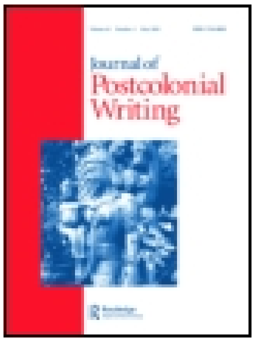

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Between imagination and delusion: Cosmopolitan postcolonial critique in Ken Walibora's *Ndoto ya Amerika* [*The American Dream*]

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This paper reads Ken Walibora's Kiswahili children's book *Ndoto ya Amerika* [*The American Dream*] as a critical intervention in the politics of the imagination in Kenya. I argue that although the story is radical in its subtle criticism of the West, its main focus is the disillusionment with the post-independence dispensation in Africa. By tracking the story's imaginative engagements with the Kiswahili language, the African American diaspora, and the disciplinary apparatus of the postcolonial Kenyan state, I find that Walibora promotes "rooted cosmopolitanism" as a framework for literary and political development. Despite its artistic innovativeness in addressing the problems that African nations face, *Ndoto ya Amerika* has received little critical attention. It behoves the postcolonial critic to consider popular and children's texts in indigenous languages of the Global South, as texts like *Ndoto ya Amerika* offer an energetic critique of universalized notions of cosmopolitanism while proposing alternative cosmopolitan practices. I read *Ndoto ya Amerika* as undermining dominant notions of cosmopolitanism which, in their triumphalist perception of globalization, privilege the affluent postcolonial subject based in the West.

Keywords: Ken Walibora; Kiswahili; children's literature; African cosmopolitanism; African diaspora in America; crime

Introduction

The Kenyan writer Ken Walibora's *Ndoto ya Amerika* [*The American Dream*] pokes fun at Africans' delusions about supposed comforts in the black diaspora in America. In this Kiswahili children's book, the characters literalize the expression "American dream", willing themselves to dream about the United States in the hope of bolstering their chances of escaping from their own continent. The narrator even dreams about being a black president in the United States and an instant political celebrity. The 2001 book obviously pre-dates Barack Obama's historic presidential win in November 2008 and even his entry into the presidential race in 2007, but it captures a collective desire of impoverished Kenyans to leave their country in search of better pastures in the West. While *Ndoto ya Amerika* portrays the abysmal failure of the post-independence nation in the government's chronic disregard for ordinary people, the text nevertheless gestures towards a cosmopolitan imaginative practice which accords marginalized societies dignity and pride.

In postcolonial children's literature, the nation remains an important site of safeguarding against the loss of self-dignity in a globalized world. However, not only has the genre been neglected in postcolonial studies but children's literature in African languages has not been given much critical attention in the field. This is true despite the fact that theorists of

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cosmopolitanism, such as Kwame A. Appiah, Pheng Cheah, Bruce Robbins, Arif Dirlik, and Dipesh Chakrabarty, emphasize the importance of local conditions in understanding the transnational impulses of postcolonial cultures.[1] Further, while most readings of East African children's literature focus on the negation of Western stereotypes drawn from European fiction, we need to focus on how African children writers portray the relationship between their societies and the West in the context of globalization.[2]

Ndoto ya Amerika is a first-person narrative about the adventures of Isaya Yano, an elementary school pupil in the rural village of Sangura in Trans Nzoia District in Kenya's Rift Valley region.[3] He decides to run away from being caned at home and at school. He and his streetwise but academically challenged friend, Madoa, try to find ways of leaving their country for America. According to the boys, to go to America, one must literally dream about the place. Isaya is lucky enough to dream several times about being in the supposed land of plenty. Rock Mwamba, a shrewd urban operative, proposes to assist them with the means of going to America. After stealing money from an old man, Mzee Zakayo Wekesa, who has left his home for a funeral in a neighboring rural district, the boys set off for the city. Unknown to the narrator, Rock Mwamba is a criminal (Zablon Okutoyi) who has recruited Madoa into the underworld of crime with the promise that he will help the boy go to America. During their first operation, the narrator, a naïve villager, is left behind as Madoa and Mwamba go out together on a robbery assignment. The criminals are unlucky and are arrested.

