POPULAR MEDIA
IN KENYAN HISTORY

Fiction and Newspapers as Political Actors

George Ogola

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George Ogola

Popular Media in Kenyan History

Fiction and Newspapers as Political Actors

George Ogola
University of Central Lancashire
Preston, United Kingdom

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Preface and Acknowledgements

The 1980s–1990s decade in Kenya was a period of significant political and social turmoil—as well as change. The resulting public restlessness was manifest in the consequent protests that characterized the period. It is a history that has received notable academic interest as it fundamentally shaped the Kenya we have today. However, as is typical of much of post-colonial African scholarship, especially those interested in documenting change in the continent, many scholars have tended to focus on the country's formal institutions during this epoch.

The period has been cast broadly as dystopic, and hence the chaos, the fragmentations and the conflicts, frames which have traditionally been used to narrate Africa. These are frames that often make it easy to tell Africa's story. They normalize the claim about the continent's incomprehensible incompleteness. Ignored in this process of re-telling have been the powerful but informal sites and ways in which Africa continues to reconstitute itself whenever it threatens to implode from within. The realm of popular culture provides us a window through which to witness change differently, to learn about alternative narrations and histories and to revise some of the problematic generic frames that characterize the reading of the African state. This realm is much more inclusive and less linear, undisciplined and quite difficult to frame.

Narrating change is no doubt a difficult undertaking. Formalizing a 'process' not only misrepresents its various contours and textures but also ignores the fundamental fact that change is neither linear nor predictable. Notwithstanding its limitations, Africa's popular cultural economy has been particularly adept at capturing change in the continent. Various

popular cultural productions are largely a manifestation of processes of change. It is against this background that I found this study especially necessary. I wanted to examine the Kenya of the 1980s through the 1990s through a different prism. It is a period I too lived and experienced and was acutely aware that the songs we sang, the plays we watched and the fiction we read spoke to our immediate experiences as ordinary Kenyans much better than the newspaper headlines of the time.

The changes were monumental, their pace extraordinarily rapid. Many have attempted to 'write' this period but few have narrated this particularly epochal decade in Kenya's history as vividly as the late Wahome Mutahi. Rightly feted as a literary pantheon, Mutahi gave us a platform from which we were able to read Kenya's alternative histories: unscripted, brave, insightful and, above all, ordinary. His fiction column *Whispers*, published at various times by Kenya's two main national newspapers the *Nation* and the *Standard*, was a must-read for many Kenyans. *Whispers* was a joy to read and perhaps even more fulfilling to study. Through his alter ego Whispers, Mutahi grappled with the vagaries of Africa's post-colonial existential anxieties and dilemmas but also captured how many responded to them. *Whispers* was the story of a man who did not live and yet did. You walked the streets of Nairobi with him, socialized with him and went to Church with him. You laughed and condoled with him as you did with your very own. He was a true Kenyan 'Son of the Soil', one who gave us a glimpse of the Kenya(n) becoming.

Through a study of this column *Whispers*, this book attempts to give agency to these alternative ordinary histories. My fundamental argument here is that to examine the African state purely from a liberal democratic paradigm silences alternative understandings of Africa. Indeed, such an approach disregards the existence of a parallel political and cultural infrastructure that informs and continues to shape the evolution of the African state. While the latter does have some analytical purchase, we need to equally recognize the continent's cultural economy and therefore sites of cultural production as key to our understanding of the continent, its evolution and its people. These sites recognize the myriad unarticulated rules and practices particularly within the realm of the 'popular' that structure relationships between polity and potentate, allowing for domination but also resistance and negotiation. Their resilience over the years against the rapacious hegemony of the rational bureaucratic state, their refusal to be 'captured' and recast as formal, demonstrates not their dysfunction but the very opposite. It is in this area and within this alternative way of

thinking through change that I make my contribution. *Whispers* was an important site and form of cultural production in which were embedded various 'hidden transcripts' that can offer us a space into understanding the various contours of Kenya's evolution: its contradictions, how the informal and formal interpenetrate, how tensions and continuities between the past and the present are reconciled and how the local and international collide but also collude in the making of new cultures and practices that reveal the character of the Kenya(n) becoming. It is the failure of much of mainstream African scholarship to recognize these alternative histories as legitimate readings of the processes of change that prompted this study.

I am greatly indebted to the author of *Whispers*, Wahome Mutahi, now sadly passed on. He spent many hours with me talking about Whispers the man and the column, a work of fiction that had become so real it was difficult to differentiate the fictional character from his 'maker'. We should consider ourselves fortunate to have had him amidst us.

I also owe a great deal to Prof. James Ogude, my teacher and mentor from whom I gained immensely.

Much of this project was written as part of my PhD studies at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It is therefore with great pleasure that I have to acknowledge my peers and colleagues at the School of Literature, Language and Media. Many have gone on to do great things and their contribution to Kenyan and African literary and media scholarship now shines through. May you all continue flying our region's intellectual flag.

I am also immensely grateful to the University of the Witwatersrand for the various scholarships that made my study possible: The Postgraduate Merit Award, the University Council Postgraduate Scholarship and the Doris Tothill Bequest Scholarship. I am also grateful to South Africa's National Research Council for their generous award.

I thank Prof. Isabel Hofmeyr who was my first contact in the 'city of gold'. Her assistance during the first confusing days at the university helped me learn the ropes relatively fast. I also spent an immensely fruitful and intellectually enriching time at the University of Birmingham's Centre of West African studies as a Cadbury fellow and therefore express my gratitude to Prof. Karin Barber and her colleagues.

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Popular Anxieties, Popular Expressions: An Introduction

Until his death in July 2003, (Paul) Wahome Mutahi was among the most popular creative writers in Kenya. He had published several novels and novellas, and was an acclaimed playwright, journalist and a thespian of notable following. Mutahi was, however, best known for his satirical newspaper column *Whispers*, arguably his most influential work. For close to two decades from 1983, *Whispers* was a regular feature in the Kenyan newspapers, a feat which at the time of the writer's death only surpassed by legendary Edward Rodwell's column *Coast Causerie*, which ran for nearly half a century. In an obituary published soon after Mutahi's death, Kwamchetsi Makokha, writing in *The Sunday Nation*, one of the two newspapers which published Mutahi's work, condoled thus: '[w]ith the exception of God and disability, Wahome Mutahi could laugh at anything in life. He laughed at society, he laughed at the Government and he laughed at his family—but he laughed at himself the hardest' (*Daily Nation*, July 23, 2003). Yet as Hertzler (1970, 58–9) once commented, 'what a people laugh at, at any given time, can reveal what they are interested in, concerned about, aroused by, disgusted and preoccupied with'.

In Mutahi's work, laughter was employed in the Bakhtinian (1986, 23) sense; it allowed authority, as well as the commonplace, to be 'drawn into a zone of crude contact … fingered familiarly, turned upside down, inside out and peered at from above and below … dismembered'. In sum, *Whispers* was a public space where Kenya's postcolonial existential anxieties were constantly interrogated. In many ways, the column defined

the 'Kenya(n) becoming', exploring his hopes and fears, his dreams and failures, his existential dilemmas as he grappled with the vagaries of African modernity and the ruthlessness of the postcolonial political order. But above all else, Mutahi highlighted the realm of the 'popular' as being capable of engaging with the complex contradictions and ambiguities of postcolonial Kenya.

In an interesting study of a popular cartoon strip in South Africa, *Madam and Eve*, Britten (1998, 30) argues that it is in the 'parallel universe of fiction, we can laugh at some of these issues that easily provoke anger, angst and frustrations in the real world …' Popular genres can, in the words of Barber (1997a, 5), 'collaborate with, adapt to or evade the intermittent demands of the state while retaining the capacity to formulate devastating criticism'.

Read as a cultural, political, historical and media text, this book interrogates how popular cultural forms such as popular fiction engage with and subject the polity to constant critique through informal but widely recognized cultural forms of censure. The book further explores how through such forms we see and experience how the Kenyan subaltern, through a 'politics of the everyday', adapt to a fast-changing world, how tensions and continuities between the past and the present are reconciled and how the local and international collide but also collude in the making of the Kenya(n) becoming.

The African popular press, more specifically the newspaper, is arguably best described as a popular platform which brings together various literary (sub-)genres, among them, popular fiction columns. These columns have been some of the most resilient and versatile components of the region's popular press. In Kenya, they have remained an enduring feature of the local newspapers since the 1970s. Among the most popular of these columns was *Whispers*, a satirical column written by Mutahi, arguably one of Kenya's most prominent writers of the 1980s–1990s. At a time when the state had all but monopolized public sites of popular expression in the country, *Whispers* kept the Kenyan press porous, opening up spaces for the discussion of social and political issues that could only be 'whispered'. This book provides a detailed discussion of this column through which it interrogates how popular culture interfaces politics—how it assembles and nurtures a subculture and how it 'disciplines' the polity as well as the public.

