role since they possess “the cultural capital to link writers to prize organizations and publishers, and therefore to global visibility” (2016: 209). Unfortunately, some of these magazines have been folding up because of lack of funding and infighting.²⁶ The death of small magazines in Africa as exemplified by *Transition* which is no longer produced in Africa is one aspect of the negative outcome of the past repeating itself in the present. It is significant to observe that the cultural capital Kiguru talks about extends to the authors’ power to renegotiate their cultural identities within a fluid, yet hegemonic literary ecosystem. It means renegotiation is about an ongoing alternative canon formation project in such online publications as *Jalada*, *Enkare Review*, and *Kikwetu*, despite some of the setbacks highlighted.

The approach of alternative canon formation adopted by Kenya’s new-generation writers is meant to achieve a variety of objectives that include gaining different audiences and publics situated within the broader digital space. Wallis (2018) reads this strategy as a means of creating important literary networks and exchanges critical in understanding the emergent modes of production and validation of contemporary African literature in English. The view of

²³ For more about the project, see: <<https://manuscript.kwani.org/kwani-manuscript-project-news.php>>

²⁴ I am using the word very carefully in the context of writers who remain marginal within Kenya’s mainstream and even non-mainstream platforms.

²⁵ See Ochiel’s piece here: < <http://quarterlyconversation.com/39-africans-walk-into-a-bar>>

²⁶ The case of *Enkare Review* is the most prominent in recent years. See: <<https://www.jamesmurua.com/troy-onyango-speaks-out-on-enkare-review-issue/>>

validation is supported by Attree who served as director of the Caine Prize for decades. While quoting Ellah Allfrey, she posits that the prize “has allowed a generation of writers to blossom – not least by granting access to what can sometimes be a closed industry and, importantly, by awarding a decent sum of money with which to buy time to write” (2013: 36). The idea of a ‘closed industry’ is interesting because it is reflective of a past that, to an extent, has often refused to open itself up to transformation. The past in this regard represents traditional media outlets and official institutions which have often been accused of stifling new talent.

Nevertheless, despite challenges of mainstream publishing, Kenya’s new-generation writers continue to produce and circulate their narratives on digital platforms that are conventionally deemed marginal. This bold cultural move traces its roots to *Kwani?* as mentioned in chapter one. In its early years *Kwani?* was known to publish ‘unknown’ authors some of whom I have listed like Mehul Gohil with his short story “Farah Aideed Goes to Gulf War.” Gohil, like Oduor, is a *Jalada* founding member where both have shared their creative works. These collaborations and literary exchanges signify a break from the grip of traditional publishing outlets even as the writers explore and seek validation from popular prizes like the Caine.

Nostalgia and fragmentation

Momentary escape from the present into the past is often what constitutes the work of memory and this could take the form of nostalgia. It could be argued that individuals engage in nostalgic trips as a means of satisfying childhood fantasies and desires. This means nostalgia is another way of contending with our fragmented identities as individuals in modern society. Simbi deploys nostalgia as a mechanism of coming to terms with the contradictions of her existence as a young woman and reconciling with the questions of human mortality. This is exemplified by how Simbi becomes conscious of death through the grief of her father who is also mourning the loss of his two friends.

Nostalgia, as seen in the earlier paragraphs, is associated with longing and yearning for a period characterized by bliss and innocence. It is a resistance “against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress” as aptly put by Boym (2001: xv). Oduor constantly reminds the reader of this affect, especially her poetic description of her father and how he used to work as a plumber before his death in a tractor accident. Simbi, who is the protagonist, “remembered the day” her father “found a gold chain tangled in the fibres of someone’s excrement, and he wiped the excrement off against his corduroys and sold the chain” (2013: 18) and later bought a television set. Her descriptive reflections foreground not just the precarity of Johnson’s life,

but its simplicity and creativity. He seems content with what life has offered him as demonstrated by his humorous remark after purchasing the television.

But why are the above memories disorienting to the narrator? This is because, despite the growing clarity of the image of her father, she still reminds her colleague, Bwibo, that they should not allow him to stay. Does it mean that nostalgia has nothing to offer to those who indulge in it, particularly in this regard when it is contemplative? To answer the question would require providing a brief background of what Johnson represents. According to Simbi, her father is a community man meaning he belongs to the people. In one of her many fantasies, she even imagines that if he dies, “*his people* would bury him seated in his grave” (2013: 16, emphasis mine). For Simbi, the past is important but it is also a period from where to be detached. It is her father’s people, not hers. Furthermore, her idea of people and belonging repeated throughout the story seems to be increasingly incompatible with her rather isolated and loveless life. In other words, she is the opposite of what her father represents and that could explain her psychological tension as well as dilemma.

The tension manifests itself between forces of tradition and modernity like the Luo proverbs that essentially capture the ongoing conflict voiced by Bwibo who is always trying to bring Simbi back to reality. She cautions her when she asks how to get rid of her father’s ghost that “[t]he liver you have asked for is the one you eat” (2013: 18). This means that one cannot escape the vagaries of reality. If the past comes back to haunt an individual in the present, only that individual has the power to extricate herself from such a condition. In the wider context, this implies that human beings should always find amicable ways of resolving socio-cultural tensions. At times, it is wise to forget about the past and move on with life as observed by Bwibo in one of her many rhetorical questions directed at Simbi followed by the proverb about not crying over spilled milk. Nothing is constant, just as the elderly man in the old-age home reminds the main character: “Only the food you have already eaten belongs to you” (2013: 16).

Returning to Boym’s concept of nostalgia as resistance against “the modern idea of time” (2001: xv) is significant because it highlights how humanity is constantly operating within the realm of contradictions. To remember the past is to transcend some of its limitations while also interrogating it. In the context of this study, the idea of time should be considered from the perspective of how Kenya’s new-generation writers have managed to engage in both local and

transnational forms of cultural production. Writers like Alexander Ikawah²⁷ and Otido Omukuvah have not only been published in *Jalada* and *Enkare Review*, but also in Nigerian online journals such as *Saraba*. This transnational model which has been accelerated by the internet affirms some of the contradictions of modern time. This is because transnationalism did not begin with the post-Binyavanga cohort but can be traced back to the global outlook of pioneer African literary magazines like *Transition* and *Black Orpheus*. To understand Simbi's nostalgia for her father and why she is hesitant to embrace the present and her new sense of identity, we have to affirm the role the unconscious plays in human consciousness. The unconscious is the repository of the repressed material that can only become conscious through processes such as dream-work. Nostalgia as an act of memory reproduction is not enough to satisfy the repressed individual fantasies and desires, which could explain the protagonist's predicament. In choosing to draw her father, Simbi can be seen to be an artistic figure, and for the emerging artists, nostalgia as work of memory is about the appropriation of old styles and aesthetics because digital publishing, to an extent, remains a dialectal component of the print era. Simbi's predicament in relation to the past is also the predicament faced by the author as an emerging writer.

Appropriation of the past is also a recovery of the repressed memories in the unconscious, which includes an acknowledgement of the finality of death. Simbi's memories bring this theme of death into sharp focus through another layer of memory which is that of her father. This signals to the notion of the double, especially in the narrator's fragmented conception of death. She is thinking of death in personal terms, but also through her father's perspective. Just like the daughter, Johnson is disturbed by the sudden loss of his friends, Sospeter and Pius Obote. However, it is Sospeter's death that reminds Simbi of the mortality of her father. Through foreshadowing, it is revealed that Johnson is a man marked for death: "I sat on the stool watching him, afraid that if I looked away, he would go too. It was the first time I imagined his death, the first time I mourned" (2013: 15). What this implies is that Simbi's appreciation of human mortality has indirectly resulted in her love for life. This is why she qualifies her new self-awareness of death by asserting that "I was mourning the image of myself

²⁷ Ikawah who has been nominated twice for the Commonwealth Short Story Prize is another founding member of *Jalada*. It is vital to add that Oduor's novella *The Dream Chasers* received high commendation from the Commonwealth Book Prize in 2012. I have explored some of the implications of participation in similar prizes, especially relating to cultural capital and the validation that comes with it.

inside the impossible aura of my father's death" (2013: 15). Death in this regard is a form of rebirth in the living.

In the end, having suffered a lukewarm reception from his daughter, Johnson seems a distraught man. The tragic news of his friend Pius Obote torments him further, sending him into a state of denial. He protests: "If you do not want me here drinking your tea, just say so, instead of killing-killing people with your mouth" (2013: 20). Oduor's clever imitation of the Luo language as voiced by Johnson's non-standard English is important because it highlights the never-ending general atmosphere of displacement, alienation, and exile. There is constantly a clash of the past and present, tradition and modernity, old and new, even if the clash adopts a new vocabulary. Moreover, the clash reinforces the idea that contradictions will often remain a part of human existence, because Simbi is not sure whether to get rid of the ghost of her father or not. The father begs to leave, but the daughter requests him to stay for "a couple of days" (2013: 20). It is also the first time he refers to him as "Baba" and not "my father." The narrator's split personality could be said to be a continuation of the work of mourning signified by the lack that will constantly plague her, just like the rest of humanity, till the end of her life.

Oduor foregrounds the themes of displacement and exile in the lives of Simbi, Johnson, and Bwibo through vivid poetic descriptions, flashbacks, use of proverbs, and non-standard English. She also uses foreshadowing in understanding the ongoing contradictions and tensions of the past and present as well the unconscious and consciousness. Kenya's new-generation writers fit into this framework of the contradictions in terms of their negotiation of the past by appropriating certain features of its aesthetics to carve a new future. Death as a dialectic of life, as seen in the narrator's overall dilemma regarding the recovery of her father's ghost, on the one hand, and appreciation of his non-existence, on the other.

Displacement, mourning and integration

Through dream-like images, Simbi manages to reconcile with her identity within a collective framework. The clash between the imaginary (which we could say is the id) and symbolic order (superego) is inevitable in Simbi's conflicted life. She is a young woman trapped in a routine job at an old-age home in Nairobi and is trying to come to terms with her existence. She is also single in a city that pressures her to get married. However, she is imprisoned in the past, which is symbolized by the elusive image of her dead father called Johnson. The significance of memory traces and the idea of restoration are evident when her father reappears in her life.

Simbi is not sure of herself because her work of memory is simultaneously a work of mourning. She cherishes the memory of her late father while she is also concerned by the question of human mortality. Importantly, she yearns for the past while is revolted by it. She finds herself in a liminal space of displacement and exile where there is an illusion of a definite place of return, yet it is also unreachable. Simbi's interior monologues are important because they offer invaluable insights into her divided personality and self-consciousness. She is able to work through personal, familial, and social loss with assistance, not just of Bwibo, but also Father Ignatius and the old people. More significantly, she does so through her drawings, an expression of artistry that links her with her generation of artists. The analysis has demonstrated the significance of digital publishing platforms among Kenya's emerging authors in terms of the cultural freedom they enjoy through symbolic acts of displacement and exile. I have read the platforms as work of cultural memory that destabilizes mainstream modes of production and circulation while simultaneously appropriating styles and aesthetics from the past. Both the narrative itself, and writers who, like Simbi, are implicated in the contradictions and tensions of the past and present seek a new form of consciousness that acknowledges the past in order to confront a promising future.

Chapter 4: Precarity in Okwiri Oduor's "Rag Doll"

Loss and precarity

The twenty-first century is a period that has been marked by the frenetic pace of globalization. This has been heightened by the increased use of digital inventions such as the internet that brings people together from various parts of the world, resulting in the redefinition of modernisation as a framework of imagining the world. Technology is bringing humanity together more rapidly than before, even as global inequality continues to affect millions in developing societies.²⁸ This chapter argues that many people are living in societies that could be described as both modern and pre-modern, and have found innovative ways of survival despite what is ostensibly a precarious existence. The emphasis is on a pre-modern worldview that is characterized by the presence of humans and non-humans coexisting in a community with one another. The discussion thus examines the fictional representation of such a society in Okwiri Oduor's "Rag Doll", a story that deploys magical and supernatural imagery to describe a world facing opposition from what appears to be a modern and conservative society. The protagonist Solea captures the feeling succinctly when she reminds her rag doll friend, Tu Tu, that they are unwanted by "[t]he people out there" (2014: 247), who are opposed to their way of life.

"Rag Doll" is the story of a woman called Solea who seemingly enjoys a carefree life with her rag doll Tu Tu on the margins of conventional society. However, she is also haunted by her past, evident in her memories of suffering and death. Solea's troubles are generally revealed through the voice of Tu Tu. There is also the milkman Kinu, who represents 'normal' society and is a little disturbed by the lives of the two protagonists. The end of the narrative signals a turning point for Solea, who reconciles with her past and, importantly, her identity and desires. This chapter explores how, through the work of memory and mourning, Solea and Tu Tu grapple with the issues of marginality and survival. They are enchanted by life despite the meagre quality of their existence, playing with dust devils, climbing trees, and visiting abandoned graveyards to satisfy their fantasies and curiosity. For survival, they depend on the remnants of industrial urban life, like discarded rags and empty milk cartons. The story is narrated from the third-person omniscient point of view but strongly focalised through the rag doll's perspective, who observes and comments on what Mama says and does. What is revealed

²⁸ See this report: <<https://inequality.org/facts/global-inequality/>>.

is a tale of resilience and fortitude, yet signified by loneliness and a mental state that may be dislocated from reality or may simply have a different sense of reality, one informed by an animistic apprehension of the world, where the supernatural finds echoes in the spirits, angels and cats referenced in the plot.