Written with school readers in mind, *Ndoto ya Amerika* is a didactic story that seeks to illustrate the veracity of a Kiswahili proverb reproduced at the end of the narrative: "Asiyefunzwa na mamake hufunzwa na ulimwengu" (48) (he who is not taught good manners by his/her mother will be taught the hard way by the world; translation mine).[4] This ending is in line with traditional African storytelling whereby the lesson of an oral narrative is expressed directly in the form of a wise saying. In the context of the story, children should heed their parents' advice and accept punishment at home or face unpleasant consequences in the outside world. The dénouement of *Ndoto ya Amerika* tries to resolve all the conflicts in the story to stress the moral lesson that not only is violent crime a social evil but dreaming about leaving one's country for the West does not pay. Isaya Yano's mother in the story serves the same function as the mother in the proverb quoted: namely, as the disciplinarian whose warnings the boy must heed if he is not to fall victim to the temptations of the world and get harsher punishment than that meted out by his mother.

The story's critique of the allures of the diaspora is as acute as in Ike Oguine's *A Squatter's Tale* or (Juliana) Makuchi's short stories "Your Madness, Not Mine" and "The American Lottery".[5] Makuchi and Oguine portray with stark irony the contrast between an African's imagined view of America from the homeland and the reality in the diaspora. Deviating from Arjun Appadurai's view of the global media as a powerful mechanism for positive transnational cultural dissemination, Makuchi and Oguine resist Appadurai's contention that western media outlets are "no longer an opium of the masses" (Appadurai 7). Contrary to Appadurai, the writers project western media as a hallucinatory "opium" in the sense that TV and cinema present to Africans empty spectacular illusions of America. But unlike Makuchi or Oguine, Walibora does not set any events in the diaspora, as the characters do not manage to escape to America. Rather, he depicts America as imagined by naïve children. By setting his story in the realm of dreaming and childhood, rather than dispelling illusions with the torch of realism, Walibora focuses on the imaginations and delusions of his characters instead of turning to the diaspora as a source of truth.

Using simple language, Walibora explores the psychology of young boys to portray the attitude of Kenyan youths towards their own cultures and towards the West. The boys' wishes seem to signify a general national desire to escape reality. Indeed, to Walibora, "Kenya may well be a nation of juvenile stupidity and myopia" (personal interview). Although not the subject matter of the story, it is worth noting that these children's notions of America are not so far removed from normal ideas about the glories of rich countries that trickle down not only to kids but to adults as well. The attitude that what comes from abroad, especially from the United States or England, is superior to anything local can be found in fields as disparate as education and agriculture, and among Kenyans of all classes. The worship of western material culture is enhanced by the gross abuses of civil rights and economic injustice at home and the citizens' lack of confidence in their own institutions, thanks to systematic poor governance. Therefore, *Ndoto ya Amerika* is a statement against unrealistic dreams, especially delusions based either on an easy life in the city, or as part of the African diaspora in America. On the whole, then, the story is not directly about American politics. It is about Africans' self-delusion about America and the need for formal education and literacy in African nations as a means of empowerment. According to the story, the boys should go through the education system at home and acquire an education before venturing out to the diaspora.

Destabilizing language hierarchies

In *The World Republic of Letters*, Pascale Casanova contends that writers from marginalized nations are restricted in their choices in the sense that their very marginalization is usually denied by metropolitan outlets "in the name of literary universality". Accordingly, her account of "the small literatures" reads their creative labor as a series of space-clearing struggles that shake up the "universe of literary possibilities" within the western canon (177). However, *pace* Casanova, African writers challenge literary and cultural assumptions of the West even when their primary audiences are indigenous. Walibora's story powerfully critiques the western orientation that Casanova's study presupposes, which he diagnoses in his fellow Kenyans as the "dream of America", through his savvy use of, to use Bruce Ackerman's expression, "rooted cosmopolitanism". In an African postcolonial context, as conceived by Appiah in "Cosmopolitan Patriots", this is a form of cosmopolitanism that is founded on concrete relationships and cultural networks in a particular local community. It respects ethnic and gender differences as opposed to unabashed embrace of universalizing western practices and ideals. Walibora's "rooted cosmopolitanism" can be seen most clearly in his strategic use of the Kiswahili language as a statement on the roles and responsibilities of postcolonial writers. Walibora's strategic use of Kiswahili employs the language as an African response to globalization, especially the universalistic tendency to overwhelm non-western languages and culture and replace them with standardized western practices and lifestyles.