The book discusses how *Whispers* became a public space where Kenya's postcolonial existence in its many contradictory faces was constantly cate-

chized. The book argues that this column provided its readers with certain 'moments of freedom'; it was a site where the limits of social and political taboos were boldly tested and ruptured. In *Whispers*, people could heartily laugh at authority, and at themselves, but ultimately reflect on the reasons for their laughter. By providing such a space for self-reflection and for the critique of society, the book argues that the Kenyan newspaper became an important site of cultural production relevant to understanding Kenya's testing political transition in the 1980s–1990s.

The agency and space that *Whispers* enjoyed for nearly two decades points to its place as a significant popular text in Kenya. From a largely descriptive single column, *Whispers* grew into a full-page weekly article in two of the region's most widely read newspapers, *The Sunday Standard* and *The Sunday Nation*. By 2003, Mutahi was also writing two other fiction columns modelled on *Whispers*, namely, *These Crazy Kenyans* and *Lugambo* (Luganda for 'whispers') in a Ugandan newspaper, *The Monitor*, owned by the Nation Media Group (NMG).

The Emergence of *Whispers*

In July 1983, *Whispers*, a small column barely occupying a quarter of a page, was created in the humour pages of the *East African Standard* to run alongside John Macklin's column *Stranger Than Fiction*. The name *Whispers* loosely reflected what the writer believed would be the column's main preoccupation—discussing 'things that Kenyans did but were only comfortable acknowledging privately' (Interview by author, Nairobi, July 2003). The name of the column was, however, happenstance. Mutahi had been a regular patron at a local bar called *Mihehu* ('Whispers' in Kikuyu) in his village in Nyeri. A notice pinned on the door allegedly read: 'When you come in, do not raise your voice'. Interestingly, Mutahi recalled during an interview with the author that once inside the bar, whenever the patrons got drunk they always ended up singing—'raising their voices'. The bar thus provided him a fascinating allegory. He saw it as providing a space, just like the column, where a number of issues could be introduced as and in 'whispers' but would soon be discussed openly and loudly by the patrons. It is notable, however, that similar fiction columns that preceded *Whispers* in the Kenyan newspapers often relied on bar-room buffoonery, the bar providing a space of 'relative freedom' for the writers. The assumption that what was said at a moment of inebriation would not be taken seriously was a reliable subterfuge to introduce and discuss 'taboo'

topics. For writers, this was one of the ways in which certain norms, political and social, were broached in a public space. It is, however, also possible that Mutahi in fact appropriated the name from Nelson Ottah's *West African Whispers*, a column which featured in the then popular *Drum* magazine. The column presented what one of *Drum*'s former editors Anthony Sampson described as an 'extremely sardonic view of political events in West Africa' (cited in Stein 1999, 6).

The early issues of *Whispers* were predictable, almost mundane 'instructive' narratives reminiscent of the didactic manuals of the market literature tradition one of the most successful of which was the famous Onitsha Market literature (see Newell 2002). Titles such as 'The ups and downs of dating' (*Sunday Standard*, November 13, 1983), 'The art of borrowing money' (*Sunday Standard*, October 23, 1983) and 'A world full of liars' (*Sunday Standard*, July 10, 1983) were common in the column in the early 1980s and point to the overt instructional intent of the writer. The column generally had a strong reformational character. In its later years, however, the column was to gravitate towards the political. It evolved into a form of 'mini-republic' to use Atieno-Odhiambo's (1987, 200) words, embodying particularly the politically subversive. Sample articles that capture this character include 'SOS thinking of defecting from the shilling economy' (*Standard on Sunday*, June 28, 1992), 'The Day SOS met Kiganjo Boys' (*Standard on Sunday*, March 15, 1992), 'Operation Whispers Out' (*Standard on Sunday*, November 25, 1992), 'Total Man's house divided: Agip House raring to go to war' (*Standard on Sunday*, September 13, 1992). The allusions, imagery and language in the titles gesture towards the political. Most of the stories reflect political events in the country at the time. For instance, in 'Total Man's house divided: Agip House raring to go to war', a domestic quarrel between a man and his wife who happen to belong to different ethnic groups is narrated against the background of politically motivated ethnic clashes in the country. Similarly, the domestic 'fallout' is to be seen against the background of the political fallout between members of an opposition party, Forum for the Restoration of Democracy (FORD), at the time a formidable political outfit in Kenya challenging then ruling Kenya African National Union (KANU). Marital infidelity is thus explained using political imagery. There is a sense in which the writer began to domesticate the national and it inflects the domestic with national politics. This inversion in the column allowed for salient political critique.

It is also important that we recognize the influence of 'New Journalism', also known as 'Immersion Journalism' or 'Literary Journalism' on Mutahi's writings. New Journalism refers to a 'movement' that emerged in the 1960s in the United States, although there were similar trends elsewhere in the world, including Africa. It is largely described as having been 'a generational revolt against the stylistic and political constraints of cold-war journalism, a rebellion against the drab detached writing of the big-city dailies and the machine-like prose' (Scott 2001, 59). The proponents of 'New Journalism' such as Tom Wolfe, Hunter Thompson and Joan Didion argued that straight journalism reduced everything to details, 'an impartiality that becomes desensitizing and objective to the point of emotional irrelevance … To do the job fully, there was need for a little soul and poetry, a little shaking up' (cited by Mordue in *Nation*, May 6, 2002).

'New Journalism' revolutionized writing in the popular press, subverting traditional news reporting by using symbols, imagery and imaginative language in news writing. In addition, the writing experimented with character developments in literary work while writers became involved in the writing. It was in effect an interface between journalism and literary writing.

There are elements of this tradition in a number of popular magazines in Africa such as *Drum*, *Joe* and even in fiction published in several African newspapers. For instance, in *Whispers*, we see Mutahi through his characters directly or indirectly immersed in the stories he is telling. Indeed, they are not just stories; Mutahi's work is part journalism. Mutahi's use of the first person involves him as a writer in the emotional contours of his narratives. Equally significant is his use of the symbolic, of imagery and of a highly imaginative language, a rupture of sorts with the more traditional conventions of journalistic writing.

But 'New Journalism' also provided a number of challenges for writers. Pegi Taylor acknowledges that it 'takes tremendous craft for a non-fiction writer to dominate his subject' (cited in *The Writer* 2002, 29). For 'once immersed in it, it becomes difficult for writers to also act as reporters' (ibid.). Quoting Christopher Hanson, she notes the 'professional tug of war between telling a good story and the desire to report thoroughly, analyse and explain' (ibid.) Joan Didion on the other hand explains that when this style works it goes unnoticed, but when it fails 'it swamps the narrative and leaves the reader toting up errors or misapprehensions' (ibid.).

The point we are making is that *Whispers* did not grow out of a vacuum. Even as he broke new ground, Mutahi's column emerged from existing

writing traditions. We see influences of *Drum*, of 'New Journalism', of *Joe* and especially of Kenyan writers such as Sam Kahiga, Hillary Ng'weno and Brian Tetley. Indeed, Mutahi revealed in a personal interview with the author that he had hoped the Kenyan newspaper would also produce its own Can Tembas, Henry Nxumalos, Bloke Modisanes, Es'kia Mphahleles and Nat Nakasas—writers who made *Drum* arguably one of the most powerful sites of social and political commentaries in South Africa. According to Mutahi, *Drum* and *Whispers* represented a 'new genre' where the popular media through popular writing would provide a new space for social and political reflection, and direction. To Mutahi, therefore, *Whispers* was supposed to foster a genre, revive a lost tradition and possibly create lasting progenies.