The discussion returns to the notion of the uncanny invoked in the previous chapter, insofar as the relation between Mama and Rag Doll is characterised by splitting and doubling. Of interest is how the personification of the rag doll as Tu Tu might help us to apprehend the process of identity formation and working through loss exemplified by the living Solea. Is Tu Tu a kind of alter ego of Solea, an imaginary formation in the sense of being another of herself, an aspect of herself that she is yet to come to terms with? Furthermore, what does the personification of the stone angels, wind, and sea reveal about the story's conception of the universe? What of the relation between collective memory and individual memory with regard to identity formation and belonging? How are these issues linked to fragmentation and self-recognition amidst precarity and vulnerability?

“Rag Doll” was published in the *Africa39* anthology emerged from the 2014 Hay Festival and Rainbow Book Club Project. The project identified and published thirty-nine promising African writers, both on the continent and in the diaspora, who were below forty years of age. The discussion again considers the ways in which the story speaks to its conditions of production. There is a resonance between the ways in which Kenya's emerging authors break boundaries and hierarchies of cultural production and the ways in which the life exemplified by Solea and Tu Tu disrupts the binaries of the normative and the deviant, the real and the imaginary. This blurring of boundaries can be possibly linked to the notions of national and cultural transcendence in the writings of Oduor. Following Wallis (2018), my approach departs from the scholarship on contemporary African writing that tends to entrench some of these binaries while ignoring, for instance, the multidirectional flows of literary publishing and circulation in the twenty-first century.²⁹

Fragmentation and unfinished stories

Lacanian psychoanalysis teaches us that desire stems from the need for recognition from others (2018: 31). Attempts at fulfilling this desire assist individuals in integrating their identity and reconciling with their past. As in the case of this story, the past could include a traumatic event that involves the loss of a loved one. The work of memory and mourning ensures the attainment

²⁹ See also Santana (2018) and Srinivasan et al (2019).

of a new self-consciousness, seen in the way the fantasies that constitute the life of Solea and her rag doll are resolved into a sense of reality, with the imaginary relationship between Mama and Rag Doll giving way to the beginnings of an actual human relationship between Solea and the milkman Kinu.

“Rag Doll” is a fantasy narrative set in a world where Mama and Rag Doll are constantly on a scavenging mission to satisfy both their needs and their desires. The story opens with the actions of a capricious wind that seems to disrupt the peaceful flow of nature, and the protagonists find themselves trying on a straw hat that had been tossed into the window by a dust devil. However whimsical the events might be, and despite the supernatural agency attributed to them, they are rooted in the material circumstances of this odd mother and child relationship. Solea and the rag doll are described as tying “ribbons around their tresses”, bowing and giggling at themselves “like girls who fry their hair and light scented candles and go to the cinema” (2014: 240). Their mimicry of these privileged girls serves to accentuate their destitution. They are acting out in childlike fantasy a world they know about but can never possess.

There is an interesting three-way relationship between Solea, her rag doll, and the privileged girls. It is Solea who initiates the play, and all the action in the story, while Tu Tu observes and comments. That Tu Tu is intended to signify a double is evident in her name, which embodies splitting, doubling and repetition. Through her relationship with her rag doll, Solea enacts nostalgia for something she has never possessed, seeks to recover what has always eluded her in material circumstances. She is in a state of nostalgic regression, playing out a child-like innocence which, as an adult, she refuses to relinquish. Although she seems unaware of her regressive state, Tu Tu registers it in her observations about Solea. If Tu Tu is an aspect of Solea that has split off from herself and projected onto the doll, then she is aware of her state as seen through the observations of Tu Tu. In this regard, nostalgia “has the potential of enabling us to think again, as adults, about ourselves” (Klopper 2016: 12). Through Tu Tu, whom she has brought to life, Solea confronts a conflicted self that is trapped in childhood and hence detached from herself.

The tension between individual consciousness and normative social perception is apparent with the introduction of Kinu, who supplies milk to this strange household. He is the only link Solea seems to have with conventional society, and is unsure how to relate to her because he finds her lifestyle fascinating but disconcerting, though he is hesitant, at first, to voice his views. His facial expression evinces his doubts. He is described by Tu Tu as “half anxious” but also “half

apologetic, as though he yearns both to come in and to flee” (2014: 241). Tu Tu remembers seeing him momentarily spying on them before he vanishes. As the narrative progresses, events shift from the whimsical to what is increasingly surreal, and situated in the liminal space of the mystical and the ordinary. The opening scene with Mama and Rag Doll at the house abruptly transitions to a scene with them at the Oasis of Grace church. In the field adjacent to the church is a grave with an epitaph that reads, ““They went off together”” (2014: 242). Mama and Tu Tu sit on the headstone and the rag doll wants to know where they went together. Solea recounts, in vivid detail, a road accident that claimed the lives of Oasis of Grace Church members and pastor. Despite the magnitude of the calamity, Solea has a matter-of-fact way of describing the event, with the deceased seen not merely as victims but as normal human beings with their individual idiosyncrasies. She recalls how

they rode in the pastor’s Toyota station wagon, twenty men and women, each squeezed so tight that they coalesced, and when the pastor’s car rolled, they become a dollop of flesh...whether they liked their maize boiled or roasted, or whether they chewed mints or sucked them – gone, and so twenty of them were buried together. (2014: 242)

Everything about this account has a strange intensity, as if the details refer to an event that remains stubbornly elusive. The name of the church suggests some form of transcendence in the midst of the rubble of life; the epitaph is enigmatic in its sense of loss and companionship; and the description of the accident is both horrifying and poignant. Opposing qualities of thought and feeling are yoked together in a way that is banal and lyrical.

The extract further draws attention to the significance of Christianity in contemporary African societies, particularly in relation to the concept of an afterlife that exists beyond this life. The dialectic in Christianity between physical and metaphysical existence is mirrored in the dialectic between reality and fantasy, the material world and the imaginary world, that informs the narrative structure. But more than this, there is also the contrast between the precarious life that Solea and Tu Tu are leading and the sense that they participate in a life that transcends their destitution and in which they discover joy and creativity, evident in the way in which they transform the rubble of modernity into usable items that bring comfort to them. Living on the margins of society and its consumerist way of life, they make do with what is cast away and delivered to them by the wind. In a sense their way of life is a form of pre-modern subsistence, scouring the given environment for what is able to sustain them, like berries, bits of cloth, broken crockery (2014: 241). They live outside the circuits of global capitalism, using a form

of subsistence existence that still survives in diverse parts of the continent, on the margins of the formal economy.

If animism is defined as a belief that the world of material things, both the things of nature and things produced by humans, is infused with spirits,³⁰ then “Rag Doll” seems to draw on this belief system in imbuing things with spirit energy. Indeed, the rag doll itself is endowed with human-like traits and consciousness, in a way that challenges modern normative conceptions of the universe. Similarly, the stone angel that Solea and Tu Tu find in the graveyard, lying face down, mouth filled with earth and arm lying broken next to it, is treated as if it is alive. The angel is inscribed with the name of the deceased “*Mbekenya Mwisya*” (2014: 243) followed by the words “She started out so well” (2014: 243), which Mama explains as meaning that the angel once stood upright but then the wind tipped her over and she broke her arm and now the other angels do not want her anymore. Mama picks up the angel and hugs it to her breast, saying, “We have to take her home with us, Tu Tu. She is lonely.” Solea and Tu Tu take the stone angel home and reattach her arm with homemade wheat glue. Solea then takes a needle and adds a line to the inscription:

Mbekenya Mwisya
She started off so well ...
But her story is not yet over. (2014: 243)

By adding the last line, Solea changes the inscription from a sense of failure to a sense of hope. She seems to project her own circumstances onto the stone sculpture in a way that amplifies the meaning of her life’s story. As becomes clearer as the story progresses, she has been broken in some way. Having lost something intimate to her, something that is a part of her, she is no longer whole. The broken stone angel mirrors the broken state of her soul. When Solea repairs the broken arm of the stone angel she repairs something in herself, or at least prefigures her psychic healing. We have seen how, in the previous two stories, Christianity, and Catholicism in particular has been deployed, not as a dogma but as a conceptual setting, a spiritual place of transformation that exists alongside a psychoanalytic understanding of how the psyche works. Catholic imagery is central to the two stories, and the images have revolved around parent and child relations (Samora, Simbi), the eternal mother (Wandia), and the resurrected body (Johnson). In “Rag Doll”, the cemetery is obviously Christian and most likely Catholic. It is

³⁰ See Mbiti (1969).

the site of the rescue of the stone angel, its restoration, and its re-inscription with an epitaph that reopens the story, makes it open-ended.

Solea evokes a form of spirituality that references Christianity but extends more broadly into the realm of animistic spirits. Freud claims that the state of mourning involves “the loss of some abstraction” (1962: 243), which implies the idea of reclaiming that which is beyond the realm of consciousness and that can only be comprehended in the imagist and animistic language of the unconscious that links the human and non-human world.³¹ To call by name is to accord recognition and dignity to another who is not me. It is to enter a conversation with another self to reach a mutual understanding. Mbekenya is her other self, a double who reflects a traumatised self in need of redemption. In empathising with the stone angel, calling her by name, and reopening the stone angel’s story, Solea reopens her own story.

Marginal writings and broken boundaries

In his review of the *Africa39*, Ngugi (2014) contends that the collection alludes to “a state of melancholy” (n.p.) among contemporary African authors. But, despite the lingering effects of “inherited traumas and memories” of colonization, and the early post-colonial disillusionment and despair that followed, the object of their loss is nearly non-existent (2014: n.p.). The aesthetic of the magical in Oduor’s narrative is crucial not because it avoids real things but because it gives language and voice to those things, infuses them with agency and affect. The unfinished story takes the reader into Solea’s childhood past, which is characterised by extreme deprivation. She and her younger brother, Haji, who is blind, are parentless and homeless, and live on the streets. The precarity evident in the earlier stories is given a more literal and material expression, but at the same time, the element of supernatural intervention is heightened. The dream-like world of Solea is marginal not only because it invokes the thematics of social marginalisation, but also because the mode of animistic consciousness it expresses is marginal to the modern globalising and transnational mind. It is intensely local and vividly expresses her object of loss, which is not just her parents and her brother, but an entire world of experience.

Solea imagines a future through reimagining the past. Her fantasies are not expressions of unfulfilled wishes but imaginings of something else, another kind of consciousness attuned to the spirits of the world. As we can see in “Rag Doll”, this consciousness differs from that of mainstream globalization, which homogenizes and marginalizes people with divergent social

³¹ Soyinka in his philosophical study of what he calls an African world attributes spirit connection to “an inner world” where an individual draws “new strength for action” (1976: 33).

orientations. This reimagining of a different consciousness is an act that challenges the binaries of individual and community, spiritual life and sensory life, private history and public history. The thematics of the story is mirrored in the narrative style and structure, which evokes the ephemeral dreams of the marginalized Solea, who takes the given circumstances of her life and reworks these into a rewriting of the self.

In Solea's flashbacks to her precarious childhood, one learns, piece by piece, of the experiences that underpin her current psychic fragmentation. After rescuing the stone angel, the narrator shifts to a different scene where "the sky is melting and the marsh is roiling" (2014: 244). Then after swimming to the bottom of the marsh, a symbolic descent into a "hot and bubbling" underworld that takes the reader deeper into the psychic world of the narrative, Solea and Tu Tu lie in the sun, and Solea recounts memories of her childhood in Old Town, Zanzibar. She fondly remembers her blind brother Haji, who "rose from the green bog of Old Town, among cawing ravens and the dusty deflated umbrella bodies of decaying sea urchins" (2014: 244), and how she described everything to him, serving as his eyes on the world. While Solea speaks about her brother and gives voice to him, Tu Tu speaks about Solea and gives voice to her, drawing attention to features of her face that carry her history: "She stares at the dimple on Mama's chin and at the slight severing of Mama's earlobe from the side of her face, as though she had once enraged a person and they had pulled at her ear too hard, almost tearing it off" (2014: 244).

Mama remembers how she used to describe moving ships at sea to her brother. For her, they resembled iron snails always crawling on the water, leaving a trail behind, but one could not see them move. Again, this is a suggestive image that seems to speak to the conceptual frame of the story, the way in which its narrative moves in imperceptible ways. She recalls the names of the ships *M.V. Britannia* and *Tausi Ndege Wangu* (2014: 245), which link to a colonial and postcolonial history, referencing, on the one hand, the former British colonial power and, on the other hand, a popular song by Fundi Konde,³² from the early period of postcolonial independence, in which a father is in quest of his children, whom he refers to as his "birds".