Kiswahili is a Bantu language, spoken as a mother tongue along the East African seaboard from southern Somalia to northern Mozambique, that now serves as an alternative first language to various ethnic groups in East and Central Africa.[6] It is a versatile language. About 35% of the Kiswahili vocabulary derives from the Arabic language, gained through more than 12 centuries of contact with Arabic-speaking traders. It has also incorporated German, Portuguese, English, and French words into its vocabulary through contact during the last five centuries. In his majestic study *Swahili beyond the Boundaries*, Alamin Mazrui demonstrates the development of Kiswahili into a transnational lingua franca. Although initially associated with Islamic literature, Kiswahili was quickly accepted by Euro-Christian administrators because of its utility as a major lingua franca and adopted as the language of the Bible in the early 20th century (Bakari 21). This uneven process, which began at the end of the 19th century, has been especially pronounced in Tanzania. Alamin Mazrui notes in *Swahili beyond the Boundarres*:

> Quasi-socialist policies which began in the late 1960s resulted in the tendency to generalize Swahili identity beyond the frontiers of Swahili ethnicity. At least in what used to be Tanganyika the term came to refer to virtually any person of African origin within the space of Tanzania. (4)

In other words, most Tanzanians are not “ethnically Swahili”, yet they are speakers of the language and they identify positively with Swahili-cum-Tanzanian identity. In contrast, although Kiswahili is a national language of Kenya, it has not attained nearly the same prominence in state-sponsored or popular constructions of national identity in Kenya as it has in Tanzania.

As Mazrui and Mazrui (125) and Bakari (22) observe, Kiswahili currently has tens of millions of speakers in Tanzania, Kenya, and the Democratic Republic of Congo alone. Not only is it a mandatory subject in schools even in countries like Uganda but it is also spoken by almost the entire population of the Comoros and by a sizeable proportion of the inhabitants of Burundi, Rwanda, northern Zambia, Malawi, Mozambique, and southern coastal Somalia. In choosing Kiswahili instead of other smaller indigenous languages, Walibora thus manages to solicit a wide readership for his book while destabilizing western/African language hierarchies. In Kenyan contexts, *Ndoto ya Amerika* is indeed a successful book. The small 48-page story won the Jomo Kenyatta Prize for Literature in 2002. Within two years of its publication in 2001 it had gone through four reprints.

Walibora’s use of Kiswahili is not only strategic as a way of marketing his literary work in the face of a globalized publishing industry that marginalizes and exoticizes African writing.[7] By publishing in Kiswahili he also responds to a long-standing conversation about the role of African writers in their societies. Like many African writers, Walibora sees himself in the terms of South African writer Es’kia Mphahlele and the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe, who are both seen as torchbearers in societies that need to be rescued from decades of denigration by Europeans (Achebe 45). In “The Novelist as Teacher”, Achebe emphasizes the compulsory task facing every African writer:

> The writer cannot expect to be excused from the task of re-education and regeneration that must be done. In fact he should be right in front. For he is after all – as Es’kia Mphahlele says in his *The African Image* – the sensitive point of his community.

Achebe cites Mphahlele’s texts verbatim without the conventional quotation marks, as if he is writing in free indirect speech, to underscore his agreement with Mphahlele that art should be placed in the service of education:

> Throughout Negro Africa the content of education will have to outgrow colonial origins of whatever brand […]. Every artist in the world, African or not, must go through the agony of purging his art of imitations and false notes before he strikes an individual medium. Leave the artist to this process of evolution; let him sweat it out and emancipate his art. (Mphahlele 22, 23)

In what appears to be a critique of the essentialization of diverse black experiences by Kwame Nkrumah (122) and Leopold Sedar Senghor (629), Mphahlele argues that the African writer should be allowed to make personal choices rather than be forced to conform to abstractions such as “the African personality”, an anti-colonial notion borrowed from the African American abolitionists Edward Blyden and Martin Delaney, that assumes that

Africans have a common destiny and a distinctive way of thinking as a group. To him, the individual writer, according to Mphahlele, will naturally find himself/herself expressing the ethos and desires of his/her respective community. For Mphahlele, the individual artist will, perforce, conform to the wider society without having to follow the dictates of what he views as Afrocentric demagogues. A similar point about the communal but individuated functionality of modern African art is underscored by Wole Soyinka.[8] The point emphasized by these theorists is that an African writer cannot subscribe to art for art's sake although we do not expect him/her to follow a prescriptive communal program.