Most of the fiction columns published in the Kenyan press, including *Whispers* at its formative years, were constrained in terms of narrative possibilities. Instructive writing barely sustains fiction. Quite often, this form of writing calls for the use of a large cast of characters, all too frequently changed to the extent that readers fail to relate with them. Njabulo Ndebele has pointed out that instructive writing 'inhibits the development of stories about ordinary feelings and experiences' (cited in Newell 2002, 5). Partly because of this, but also because of the repressive political environment and the rapid social transformation in Kenya, *Whispers* was to radically transform in the late 1980s. It is within this transformation that one notes the influences of prose writers such as Ferdinand Oyono, Chinua Achebe and one of Mutahi's most favourite novelists Mongo Beti. Mutahi noted during a personal interview with the author that it is writers like Beti who 'understand the conceptual nuances of African rural life', a key aspect in Mutahi's narratives. He remarked that Mongo Beti had a special way of moulding 'rural' characters, especially noting his portrayal of Medza in the novel *Mission to Kala* (1958). In the novel, Medza fights for cognition when she discovers herself in 'a strange universe and reacts strongly to anything that departs from her own cultural expectations and prejudices' (Lindfors 1991, 65). It is a relationship that defines Mutahi's portrayal of the Kenyan 'urbanite' and is particularly captured by Mutahi's main character in the column, *Whispers.*

Among some of the radical transformations in *Whispers* included shifts in the column's narrative framework and thematic trends. Mutahi created a parallel fictional family from where he situated his fiction. He set *Whispers* within a fictional Kenyan family comprising the characters Whispers, Thatcher (Whispers' wife), the Investment or Pajero (daugh-

ter) and Whispers Jr. (son). Other characters who were, however, transient included Teacher Damiano (Whispers' former teacher), Father Camisassius (Whispers' former Catholic priest), Appepklonia (Whispers' mother), Rhoda (a barmaid), Uncle Jethro (Whispers' uncle), Aunt Kezia (Whispers' aunt), among others. These were used as allegorical characters, becoming determinative tropes, discourse markers and acting as points of reference for readers of the column. The 'new' *Whispers* was loosely modelled on Mutahi's real-life family—his wife Ricarda Njoki (as Thatcher), Octavia Muthoni (as Appepklonia), Caroline Muthoni (as the Investment or Pajero) and Patrick Mutahi (as Whispers Jr alias the Domestic Thug). An interesting omission in the column's permanent characters was Whispers' father. It is instructive to point out that in the 1950s when Mutahi was growing up under the British colonial government, traditional life in rural Kenya had been significantly disrupted as the wage economy and Christianity became integrated in the Kenyan social life. The school and the Church replaced the father as the centres of knowledge in rural Kenya. Since for the most time of the year the father was away from home, it is the mother, the school and the Church that mostly influenced a child's early years and not the father as would ordinarily have been the case. It is also the case that many men around the Mt. Kenya region had either joined the Mau Mau or had been detained by the colonial government.

The main character who lends the column its name, Whispers, also called 'Son of the Soil', is stereotyped as a 'typical' Kenyan male: unapologetically chauvinistic, opinionated and self-indulgent. This was a narrative figure already partly defined and popularized by several other writers of popular literature such as Charles Mangua, Sam Kahiga and David Maillu. But in *Whispers* this character speaks for many 'Sons of the Soil'. He epitomizes their anxieties at a time of rapid social and political change. Within the context of the harsh political realities of the period, his name also gestures at certain forms of resistance, which we discuss later in the book. Mutahi indicated during one of my interviews with him that the character was among the most popular in the column, judging from the correspondence he received from readers. It is this character who inspires events and the mood of the column.

Thatcher on the other hand became the model for the new Kenyan woman. In the 1980s, the most visible female symbol of 'independence', at least in the popular imagination in Kenya, was former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. Thatcher was a popular figure in the Kenyan media, and it is because of her visibility and her reputation as the 'Iron

Lady' that the name was appropriated in the column to partly reflect the 'new woman'. In the column, like the former premier, Thatcher is portrayed as a domineering woman, a matriarch who challenges patriarchy and its notions of 'established order'. Thatcher is not the 'good time girl'—the weak and fun-loving woman of the city. Thatcher became the symbol of the changing times, portrayed as representing a new culture that privileged individual personal liberties.

The Investment alias Pajero and Whispers Jr on the other hand were used as allegorical characters to represent an urban youth culture whose expressive dress sense and language symbolized their latent anxieties and desires in the new era. These characters offered glimpses of how the youth contested certain normalized practices such as the perception of the girl in the family as a source of wealth. In fact, Mutahi explained to me that the naming of 'The Investment' was directly inspired by his father's view of one of Mutahi's sisters. Often, the old man would come back home drunk late in the night and call his daughter 'my one thousand'. To Mutahi's father, the daughter was an 'investment' whose returns would come with marriage. It is some of these issues that Mutahi attempts to address with 'The Investment'. We give a detailed reading of these characters in a separate chapter.

Creating characters in *Whispers* necessitated a redefinition of, among other things, the column's language. Bardolph et al. (1998, 106) argue that the choice of language in popular writing also involves 'a choice of readers, of tone, of concepts'. She observes that where this must be done, some writers 'try to explore new modes that would address a society where diglossia is the norm' (107). These new modes involve the use of a language defined within particular sociocultural spaces. Mutahi introduced a language that reflected the popular speech patterns in the country. This language undermines the dominant practices in fiction by reworking and subverting grammatical conventions especially of the English language. The column assumes a polyglot readership able to operate a complex set of mixed codes. Latent in this writing is the construction of an audience defined by among other things, one's ability to operate these mixed codes. Barber (1997b) supports the idea that a particular audience is formed on the basis of language, giving the example of Ghanaian concert party where language is used in the interpellation of readers as 'citizens of a polyglot nation able to operate mixed codes while still remaining capable of addressing the condensed allusion of the discourses …' (354). The language used in *Whispers* was also an attempt by the writer to dramatize the

limits of the column's circulation. By speaking a language of his publics, Mutahi was in effect expanding the reach of the column. Below is an example of how this language is used in the column.

> According to the professor of politics who has never been inside a university lecture room, come January next year one real professor of mathematics will be calling a man who was born when I was the village twist dancing champion, '*Mtukufu baba*' (Trans: His Honourable father). The professor of politics has said that *wapende wasipende* (Trans: whether they like it or not), the man who stopped speaking *Sheng* just the other day when someone whispered into his ear that he could follow his father's footsteps and become president, cannot develop malaria if he got the main job in State House. The agemates of the young man are also telling him, '*Uhush, wewe mufiti kuwa prezzo. Steto hau ni yako. Mabuda kama Saitosh waume vako*' (Trans: Uhuru you are fit to be president. State House is yours. Old men like Saitoti should stand aside). Others are telling him … A guy swing us *jobos* (jobs) when you get there. (*Sunday Nation*, August 11, 2001)

Above, we see a language that is only *just* English. Apart from the political allusions and imagery that a Kenyan reader familiar with the political process in the country can easily decode, infused in what should be English are Kiswahili words as well as the urban lingua franca *Sheng*. Equally important are the markers of discourse such as 'professor of politics', meant to refer to then President Daniel Moi, who had once claimed to be a 'professor of politics'. The 'real professor of mathematics' is a reference to Moi's then Vice President George Saitoti who was a university professor. Other markers include Uhush, a contraction for Uhuru, here referring to first president Jomo Kenyatta's son and now Kenya's president Uhuru Kenyatta who had been 'anointed' by Moi as his successor. Several of the 'idioms' appropriated in the text can only be understood within a particular sociocultural space even though an attempt is made in the subsequent paragraph to make sense of the message. Interestingly, it is unlikely that this 'linguistic maze' causes any confusion to the intended readership. Instead the language creates its own unique audience. The writer thus imagines a public that is able to decode the text with all its mixed codes, code switching and allusions. When the text excludes through language, it disempowers some but at the same time empowers a particular in-group (Githiora 2002).

The language adopted in *Whispers*, however, came under intense criticism especially from schoolteachers. 'People had just woken up from

David Maillu and were not ready for another Maillu,' noted Mutahi during an interview with the author. As discussed in a separate chapter, Maillu, a Kenyan author, had been furiously debated in the 1970s through the 1980s because of the language he used in his novels. *Whispers* came under similar attacks. Although the column was not entirely modelled on 'Maillusque', it was criticized for being thin on imagination and typecast just as Maillu's work, as imitative rather than imaginative. Constant criticism was mostly levelled on the language in *Whispers*. Kenyan English language teachers accused Mutahi of 'bastardising the English language' and complained about its deleterious effect on their students. Mutahi, however, argued that this language adequately mediated the realities he was interested in exploring.

Mutahi appears to have also been aware that there is a sense in which language encodes certain values and practices. For instance, in one of his early articles titled 'English language R.I.P', he writes: '… [y]ou meet a fellow in the morning when you are suffering from a splitting headache, perhaps caused by the joys of Friday night at the disco and when he asks you how you feel, you beam and say, "fine thank you!"' (*Sunday Standard*, November 6, 1983). Mutahi then argues that having a splitting headache is not a 'fine' condition. He wonders why to say otherwise in English would invite derision. He finds the English language 'as is' inappropriate in certain contexts and therefore deliberately 'bends it'. He argued that language carries with it certain cultural values and mannerisms quite specific to the space and context within which it is used.