The names Solea invokes are tied to different parts of her identity, and to remember the names and spell them out is, to a large extent, to bring these parts of herself together. Her memories represent an ongoing reconstruction of her subjectivity in her desire to attain individual agency

³² Fundi Konde is a pioneer Kenyan artiste renowned for his slow, melodic tunes marked by a distinctive guitar style. His song "Tausi Ndege Wangu" dominated Kenyan cultural imagination in the 1990s as an opening soundtrack for a weekly popular television programme titled 'Tausi'.

in a society that has been mostly indifferent and even hostile to her. She remembers how, in Old Town, she and her brother used to scavenge for things to eat, and how, at times, they were fed by Aisha, who owned a tea shack and would cut Haji's hair and plait Solea's hair and cut their toenails (2014: 245). These fond memories are punctuated by scenes of waste, like the mouldy biriyani thrown away by the old housewives, and of loss, like the aborted fetuses (Oduor 2014: 245). Despite their deprived circumstance, they derived pleasure from the "nice things" they found, like "a child's caramel smile" that they "took turns wearing" (Oduor 2014: 245).

The sense of wonder and curiosity, which expresses a sense of hope, is closely tied to the animistic sense of a world imbued with spirits. In Solea's recollections of her childhood, the source of this animistic belief is traced to what emerges clearly as an Islamic context. She mentions her encounter with a *mganga* (a herbalist or diviner) who had the power to exorcise evil spirits, and suspects that she herself is haunted because she was not appropriately named according to the rules of the spirit world. Her tribulations can be seen to mirror that of her Swahili culture – symbolised in the references to Zanzibari and Old Town, and in the prevalence of the Islamic names – a culture that is reimagining itself in a changing world. Old Town symbolizes the tension in a world that is at once material and immaterial. Kjersti Larsen argues that, in Zanzibar, humans and spirits have a shared reality, and this old spirit world is perceived to be stable and predictable in contrast to the non-spirit world, which is chaotic and alienating (2014: 7).

Internet connectivity may not be a spirit world but it does have a digital immateriality about it. Shola Adenekan has lauded the innovative methods of cultural production by new-generation Kenyan authors like Oduor and Kioko, saying that these writers break the boundaries of "distribution and publishing networks" (2014: 139) ingrained in traditional practices of production. Nevertheless, certain forms of cultural capital such as literary agents and global visibility still inform the decision to publish in print anthologies like *Africa39*.³³ As Wallis (2018) has observed, the circulation and validation of contemporary African texts often occur

³³ Apart from Oduor's "Rag Doll", other emerging Kenyan writers featured in the anthology include Mehul Gohil, Linda Musita, Clifton Gachagua, and Ndinda Kioko whose story "Sometime Before Maulidi" is analysed in the next chapter. These writers, as I have previously indicated, operate within a cultural framework where they are constantly in conversation with one another's works in terms of similar stylistics and modes of production. For example, some of the narratives by Oduor and Kioko deploy a fragmented narrative form that mimics the difficulties of grappling with memory work.

within a literary network that makes mainstream publishing highly indispensable. In other words, the immateriality of the digital is tied to the materiality of the book.

“Rag Doll” does not reference the digital world, but it does inhabit it, and it is reasonable to infer that the context of production has informed the thematics of a story that is infused with the psychical and the supernatural. This expansion of narrative form is also evident in Oduor’s short story “The Daily Assortment of Astonishing Things”, which is aesthetically similar to “Rag Doll” in using symbolism and supernatural imagery to blur the lines between fantasy and reality. There is a resonance between the entanglement of material and spirit worlds described in the story, and the entanglement of the commodity of the book and the ephemeral circuits of social and cultural discourse evident in the contemporary digital world. That artists with diverse worldviews have participated in shared cultural spaces has been enormously important in the mediation of the past and the future, not just in Kenya but also within Africa and her diaspora. The *Africa39* project is a perfect example of bringing together a range of writers who experiment across different discursive formations, including Chimamanda Adichie, Chika Unigwe, Zukiswa Wanner and Stanley Gazemba. There is an emerging cultural and political consciousness that crosses the boundary between traditional forms and emergent forms, between mainstream book productions and online literary productions like *Jalada* and *Enkare Review*.

While there is invariably the temptation to highlight the clear demarcation between mainstream and non-mainstream platforms, which indeed exists, the influence the two have on each other has increasingly become the norm. Nevertheless, this does not entirely discount the criticism, voiced by Akin Adesokan, that these authors are not directly engaging with “the cultural and political predicaments that face the continent” (2012: 16). Adesokan adds that there is a proclivity to appease a western market that is fixated with the concept of Africa as the Other.³⁴ While there is some truth to the argument, Adesokan ignores the reality that writers will always gravitate toward cultural capital. In recent decade this has involved a choice between embracing western publishers or publishing on digital platforms that are less encumbered by the challenges of capital.³⁵

³⁴ See this thoughtful essay by Ikhida R. Ikheloa (2019): <https://brittlepaper.com/2019/04/whyimalkingabouttrace-on-african-writers-empathy-woke-identity-politics-and-skewed-priorities-ikhida-ikheloa/>

³⁵ See Bgoya and Jay (2013) on their lucid analysis of the challenges facing publishing in Africa.

Repetition, recognition, and the world

Psychoanalytically speaking, the experience of loss can take the route either of melancholia (compulsion to repeat) or of mourning (working through) as aptly argued by Freud in “Mourning and Melancholia” (1962). Oduor’s stories tend to contain elements of both processes, with melancholic fixations giving way to a reworking of loss and a rewriting of the narrative of the self. While the stories are focused on the subjectivities of the protagonists, they are nevertheless embedded in the communal and cultural specificities of the external world, creating a dialectic of the personal and the social. In “Rag Doll”, the dialectic of the personal and the social plays out in a fantastical way, because each is collapsed into the other. Solea invests things with psychic life, animates them, and these animated psychic things act upon her. The style can perhaps be described as a form of magical realism, which is useful in pointing to the interrelationship of the empirical world and the spirit world in societies where animistic beliefs seep into the official Abrahamic religions of Islam and Christianity.

Pre-modern and modern views of existence affect the characters in different ways. The pre-modern is marked by the personification of inanimate objects, providing a fascinating vision of a world in which human and non-human coexist as interrelated subjectivities. Such recognition of other subjectivities deconstructs modern conceptions of identity formation as simply biological or cognitive. The most vivid example is when Solea and her brother are on a bus to the big city and, at Voi town, which lies between Nairobi and Mombasa, the sea creates a storm that forces Haji to return and appease it (2014: 245). Haji’s identity and fate are tied to the subjectivity of the sea and the relationship that exists between the human and the non-human. As portrayed in “Rag Doll”, this animistic experience of the world is tied to a childlike view. Mama has not progressed beyond childhood fantasy. Her doll is taken as a real person, the world of inanimate things is invested with spirit agency, and life is lived fully in the here-and-now of immediate sensations and needs.

In childhood, fantasies that are repressed in adulthood find expressions in games, which play a significant role in the lives of Solea and Tu Tu. Mama and Rag Doll cheerfully play various childhood games, including Broken Telephone. However, it is not humans who whisper messages into one another’s ears but the walls of the house:

When someone says a thing, the walls lean in to catch snatches of it. The walls then tell these words to other walls, stretching them and smothering them in turn, so that when you finally hear them, the words have become tiny, pea-shaped whispers that would burst like maize grains if one held a candle to them. (2014: 246).

While Mama is detached from mainstream social intercourse, she nevertheless has an emotional connection with her immediate surroundings. She describes the responsiveness of walls as they lean together to pass on a message, and how the words shrink into pea-shaped whispers that burst like maize grains when examined in the light of a candle. Like other descriptions in the story, much is suggested by the figurative language that is used. There is the idea of a broken circuit of communication, of walls closing in, of words that are retrieved from the dark unconscious and whose meaning bursts in the light of consciousness. If these experiences are those of childhood they are also those of psychic disorder in adulthood.

Of particular interest in the story is how Mama and Rag Doll use not just the waste products of modernity but also natural things to subsist. There is the wheat and water glue mixed to fix the broken arm of the stone angel, and the saliva and cow lard mixed to fix broken chairs. As Nicholas Ochiel attests in his review of the short story, survival involves seeking “improvisational and innovative ways of interacting with one’s environment” (2014: n.p.). In some sense, the narrative structure is similarly improvisational and innovative, using bits of objects in the lived environment, (scraps of discarded things, spirit manifestations, memory fragments) to challenge the normative discourses of modern consciousness. If modernity as a form of existence is linear and progressive, and enforces a teleological pattern in which individuals adhere to certain universal goals and objectives, the story refers to the same world but reimagines it as recursive, going back to go forward, and characterised by repetitive and processes. Mama and the rag doll inhabit a universe where they fill “their pockets with rags that the seamstress” no longer needs (2014: 246), and embellish the rags into a “quilt which they [would] lie on each night and dream grainy rayon dreams” (2014: 246-7). The reference to dreams points to the realm of unconscious fantasies, derived from lived experience but also from historical layers of beliefs and myths, such as the belief in animistic spirits, or even the belief in psychic regeneration as preached by modern religious systems and explored by psychoanalytical practices.³⁶

Solea’s split identity, evident in her relationship with Tu Tu, might be a form of psychic regression and fracture, but it has paradoxically helped her preserve intact her innocence in a precarious world. The hostility of the social world is evident in the skinned cat Mama and Rag Doll find at the house, left by unknown people who, according to Kinu, could be “the chief and

³⁶ Ndinda Kioko’s “Some Freedom Dreams”, which I analyse in chapter six, also uses the dream motif as a stylistic device of revealing the tension of thwarted hopes and despair of a younger generation of poets struggling to keep their hopes alive.

his cronies” (Oduor 2014: 247). Clearly, she is regarded as possessed and feared by the community to which she has come as an outsider, and in which she has resided as an outcast. The strange fantasy relationship that Mama has with Rag Doll ends abruptly when Kinu and Mama go to bed together. Mama wants to take Rag Doll out of the room so she will not see them, and Kinu says: “Jesus Solea! Tu Tu is just a rag doll. Rag dolls don’t *see* things,” and Mama simply “drops Tu Tu on the bamboo table and shrugs out of her frock,” (2014: 249). The fantasy is ended.

The disclosure of Tu Tu’s real identity as a lifeless rag doll signals a new understanding of Mama’s life and way of assessing the world. While she may seem to capitulate to a form of empirical reality, she refuses to take on a predetermined identity. At Kinu’s insistence to know her true identity, she declares: “My real name is the marks on my body...[c]all me by the chinks in my chin and the discolourations in my toe nails. Call me Trembling Eyes. Call me Torn Ear” (2014: 249). The repetition of the phrase “call me” is particularly important because it sums up her wish to be accorded full recognition of the history that is marked on her surface, and cannot be pinned down in a name. So even as she chooses integration into a normalised social order of man and woman, perhaps even husband and wife, she resists the category of the proper name.

Oduor’s early writings examine the danger of grand narratives, especially when they are reproduced within social institutions like marriage.³⁷ In her short story “The Red Bindi on Diwali” (2010), an unnamed Indian protagonist refuses to participate in an arranged marriage and defies his parents in marrying his Maasai girlfriend, Namunyak. The narrative deploys the imagery of two nights in conflict with each other in a narrative that is more redemptive than hopeless. Like Solea, the unnamed protagonist represents a new consciousness opposed to the conformist mind-set of modernity and the selected traditions to which it adheres. First published in the *Storymoja* blog, the story reinforces the idea that the new-generation authors are increasingly becoming bold in addressing thematic issues that were considered taboo among their predecessors. Using digital publishing as a transgressive space, Oduor situates her stories within a literary framework of rethinking a cultural memory that has been dominated

³⁷ Oduor has been involved with AMKA, a non-governmental organization that facilitates a monthly writing forum for mostly aspiring women writers, though men are also allowed. AMKA describes itself as “concerned about the historical injustices suffered by women...in social, political and economic spheres both at the local and national level.” For instance, Oduor’s narrative “Children of the Dark” featured in the *Fresh Paint* anthology, largely explores the themes of patriarchy and the invisibility of women in society. For more about the organization see <<http://amka.or.ke/about/>>.

by meta-narratives of nationalism and decolonization as seen with the works of Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Micere Mugo. However, it is imperative to observe that there are thematic exceptions in the works of other notable Kenyan authors such as David Mailu, Margaret Ogola and Yusuf Dawood, who are not directly steeped into the grand narratives of nationalism and decolonization.

A return of the past

The notion of the repressed that returns to individual consciousness through the distortions of fantasy is crucial in understanding Solea's survival. Like the narrative style in which she is embedded, she refuses to conform to conventional identification, and seeks identification in a more relational and embodied way with the world, and identification with the spirit world that informs her culture. Digital production is itself an act of repetition insofar as reimagining Kenya's cultural memory is concerned. The narratives of both Oduor and Kioko, to whose stories the study now turns, are interwoven with the unfinished stories of the past. This return to the past is in some sense a return to the unconscious, a return of what had been repressed in both the colonial and the postliberation era. The narratives are geared toward recreating a new consciousness, to an extent, in a new digital era, one that pushes the boundaries of human experience beyond conceptions of race, class and gender³⁸ towards the conception of the interrelationship of human and non-human in the world.

³⁸ The notion of transcending the 'conceptions of race, class and gender' among the new-generation Kenyan writers should not be misconstrued as an act of passivity on their part, or lack of consciousness in addressing these urgent and pressing issues of the twenty-first century. The stories under study already make subtle hints at some of the issues.