Even when observing this maxim, Walibora differs from Mphahlele, Achebe, and Soyinka in the sense that while they prefer to correct the distorted image of Africa through writing in English, he has chosen, like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, to write in an African language. Yet unlike Ngũgĩ, he does not write in his mother tongue, choosing instead to write in Kiswahili, Kenya's national language that is also widely spoken in the eastern and central regions of Africa. This is despite the fact that Walibora comes from the inland Rift Valley province in a country where Kiswahili is not as widely spoken in everyday discourse as it is, for example, in the coastal regions of the country. He is not fettered by the traditional Standard Swahili in the sense that his language use is marked by lexical influences from different dialects of Kiswahili. Unlike Achebe, whose language use deviates from Standard English in his use of Igbo words and Nigerian Pidgin English, Walibora seems to view the use of a fairly standardized form of Kiswahili – not its informal variants popular with young people, such as *Sheng* – as a viable site for destabilizing linguistic and social hierarchies. In Walibora's literary criticism of other writers, such as his reading of the polyphony in Abdilatif Abdalla's collection of poetry *Sauti ya Dhiki* [*Voice of Agony*], he does not subscribe to notions of an unadulterated language. But the only time in *Ndoto ya Amerika* another language features in a polyphonic relationship with Kiswahili, is in a negative context, coming from characters the reader is supposed to dissociate from because they are presented either as criminals or as speaking in laughable village accents. Overall, however, Walibora eschews the officially sanctioned Standard Kiswahili of Zanzibar to write a gripping story in an amalgam of the less privileged dialects of the language.

As Walibora's use of a Kiswahili pen-name suggests (his real name is Kennedy Waliaula), he seems to champion cultural hybridity and the spread of Kiswahili beyond its original boundaries.[9] He chooses his characters' names from inland Kenya and describes activities performed in a non-coastal region of the country, instead of the Arabic-inflected names and activities from the coastal region readers are familiar with in Kiswahili fiction, such as Said A. Mohamed's *Utengano* [*Separation*]; *Asali Chungu* [*Bitter Honey*]; Mohamed Suleiman Mohamed's *Nyota ya Rehema* [*The Star of Mercy*] and *Kiu* [*Thirst*], to mention the most obvious examples from a legion of texts where this is the norm. By deviating from the tradition, Walibora participates in de-ethnicising Kiswahili, widening its scope beyond what is regarded as part of Swahili ethnicity. He joins inland Tanzanian writers, who in the late 1960s, rejected traditional forms of Kiswahili artistic expression, such as rigid rhyme and meter in poetry. But while the "cultural label Swahili and the national label Tanzanian were gradually becoming synonymous" (Mazrui 28) after Tanzania adopted Kiswahili as its national and official language, Walibora's story suggests that non-Swahili ethnic Kenyans can also use the Kiswahili language to represent themselves in regions far from the coast. Thus Walibora performs a similar move as the poet Abdulatif Abdalla who uses a classical verse form but, in a dialogic and subversive way, that challenges the monolithic political structures of post-independence Africa.[10]

Walibora is cosmopolitan in the sense that he sidesteps the language of his ethnic community, Luhya, to use a transnational language, Kiswahili. Walibora, like Ngũgĩ wa

Thiong'o in the Gikuyu novel *Murogi wa Kagogo* [*Wizard of the Crow*], wants to show that the "small languages" of the southern hemisphere are capable of carrying the responsibilities of a transnational social order. While Appadurai argues that it is difficult to believe in the nation-state anymore (4), Walibora's *Ndoto ya Amerika* seems to see the nation as a privileged site to counteract the domestication of communities of the southern hemisphere into a homogenized western-dominated social and political order. This cosmopolitanism remains rooted in a local, intimate politics of linguistic value. As such, Walibora's story signifies the view that one does not need to be deterritorialized or to physically travel and cross national borders in order to be cosmopolitan and global. It is a cosmopolitanism that does not demand abandonment of one's national identity. It is not founded on ignorant celebration of the West as the place to escape to when life in Africa becomes unbearable.

Diaspora, race and critical subjectivity

If Walibora's language politics are predicated on resistance to globalized homogenization, his difficult engagement with the African American diaspora productively complicates this resistance. Before launching his writing career, Walibora was educated in Kenyan schools, where the syllabus emphasized the radical African American literature covering mostly the civil rights era. Although the government had limited Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's influence on the syllabus, his recommendations for non-Kenyan books were still in force in the 1980s. As long as the critique of oppressive and racist practices were about other places such as apartheid South Africa and racist North America or colonial Africa, the Kenyan government did not have any problems with politically radical materials. Therefore, at the time of writing *Ndoto ya Amerika*, Walibora's reading of American literature was limited to socialist-inflected texts or works that, if not about the struggle against racism in the diaspora, could be easily interpreted to serve a socialist agenda.[11] Nurtured on this kind of syllabus, it is not surprising that his view of America became skeptical.