Mutahi was also accused of focusing more on the event than the form of writing. While it is true that the column sometimes relied on rhetoric and clichés and that this on occasion affected the quality of the writer's arguments, this strategy should also be seen as having been necessitated by other factors. Indeed, Newell (2002) has defended this style of writing arguing that popular writings understandably 'pollute form' because sometimes they are 'concerned with the reconstruction and documentation of their immediate surroundings rather than their interpretation' (100). In a related discussion, Newell (1997) argued that some authors' refusal to adopt European plot conventions is often deliberate and should not be taken as a mark of literary incompetence, but as an indication that fictionality has been marginalized in favour of the didactic, problem-solving approach to narrative. Mutahi's decision to employ this demotic register should therefore not be taken as a mark of linguistic incompetence. Indeed, Mutahi's educational background, which we discuss, leaves

no doubt that his rather unique use of the English language was a deliberate narrative strategy.

THE 'MAKING' OF (PAUL) WAHOME MUTAHI

Wahome Mutahi was born in October 24, 1954, in Nyeri, Central Kenya, a place he immortalized in his work as 'the slopes of Mount Kenya', possibly a literal reference to the region's mountainous topography. Nyeri was the second settlement of the Consolata Missionaries in Kenya and generally had a strong missionary presence, both Catholic and Protestant. Mutahi admits to his upbringing as having been hugely influenced by the Catholic Church. He was even 'forced' into a seminary by his parents. Baptized Paul, a name he was to drop later in life, Mutahi became an altar boy at his local Church, living a life that was supposed to have led him to priesthood. It is a life he refers to quite regularly in *Whispers*. Like most Kenyans, Christianity had a significant impact on Mutahi's life both as a child and as an adult. In a later chapter, we argue that because of decades of Christian missionary evangelization and education, Christianity has become a part of Kenya's popular traditions. Despite initially being persuaded by his parents to train as a Catholic priest, Mutahi refused to make it to the altar, 'robed'. Although 'the word' remained his vocation, he became a 'priest' of another kind, of 'whispers'. Mutahi often prided in 'congregating a far bigger audience through *Whispers* than I would have had I become a Catholic priest' (Personal interview by author, Nairobi, July 2003).

Mutahi was one of five boys in a family of seven. His father Elijah Mutahi died in 1972, although the writer's early childhood, as noted earlier, mainly revolved around his mother, the school and the Church. Because his father was away most of the time, young Mutahi established what he called 'a special relationship' with his mother Octavia Muthoni, a relationship that is constantly revisited in *Whispers*. In the column, one of the characters Appepklonia (hereafter referred to as Appep) is a 'literary clone' of Mutahi's mother Muthoni and shares with the character Whispers a similar relationship that Mutahi had with his mother. Quite often, it is Appep who acts as Whispers' moral guide in the column just like Muthoni did with Mutahi. But Appep also gives us the face of a mother figure that is quite different from Thatcher. She is almost the antithesis of Thatcher in part representing two very different worlds and thus conflicting traditions all fighting for legitimacy in the face of overwhelming change.

At the insistence of his mother, Mutahi attended St. Paul's Seminary in Nyeri for his primary education, later proceeding to St. Thomas Aquinas Seminary in Nairobi for his O-level education. However, after only three months, Mutahi was expelled from the school. Mutahi said his expulsion was because his lifestyle was deemed 'incompatible with Catholic teachings' (Personal interview by author, Nairobi, July 2003). He claimed to have rebelled because Catholic education was too authoritarian, too guided and dogmatic. In 1972, he returned to 'the slopes of Mt. Kenya' and joined Kirimara High School in Nyeri for his A-level having rejected a possible life as a priest. Incidentally, while at St. Thomas Aquinas Seminary, he had developed a keen interest in literature, although the school allegedly discouraged students from studying the subject, which at the time was considered 'subversive' to the minds of young Catholics. As a result, Mutahi did not formally read literature at O-level. But he claims to have persuaded his new headmaster at Kirimara to allow him study literature at A-levels. This decision was to mark a turning point in the former altar boy's life. He passed his A-level examinations and joined the University of Nairobi in 1974 to study for a BA in literature. At the university, Mutahi remarked that he was later to be influenced in a number of ways, which we discuss separately, by his literature lecturers who included among others, Ngugi wa Thiong'o.

After completing his undergraduate degree in 1978, Mutahi was employed as a district officer by the Kenya government and served in Meru and Machakos districts. One notes influences of his experiences as a public administrator in *Whispers*. He writes with the buoyancy of an insider who understands and disavows the bureaucracy of public administration, especially the condescension with which the government performs its power. When in early 2002 his play *Ngoma cia aka* (The Whirlwind) was banned by a district officer in Nyeri 'on security grounds', Mutahi satirically tore into the public administration (read government) exploiting the situation to expose the vanity of the country's political leadership. This was a typical tactic used by the Moi government to clamp down on oppositional practices. Quite often without substantive explanation, plays, songs and even books were routinely banned on 'security grounds'. The provincial administration had claimed that staging the play amounted to 'a public gathering' which required notification of a whole range of state apparatuses. The administration also argued that the play was 'obscene and pornographic'. Below is an excerpt of the article in which Mutahi uses

his alter ego Whispers to comment on the banning of the play but which, in fact, offers us a glimpse of how he critiqued power.

> Just when I was getting in the mood of making a fool of myself, I got word that there was a new chief, nay, an emperor, who often got annoyed when natives made merry. He did not like the natives dancing excessively so he had declared a dance called *Mugiithi* subversive and banned it. He made sure that anyone seen shaking his shoulders in a manner likely to suggest the dancing of *Mugiithi* after ten in the night was made an unwilling guest of the men in blue. Like Bwana Ndithii of those early days, something tells the new emperor that whenever the people of the slopes begin to dance, they are up to some evil. (*Sunday Nation*, April 7, 2002)

When Whispers (Mutahi) asked the administration police why they did not want the play staged, he writes:

> The one who looked like a former Chinkororo (a reference to a vigilante in certain parts of western Kenya) was the first to speak, '*Wapi license ya mchezo? Wapi permit ya DC? Wapi licence ya polisi? Wapi barua ya chief ya mchezo? Wapi kitambulisho? Wapi entertainment permit? Wapi Wapi?*' (Trans: Where's the licence for the play, where's the DC's permit, the Police permit, where is the letter from the chief of plays? Where's your ID, where's the entertainment permit, where … where?) I suppose he was about to ask to be shown my death certificate too … Then I made the first mistake. I decided to speak in English, thinking it might impress the former Chinkororo and make him think I knew what I was doing. 'Pray, tell me without hesitation or repetition, who says that I need bureaucratic licences to be a thespian. Matters of theatrical persuasion and enactment don't need to be legislated. No one has the caveat to disengage me from my literary pursuits!' … [t]he former Chinkororo talked into his walkie-talkie and said, 'Inspector Bwire speaking, over. *Kanatoa matusi eti hakaogopi serikali. Eti sijui serikali ni thespian, sijui ati legico…. Yes sir… Eti ata-pursue sisi out.* Yes sir, yes sir … Over and out.' (Trans: He is insulting us. He claims he does not respect the government … He is saying that the government is not a thespian … Yes sir. He is saying that he will pursue us …). The fellow in the Kaunda suit came closer to my face and showered me with saliva as he said, '*Gamzee, utagoma hiyo kizungu yago mingi. Nafigilia sisi hatugusoma? Chunga mdomo.*' (Trans: Old man, you will have to stop addressing us in English. Do you think we did not go to school? Watch your mouth!) Then he did a Kiganjo (the location of the Kenya police training college) war dance around me as he swore, 'Hagi ya Mama, haga gamzee nitaua!' (I swear by my mother I will kill this old man!). (*Sunday Nation*, April 7, 2002)

The narrator dramatizes his mistreatment at the hands of the provincial administration, turning the story into a hilarious yet hugely discomfiting drama. The police officers who confront the narrator are depicted as illiterate goons but also as 'robots' of the regime unable to question any orders from their masters. The excerpt narrates the gamut of the oppressive politics of the colonial administration but one whose continuum Mutahi sees in the post-independence administration. The new polity oppresses the Kenyan subject just like the colonial administration did with the 'native'. The confrontation is narrated as a drama, which tells its own story. It betrays officialdom's fear of popular theatre's potential to unite publics around national issues and more so, popular theatre's ability to explain these issues in the 'language of the rural peasantry', a language over which the government has no direct control. Meanwhile, district officers, chiefs and the administration police are laughingly if tellingly depicted as 'emperors', indeed, very powerful actors in the village political economy but largely symbolic of the oppressive political system. The excerpt above also highlights some features that were characteristic of this column; the wit and satire, its narration of topical issues including the politically sensitive humorously, which deceptively made it look 'harmless' and irrelevant. The language Mutahi uses is characterized by complex code switching and code mixing as Mutahi appropriates registers commonly used by a cross section of the society yet which remain intelligible to an audience he anticipates.