Chapter 5: Liminality in Ndinda Kioko's "Sometime Before Maulidi"

Death and renunciation

Death in human society occurs in different forms, through illness, accidents, or even extra-judicial killings. However, there is also the question of social death that comes with rejection by the dominant group of its minority groups. This triggers resentment from the rejected group, resulting in the desire to sever ties. In the case of nation-state systems, minorities might call for secession and a right to self-determination. The work of mourning in response to death, and its role in the reconstruction of personal and collective identities, provides an appropriate context within which to situate Ndinda Kioko's "Sometime Before Maulidi" (2014), a story that deals with loss at both the individual and group level.

Set in Lamu island in the coastal part of Kenya, the narrative involves a female traveller, who calls herself 'not Anah', coming to terms with the death of her husband, Issa, from whom she had acquired her married name Anah. After his burial, she travels to the island for the Maulidi festival and immerses herself in a journey of self-introspection, which culminates in a one-night stand with an old man who reminds her of both her father and her husband. The protagonist is conflicted about what she wants to do with her life. Moreover, her sense of internal conflict mirrors the fate of the old man and the other residents of Lamu, who are dissatisfied with their status as marginalized citizens in their country. At the end of the narrative, the protagonist is stuck with the memories of the old man, her father, and the departed husband.

The story's title and its unfolding events reveal not Anah's desire to become a new individual, which inform the state of liminality in which she finds herself. Her liminality is manifested, on the one hand, in her memories of Issa and, on the other hand, in her ongoing meditation on life. Bhabha's invocation of a psychic state in "The World and Home" where "the border between ...the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting" (1992: 141), provides a useful frame through which to consider the narrator's temporary psychic dissolution. Her personal predicament resonates with that which afflicts minor characters, like the boat rider, who find themselves physically as well emotionally displaced from their 'own' country.

As far as memory and identity are concerned, the connection between the individual circumstance and the collective circumstance is evoked throughout the story. For example, the

protagonist rejects her identity as Anah and refers to herself as not Anah, but thereby simultaneously affirms the identity she rejects. This seeming contradiction partly highlights her ambivalent relationship with the Muslim people she encounters in Lamu Island. Likewise, those in Lamu who call for secession from Kenya endorse the very state power they seek to renounce. This discussion explores the ways in which not Anah's memory is constructed and concurrently reimagined within a social context comprising the collective memory of others contending with doubts about their own past and future. Since the reliability of memory, whether at the individual or collective level, is highly contested, the links between memory and forgetting as argued by Ricoeur (1999) provide an important perspective. The question posed in this chapter is how forgetting, as part of the work of memory, enables the achievement of new forms of individual and collective consciousness.

Aside from the interwoven destinies of the protagonist and the people of Lamu, both of whom seek to renounce and separate from something to which they had been attached, there is also the situation of the author herself, who, along with other new-generation writers, seeks to reimagine Kenya's cultural identities as they manifest in mainstream and non-mainstream literary platforms like blogs and online magazines. Here, too, the question of the hegemony of authorised identifications and the liminality of exploratory forms of identification arises.

Remembrance and self-identification

Individual memory is a part of collective memory because of its social construction, which involves other people and language. However, this does not mean individual memory is of little significance when it comes to identity (re)construction and the conscious process of dealing with loss. Not Anah's memories help in the mediation of loss while also assisting her toward a journey of self-rediscovery. Her movements are symbolically important as they occur on both physical and psychical levels in a sustaining desire for self-emancipation. Her strolls on the streets of Nairobi and later in Lamu illustrate an individual trying to redefine and re-evaluate her existence. The contradictions that permeate not Anah's consciousness are significant in the process of her self-recreation.

Kioko's fiction is narrated through an internal focalization, whereby the narrator recounts the events of the narrative from the traveller's point of view.³⁹ The point of view concentrates on not Anah's stream of consciousness, which is integral to her interactions with others in her

³⁹ Mieke Bal and Jane E. Lewin following Gerard Genette define internal focalization as "the narrative whose narrator knows only what a given character knows" (1983: 240).

journey of self-discovery. The story opens with the sight of a man in an embroidered hat and his donkey passively observing the ocean in the Lamu archipelago. The main character is just above him and fixes her gaze on him. Mediated through this focus on the man, her gaze provides an extended view of dawn and the sun that “peeps its eye into the day, slowly rising from below” (2014: 165). The cinematic gaze leads to flashbacks revealing memories and desires are projected as a state of mind that the protagonist wishes to accomplish during the *Maulidi* festival. The narrator says “[s]he is here to switch off her mind, to get rid of the stain of everyday noise, [...] to have a new conversation [...] to litter another part of the world with pieces of herself, to [...] recognise herself” (2014: 165).

The aspect of self-recognition is significant because it speaks to not Anah’s self-awareness about herself as another. She possesses the ability to examine herself as another through what seems to be an internal gaze, and then immediately questions her overt intentions to fragmentise and recognise herself by reframing these intentions as a need to return to the place where she had first met her recently buried husband Issa, ostensibly to mourn his loss. This inversion of her intentions is paradoxical in the sense that while it purports to reject her preoccupations with self, it also offers her an opportunity to reimagine her life in the absence of the husband. More arbitrarily, she also suggests that she has arrived at this location because it is the last place the bus stops. These fragmentary intentions accord with what Nicholas Ochiel (2014) in his review of the story calls the idea of “self-shattering to find pieces of herself” (n.d). It is tempting to read not Anah’s return as a return of the repressed and to read her sense of unknowable intentions and fatalistic actions as a yielding to the unconscious.

Not Anah is fixated on memories that are both fond memories and traumatic memories and, meaningful and whimsical, like when “[s]he remembers his [Issa’s] fear of guns almost at the same time she remembers the curliness of his hair and how much she hated his overuse of the outmoded Hair Glo” (2014: 167). Her present desires are anchored on remembering as a means of working through personal and familial loss, personal in terms of her husband’s murder and familial in the larger context of a father she loves and misses. Familial loss is also a recurring motif in the stories by Oduor that we have examined, haunting her protagonists Samora, Simbi and Solea. The motif of loss is a manifestation of the work of memory in reconciling with the past while reconstructing a future, and appeals to the generation of emerging writers with which this study is concerned.

The protagonist’s process of renegotiation of her individuality is symbolized by the metaphor of travel. Her geographical and psychological travelling is about re-discovering the old,

renouncing the past (at times, even the future), and reclaiming the present. As in the case of Solea in Oduor's "Rag Doll", she occupies a liminal space of personal decision-making on the margins of the constraints imposed by social conventions. In one of her many interior monologues, not Anah recalls the desire to be on a bus and enjoy the tranquillity of silence. Movement in this context is part of working through a conflicted self that is laid bare during a brief meeting with her friend, Boni. The latter ironically congratulates her "for a good funeral, as if it were a birthday party" (2014: 166). Boni's statement is swiftly followed by a negation from not Anah, who wants to forget everything said and think about something else.

The act of negation is evident in not Anah's name itself, which would initially have been Anah. This negation is paralleled by the calls for self-determination by the boat rider and other disenfranchised Lamu residents in phrases such as "*Lamu sio Kenya*" and "*Pwani sio Kenya*" (Kioko 2014: 173) which in Swahili loosely read 'Lamu is not Kenya and the Coast is not Kenya'. The narrator's observations affirm this sense of negation and a juxtaposition, such as when she marvels at the sharp contrast between the street and the ocean, and between the ocean and the land. In both instances, there is always a gap, words unspoken, a lingering mystery: "[w]hat things do [the ocean and the land] say to each other when no one is listening?" (2014: 169). Her rhetorical question is critical in revealing the complex relationship that connects individuals with nature. For not Anah, the things of nature constitute a community as present to her as the community of human others. Nature is not so much a mirror image of not Anah as a metaphor of the situation in which she finds herself, where she is in intimate conversation with something other in herself, with what she has negated, and placed in a dialectical relationship with herself, in order to attain an alternative, more dynamic form of self-consciousness.

Is not Anah's fascination not perhaps an aspect of reconnecting with repressed feelings in an unconscious that is an unknowable aspect of our subjectivity? The answer to the question reverts to the metaphor of the unknowable that is embedded in the narrative structure, particularly in how it controls the actions of the traveller. For the old man and the boat rider, it is about their invisibility. The writer does not name these characters except mentioning their clothing, texture of their hair, political frustrations, and a little clue to their family background and sexual mannerisms. Consequently, the reader finds their identity perpetually elusive. This brings us back to the idea of a persistent negation that drives the narrative plot. Not Anah's memories after the burial of her husband reveal the cathartic effect of remembrance in understanding the present and intimating a new future. Remembering is largely symbolized by

her journey as a traveller in search of an identity that remains contradictory and elusive. The stylistics of inversion is an extension of the desire to reconcile with multiple contradictions, and the shifts from internal focalization to the first-person highlights a sense of fragmentation that she recognises in others, like the old man she meets in Lamu.

Projection and fragmentation

Bereavement can trigger a chain of emotional reactions from which bereaved individuals seek to distance themselves by projecting unwanted feelings onto others. As we shall see, the projection can happen consciously or unconsciously. The protagonist's sense of fragmentation is caused by her inability to reconcile with her loss of Issa. In parallel with the non-linear, recursive narrative structure, the circumstance of not Anah is tied up with the repetitive work of mourning, which, in this story, comes close to melancholia, as the bereaved is unable to free herself from the subject of her loss. At stake seems to be a doubling of the personality that projects both loss and desire. The study traces the ramifications of the doubling in relation to wish-fulfilment, and later link this with the circumstance of the Lamu people who have been marginalized by their government. Similar to not Anah, they conceal their despair while simultaneously expressing their desire for an autonomous life.

Not Anah's memory of her husband Issa, shot dead by police on the streets of Nairobi, and her recollections of her father, who farms in the countryside, are projected in different ways. The most conspicuous physical feature of her murdered husband, consistently repeated in the narrative, is the image of "curly" hair, which is linked with the old man she meets as well as the boat rider. The old man, for example, is described as "bald, with just small bushes of curly white hair" (2014: 172). These uncanny resemblances highlight the fractured and shifting nature of not Anah's work of memory. At one point she reveals her newfound joy in rediscovering the world when she arrives in Lamu. However, the scene flashes back to her gaze at the old man who is also watching fishermen and a band of weary-looking tourists. Her memory then moves to Issa in what appears to be a series of associations that, interestingly, lead back to her (2014: 165). These associations demonstrate how recognition and identification is inextricably bound with social situations. The protagonist's intersubjective relations are about her recognizing herself in others. This is paralleled by the situation of the Lamu people in their quest for self-determination, for whom the government is the other from which they desire full recognition, if not as Kenyan citizens then as an autonomous people.

Aside from the visual identifications that she makes between the old man and her deceased husband, not Anah also projects onto the old man a father-daughter relationship, which harks back to her memories of her father. On the one hand, she unconsciously views herself in him as his daughter, and on the other hand, she remains hesitant and doubtful whether she should find out more about him, and thus resists intimacy. If identity formation is constructed in relation to the other, there is always the attendant anxiety of (mis)recognizing oneself in another person. When the old man asks the protagonist her name, the question jolts her back to a different scene regarding “the man who gave that name, but by the time she decides, he [the old man] is already asleep” (2014: 172). This recurring trope of misrecognition, and the ambiguity it generates, affirms the idea that remembering is in a dialectic relationship with forgetting, and demonstrates how remembering and forgetting function together in the process of managing loss. Of equal significance is not Anah’s self-detachment and depersonalisation in her act of looking back at herself. This trait has a close connection to the aloof tone in her interaction with others. Aloofness is indicative of detachment, and is important in apprehending not only the themes of marginality and political exclusion but also the idea of a double and contradictory identity.

The way in which not Anah’s identity has become disassociated resonates with her relation to the natural world. She wonders “about the language of the ocean; the language between the ocean and the land and language between the ocean and those it has swallowed” (2014: 169). In her tormented world, where she is struggling to come to terms with the simultaneous loss of her husband and herself, the personification of the ocean and land signifies a dialectical of two entities seeking to relate and mirrors not Anah’s own divided and shifting identity. The metaphor of language in describing the interaction between the elements of land and sea suggests not only the sense of separation experienced by not Anah, but also her desire to overcome her grief and rearticulate herself. As in Oduor’s “Rag Doll”, nature plays a significant role in the reconciliation of the protagonist with herself, but in Kioko’s “Sometime Before Maulidi” the elements of nature serve as triggers for not Anah’s projections rather than, as in the case of Oduor’s “Rag Doll”, as animistic participants in her psychic processes.

Moreover, as in the case of “Rag Doll”, the Muslim faith provides an important social context for the narrative events. On her way back to Shela Beach the morning after the night she spent with the old man, not Anah recognises the boat driver as the same man who drove her and Issa around the previous year. They talk about Nairobi and the boat driver says that he has never been to the city and has no wish to go there, claiming “They hate us there” (2014: 173). The

context of the conversation makes it clear that he refers to the tensions between coastal people generally, not just Muslims, who feel marginalised, and the Kenyan state, under whose rule the coastal land is being invaded by the wealthy and the local culture is being eroded. Not Anah reflects that she knows what the man means when he says, “They hate us there” (2014: 173), and wishes to share with him her memory of the pool of blood on the street where Issa had died. What is suggested here is that her husband’s death may have been related to politics. The official news had stated: “Suspected gangster killed, two guns and explosives recovered” (2014: 166). While the news item refers to “gangster”, the reference to “explosives” would seem to be intended to intimate that the alleged criminality had “terrorist” links.⁴⁰

Of significance, too, is the way in which not Anah constantly has in mind, even in her sexual experience with the old man, not only Issa, her husband, but also her father, who appears to be a simple farmer working his lands in the countryside. Both departed husband and absent father feature uninterruptedly in her reflective nostalgia. Of her father, she says, “She wants to tell him that she loves him, but between her and her father, such incoherence is known, not uttered. These words are strangers to her father’s lips. She wouldn’t even recognise them if he uttered them” (2014: 168-169). The incoherence to which not Anah alludes is a measure of what seems to be both the generational and the social distance between her metropolitan self and her father’s rural self. Her bereavement has thrown open the incoherence of the personal, the social and the familial in her life, and the liminality she now experiences as she drifts randomly between sensation and memory.