In *Ndoto ya Amerika*, Walibora satirizes the boy characters for wanting to change their names to sound American, as they are oblivious to the history behind these names; specifically, African Americans bear these kinds of names because they have been stripped of their African identity through the traumatic experience of transatlantic enslavement. Madoa, who cannot pronounce the name America in Kiswahili properly (in a repeated spoonerism, he calls the country he is dying to go to "Makerani" instead of "Marekani"), seems to consider himself an expert on names and power in America. Once he arrives in America he intends to change his name to assimilate better:

> Lazima mimi pia nibadilishe jina. Huko kila mtu anaitwa Michael au kwa kifupi Mike. Rais wa huko anaitwa Mike Tyson, Waziri wa elimu anaitwa Michael Jordan. Waziri wa Afya anaitwa Michael Jackson. Makamu wa rais ni Michael Johnson. (10)
>
> (It's a must that I change my name when I arrive. There everyone is called Michael or in short Mike. Their president is called Mike Tyson, the Minister for Education is called Michael Jordan. The health minister is called Michael Jackson. The vice-president is Michael Johnson.)

The irony of Madoa's statement is easily discernible because even young Kenyan readers would know that Mike Tyson has never been the American president. Madoa's wish to change his surname to "Monday" echoes the alienation of Friday in Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. But while in Defoe's novel it is the European who assumes the non-westerner did not have a name before he met him on a Friday, and decides to name him after his first day in the journey to civilization, in Walibora's story it is the African who has elected to name himself Monday. This underscores Madoa's alienation from his culture.

The height of irony in Walibora's story is that it is the Africans who volunteer themselves for self-violation by changing their names and those of their children to sound Christian (read western).

This politics of self-naming is apparent at the very beginning of *Ndoto ya Amerika*. The story begins with the narrator invoking his own name as a way of asserting his identity: "Jina langu ni Isaya Yano. Mamangu huniita Isaya. Lakini rafiki zangu huniita kwa ufupi Isa. Napenda zaidi waniitavyo rafiki zangu" (5) (My name is Isaya Yano. My mom calls me Isaya. But my friends call me Isa for short. I prefer what my friends call me.) Isaya Yano, the narrator, prefers the more fashionable Isa, one of the Swahili-Islamic names for Jesus, which also echoes the stage name of a popular hip hop artist, E-Sir aka Issa Mmari (1981–2003). The character's mother is presented as equally alienated because she calls him by the "Christian" name Isaya (a localized version of Isaiah).

Furthermore, the child seems to look down on black pigmentation, as when he introduces his supposed benefactor, Rock Mwamba. To make fun of Rock Mwamba a strange-looking criminal, the narrator describes the man as dark beyond comparison in a way that seems to conflate blackness with criminality:

> Nimewahi kuwaona watu weusi, lakini mweusi kama huyo sijawahi kumwona. Mweusi kuliko makaa. Alikuwa amevalia miwani ya jua, fulana nyekundu na suruali nyeusi. Nywele zake zilikuwa zimesukwa rasta. (31)
>
> (I had seen black people, but never a darkie like this one. Darker than charcoal. He had sunglasses on, a red sweater and black shorts. His hair was done in the *rasta*-style dreadlocks.)

This is a very delicate moment of play between the author, his character and his audience. Walibora expects his readers to recognize that Isaya is making fun of Mwamba's pigmentation, which they can only do if they are familiar with the denigration – within East Africa and among East Africans – of dark skin. At the same time, he expects his readers to see the tragedy in Isaya's unwitting self-implication. This moment of dramatic irony, in which the audience recognizes that the joke is really on Isaya, also does critical work by enabling the audience to become aware of similar prejudices in themselves.