After his brief stint as a district officer, Mutahi enrolled for an MA in literature at the University of Nairobi and reportedly even started working on his thesis on Indian literature, later writing a student's guide to Mulk Raj Anand's *Coolie*. However, Mutahi cut short his studies when he was offered a job as a trainee subeditor at the *Nation* newspaper. Interestingly, after only three months into the job, the then news editor Philip Ochieng' recommended Mutahi's sacking describing him as 'untrainable' (Personal interview by author, Nairobi, July 2003). Ochieng' was uncomfortable with Mutahi's unconventional style of writing. In the Kenyan media, Ochieng' was especially renowned for his impatience with budding journalists and particularly those who attempted to 'depart from the canon'. Mutahi admits he was lucky to have been retained at the *Nation* and only moved to a different desk—the features desk—where he later served both as a subeditor and a features writer. Mutahi notes that at the time he joined the *Nation*, Ochieng's word was 'law' in the Kenyan media and 'to disregard his

(Ochieng's) opinion was to disregard journalistic wisdom having been an old hand at journalism in Kenya and helping train nearly all the leading journalists in the country at the time' (Personal interview by author, Nairobi, July 2003, Nairobi). Two years later, Mutahi got a job at the *Standard* newspaper, a fierce competitor of the *Nation* as a full-time senior subeditor. It is while at his new 'desk job' at the *Standard* that he started the column *Whispers.*

Apart from writing the column *Whispers*, Mutahi was an accomplished novelist, playwright and essayist. At both the *Nation* and *Standard* newspapers, Mutahi wrote two regular political commentaries 'Where It Matters' and 'The Way I See it'. However, because of the (political) constraints on both the form and thematic options of the 'news' and 'commentary' subgenres in the Kenyan newspapers, these columns were short-lived. More editorial freedom was to be found in fiction—*Whispers.*

Having already made a name in the mainstream press, Mutahi also ventured into the novel form. As a novelist, Bardolph et al. (1998) have compared Mutahi to renowned South African writers Peter Abrahams and Alex La Guma. Although Bardolph does not explain the similarities between these writers, she hints at the writer's aesthetic which is underlined by what Njabulo Ndebele describes as a sense of 'recognition, understanding, historical documentation and indictment' (cited in Newell 2002, 5). These features are to be found in a number of Mutahi's novels which include *The House of Doom* published posthumously and later serialized by the *Nation* newspaper, *The Miracle Merchants* (2003), *Doomsday* (1999), *Jail Bugs* (1996b) and *Three Days on the Cross* (1991). He also published a collection of humorous anecdotes *How to be a Kenyan* (1996a), which was reprinted four times in as many years. Mutahi's most celebrated novel, however, was *Three Days on the Cross.* In 1992, he received the Jomo Kenyatta Award for Literature, the highest literary award in Kenya, for the novel. Bardolph et al. (1998, 123) describe this novel as 'an angry account of the failure of democracy … in an imaginary country where journalists are brutalized when they try to expose the truth about mismanagement and fraud in high places'. The novel prominently features important markers to Mutahi's narrative style, his interests in both documentation and indictment, his merging of fact and fiction into a powerful hyperbole which readers are then forced to confront, the pervasiveness of wit and irony, among others. Although fictitious, *Three Days on the Cross* combines reality with dramatized versions of Mutahi's real-life experiences.

Working as a journalist, Mutahi was brutalized by agents of the Moi regime in the 1980s during a crackdown on perceived dissident voices in the country. In 1986, together with his brother Njuguna Mutahi, they were arrested and later jailed for 15 months after pleading guilty under duress to '*Mwakenya*-related' charges. The two brothers pleaded 'guilty' to 'neglecting to report the existence of an anti-government organization *Mwakenya*' (see *Kenya: Taking Liberties*, 1991). *Mwakenya* is an acronym for 'Muungano wa Wazalendo wa Kuikomboa Kenya', loosely translated as 'The Progressive Movement to Liberate Kenya' (see Maina wa Kinyatti 2000). This was an underground movement that was formed in the 1970s. The Moi government accused the movement of clandestine activities. Critics have noted, however, that this movement gave the Moi administration a convenient excuse to persecute its political opponents. Consequently, many government critics including political activists, academics and writers were arbitrarily linked to the organization and promptly incarcerated. Others were forced into exile. Mutahi later 'fictionalized' his jail term in the novel *Jail Bugs.* The last novel he published before his death *Miracle Merchants* interrogates one of his pet topics, religion, looking at the Pentecostal movement in Kenya and how it feeds on the material and spiritual desperation of most Kenyans. He also shows the scam that is hidden under the rubric of latter day evangelism. He discusses how the new evangelists engage in corruption, smuggling and other murky deals under the cover of religion.

It is, however, in theatre that Mutahi found his metier in later life. Theatre was one of the most covert sites of cultural production in the repressive years of the Moi administration. With the reintroduction of multi-party politics in Kenya in 1992, popular arts in Kenya in general began to experience a rebirth. Stand-up comedy popularized by street comedians in Nairobi became hugely popular while thespians began taking their work to audiences rather than only stage them in the major theatre halls in Nairobi. Mutahi was among those who inspired this 'revival' and especially the rediscovery of vernacular theatre in the country.

Mutahi's interest in theatre can be traced to his days at the University of Nairobi where he was a member of the university's 'Free Travelling Theatre'. He later joined a popular Nairobi theatre group *Sarakasi Productions* and produced and acted in several plays including *Ciaigana ni Ciaigana* (a remake of Protais Asseng's *Enough is Enough)* and *Wangu*

wa Makeri, a play about the mythical woman who ruled the Agikuyu ethnic community. In 1995, Mutahi formed *Igiza* (Kiswahili for Imitate) *Productions*, a group that was to follow closely in the footsteps of Ngugi's *Kamĩrĩĩthu* theatre. *Kamĩrĩĩthu* theatre is a term now used to refer to the drama that was staged at the beginning of the 1980s by the peasants of Kamĩrĩĩthu. Bjorkman (1989) notes that the villagers had built a cultural centre to further adult education and the arts by staging traditional plays in their own language. By using material recognized and understood by the people, this village theatre 'explained to them facets of society that had become unintelligible' (Bjorkman 1989, viii). According to Ndigirigi (1999), while with Kamĩrĩĩthu, Ngugi had 'discovered' that good productions could be staged outside the confines of the Kenya National Theatre (KNT), the famous theatre hall in the capital Nairobi. At the same time, theatre was regarded 'not as a physical building but a space in which there were performers, actors and an audience' (see Outa 2002; Ndigirigi 1999). It is after the famed Kamĩrĩĩthu theatre that artistes began performing outside 'conventional' theatre halls, some out of experiment, others because they could not afford to pay for halls such as the KNT. Bars became one of the most popular alternative venues for theatre productions. It is *Sarakasi Productions* that can be credited with the emergence of what has now become known as 'Bar Theatre'. The group staged most of its plays in bars and hotels around Kenya.

'Bar theatre' was further popularized with the formation of Mutahi's *Igiza Productions*. Already a household name because of *Whispers,* Mutahi played to full houses. Mbugua wa-Mungai (2003) notes that people would attend Mutahi's productions to see 'Whispers' or 'Son of the Soil' as he was now popularly known because of his newspaper column *Whispers*. The bar similarly became a popular space for expression in his column *Whispers*. Most of Mutahi's plays were written in his native Kikuyu language and performed mostly in venues he considered 'close to the people'.

But the academy was particularly hostile to this 'innovation'. Critics and academics saw profits as this theatre's motivation. Ndigirigi (1999, 19), among others, complained about the scripts and the acting being 'generally poor … (t)he audience (which drinks beer during the performance, with waiters moving in between seats to take orders) is normally looking for entertaining diversion and not a quality performance. The bawdier the performances the merrier the audiences'. The criticism notwithstanding, the 'popular' nature of 'Bar theatre', its ability speak to people's immediate

concerns and in a language they understood best established it as an artistic phenomenon in Kenya.

Some of *Igiza*'s most popular productions included *Mugaathe Mubogothi* (His Excellency the Hallucinating leader), which Mutahi co-authored with Wahome Karengo, *Mugaathe Ndotono*, *Professa Nyoori, Igooti ria Muingi* (The People's Court) and *Makaririra Kioro* (They will cry in the toilet). These plays were indictments of the political regime in Kenya and one notes parallel themes and styles in *Whispers*. In one of the play's premier opening, Mutahi later said of the audiences in an interview by Ogova Ondego ([2008](#)): '… fear was etched in their faces as they watched it. As soon as it was over they would put on caps or goggles to disguise their identity and then literally flee fearing arrest and detention' ([Artmatters.info](#)). Mutahi's theatre productions were highly political, perhaps an influence of Ngugi's Kamĩrĩĩthu Theatre. But it is also necessary to bear in mind that Mutahi published and wrote his fiction and plays at a time when it was impossible to mute the political, for this realm was inescapably linked with the everyday.