Cultural drift and artistic freedom

Freedom of cultural production in Kenya remains elusive, partly due to the fragmented nature of publishing that tends to be skewed toward well-known writers, pushing emerging writers toward digital platforms. However, emerging writers like Oduor and Kioko have continued to expand the scope of cultural production by forging relations with traditional media platforms, including print anthologies such as *Africa39* (2014), where “Sometime Before Maulidi” was

⁴⁰ Kenya has suffered a spate of terrorist attacks since the 1998 bombing of the US Embassy in Nairobi in which Al-Qaeda took full responsibility. In recent years, however, terrorism has taken new dimensions with the rise of Al-Shabaab in Somalia. The terror group is known to recruit foot soldiers from disenfranchised and frustrated youth who feel neglected by the Kenyan government. The recruitment, according to various reports, targets mainly young people in the coastal parts of Kenya like Lamu and Mombasa. Unfortunately, government response to these forms of religious radicalisation with roots in unemployment and hopelessness has also led to blatant discrimination of innocent of Muslim youth. See this article: <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/11/muslims-feel-under-siege-kenya-201411911737464684.html>>.

first published. The desire to reimagine Kenya's literary scene signifies a cultural drift toward a consciousness that defies the binaries of traditional publishing practices. Like the fictional residents of Lamu in Kioko's story, as mediated through the consciousness of not Anah, new-generation authors are involved in a work of memory that exposes the contradictions of the past in an attempt to liberate an imagined future.

Apart from "Sometime Before Maulidi", Kioko's other narratives were earlier published in the anthology *Fresh Paint* (2012) courtesy of the AMKA Writers Collective.⁴¹ The stories "Over My Shoulder" (2012) and "The Angel of After the Sunset" (2012) are featured alongside Oduor's "Children of the Dark" (2012) in the anthology. These narratives ride on the motifs of sexuality, which help Kioko's characters to process and work through various forms of loss. This trajectory is pursued further in the life of not Anah, who projects her internal issues on an old man she randomly meets in Lamu. The protagonist's movement through what Ochiel calls the "circuits of desire" (2014: n.p.) in her acts of repetition can credibly be seen to be analogous to the artistic experimentation that characterises the work of emerging writers in Kenya. The latter entails not only the exploration of transgressive themes and states of mind, but also the interlinking of genres such as short stories, poetry, short memoirs, confessional literature, photo-essays, podcasts,⁴² and interviews. This cultural development reinforces what Arias and del Campo have appropriately described as "key spaces for the negotiation of cultural memory" (2009: 7). In Kenya, the artists have achieved this objective by also widening the terrain of cultural participation through digital publishing.

For example, Adipo Sidang, an emerging Kenyan author,⁴³ has fused elements of drama and poetry in a stage adaptation of his verse collection called *Parliament of Owls* (2016).⁴⁴ A participant at AMKA, which is one of the local writers' collectives that have nurtured the artistic growth of Kioko and Oduor, Sidang draws his artistic inspiration from both Luo folklore and digital technology. In using audio-visuals in his performances, he demonstrates the multidirectional flows and literary exchanges that have come to characterize cultural production in the twenty-first century among emerging African writers. His artistic experimentation is testament to the fluid nature of publishing within Kenya's literary scene, and exemplifies an ability to tread with ease what Karin Barber (2014) has called the triad of

⁴¹ For more about AMKA see chapter four.

⁴² See "The Jalada Conversations" (2015): <<https://jaladaafrica.org/jalada-conversations/>>.

⁴³ See this interview of Adipo Sidang explaining his journey as a poet, playwright, and musician: <<https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/evewoman/article/2001246684/a-poetic-man-adipo-sidang>>.

⁴⁴ Here: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TjU4w6soOk4>>.

“traditional-popular-elite” (xvi). This indicates that authors such as Sidang are not constantly fixed to singular approaches and artistic modes of recreating art. Instead, there is a palimpsestic aspect to the approaches and narrative techniques,⁴⁵ which signals not just pre-colonial, colonial, and early post-colonial literary formations, but also the latest digital technologies of production.

For these writers, as for not Anah in Kioko’s story, there is a persistent drift where nothing is permanent or even resolved. The metaphor of the drift is characteristic, also, of Kioko’s rich literary oeuvre of essays that similarly deal with memory and mourning. Published in the *Trans-African* online magazine,⁴⁶ they include “A Memory on the Wall” (2016) and “Stones and Memory” (2016). Likewise, the trope of death, evident not only in “Sometime Before Maulidi” but also in “Some Freedom Dreams” (2017), which is examined in the next chapter, resonates with essays Kioko has written such as “The Image of Life and Death” (2016) and “The Khanga is Present” (2016). The latter reads the exclusion of khanga from national archives as an allegory of the continued silencing and marginalization of women, and as an ongoing social death of the female. A sense of drift and loss is evident in her essay “The Image of Bi Kidude”, where Kioko narrates:

the first moment I was overwhelmingly aware of Bi Kidude’s presence. It was also the same time I became aware of her absence. I was sitting in the dark during a solitary trip to Zanzibar at the Sauti za Busara Festival [...] surrounded by people I did not know. (2016: n.d.)

The extract resonates with the imagery of the lone traveller in “Sometime Before Maulidi”, who is always on the move, as well as with the preoccupation with a sense of absence. Moreover, narrative similarities like the haunting atmosphere and coastal setting support the notion of a dialogical relationship between fictional and non-fictional accounts in Kioko’s writings, where themes and characterizations intersect. The work of memory evident in the essays illustrates how confronting loss and renegotiating identity is not just confined to fictional representations, but it is also amplified in personal testimonies that find easy production and circulation on the internet. Furthermore, it symbolizes the subjective drift from the uncharted territories of the unconscious into consciousness, which is signified in the essay by the image of an evolving nation-state. Like not Anah and the minor characters in the story, the drift

⁴⁵ I am using palimpsestic figuratively to mean the way a text recreates itself in a dialogical relationship with other historical, social, and even political formations.

⁴⁶ The magazine has since changed its name to *Contemporary And* (C&); see: <<https://www.contemporaryand.com/>>.

signifies an evolving state in which personal and social desires seek expression in a material reality that does not necessarily accommodate these desires.

For other post-Binyavanga writers like Abdul Adan,⁴⁷ there have been numerous choices to exploit and with which to contend. He and Kioko are both part of *Jalada*'s founding members alongside Okwiri Oduor. *Jalada* has been instrumental in offering opportunities that encourage cross-generational collaborations, demonstrated by Adan's co-translation of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's short fiction "The Upright Revolution: Or Why Humans Walk Upright" (2016) to Kazakh, under the title "Алға нық қадам" (2016). Nevertheless, it is not just the collaborations that help to bridge the literary-cultural divide in Kenya. It is also worth emphasising the actualization of artistic freedom to experiment, as suggested by Oduor (see chapter two). Unfortunately, by participating in Ngugi's life-long decolonisation project of promoting ethnic languages,⁴⁸ Adan and other new-generation authors entered a terrain of contradictions that have subjected Ngugi's project to debate. Most of the writers who have participated in the project embody diverse identities that are local, regional, national, continental and global, a diversity of identification that has been accelerated by digital technology. Endorsing what appears to be a nativist consciousness, which is at the heart of Ngugi's decolonization argument, would be to contradict the concept of cultural freedom that transcends space and time, which has been critical in reimagining and reconceptualising cultural and national memory.

This does not imply that these artists cannot contribute to the language debate, or even help shape it to meet modern demands. Nevertheless, the temptation to reproduce hegemonic tendencies within fragile nation-state such as Kenya, where social status and the distribution of national resources are predicated on ethnicity, must be avoided. In Kioko's "Sometime Before Maulidi", the old man and the boat rider are victims of an exclusionary politics sustained by a nativist appeal to ethnic and cultural extraction, what Butler refers to as distorted frames of recognition, where one group is recognised at the expense of misrecognising another group (2012: 30). The boat rider, for instance, "talks about Nairobi ...as if it is another country", saying that "[t]hey hate us there" (Kioko 2014: 173). Who is 'us' and where is 'there?' To

⁴⁷ Adan has been associated with various continental and global prizes such as the Caine Prize. He was shortlisted for his short story "The Lifebloom Gift" in 2016 and "The Secret Language of Vowels" published under the 2017 Caine Prize workshop series. See the anthologies, *The Daily Assortment of Astonishing Things and Other Stories* (2016) and *The Goddess of Mtwara and Other Stories* (2017).

⁴⁸ See Thiong'o (1986).

what extent does (popular) culture, through representations in both the mainstream and alternative media, reinforce and reproduce some of these prejudices? To whose benefit?

Grappling with these questions is critical to instigating a paradigm shift in the analysis of the popular art forms produced and circulated by the new-generation authors. These writers are not exempt from the (un)conscious perpetuation of the very “hierarchies and forms of exclusion” (Srinivasan et al 2019: 10) that they attempt to overcome or confront. Nevertheless, the intergenerational conversation between old and new writers is important in stimulating Kenya’s contemporary literary activity. Thus, some of the writers who advocate what could be seen as an exclusionary linguistic and ethnic identity, also participated in the language issue of *Jalada*, which brought together artists from across the African continent and the globe.⁴⁹

New consciousness and recovery

The shift from what might be construed as an insular and somewhat parochial cultural outlook to a differentiated and dialogical cultural consciousness is evident in the aesthetics of Kioko and her contemporaries, for example, the technique of foregrounding cultural specificity through grammatical deviation, exemplified by informal and italicised Swahili phrases and words in Kioko’s story. The use of the colloquial alongside the metropolitan demonstrates the spontaneity of language use among ordinary Kenyan speakers, who are constantly (re)negotiating their multiple social identities in public spaces. This foregrounds a self-awareness in the story of individuals operating within their own frames of reference and bending language use to suit their socio-economic needs. In the case of the minor characters, emphasis on Swahili is meant to dramatize not only their marginality but also, most critically, the desires and fantasies that energise their daily lives.

Reimagining Kenya’s national and cultural consciousness through Swahili words and phrases is demonstrated in numerous ways. For instance, commuters portrayed as competing for “[g]ari ya mwisho” (2016: 166), which translate as “the last bus”, reinforce the concept of travelling as not only as a practical necessity in moving from one point to another but also a mode of satisfying certain individual and social desires. Through the language they use, commuters in Nairobi perform both their desires and their anxieties on the streets. But not Anah finds it hard to understand why everyone is on the move. She wonders if there is something sacred to human

⁴⁹ See: <https://jaladaafrica.org/2015/09/15/jalada-04-the-language-issue/>. The issue featured various new-generation writers like Okwiri Oduor and Amol Awuor for his story “Geno Makende” (2015) later translated to English as “The Last Hope.” (2015): <https://jaladaafrica.org/2015/09/15/the-last-hope-by-amol-awuor/>.

movement and hurry. Her view alludes to the instability and uncertainty of identity and belonging, particularly in a world where one is unsure how to grieve and, at the same time, find new love and community. This conflicted sense was evident also in Oduor's "My Father's Head", where Simbi's permanent separation from the father induces ubiquitous anxiety in her daily existence.

Other important Swahili phrases that enrich the idea of renegotiation include the sayings, "*Nipe Nikupe*" and "*Wape Vidonge Vyao*" (2014: 168). The former translates as 'give and take'. "*Wape Vidonge Vyao*", on the other hand, means 'repay them with their own medicine'. For Lamu people, who have to endure a life of marginalization and exploitation, the phrase is a potent symbol of resistance, allowing them to re-inscribe themselves into a national identity from which they have historically been denied. The writer is implicating the reader into empathising with the boat rider and others like him whose culture is Swahili yet who nevertheless face threats both from within and without, from Kenya's urban middle class as well as from foreign tourists. This is observed in the scene where not Anah is riding back to Shela Beach and the rider rhetorically asks her "what she would do if a man walked into her house and started bringing down the walls" (2014: 173). The protagonist does not answer, leaving the question up to the reader to decode its symbolism in the context of a story that highlights, through the invocation of Swahili terms, the contradictions in the national consciousness. The symbolism signifies the ways in which the nation-state, despite its positive progress, is also characterised by those who are hellbent on destabilising the wellbeing of others such as the boat rider. Furthermore, words such as *makuti*, *biryani*, *masala*, and *taarab*, uttered mainly by not Anah, emphasise how inland urban Kenyan identity already incorporates the world of the coastal other.