With the author distancing himself from the narrator by suggesting that the narrator is ideologically immature, the story also stages the distinction between the narrating "I" and the experiencing "I". Franz K. Stanzel describes this distinction in his study of perspective in autobiographical narration in *Narrative Situations in the Novel* and *A Theory of Narrative*. Stanzel observes that the meaning of a first-person narrative derives from "the references and relationships between the fictional world and the figure of the authorial narrator and from the resulting tensions in values, judgments, and kinds of experience" (*A Theory* 28). Stanzel helps identify the differences in spatial, temporal and even psychological terms between the character who experiences, witnesses and assesses the events in the story and the character telling that very story, especially in terms of age, in a quasi-autobiographical narrative such as Walibora's. In *Ndoto ya Amerika*, the person telling the story is, like Helen Shaw in Nadine Gordimer's *The Lying Days*, different from the character who experiences the events. The narrating individual is a wiser person than the individual who goes through the experiences and is capable of laughing at his former alienated self, the wannabe naïve African who would clip his name to appear hip while eroding his identity. The children readers (mainly 14–16 years old in the Kenyan school system) would be able to see the naïveté of even the narrating "I", because the character does not fully understand the circumstances that he narrates. These distances – between the author and the narrator, and between the narrator and himself – represent moments of critical subjectivity that are enabled by Walibora's engagement with the problems of diaspora and alienation.

Dreaming in the postcolony

Having situated his characters in a web of critical relationships both local and global, communal and personal, Walibora turns to dreams as a highly ambivalent way of responding to the disciplinary apparatus of the postcolonial Kenyan state. The children characters repeatedly interpret the term "American dream" in a literal banal way by having dreams in which they escape from Kenya to America. Moreover, in these dreams they invariably live out the fantasies of wealth and power that are associated with the term "American dream" in its tropological usage. Madoa claims that one would have to be mentally deficient not to have had a dream with America as its setting:

> Akaniambia ikiwa sijaota ndoto ya Amerika basi nina kasoro fulani. Akasema kuwa kila mtu nchini kwetu anaota ndoto hiyo. Akaniambia jinsi yeye anavyoota kila siku juu ya maisha Marekani. (11)
>
> (He told me that if I've never dreamt the American dream, there must be something quite wrong with me. He said everyone in our country dreamt that dream. He told me how he dreamt every day about life in America.)

The children's misinterpretation of "American dream" to mean literal dreaming enhances the irony that pervades *Ndoto ya Amerika*, highlighting their failure to distinguish between truth and falsehood. As such it opens the way to a critique of postcolonial self-delusion. Furthermore, Isaya even dreams about a constitutional impossibility, a foreigner becoming the American president and being wildly received in public rallies:

> Niliota nimekuwa rais wa Amerika. Watu wananishangilia huku nikipita barabara za New York kwa gari moja kubwa. Dereva wangu alikuwa Mzungu. Nikawapungia watu mkono nikiwa nimesimama juu ya gari. Nikaingia katika uwanja wa michezo. Watu karibu kupasuka kwa sababu ya kufurahi kwa kuniona. (35)
>
> (I dreamt I was the President of America. People cheer me as I drive in the streets of New York in one mammoth of a car. My driver was white. I waved at the people, standing tall. Then I entered the stadium. The crowd went berserk with the joy of seeing me.)

Walibora's text conjoins a mockery of African governments with Isaya Yano's impractical dreams. In a Kenyan context, the presidential style presented here is mainly that of African heads of state, showing off their popularity on national television in grand displays of opulence. It is remarkable, too, that the race of the driver is mentioned. He is white. In a country where the children, as shown by many theorists including Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*, have been conditioned to hate the color of their skin, the ultimate success comes when one is the boss of a white man. Ironically, "President" Isaya does not see himself as part of the crass postcolonial regime that Achille Mbembe talks about in *On the Postcolony.* This kind of wasteful regime "must furnish public proof of its prestige and glory by a sumptuous (yet burdensome) presentation of its symbols of status, displaying the heights of luxury in matters of dress and life style" (Mbembe 109). In wishing for display that verges on grand theatre as an American president, Isaya, then, seems to be dreaming to be an extravagant dictator in America like the African leaders he is probably used to seeing in the national media.