Conclusion

This chapter has introduced the key objectives of the book. It has also introduced the newspaper column *Whispers*, whose discussion is then spread over the next chapters. The chapter has also provided an abridged biography of the writer of the column, Wahome Mutahi, focusing on his background and how this influenced his writing. We have also briefly examined his other work including some of his novels and theatre productions in an attempt to broadly contextualize the traditions that inform his narrative interests.

Structure of the Book

Chapter [2](#) offers a critical reading of the notion of the 'popular' and of 'popular culture' in Africa in an attempt to theoretically locate the study. It explores critical debates on popular culture in Africa and how it interfaces with the everyday and the political. It seeks to demonstrate how the realm of the 'popular' is particularly important in giving agency to alternative or repressed histories and narrations of the continent.

Chapter [3](#) discusses the re-emergence of popular literature as a significant site of intellectual inquiry in Kenya. It revisits some of the debates

that have characterized the place of the popular within the country's intellectual and literary traditions and how its significance has since been 'recuperated'.

Chapter 4 is a literary-historical overview of popular fiction in Kenya and the role of the popular press in the emergence and growth of this writing. The chapter maps out the broader historical, intellectual and literary traditions that have attended the 'making' of the Kenyan popular writer.

Chapter 5 discusses how *Whispers* interrogates the 'politics of the everyday'. The chapter offers a critical reading of the column and its characters and how these characters are 'bound to discourse'. We identify and discuss the possibilities the writer's rhetorical strategies create in the development of his narrative discourse but also the constraints that emerge as a result.

Chapter 6 works on the premise that Mutahi does not write for an anonymous crowd. Instead, he imagines certain publics and uses various strategies to construct these publics. This chapter thus examines how Mutahi anticipates his readership and how he in turn 'constructs' them. We explore how he is able to access publics that are inherently heterogeneous but which he wills into composite publics. The chapter also attempts a discussion of how the column innovatively dramatizes the limits of its genre through an analysis of some of his narrative strategies while simultaneously interrogating why they are deployed and to what end.

In Chap. 7, we examine *Whispers* as a 'political' text, looking at how fiction helped Mutahi debate potentially subversive political issues. In the course of this discussion, we examine the relationship between popular culture and politics. The chapter looks at how *Whispers* engages with the political and how, to borrow the words of Street (1997), the column 'sheds its pleasures and becomes political practice' (12).

Chapter 8 looks at Mutahi's appropriation of Christianity in *Whispers*. We argue that as part of Kenya's popular traditions, Christianity as both a religious and cultural practice has in effect become part of the 'popular' realm in which popular concerns can be mapped, discussed and understood by readers. The chapter thus attempts to show how manifestations of Christian religious practices and experiences in Kenya are characteristic of popular anxieties in the country and how Mutahi uses Christianity to explore them.

In Chap. 9, we recapitulate some of the major issues discussed in the book and set the agenda for further research.

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Re-reading the 'Popular' in African Popular Culture

As an area of academic inquiry, the study of popular culture has largely been influenced by Euro-American literary traditions where the production, distribution and consumption of culture have for long been seen as hierarchical—elite/popular/traditional. In these traditions, the 'popular' is said to constitute 'low class' culture viewed against a more sophisticated culture of the elite—high culture. Barber (1997, 3) gives an example of the conflation of the 'popular' with 'low class' using Shakespeare's play *Henry V*. In Act IV Scene 1, the character Pistol asks the disguised Henry V, 'Discuss unto me; art thou officer?/Or art thou base, common and popular?' From writers such as Aristotle who equated popular literature with the carnivalesque—the 'actions of comedians, revellers, the meaner sort of people, the ridiculous', to Shakespeare, to the post-war Frankfurt School of F.R Leavis and Mathew Arnold, popular culture has long been associated with the lowly, and the popular literature writer specifically defined as 'a purveyor of rag-bag language and rag-bag characters' (Wildhaber, Robert 1965, cited in Wanjala 1978, 7). The 'popular' was deemed a threat to the values of polite society, 'standardized' and said to promote 'passive consumption'. However, a group of scholars, mainly cultural historians and anthropologists, among them Chartier (1987) and Barber (1997), have disputed the concept of the 'popular' as only representing 'low class' culture, indeed even in European cultural traditions. In a study of the sixteenth- and seven-

teenth-century French texts, Chartier discovered that 'it was not pos-
sible to find strict correspondences between cultural cleavages and social
hierarchies' (cited in Barber 1997, 3). Instead, he realized that there was
a 'fluid circulation of practices shared by various groups', which blurred
class distinctions (Ibid.). The lower echelons of society, he observed,
indulged in genres 'not considered specific to them; and elites only
slowly distanced themselves from common culture' (Ibid.). Research by
scholars such as Storey (2015) supports this observation. Indeed, Storey
argues that equating popular culture to a less sophisticated social cat-
egory merely reflects the anxieties of the elite eager to invent an 'Other'
on whom to blame societal decay.

The uniqueness of cultural experiences in Africa posits equally inter-
esting challenges to the study of popular culture. This book finds partic-
ularly useful the criteria popularized by scholars such as Barber (1997),
Newell (2000) and more recently Newell and Okome (2013). These
scholars argue that the fluidity in cultural production and consumption
in Africa has made the hierarchical classification of culture highly unten-
able. Barber (1997, 2), for example, notes that there is a 'vast domain of
cultural production that straddle and dissolve various distinctions'. Veit
Erlmann (1991) had earlier made a similar observation arguing that in
Africa,

> [you] cannot deduce an individual's position in the social process, his or her
> class position, from the musical forms, styles and genres he or she performs,
> listens to or patronises. A worker who participates in a collective perfor-
> mance of rural wedding songs is not necessarily less proletarianized than the
> one who patronises soccer clubs and discos. (4)

Bennet (1998) and Ogude and Nyairo (2007) similarly argue that with
the proliferation of new media technologies such as the Internet and
satellite television, lower echelons of society now share social spaces and
make use of motifs and genres that may not be considered specific to
them and the reverse is true of the elite even if they occasionally try
to distance themselves from cultures emanating from below. Giving the
example of Kenya, but a point potentially applicable to many societ-
ies in Africa, Mbugua wa-Mungai (2004) also points out the blurring
of demarcations between 'high and low' culture as more people gain
access to what have for long been markers of social privilege. He gives

the example of the 'public' access to TV pay channels such as DSTV as Nairobi restaurant and bar owners install satellite dishes for their patrons. The increasing access to these new modernities continues to have profound influence on the production and consumption of popular cultural artefacts in many African societies. As Ogude and Nyairo (2007) put it, social mobility of cultural artefacts or even of their appropriation across social boundaries is not something that is specifically confined to one group. We therefore approach the 'popular' in this book as a blend of voices and interests not confined to a society's underclass. Indeed, in the situation of a country like Kenya, one also needs to look at the fluidity of class formations in which an elite culture, for example, may be difficult to define because of its fragmented and intermediary position. The middle class in Africa, as Frantz Fanon (1991) once observed, is largely undeveloped and quite often still maintains very strong bonds of kinship with alternative identities and forms of social organization such as ethnic groups, clans, extended families and particular ethno-regions. In the essay 'Pitfalls of National Consciousness', Fanon describes the middle class in Africa as having practically no economic power, arguing that it is not commensurate with the bourgeoisie of the colonial powers it hopes to replace. Fanon notes that this class is characterized by its smallness and because it is not engaged in production, 'it is completely canalised into the activities of the intermediary type' (150). Schatzberg (1988) in a similar vein argues that the degree of class identity in Africa varies depending upon geographic, social, political and economic junctures of the moment in question. The 'social class and the state compose the context in which ethnicity becomes salient. Similarly the context in which social class comes to the fore might well be a combination of ethnicity and the state. So, too, for the state' (11). The 'triple helix', a term Schatzberg uses to describe the interaction between the state, class and ethnicity, is therefore continuously reconstituted.