If cultural consciousness within the national borders of Kenya is already heterogeneous, the cultivation of an even more diverse and expansive cultural consciousness is facilitated by Kenyan writers through the establishment of cross-border links and affiliations with other African countries. Kioko was a mentor during the 2015 Writivism Festival alongside Linda Musita and Kiprop Kimutai, and Nigerians Dami Ajayi and Emmanuel Iduma.⁵⁰ The latter two

⁵⁰ Iduma has shared the same digital space with Kioko in the *Trans-African* (now called *Contemporary And*) where he mostly publishes photo-essays. As we shall see later in chapter six, he has been equally involved in *Wasafiri*, the platform that featured Kioko's "Some Freedom Dreams" interviewing mostly emerging African writers. This example just points to how the internet if read as a liminal cultural space becomes an avenue of contending with a plethora of desires and fantasies of artists keen to create an alternative canon while concurrently wanting to be active players in the global cultural scene.

are co-founders of *Saraba* magazine that published Oduor's short story "Christopher". These partnerships, which involve pairing published and aspiring writers to work on a creative project, incorporate the literary and cultural networks, facilitated by the internet, that are now emerging in Africa. Through such intracontinental connections and collaborations, the artists are able to forge broader links of production and circulation of their narratives. Kiguru's analysis of the role of the local and regional writers' organization Writivism attests to the immense cultural capital that such entities possess. This cultural capital can be measured in relation not just to "global visibility" she mentions (2016: 209), but also to the symbolic effect of digital publishing as space where cultural memory is constantly contested and reconstructed and where artistic freedom is constantly affirmed.

The exercise of artistic freedom can be seen as a work of mourning insofar as such freedom seeks to restore what is claimed to have been lost, a practice evinced in the partnership between Writivism, a Kampala-based initiative that promotes emerging African writers, and *Enkare Review*, a Nairobi-based literary magazine. Since 2017, the magazine has been publishing the shortlists for the Writivism-administered Koffi Abo Prize for Creative Nonfiction. This sharing of digital platforms has become the norm in the contemporary African literary landscape, enacting what George Ogola calls "a recuperation of a repressed archive" (2015: 78). This cultural act is analogous to the endeavour by the minor characters in Kioko's story to express their desires and expectations, despite their marginality and anonymity. The story is not an allegory of the fate of Kenya's writers, but it shares in the cultural conditions that shape the contemporary cultural and political aspirations. The story implies that freedom involves the recovery and expression of suppressed identities in the (re)construction of self and culture. The reconstructions happen either consciously or unconsciously, and play out in an endless network of movement that mirrors the image of the traveller, constantly receptive to surprise.

Liminality and the journey

Liminality is a recurring motif in "Sometime Before Maulidi", where it functions as a critical site in the ongoing contestation and negotiation of desire and its fantasy formations. In the story, the motif of liminality is actuated through the imagery of travel, which is emblematic of the work of mourning as a journey that traverses different landscapes of loss, both personal and social. The impressionistic and the fragmentary nature of the narrative is similar to Oduor's "Rag Doll", and in both narratives, the protagonists are at once personally implicated in the changing environment around them and strangely detached. In Kioko's story, the detachment is even more evident, built as it is around the experience of travel, where the world slides by at

a psychic distance, like a phantasm that mimics the protagonist's intangible and shifting consciousness.

The motif of liminality, the imagery of travel, and the notion of cultural drift have proved useful in reading Kenya's cultural and literary landscape within which Kioko and other emerging writers publish and circulate their diverse narratives. There is something disembodied about the internet resources used by emerging writers that enable the literary flows and exchanges that are proving to be productive in destabilising ingrained cultural hegemonies and opening up more expansive flows of language. These flows and exchanges are both lateral, connecting different cultural groupings across different geographies, and historical, retrieving cultural memory in a palimpsestic manner, with the post-Binyavanga generation repeating the pioneering work of the earlier generation, but through different narrative forms and genres. The act of repetition performed by these writers is not unlike the act of mourning performed by not Anah, who is constantly reinventing herself through physical and emotional journeys that hold the hope of some kind of redemption from loss.

Chapter 6: Metatextuality in Ndinda Kioko's "Some Freedom Dreams"

Palimpsests and metatextuality

What is the connection between freedoms and dreams in a society where people still struggle with various forms of precarity as a result of economic, social and political exclusions? Is it possible to reactivate the unfulfilled dreams of the past in actualising the hopes and desires of contemporary existence? How can young people “find the *future of the past*”, as put by Ricoeur (1999: 14, author's emphasis), and resist the temptation of apathy and disinterest in local and global events? The answer to some of these questions is predicated on the understanding that in a world that is constantly evolving, the concept of freedom remains fundamentally important in safeguarding both the gains of the past and present. It is about learning from the errors of history so that the work of memory becomes a form of remembering and repetition that opens up multiple futures. Ndinda Kioko's "Some Freedom Dreams" (2017) is a story that raises some of these issues from the point of view of both fictional representation and mode of production.

As in Kioko's "Sometime Before Maulidi", the nameless protagonist of "Some Freedom Dreams" has lost her husband, here named Ras, and chooses travel as a way of mourning. She has left her hometown of Nairobi for Bukavu in the DRC to join her friend Samira, with whom she has had a sporadic affair since before her husband's death. The opening scene portrays the two lovers planning to visit an art exhibition in Bukavu at Samira's insistence. The narrative then provides a flashback to the lives of the narrator, her lover Samira and her husband Ras in Nairobi, where they had immersed themselves in Samira's "freedom dreams". Events subsequently switch back to the present in Bukavu, where the protagonist expresses her intention to quit her relationship with Samira for good. Her interior monologues offer insight into her psychological struggle in opting for a permanent separation or clinging to her lover. In the end, despite her dilemma, she chooses to remain with Samira "until Sunday" (2017: n.p.).

The narrator's flashback to the time the three friends lived together in Nairobi, and her reflections on struggling writers and their dream of being recognised and heard, foregrounds the central themes of artistic resistance and the actualization of dreams. The unnamed narrator writes that "[n]o one wanted our Eng Lit degrees, so we wrote poetry and mailed it to ourselves. They were poems about everything and nothing, poems about loving and eating and dying" (2017: n.p.). The practice of poetry in the story signifies a metatextual reflection on the

possibility of art in resisting conventionality and overcoming a sense of alienation. In his book *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, Gerard Genette defines metatextuality as that which “unites a given text to another, of which it speaks without necessarily citing it (without summoning it), in fact sometimes without naming it” (1997: 4). In the context of this chapter, metatextuality is taken as an aesthetic device in the story that foregrounds the cultural story told about art as a liberatory practice in negotiating the past.

Caught between the demand of her lover for permanency in the relationship and her need to mourn her deceased husband, the protagonist struggles to reconcile her conflicted desire, leaving her indecisive and anxious about life. Once again, Freud’s conception of mourning as that which involves “reaction to the loss of ... an ideal” (1962: 242) is useful in advancing the argument. The desire to reclaim the “ideal”, which is directly linked to her “freedom dreams”, is summarised by the narrator as follows:

We wanted clean water in Pipeline. We dreamed of houses that did not sink. We dreamed of quiet nights. We vowed to vote. We were going to build a community centre. We gathered emerging voices in Pipeline for this new project and that new project. (2014: n.p.)

The excerpt above draws attention to the precarious material conditions of life in Pipeline Estate, and the determination of the three friends and housemates to reimagine and rebuild a new world. Dealing with social loss entails coming together as a community of artists to formulate a new social consciousness. The ability of individual memory to operate within a collective framework is significant because it demonstrates the modes of resistance that “emerging voices” might deploy in conceptualising a future which does not forget the past but seeks to transform it. This might be a Romantic aspiration but it is not escapist. If, as Genette argues, metatextuality is premised on palimpsests, then it is well to recall the Romantic essayist Thomas De Quincey, who suggested that palimpsestic invocations enable “the possibility of resurrection, for what has so long slept in the dust” (2019: 55). Such insurrection involves the return of forgotten desires in the emerging voices of aspirant poets who reactivate a nostalgia for freedom dreams.

The analysis explores the notion of the palimpsest in reading how the unnamed narrator, and through her Kenya’s emerging authors, contend with social marginality, showing how the palimpsest embodies, as Sarah Dillon puts it, “the potential for future reinscriptions” that lead to “shifts in the balances of power and force” (2005: 255). For emerging writers, the ideas of resistance and self-recreation entail the rewriting of cultural memory.

Dream-work and the construction of subjectivity

Self-creation as an ongoing process of human subjectivity may receive added impetus after a major life transition such as death, where the bereaved has to deal with loss and grief, which puts life itself in question. Struggling to redefine her individual self at the loss of her husband, while simultaneously dealing with her ongoing attachment to Samira, the protagonist's dreams portray her current circumstance and express a desire to chart a different future. The dream-work presented in her story offers an entry point to understanding both her conflicted feelings and her desire for renewal. Aside from the actual dream that she describes, there is also the figurative dream she invokes of freedom through the practice of art. The actual dream imagery involves the lake, while the imagery of the daydream revolves around the community.

Set in Bukavu on Lake Kivu, in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, and in Pipeline, a semi-informal settlement in Nairobi, Kenya, the story focuses on art in contexts of political and social deprivation. While the poverty and precarity of Pipeline is explicitly referenced in the story, what is not made explicit is that Bukavu was the centre of ethnic conflict that spilled over from Rwanda at the close of the last century, in the course of which the city was temporarily invaded by rebel Congolese forces under General Nkunda.⁵¹ There is an implicit tension in the story between the individualistic life of the bohemian artist and the social life of the community in which the artist resides. While the unnamed narrator is emotionally attached both to her late husband Ras and to her lover Samira, these two are in an antagonistic relationship with one another, overtly in the arguments they have and covertly in their different social and artistic positions. Ras is a struggling artist who comes from an impoverished community, whereas Samira is an art entrepreneur who comes from a wealthy family. The narrator's decision to leave Samira seems to be motivated as much by the pretensions evident in the artist community in Bukavu as it is by her need properly to mourn the death of Ras. She wants to leave Samira so that she can learn again how to mourn properly and restart her life, but that is not yet possible as she has not entirely disengaged herself from Samira. She keeps postponing her decision even as she emotionally drifts away from her friend and lover. In order to rediscover herself, she has not only to disentangle herself from Samira's controlling behaviour but also to understand her own desire, which seems to consist in defying social conventions, even those of the artistic community that stifle her independence.

⁵¹ See Thomas Turner's account of the crisis in his book *The Congo Wars: Conflict, Myth and Reality*.

Through the first-person narrative voice, the story invokes the narrator's dreams during her stay with Samira in Bukavu. "In one of them", she recalled, "the water had swallowed up the shore, and the three of us – Samira, Ras and I – were stacked on top of each other like wood, floating with the bed. Almost each morning, we had to dry the mattress in the sun (2017: n.p.). The image of figures stacked on top of each other is oppressive. They are afloat on the water in the bed they metaphorically all share, but there is no room for movement. For Samira, the still water of the lake, to which she wakes every morning, is a calming but also disturbing presence (2017: n.p.). For the narrator, the water is dreamt as submerging the land. Freud interprets the symbol of water as representative of birth in a dream where "one either falls into the water or climbs out of it, [or] one rescues someone from the water – that is to say, the relation is one of mother to child" (Strachey and Richards 1973: 186). According to Freud, a body of water is thus the body of the mother from whom the child is born and from whom the child consequently separates. It is an image of both the promise of life and the threat of death, which is the ambivalent condition in which the narrator finds herself, and recurs in several of the stories we have discussed, where it variously suggests stasis and movement, and seems to stand for an unconscious that is active but hidden beneath the surface.

While the narrator's dream of the water submerging the land speaks to the personal condition in which she needs both to free herself from Ras by mourning him and to free herself from Samira so that she can mourn properly, water is also significant in the passage describing the communal aspirations the three friends had in Pipeline, where they dreamt of houses that did not sink. In this way, personal need and communal aspiration are metaphorically interwoven in a way that raises their relation to one another. The poetry written by Ras and the narrator is initially posted to one another as the society evinces no interest in "EngLit degrees" (2017: n.p.). In other words, writing poetry is a self-absorbed activity, relevant only to the two of them. It is only when Ras posts the poems on lampposts around the city, and he is briefly arrested, that they achieve recognition and Samira 'discovers' them. Nevertheless, her description of them as "part of a generation that was reshaping what she called 'the artistic expression' in Nairobi" (2017: n.p.) merely elicits derisory laughter from Ras, who does not share Samira's entrepreneurial spirit. If Samira functions as an alter ego of Kioko in her commentary on a renaissance of artistic expression in her generation, Ras functions as a cynical observer of what could be seen to be a presumptuous claim. The observation and response it elicits reflect back on the situation in which the author finds herself. While such self-reflexivity in respect to the conditions of writing has been argued to be the case in all the stories examined in this study, it

is overtly presented here as a metatextual device. The story we read is a story about the contexts and work performed by emerging writers, in respect of whom Kioko is one of the principal exponents. The palimpsest is the condition of the writings. It references their textual context rather than an individual text. Nevertheless, the story cunningly references itself in its description of a projected anthology of poetry, featuring emerging writers, to be called *Some Freedom Dreams*, but that was going nowhere (2017: n.p.).