The trouble with the narrative's realistic portrayal of dreams of an impossible world is that it does not seek to disrupt other myths in Kenya, especially the myth of the founding president Jomo Kenyatta. Kenyatta is introduced to the children as "hayati Mzee Jomo Kenyatta, rais wa kwanza wa Kenya" (39) (the late, honored Mzee Jomo Kenyatta, the first president of Kenya). When he is introduced to the reader through a portrait in the courtroom, the privileged site of discipline that Isaya seems to endorse, it is in adulatory terms. Even at Isaya's trial, when he renounces his desire to emigrate to America and reinvests himself in the nation, he does so by invoking Kenyatta as the founder of the country and the source of Kenyan civic virtue:

> Nataka nirudi shuleni nimalize masomo yangu. Nikishakuwa mkubwa nigombee kiti cha ubunge niwe mbunge wa Cherangani. Nataka niwe mtu wa maana nikifa nijengewe sanamu kama ile ya hayati rais Kenyatta pale nje. (44)
>
> (I want to go back to school and finish my studies. When I grow up I would like to contest for the Cherangani parliamentary seat and be the area's Member of Parliament. I want to be an important person in society so that when I die, a statue like that of the late President Kenyatta out there would be erected in my honor.)

If deconstructive readers would see this as a critique of Kenyatta's over-visibility in Kenyan institutions, the narrator does not seem to see anything wrong in the Kenyatta-based personality worship and display of power. He wants to participate in the post-independence civic virtue without questioning Kenyatta dictatorial tendencies.[12] Granted, sometimes Isaya could well be telling the court what it would like to hear, but there is no discernible difference between his inner thoughts about Kenyatta and what he verbalizes in court.

Furthermore, the police and the judicial system are also presented positively, despite their extrajudicial killing of the alleged criminal Zablon Okutoyi. The narrator fails to problematize the system's account about the criminal when he does not show up in court for sentencing:

> Lakini sikumwona Rock Mwamba. Afisa mmoja wa magereza aliiambia mahakama kuwa Zablon Okutoyi au Rock Mwamba alikuwa amewekwa rumande katika gereza la Kamiti. Kisha akajaribu kumpokonya askari jela bunduki ili atoroke tena … "Alipigwa risasi na kuuawa na askari jela." (46)
>
> (But I couldn't see Rock Mwamba. One prison official told the court that Zablon Okutoyi alias Rock Mwamba had been put in custody at the Kamiti Prison. He tried to snatch a gun from a prison guard so he could escape from jail again … "He was shot dead by a prison guard.")

At this point in the narrative, Isaya tellingly falls silent. He does not contest the report by the prison authorities, nor does the court. The dénouement is an important node in the story because it enables the writer to tie up the narrative and resolve the conflict. Jefwa observes that children's stories and folklore tend to prefer a happy ending even if the narrative is about cruelty (Jefwa 7). Evil is eliminated and virtue is left to thrive. Although the end of *Ndoto ya Amerika* may not be happy in the sense of being joyous, the extrajudicial death of the alleged criminal is structurally a point of resolution, not of conflict. As such the story does not simply miss an opportunity to take a political stance against authoritarianism, but it uses the heavy hand of the law to satisfy its narrative tension.

If we agree with Stanzel's typology that there is a difference between the experiencing "I" and the narrating "I" in the story, the dramatic irony occasioned by the disjuncture is at the boy's expense. This kind of irony emanates from the fact that the experiencing "I" is ignorant of issues and perspectives that the narrating "I" and the audience fully understand. Deluded to believe that he is culturally superior to the rural folk, Isaya laughs at the heavily accented Kiswahili of Mzee Zakayo Wekesa, probably preferring a version of Kiswahili spoken by the elite. Instead of embracing the diversity of Kiswahili, the narrator finds the old man's Luhyia-inflected Kiswahili a ripe topic for cynical laughter. Yet when the court asks him for *malilio* (a mitigation statement) after he is found guilty, he wrongly thinks the court is misusing language:

> Hii lugha ya mahakani ina maajabu. Ukiandika insha kwa neno kama hilo, mwalimu atakulipua viboko wee! … .Sikupenda hilo neno malilio. Mpaka hii leo ninaamini kuwa neno hilo si Kiswahili sanifu. Ingalikuwa bora kama wangemwuliza mtu aeleze sababu ya kuitaka mahakama kumwonea huruma. (41–42, 43)
>
> (This language of the courts is strange. If you ever used a word like that in an essay at school, the teacher (woe unto you!) would rain strokes of the cane on you … I didn't like the word *malilio.* Even today I don't think the word is part of Standard Kiswahili. It would have been better for them to ask the person to beg the court for mercy.)