My point is that class identity in Africa is quite brittle and thus only defined by its fluidity. A number of scholars have thus argued that the individual actor in Africa can and does belong to different class alliances at the same time. Chabal's (1986) analysis sums up the fragmented nature of the elite in Africa. He argues,

> [T]he high, if it exists at all, is not the prerogative of an ancient ruling class but of a fragmented, precarious, conflictual new elite, defined by its proxim-

ity to an outside power, but nonetheless bound up with local populations by innumerable ties of kinship, language, community membership and patronage. The people are neither the rural, idyllically remembered 'folk' nor the urban industrial proletariat … rather they are unstable congeries of differentially defined groups, linguistic, ethnic, occupational, and religious, only thinkable as a category in that they are excluded from the privileges of the political, business and military elites. (cited in Barber 1997, 3–4)

We therefore want to argue after Keller (1981, 548–549) that at one time and under certain circumstances, clan identities or ethnicity might provide the basis for action, at another, a sense of national identity or social class interest might spark conflict and change. The idea of class should also be understood against the African postcolonial reality in which the state monopolizes power to the extent that the middle and lower classes both experience forms of disempowerment. Indeed, one must note that *Whispers* revolves around the life of an urban middle-class family, trying to grapple with the existential dilemmas of an ordinary Kenyan. This middle-class family shares much with Kenya's underclass. The column therefore explores not just middle-class anxieties but 'popular' issues which are just as relevant to the lower echelons of society. The very fact that this column was published in a national newspaper does in a sense also reveal its target audience. It is an audience that is literate, possesses some disposable income but still a part of the subject population. This certainly has implications on our understanding of 'the popular'. It is irreducible to concrete class structures.

In Africa, one also finds informative Hall's (1992) interesting observation that the 'popular' comprises

classes and forces which constitute the popular classes. The culture of the oppressed, the excluded classes … the opposite to that side with cultural power to decide what belongs and what does not, which is by definition another whole class, but that other alliance of classes, strata and social forces which constitute what is not 'the people' and not the 'popular classes', the culture of the power bloc. (238)

Hall therefore argues that 'the people versus the power bloc; this rather than the class against class is the central line of contradiction around which the terrain of culture is polarised … Popular culture is organised around the contradiction between the popular forces versus the

power bloc' (Ibid.). This argument introduces us to another strand of the 'popular' that has influenced the study of popular culture; the idea of 'the people'. Barber (1997, 4) talks about the 'popular' having 'a powerful sense of the people, naming the inequality they suffer from, and recognizing them, often with humour and bitter irony, their own struggle and endurance'. She argues that these people name their suffering 'because it is important to keep its memory which is itself empowering' (5). Commenting on a 'popular' song titled *Mnyonge Hana Haki* [Trans: The poor have no rights] by Remmy Ongala, a Tanzanian musician whose work is analysed by Werner Graebner in the same volume, Barber argues that Ongala's songs formulate 'a powerful vision of confraternity in suffering' (Ibid.). Ongala's lyrics are a cry of the oppressed, apparently exasperated at their powerlessness. But the song in a way talks back at the oppressors. In the same volume, Coplan (1978) also defines the 'popular' in similar terms reiterating that collective suffering engenders the production of the 'popular'. In a study of Basotho migrant workers in South Africa, Coplan argues that because of their life of struggle in South Africa where they work as labourers, the Basotho, 'through song deal with the exploitative and disintegrative social conditions … [to] … create for themselves a sense of personal autonomy within which they may truly act' (32). Coplan notes that for the Basotho migrants, 'this autonomy is built upon the positive redefinition, through performance, of their human value in opposition to their identity as mere labour units in the political economy of South Africa' (Ibid.).

The idea of 'the people' has, however, been variously defined and remains a highly fluid and contested social category. Mattelart (1983, 18) cautions on the ambiguity of this category calling the idea of 'the people' 'intoxicating'.

> On a positive side, the idea has arisen as a generous some would say, romantic ideal, lyrical, libertarian and democratic … On the negative side, the people can be a distorting mirror and an alibi of all sorts of populism and demagoguery. The omnipotent invocation of the popular can in fact hide the absence of concrete people … (Ibid.)

The term has also been invariably used as a tool for political mobilization. Sparks (1992, 25) observes that within the traditional political Left,

the term 'the people' has been used to mean 'the opposite of the terms which together might be taken as elite … an amalgam of the peasantry, the urban poor, the nascent but not yet independent working class and, in the leading roles, elements of the urban petty bourgeoisie'. But Sparks also notes the 'shifting' uses of the term by both the Left and the Right who at their convenience imbue the concept with new meanings that merely justify their ideological aims. Other cultural critics like Hall (1992) have, however, attempted to address this ambiguity. Hall argues that 'the people' is defined by

> what it is not—not the state, the dominant classes, the aristocracy or the bourgeoisie. It corresponds to a class or a group of classes, though the boundaries are not always clearly specified, and the people's culture can be seen as engaged in contests over those boundaries. (238)

Another definition of 'the people' can be traced to Marxist scholarship, and particularly to the ideas of German scholar and playwright Bertolt Brecht who equated 'the people' with the working class. According to Brecht, the 'popular' was also radical and revolutionary. It is a strand of thought that defined the 'popular' in East Africa in the 1960s through the 1970s especially popularized by the socialist politics of among others Julius Nyerere and later by writers such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o (see Ogude and Nyairo 2007). Ngugi's 'the people' were the rural peasantry and the 'popular' not only had to represent their interests but also had to speak in their idioms. This partly explains Ngugi's nativist gesture towards oral traditions, and later his adoption of the Kikuyu language in his literary work, although as Ogude (1999, 87) argues, 'at least in the sense of appropriating oral forms, this was not so much a rupture but a continuation and a more radical development towards a syncretic use of both Gikuyu and Western modes of creation'.

But is the 'popular' necessarily radical and revolutionary? This book underscores the danger of adopting a 'populism' which allows all popular culture to be treated only as a form of (political) resistance. Scholars such as Street (1997, 19) have warned against 'the assumption that everywhere, in all acts of cultural consumption, subversive interpretations are being imposed, which somehow empower audiences'. Street explains that this is to 'ignore the differences between works of popular culture; it is to treat them as a blank screen onto which any idea can be

written' (Ibid.). In the same vein, Jim McGuigan (2012) warns against the uncritical valourization of the 'popular' because it overlooks 'the need for judgment and discrimination in understanding popular culture, the need to select between accuracy and distortion, the genuine and the phoney' (cited in Street 1997, 19). McGuigan proposes that the 'populist reading of popular culture just like the populist reading of politics needs to be replaced by an approach which understands popular culture in terms of institutions that create it and the political ideologies that inform it' (Ibid.). While it is true that there are predominantly oppositional practices within the 'popular', it is important that it is approached as an analytical category comprising multiple narratives even if it is largely shaped by an oppositional cultural and political aesthetic. To read *Whispers* is not to engage in a reading of only 'oppositional politics', instead it is an appreciation of a complex process of cultural production as an 'arena of both consent and resistance' to borrow the words of Hall (1992). While this book approaches the idea of the 'popular' as largely defined by the idea of 'the people', we remain alive to its contradictions and discursive complexity.

We also use the 'popular' as defined by its 'moralistic' and 'didactic' characteristics. According to Etherton (1982, 361), African popular arts attempt to 'open the eyes of the masses to their own objective historical situation, the actual conditions of their existence and thus enabling them to empower themselves'. Pongweni offers a similar argument in a study of Ngugi's Kamirithu theatre and of Chimurenga music in Zimbabwe (see Barber 1997, 63). Similarly, Barber argues that the long-held assumption of the 'popular' as carefree has now been replaced by 'the recognition that genres billed as entertainment usually talk of matters of deep interest and concern to the people who produce and consume them' (2). Some of the supposedly 'carefree' pamphlets from Onitsha, Accra and Ibadan, for instance, also speak profoundly about the anxieties and dangers facing the urban neophyte/dweller (Ibid.). Elsewhere, Bryce (1997) finds the African 'pacesetters' dealing with serious issues that affect African societies trying to grapple with the challenges of urbanization. The 'pacesetters' are books about the struggle for survival, economic hardships, sexual and economic exploitation and, in general terms, the everyday problems of the subaltern. Bryce argues, for instance, that romantic love in these pacesetters, rather than be seen as escapist fantasy, becomes 'a trope for the desire for change, both per-

sonal and social, and for the belief in the possibility of change' (cited in Barber 1997, 6). Barber summarizes Bryce's work noting that 'stereotyped characters and plots do not prevent writers from dealing with real experiences, and if they wrest a happy ending from their plots, it is hard-worn' (3). Catherine Cole (1998) also observes that these texts are used as life manuals by their readers. Indeed, in the study of audiences of the Ghanaian concert party, she found out that what might at first be presumed escapist are not taken as such by the Ghanaian readerships. Instead, essential features of characters and situations are used to interpret social experiences. Fabian equally recognizes African popular arts as a site where 'perceptions, experiences and problems are worked out in an open never-ending process' (cited in Barber 1997, 6), while Achebe (1965) once briefly summarized the didactic character of African popular literature, saying that the (popular) novelist in Africa remains above all, 'a teacher'.