Sexual freedom as agency

The narrator's poetic sensitivity is projected through the sensitivity of her senses of touch and smell, which signifies her intimate and direct apprehension of the world, and constitutes a form of personal transcendence that allows her to escape from the stresses of social interaction where she feels awkward and self-conscious. Her sensuousness is highlighted in her response to Samira's statement about a new generation of emerging voices reshaping artistic expression in Nairobi. Unlike the cynicism this utterance elicits from Ras, the narrator says that she liked not only the way in which this made them seem important but also "how it sounded on Samira's purple mouth" (2017: n.p.). Later, we are told the way in which she senses the presence of a man standing behind her by the "smell" (2017: n.p.) of his body. The narrator's sensitive feelings, captured in the nuance, ambivalence and irresolution of her interior musings, seem closely tied to her sensuousness, which is tied, in turn, to her sensuality.

Of interest is the role of sensuality, and specifically sexual transgression, in reimagining the liberatory potential of the future. Transgression, both sexual and social, is not only a thread running through the story, as it does in Kioko's "Sometime Before Maulidi", it is also evident in the story's range of structural and stylistic choices, like the use of stream-of-consciousness, the emphasis on tonal variation, and the flashback. Memory is presented in sensuous detail as the act of mourning returns to a past that is giving way to an unknown future, with the narrator having left Nairobi and stopped over in Bukavu en route to Johannesburg to take up an editing position (2017: n.p.). The narrator's process of working through grief and bereavement bears similarities with not Anah in "Sometime Before Maulidi". In both instances, the women who have recently lost and buried their husbands travel not just to deal with the anguish of death, but to rediscover themselves through the idea of self-shattering. The latter involves re-evaluating one's emotions and feelings from multiple perspectives, but without necessarily succumbing to societal pressures that may prescribe certain conventional modes of mourning.

Samira is an interesting case. Her charismatic personality is evident in the narrator's reference to her "walking into a room when everyone was already there, and was familiar with everyone else" (2017: n.p.) so that she can dominate attention. With the narrator, in their private moments, she is physically attentive, as when she plaits the narrator's hair (2017: n.p.). She takes command of situations, as she took command of the lives of Ras and his wife, the narrator, who was always leaving him (2017: n.p.). In one respect, she is the embodiment of redefining oneself and becoming visible. But in another respect, according to Ras, as well as what we observe of her at the exhibition in Bukavu, she is "the biggest sham this South of Sahara" (2017: n.p.). In the context of this story, with its transgressive sexual practice, visibility includes performing one's sexuality in freedom (as a lesbian and bisexual), at least in the bohemian circle in which the three friends move, largely with reference to Samira and, perhaps to a lesser extent, the narrator. On the other hand, disclosure of the lesbian relationship between the narrator and Samira elicits from Ras the threat of damnation in hell (2017: n.p.). Sexuality is a transgressive act in terms of how it undermines social order and prompts individuals to imagine alternative forms of relationships. The motif of queer sexuality foregrounds the difference between Samira and her lover, and dramatizes the unique nature of their respective "freedom dreams" in deviating from a conformist worldview.

For the narrator, transgression entails not only the rejection of social sexual norms but also the exposure of the pretentious norms of the artistic conversation that she encounters at the exhibition in Bukavu. Talk about the self-consciousness of representation evident in the photograph of the woman on the lakeside leaves her feeling exasperated: "I told him the first thing that came to mind so he could leave. I said that the woman in the photo didn't seem to care if the camera or anyone else was looking at her, that she was just bathing" (2017: n.p.). Her tone reveals the exasperation with which she views the conventions of photographic interpretation as uttered by Kaká Kamissoko, whom Samira subsequently refers to as the "Renaissance man" (2017: n.p.), and who had introduced himself to the narrator "by a list of the people he was: painter, historian, filmmaker, photographer, explorer, actor, and the curator of the exhibition" (2017: n.p.). His pronouncements on the photograph are erudite in his use of terms like "symbolist, pastiches, someone called Gustav Klimt" (2017: n.p.). He is clearly knowledgeable, but also self-conscious about his importance. In some way he himself is absent, as if he exists only in his attributes, which include his sexual prowess: "Samira whispered in my ear, saying he was the man she had told me about, the one who was an expert at everything, but fucked like he knew there were depths he'd never reach" (2017: n.p.).

Whereas Samira is at ease in this gathering of bohemian artists with their cosmopolitan aesthetics and promiscuous sexual mores, the narrator feels more alone than she has ever felt before. If the stories previously examined allude indirectly to their cultural contexts of production, “Some Freedom Dreams” seems directly to reference its contexts. In the story, there are two contexts: the impoverished neighbourhood of Pipeline Estate, the place of emerging writers in Nairobi that the narrator has called home, and Bukavu, the place where artists seemed to have arrived that Samira has made her home. If the movement from Pipeline to Bukavu signifies a movement from emerging to arriving, then the narrator is clearly uncomfortable with the way in which a new hegemony is consolidating itself. Her repetition of the first-person pronoun ‘I’ conveys a powerful affect and assertion of voice that reflects an ongoing resistance and desire for freedom, which is threatened with repression through the indirect methods of control exemplified by Kamissoko and his sophisticated assurance of authority.

The narrator’s reaction to Kamissoko’s question about her real identity captures her self-consciousness and anxiety, wishing her “hands were holding something, like Samira’s hand, or my husband’s, or a bag requiring both hands” (2017: n.p.). This response describes an individual conscious of her emotional and social vulnerability in a society that seeks to label and compartmentalise people while suppressing their imaginations of self. Earlier, the narrator had used a telling image to describe how she was tagging along at the exhibition with Samira: “Samira led me from this person to the next, and it was as though I was a girl once again, wearing my Sunday best, holding my mother’s hand after Sunday service. It almost felt good” (2017: n.p.). This description invokes the security of family and faith. The child, the mother and the Sunday service coalesce into a nostalgic memory that resonates with images of childhood and religious faith found in Oduor’s “The Plea Bargain” and “My Father’s Head”. Both childhood and religious ritual suggest a kind of innocence. The narrator is in a dilemma between nostalgia for an irrecoverable past and anxiety for an unknown future in Johannesburg. Like not Anah in “Sometime Before Maulidi”, she is in transit, between lives, working through loss, on a journey of healing and recovering agency.

Cultural identity and redemption

Among the emerging writers with whom the narrator as much as the author is affiliated, redemption consists in creating a new cultural identity. In this regard, there is a noteworthy reference in the story to Nairobi as “palimpsest” (2017: n.p.). While cultural identity is a continuation of the aesthetics of the past in terms of modes of collaborations, linkages, and

even circulation, there is a growing desire among artists to reimagine Kenya's cultural memory. This is demonstrated by their participation in scholarships and fellowships like the Miles Morland to counter poor literary infrastructure in many African countries. As the conditions of production are integral to this study, it is necessary to detail the ramifications of some of these cultural reconfigurations insofar as the concepts of resistance and reconstruction are concerned, and to tease out the existing "material networks of production and circulation" (Santana 2018: 187) in suggesting how writers undermine conventional cultural modes that have tended to dominate the scene of writing.

Through her narratives on digital platforms, Kioko exemplifies an artist who continues to push the boundaries of cultural freedom, as evidenced by the publication of "Some Freedom Dreams" in the online edition of *Wasafiri* journal. Analogous to the characters portrayed in the story, the emerging authors seek to rewrite themselves into a cultural framework signified by partnerships and collaborations.⁵² Of equal importance is the sharing of publishing spaces on electronic media such as *Wasafiri* in order to expand contemporary literary conversations around the craft of writing, and the state of publishing in Africa. The interview of Peter Kimani, a literary critic and second-generation Kenyan writer, in the same journal, is an example of the indirect inter-generational dialogue through cultural networks that constantly signal each other. Rewriting does not just manifest itself in shared publishing platforms, but extends to literary scholarships and fellowships that have progressively become popular. The situation, to an extent, has been exacerbated by the inadequate funding of culture and arts in different parts of Africa, which drives artists to venture into alternative means of sustenance.

A central motivation for emerging writers has been the idea of situating oneself within a global literary market and the cultural capital that comes with it. Kiguru has investigated some of these linkages of "economic and cultural value" (1962: 212) that intersect with literary prizes and local writers' organisations and refashion an alternative cultural power. I wish to extend her argument by including the Miles Morland Scholarship, which supports nearly all popular literary magazines and journals in the continent, and also gives support to individual writers. Kenyans who have won the scholarship include Kioko (2014), Abdul Adan (2016), and Gloria Mwaniga and Parselelo Ole Kantai (2019). These developments are clear evidence of the linkages that essentially expand the spaces of cultural production and circulation. Kioko and

⁵² See chapter five where I examine some of the collaborations among these writers, particularly the *Jalada's* translation project of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's short story "The Upright Revolution" originally published in Gikuyu.

Adan, for example, are founding members of *Jalada* and thus their participation in the same scholarship underscores the significance of operating within a literary network where writers validate one another while simultaneously establishing new forms of cultural identity and new ways of recovering memory.

Grappling with cultural memory in Kenya denotes the artistic freedom to engage boldly with non-normative themes such as same-sex relationships. Unlike the derogatory portrayal of homosexual characters by the older generation of writers,⁵³ Kioko and her literary companions have tended to express compassion and sympathy to such marginalized and maligned figures. This is demonstrated also in Cherrie Kandie's "Sew My Mouth", which was nominated for the 2019 Caine Prize. As in "Some Freedom Dreams", Kandie's story is narrated from a first-person perspective by a female character who recounts her tribulations with her girlfriend Magda. The latter is under pressure by her parents to get married and to conform to a heterosexual identity, thus revealing the challenges that confront queer people in most African societies. Kandie's story is a manifestation of resistance and refusal to be silenced as wittily exemplified by its defiant title, which alludes both to silencing and to infibulation. Interestingly, both narrators are unnamed, symbolizing the invisibility of individuals who are deemed social deviants.

Kandie joins a long list of Kenyan writers shortlisted for the *Caine* Prize like Parsalelo Kantai and Mukoma Ngugi, both in 2009, for "You Wreck Her" and "How Kamau wa Mwangi Escaped into Exile", respectively. Ngugi's story was first published, again, in *Wasafiri*, reinforcing a literary tradition that remains multidirectional in terms of cultural circulation among the different generations of authors. The two nominees have also long been associated with *Kwani?*, which has had an enormous artistic influence on Kioko and Oduor. In "Some Freedom Dreams", the main characters can be said to be fictional versions of the post-Binyavanga group in terms of their artistic aspirations, fantasies, and memories. In an interview, Kioko has confessed her "nostalgia for that time in Nairobi when there'd be readings like Wamathai Open Mic, Bar Stool Poetry, and others" (Arunga 2017: n.p.), while the narrator in her story is "on [her] way to Johannesburg for a new editorial gig" (2017: n.p.) This fusion of autobiography and fiction mirrors the cosmopolitan lives of the writers in the digital age of transnational modes of circulation of African literature.

⁵³ See Chris Dunton's (1989) critical analysis of homosexual references in some pioneer African novels.

The example of Kandie and Kioko demonstrates how the concepts of freedom and dreams are integral in framing cultural identity as a material network of publishing and circulation. Participation in and sharing of similar cultural spaces, scholarships and fellowships accelerate the creation of local and global linkages that are instrumental in reimagining traditional cultural memory. The notion of redemption assists in rethinking the work of mourning to “create ruptures and instability in hegemonic interpretations of the past” (Arias and del Campo 2009: 9), using modes of reinterpretations that rewrite narratives through inter-generational collaborations. These literary and cultural exchanges exemplify the metaphor of the palimpsest, with its reinscriptions of the past acting simultaneously as erasure and as an appropriation that instigates a future marked by new literary imaginations.

Self-actualisation and new imaginations

Formulating new imaginations at the cultural or social levels is a form of resistance against distortions of memory like forgetting. Issues of cultural and social memory preoccupy the characters in Kioko’s story, who happen also to represent the community of new artists emerging in Kenya and neighbouring countries, including the new-generation writers with whom the study has been concerned. Of relevance to the study is the relationship between imagination and a freedom aimed at self-actualisation in the work produced by the writers, particularly in terms of their cultural experimentation with interactive digital platforms such as *YouTube*, where their narratives circulate. For purposes of this study, it would be interesting to investigate the place of resistance and healing among the characters, and to identify their overall conceptualisation of existence as they work through various forms of loss, from the interpersonal to the psychical.

Attention has been drawn to the image of the palimpsest in the context both of personal memory work and of historical reference to such countries as South Sudan and Congo which have been devastated by civil wars for decades. The appropriation and erasure of memory is a fundamental plot development in Kioko’s story. One of the humanitarians at the art exhibition expresses interest in the narrator’s opinion regarding Kenya’s capital. In a series of rhetorical questions that dramatize the contradictions of loss, he asks her about her actual identity, then says: “Nairobi? What did I [the narrator] think of Nairobi as a palimpsest? Did I make those earrings? Had I been to South Sudan, and wasn’t it awful what was happening there?” (2017: n.p.). Nairobi represents a site of contestation and negotiation of multiple desires and identities that often conflict with each other. This is interesting because while Ras and his wife live in Pipeline, a neighbourhood characterized by collapsing houses, inadequate basic amenities and

poor sanitation, their friend Samira is from Karen, an opulent suburb. The sharp contrast affirms that the work of memory as a means of dealing with loss is invariably characterized by inescapable contradictions.