The young narrator was wrong then about the register of the court proceedings and he is still wrong at the time of his narration: the institution is right in using the word. It is worth noting further that while he appears ready to criticize the court, he seems to have accepted wanton caning at school as an appropriate corrective measure for wayward boys like him. His initial desire to run away from school was because of this kind of violation, but the overall theme of the story is that running away from school because of unbearable punishment is a futile exercise.

By way of conclusion

Ken Walibora's *Ndoto ya Amerika* stages a sustained critique of African nations' failure to secure basic rights. The children's main motivation to enter the "dream of America" is the harsh conditions in which they live in their own countries. Therefore, despite his satirical view of the United States, Walibora does not take a simple oppositional stance against globalization, transnationalism, migration, or the diaspora. Rather, he satirizes uncritical perceptions of the diaspora as a space of absolute bliss. The children's dreams about escape into a problem-free United States are presented as based on a misunderstanding of the reality in the West. Walibora's story reads as a methodological inquiry into different kinds of imagination: the rooted cosmopolitanism of Kiswahili, and the childish immaturity of US dreaming. Yet, despite his critique of the postcolonial Kenyan state, Walibora's conclusion ultimately reinforces the hegemonic institutions of the police and Kenyatta's moral authority.

As in most African texts, the dramatic irony in *Ndoto ya Amerika* signifies the ambivalence around the celebration of postcolonial independence in the light of neocolonialism, presented here in the form of parental highhandedness and escalating crimes in the city. However, escape from Africa or, distraction from the realities, one has to contend with is presented as the ultimate form of irresponsibility to one's society. The kind of distraction the boys undergo in *Ndoto ya Amerika* signals their disillusionment and apathy. Walibora writes against this disposition using the transregional cohesive glue offered by Kiswahili in East and Central Africa.

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Notes

1. For a powerful critique of cosmopolitanism as conceived by intellectuals based in the western academy, including some of those I have listed here, see Simon Gikandi's "Between Roots and Routes". Very useful in outlining this critique as postcolonial studies continues to re-examine its terms and practices is Janet Wilson's introduction to "Theoretical Reroutings" in *Rerouting the Postcolonial: New Directions for the New Millennium.* We should note that even when these scholars disagree with one another, they all stress the need to avoid universalistic views of cosmopolitanism that celebrate globalization at the expense of indigenous and local cultural expressions and practices.
2. See, for example, Asenath Bole Odaga's *Literature for Children and Young People in Kenya* and Ngũgĩ's *Decolonising the Mind* (16–20). Echoing Bob Dixon's *Catching them Young*, Odaga and Ngũgĩ severally decry the colonial system's use of European children's stories to brainwash African children into willing servants of the colonialist agenda.
3. This is the name of Walibora's village. But the story is not autobiographical; neither is the narrator, for all the empathy created towards him, the mouthpiece of the writer.
4. Subsequent translations in parentheses are mine.
5. Makuchi is the pen-name of the US-based anglophone Cameroonian writer and critic Juliana Nfah-Abennyi.
6. Following Swahili morphology, I will refer to the language as Kiswahili and its ethnic indigenous speakers as the Swahili people.
7. For a discussion of exoticization and commoditization of anglophone African writing in the West, see Huggan.
8. Soyinka argues that "the artist has always functioned in African Society as the record of the mores and experience of his society and as the voice of vision in his own time. It is time therefore for the modern artist to respond to this essence of himself" (13).
9. Walibora coined his pen-name Walibora from Swahilinizing his Luhya name. He divided the name Waliaula into *Wali* (Kiswahili for cooked rice) and *aula* (Luhya for good or better). *Bora* is Kiswahili for *good* or *better* (see Waititu's "Walibora Away from TV Fame"). In Luhya, "Waliaula" means "the one who leads a herd of cattle in another or different direction".
10. For example, see Walibora's essay "Prison, Poetry, and Polyphony in Abdilatif Abdalla's *Sauti ya Dhiki*". He reads Abdalla's language as dialogic and disruptive even though Abdalla uses a classical Arabic verse form, which has been rejected by inland poets such as Kithaka wa Mberia and Euphrase Kezilahabi as too conservative to express modern themes. The departure from the classical format has been the trend since the introduction of free verse in Tanzanian poetry since the late 1960s.
11. In a personal interview he says his reading of African diaspora writing was limited to Richard Wright's *Native Son*, George Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin* and Vic Reid's *New Day.*
12. For a discussion of civic virtue in Kenya see Berman and Lonsdale, *Unhappy Valley*, especially Chapter 12 on "moral ethnicity".

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