For Samira, her memory of loss is that of a corrupt father with lots of money, while for her friends, it about unemployment and precarious living in an informal settlement. Despite these contradictions, or perhaps because of them, the city serves as a metaphor of contending with resistance and healing, in a dialectal process where both feed each other. Kioko's essay "Stones and Memory", which deals with commemoration and healing, describes Nairobi as "a text through which we read our own acts of forgetting and misremembering" (2016: n.p.). There is no singular consensus, no single narrative in the work of memory. In the story "Some Freedom Dreams" there is both amnesia (the narrator is unable to remember how her wedding ring went missing) and nostalgia (the narrator's reflections on life in Pipeline Estate with Ras and Samira). One might say that Nairobi embodies an open-ended space where infinite possibilities abound, as in Achille Mbembe's description, in his article "Writing the World from an African Metropolis", of the African city "as a site of fantasy, desire, and imagination" (2004: 355-6). But Nairobi is also a political space, and, as evident in the conversation in the story about reconstruction through "affirmative action, policy, [and] localisation" (2017: n.p.), it played a critical role in helping South Sudan achieve self-determination, and thus finds a regional voice in the story.

The questions posed by the humanitarian at the art exhibition finds resonance with Kioko's "Sometime Before Maulidi", which grapples even more centrally with the political issue of historical marginalisation and the quest for autonomy. In both stories, peripheral figures grapple with loss, whether personal, social or cultural, and in both stories loss initiates the work of memory and mourning. To remember is to reactivate and reinterpret a past that is under the threat of either erasure or distortion. The invocation of memory involves a duty that Ricoeur associates with the "concerns [of] the future" (1999: 10), which is about a manifestation of freedom. The question of freedom persists to the end of the narrative, when the two lovers come to terms with the termination of their relationship. The narrator, who is increasingly getting agitated and impatient, declares emphatically her intention to quit the affair. This declaration culminates in a momentary confusion between her, Samira and Kamissoko, because they were just getting ready for a photograph. Samira is depicted as adept and discerning when it comes to reading the widening rift.

The concepts of reading and writing help in framing the desire of transcending personal and social predicaments, indicating the way in which characters can reimagine themselves through alternative narratives that are attuned to their aspirations and dreams. It is not just what the narrator says that is taken in by Samira, but also how she says it through her body language, which in turn changes Samira's body language. Transcendence of the impasse between the two lovers, who are soon to part, is evident in the tonal variation from disorientation to relief as the two lovers subsequently visit the club Coco Jambo. The narrator finally has the opportunity to take charge of her dreams while processing the loss of her husband. While the past is not absolutely transcended, it is reworked or rewritten to reflect the biblical salvation mentioned by the narrator at the end when she confesses to Samira how, as a child, she used to "have dreams of living in a truck with Diguna Christian missionaries, travelling the world and preaching the word" (2017: n.p.). Her vision ties the world to the word through alliterative rhyme, and refers to the overall desire for a deeper transformation previously signalled by dreams of publishing a poetry collection called *Some Freedom Dreams*.

The notion of transformation through self-actualisation can be explored from the standpoint of Kenya's new-generation writers, represented here by the narrator and her deceased husband Ras who, like the author Kioko, experiment with *YouTube* to circulate and share narratives that range from interviews and readings to personal reflections. Kioko has used this platform to discuss her writing history, and has involved herself in other artistic ventures as well, notably film production.⁵⁴ In this way, she has expanded her audience and secured feedback through online comments, something not readily available on mainstream platforms. This freedom to experiment with diverse electronic forms has significance to the broader reconfiguration of Kenya's literary landscape, where the use of audio-visuals in cultural production, which is still downplayed or absent in literary discourses, and the creation of an alternative cultural identity through these new technologies, facilitates processes of transformation through artistic self-actualisation among the new-generation writers.

Freedom to dream

The story of a woman's journey in grieving the loss of her husband is at once deeply personal and sharply political. Juxtaposing the woman's immediate experience with her vivid memories, it illustrates how psychic landscape overlaps with cultural and political landscapes, and

⁵⁴See some of these links: < <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qNhPs9EgOmk&t=9s>>; this reading from "Some Freedom Dreams": <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GetP11JK0vo&t=54s>; and this interview: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VcPKEB5LqHQ>> .

demonstrates the palimpsestic relationship between the present, past and future in a story that is not only about dreaming, but also reads like a dream. Dream assists the woman in dealing with personal and social loss through providing a language that reconnects with suppressed desire, a desire signalled both by the figurative dream of freedom and by the actual dream of water. What is desired is a form of survival and redemption, as in the image of the bed in the carrying the three lovers floating on the flooded lake, like an ark delivering its inhabitants to a new life, another life that will emerge after the flood has subsided. The narrative employs a dream-like style of geographic fragmentation, stream-of-consciousness and allusion to grapple with mourning from the perspectives of an identity reconstruction that pertains not only to the narrator but also, through her, to the emerging writers whom she represents in the story.

Chapter 7: The Censored Chapter

“The unconscious is that chapter of my history which is marked by a blank or occupied by a falsehood: it is the censored chapter. But the Truth can be found again...” (Jacques Lacan 1968: 12).

The study has focused on stories by Okwiri Oduor and Ndinda Kioko, who form part of a group of new-generation Kenyan writers using digital media in the production and circulation of their work. It has argued that the digital production and circulation of literary items in blogs, online magazines and YouTube, among other media, is changing the literary conversation. The proliferation of such modes of publishing and circulation has been accelerated by increased internet access, and by the urge to tell stories that seek to recuperate the repressed through narratives of memory and mourning. An alternative archive is in the making, not a new archive but one that uses the new digital technologies to recover a “censored chapter” in the book of culture. Tropes of loss, identity, marginality, desire and subjectivity abound in stories we have examined, and expose conflicting identities that range from the individual to the collective, the private to the political. In these stories, the past, the present and the future are interwoven in a temporal network of mutual influence.

The study has historicised the advent of magazine publishing across Africa with the rise of *Black Orpheus* and *Transition* and later in Kenya, the emergence of small journals like *Joe*, *Viva*, and later *Parents* and *Jahazi*. The 1980s and 1990s were marked by a decline in cultural production as a consequence of socio-political and economic factors, including the introduction of the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) that fragmented the public space through privatization policies. The biggest casualties were former government-funded institutions like cultural centres that could no longer survive without private or donor funding. Because of some of these external interferences, few writers were able to produce significant work until the early 2000s with the entry of the Caine Prize and the birth of *Kwani*? The new art scene was signified by a complexity of literary networks that transcended the previous binaries of local and foreign. Taking advantage of the growing popularity of the internet, writers like Oduor and Kioko started publishing stories on blogs and online magazines such as *Jalada*, *Enkare Review*, and *Storymoja*. These digital platforms continue to overcome spatial and temporal boundaries that had constrained the framing of issues among the older generation.

The inter-generational relationship between older writers and emerging writers has been investigated from the standpoint of an alternative cultural aesthetics that informs both form and content in the work of emerging writers, who employ a range of discourses such as photo-essays, personal anecdotes, biopics, testimonies, reflections and blogposts. While the study has drawn attention to how the writers experiment with other forms and style to reimagine Kenya's cultural memory, its subject has been the short fiction of Oduor and Kioko, whose stories seek to reimagine the past from the perspective of a present whose future is accelerated by the new digital technology, the forms of consciousness it facilitates, and the kinds of stories it enables. Resistance to hegemonic practices of personal, social and cultural exclusion has resulted not in a rejection of mainstream platforms but a fluid movement between these platforms and the emerging new non-mainstream platforms. Traditional media still play a significant role in the growth of literature, and in Kenya writers' organizations like AMKA, Storymoja, and Lesleigh continue to have formidable influence in nurturing and mentoring artists, introducing them to local and global networks that provide cultural capital as well as literary visibility. But even emerging writers who have found a space on mainstream platforms continue to publish on virtual spaces because of limited costs of production and access to diverse audiences.

The question of literary visibility has been the subject of polarising discourses and polemics. There is the argument that digital platforms are part of the popular culture of resistance because they destabilise cultural hegemony and instigate a new consciousness in the appreciation of contemporary African literature. However, others counter that popular culture can also be deceptive and illusionary, as there are invisible contradictions that define virtual spaces, and which can only be decoded through close analysis (Srinivasan et al 2019). For example, it could be argued that online journals and social media networks have hierarchies that are persistently reproduced and replayed, as seen with the names of writers who appear in certain online anthologies and even get shortlisted for international prizes. While the study has not delved deeper into these contradictions of cultural production, popular culture as embraced by the third-generation writers requires further investigation in order to sharpen its critique and suggest further possibilities of transcendence. The possibilities may include different theoretical and methodical approaches that are not entrapped in the fantasy of endless possibilities associated with digital media. This does not mean that digital publishing is crippled by contradictions. The post-Binyavanga group has significantly opened up creative possibilities through online publishing, perhaps more than at any other time in Kenya's cultural history. What has emerged is the artistic freedom not just to experiment with form and content

but also to have relative control of the narratives without fear of censorship and exclusion. Moreover, digital media has been instrumental in the invigoration of transnational and global dialogue between writers and audiences.

The study has used a psychoanalytic framework to explore both the motives of the characters portrayed in the stories as well as the meanings behind the choice of particular modes of production among the emerging writers. It has sought to show how these modes of production are not external to the stories but inhere in them. The thematics and stylistics of desire, dreams, subjectivity, alienation, and fantasy are manifest not just in the stories themselves but also within their socio-cultural and political contexts of production. The aesthetic dream works and the political dream aspirations are an expression of Africa dreaming. The emphasis has been on the dialectical relationship between the unconscious and consciousness to tease out the themes of existential crisis, displacement and resistance. This theoretical framework has enabled nuanced approaches to be understanding how individuals and groups confront loss, negotiate ways of belonging, and reconstruct new identities amid personal, cultural and economic upheavals. A potential danger in using a psychoanalytic framework lies in its emphasis on the past as an exclusive determinant of human behaviour divorced from contemporary events, and in focusing on the individual to the exclusion of the social. This has been slightly the case in the few representations of present-day life in Kenya as portrayed by the two authors in their respective stories. Therefore, while the historical approach is defensible on the principle that the unconscious contains suppressed memories, there is the danger of making subjective conclusions based on what are by nature elusive and inconclusive representations. The study has endeavoured to show that human development is not hamstrung by the past and locked into an enclosed selfhood, and that the production of literary meaning partakes of reality as much as it partakes of fantasy. Through its emphasis on the symbolic function, Lacanian psychoanalysis has provided a way of thinking about the discourse of the self in relation to social discourse by emphasising the role of language, into which the human subject enters on acquiring speech, in the construction of the human psyche.

This study follows Lacan in its reading of the significance of images such as the doll in “Rag Doll” and the headless father in “My Father’s Head” (Oduor), and the significance of absences such as the deceased mother in “The Plea Bargain” (Oduor), the murdered lover in “Sometime Before Maulidi” and the breaking up of the trio of friends in “Some Freedom Dreams” (Kioko). It has traced these significances with references to the notions of crisis (“The Plea Bargain”), displacement (“My Father’s Head”), precarity (“Rag Doll”), liminality (“Sometime Before

Maulidi”) and metatextuality (“Some Freedom Dreams”). The psychoanalytic motifs of sexuality and dreams have been valuable in tracking the performance of desire and transgression in the subjective fantasies and intersubjective relationships of the protagonists, who are inward-looking but sensuously aware of their natural and social habitats.

The study has sought to link the thematic circumstances in the stories to the material circumstances of their modes of production and circulation, by suggesting that thematic preoccupations and modes of production are in a dialectical relationship, where each acts upon the other, obscuring the line between art and life. Aside from discussing the new digital platforms and their enabling technology, the study has also looked at the role of literary prizes and awards in assisting new-generation writers to inscribe themselves into the global cultural world, in the context of the local writers’ organizations and collectives that have been a constant feature in the East African literary space. While global awards are vital in the validation process of the authors, that is not license to ignore the less visible African-based prizes that continue to sustain and nurture contemporary African literature, such as the Jomo Kenyatta Prize for Literature and the Wahome Mutahi Literary Award. While donor-funded projects in Kenya and around the continent continue to transform African literature in radical ways, there is always the danger of (re)producing stories that recycle themes and styles endorsed by these projects. This suppression of alternative narratives as a precondition for funding would entrench the very hierarchies that the writers have been challenging in their quest for recognition and visibility.

The stories provide a vivid and insightful examination of personal and social issues. They are sophisticated in the use of symbol and voice, fluid in the transitions they facilitate between fantasy and actuality, and metatextual in respect of the intertwining of the writing of character and the life of writing. The stories deal with gender dynamics and religious faith (“The Plea Bargain”), the uncanny figure of the double (“My Father’s Head”), psychic fracture and animistic fantasy (“Rag Doll”), the mirroring of the private and the political (“Sometime Before Maulidi”), and the inscription of the scene of culture in the scene of writing (“Some Freedom Dreams”). Their projection of the contemporary Kenyan imaginary is affective, reflective and liberatory. In dwelling on memory, and taking on the work of mourning, they prepare the way for a future that is inscribed in, but not circumscribed by, the past.

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