This 'popular' in Africa has also been traditionally associated with an organic, authentic, unchanging past. It is a position that has contributed to its misunderstanding. Culture changes and thus the popular is a living evolving process. Indeed, it is in African urban centres, places of rapid changes where we often see new ways of doing things and where social transformation is arguably most manifest. The latter-day popular writers in West, South and East Africa arose primarily out of a burgeoning urban culture in these parts of the continent. They tapped into themes and experiences that largely emerged from the urban space. So, for example, Onitsha Market literature is heavily indebted to the emergence of Onitsha as a major urban centre in the Niger Delta. The '*Drum* literature' found inspiration in an increasingly urbanized Johannesburg, while the Kenyan popular writer tapped into themes of crime, love and sex, whose increased visibility in the popular media was partly because of the socio-cultural changes intensified by processes of urbanization particularly in the city of Nairobi.

We also examine the 'popular' from an aesthetic perspective. Here, emphasis is placed on its openness to experimentation. African popular texts are especially 'parasitic', allowing a great deal of borrowing and experimentation. Many popular fiction writers deliberately ignore canonical conventions and in the process stretch the boundaries of local literary expression. Indeed, Macherey (1978) once described African popular literature as 'notoriously undisciplined'. Newell (2002, 45)

argues that to define popular fiction in Africa, we must note that local practitioners constantly absorb 'new cultural currents, poach upon so-called "traditional" and "elite" cultural discourses, adapt and innovate and operate outside of "official" art forms'. Other critics such as Ulf Harnnez therefore see the 'popular' as 'stretching horizontally from the bush to the metropolitan centres, taking in Onitsha, Sophiatown and Nairobi on their way' (cited in Barber 1997, 6). Similarly, Barber (1997, 6) underscores African popular arts' 'ability to draw in and creatively absorb materials from the outside in order to fuel local contests and projects' without being pulled into the West's magnetic field (see also Bayart 1993). Bogumil Jewsiewicki describes this absorption as an 'extraversion … a cannibalisation but one which does not involve loss of identity on the part of the cultural intermediaries who perform it' (cited in Barber 1997, 6). The syncretism of African popular literature is such that it cannibalizes or feeds on other cultures while at the same time retaining an identity against which it defines its peculiarity. Lindfors (1991) thus comments that Ngugi's *Petals of Blood* (1977), Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and Maillu's *Unfit for Human Consumption* (1974) are all disparate manifestations of essentially the same creative impulse, to speak to as many people as possible. The basis for the comparison here, it seems, lies not in representation but primarily in the idioms of expression grafted into the works of these writers. Indeed, while Ngugi and Achebe heavily borrow from the traditional idioms of the Gikuyu and Ibo, respectively, Maillu's idioms are derived from Kenya's urban space. The three writers are, however, all interested in expanding their reading publics by using a language that these publics find most appealing.

It is also important to examine *Whispers* within the context of the 'popular's' representation of two main analytical categories: those that relate to socio-cultural issues and the 'popular' as mediating questions around power. As such, we interrogate how the column explores the effects of Kenya's rapid social transformation on its people. Urbanization is especially noted as significant and narrated as a fragmentary affair in which the Kenya(n) becoming is torn between various worlds. *Whispers* demonstrates the Kenyan's subjects' continuous negotiation of these worlds. On the 'popular's' exploration of questions of power, my point of entry is that popular culture offers a 'critical corrective to state-centric analytical models of politics that represent institutions as the sole

loci of power' (Kelly 2002, 14). Like Bayart (1993, 20) suggests, a discussion of power in Africa cannot be limited to 'regimes of statements which exclude the subject of enunciation'. It must include 'the people involved, the social strategies as the material basis of this "governmentality" ' (Ibid.). Popular fiction often tells the story from the position of the subject.

Any culturally oriented work on African politics, Karlstrom (2003) among other critics has argued, cannot avoid Mbembe's discussion of power in the postcolony. Mbembe (1992, 29) recommends the need for research to go 'beyond institutions, beyond formal positions of power and the written rules, and examine the way the implicit and explicit are interwoven …'. It is in the realm of popular culture that we want to examine this 'entanglement'. We adopt the view that the public face of power in the postcolony is largely a performance. Indeed, Mbembe has described the postcolony as a '*simulacrum*', a regime in which 'the people pretend to obey and the rulers pretend to believe in their obedience, resulting in an inescapable cycle of pointless violence and cynical laughter' (30). In his study of Cameroon and other West African states, Mbembe adopts and partly pioneers a unique approach to the study of power in Africa. He focuses on the salience and the symbolic importance of the obscene and the grotesque as entries into understanding the aesthetics or modalities of power in the postcolony. His analysis begins with Bakhtin's (1984) discussion of the use of bawdy humour and the carnival tradition in medieval Europe. Although Bakhtin attributed this 'folk' tradition to the 'province of ordinary people' and thus read this site as one for oppositional discourses, Mbembe (1992, 9) points out that these traditions are in fact spread across social classes. He rejects the notion that this carnival tradition subverted 'official culture'. He argues that such imagery is generated by the state and it is the state that constitutes 'the principal locus of both self-narration of power and the places in which it imagines itself' (Ibid.). But Mbembe's criticism of Bakhtin has itself been a source of other criticisms. Karlstrom (2003), for instance, points out Mbembe's failure to locate Bakhtin's argument within its cultural and historical context. Karlstrom argues that Bakhtin did not propose 'a transhistorical theory of the political valence of bodily humour' (62). He 'historicized the oppositional role of humour by noting that in earlier social formations the serious and the comic aspects of the world and of the deity were equally sacred, equally official' (Ibid.). Karlstrom, among others, also raises objec-

tions to Mbembe's notable ambivalence over the emancipatory potential of forms of popular culture such as humour. According to Mbembe (1992, 8), 'popular bursts of hilarity are actually taking the official world seriously', and 'people who laugh are only reading the signs left, like rubbish, in the wake of the *commandement*'. Mbembe explains that he uses the term *commandement* to 'denote what the colonial authority, that is in so far as it embraces the images and structures of power and coercion, the instruments and agents of their enactment, and a degree of rapport between those who give orders and those who are supposed to obey them, without of course discussing them' (30). He argues that 'although these processes [humour, laughter] may … demystify the *commandement* or even erode its legitimacy, it does not do violence to the *commandement*'s base. At best, it creates pockets of indiscipline on which the *commandement* may stub its toe, though otherwise it glides unperturbed over them' (10). Consequently, for Mbembe (1992), the postcolonial relationship is not one of resistance and collaboration but one that

> can best be characterised as illicit cohabitation, a relationship made fraught by the very fact of the *commandement* and its subjects having to share the same living space. It is precisely because of this logic—the necessary familiarity and domesticity in the relationship—that explains … the refusal to be captured, the contradiction between overt acts and gestures in public and the covert responses made underground. (4)

Mbembe argues that instead, this relationship has resulted in the 'mutual zombification of both the dominant and those whom they apparently dominate. This zombification means that each robbed the other of their vitality and has left them both impotent (*impouvoir*)' (Ibid.). But is this necessarily true? Is the relationship between the potentate and the subject by implication intimate and fatalistic? We want to agree with Karlstrom's objections to Mbembe's analysis which he does using the Baganda as a case study of how political relations are 'staged', in an effort to explain the element of reciprocity in political relations in Africa. When the Baganda invite political leaders to their villages, they partly partake in what Mbembe calls the 'corporeal extravagance of power' but then with an end in mind. They deluge their leaders with praises, compete to offer the fattest ram, but at the same time expect their leader to meet his obligations as a leader by contributing to their welfare. If the leader fails to demonstrate that which

makes him a leader, for instance, by not contributing towards the project for which he is invited, he is rejected. The element of reciprocity and of 'ritual dialogism' thus underwrites this relationship. Karlstrom (2003, 72) thus argues that 'the underlying logic of popular political subjectivity also contains resources for the sort of critical consciousness of which Mbembe despairs'. According to Karlstrom, 'if critical responses by non-state political imaginaries are incapable of disciplining state power and holding it accountable to popular demands, this limitation is not intrinsic to the idiom of critique …' (Ibid.). Popular culture might not necessarily lead to revolutions precisely because it is not at this level that it operates. Indeed, as Karlstrom observes, 'it does not ipso facto constitute resistance. But it is a form of critical consciousness nonetheless' (Ibid.). This book thus adopts especially Mbembe's approach to the study of the performance of power in the postcolony but with certain provisos. Mbembe's framework is only useful insofar as it provides an entry into examining what Karlstrom (2003, 64) describes as the 'official–popular interface as a dialogical process of reciprocal influence in the context of a (partially) shared cosmology of power'.

Our discussion also involves a discussion of the techniques which Bayart (1993, 254) has described as the 'techniques of evasion and pretence'. Those techniques characterize daily life in Kenya as points of entry to understanding the modalities of power in Kenya through a reading of the 'popular'. These techniques show how 'small men take refuge in things which cannot be stolen in order to escape from the incessant thefts of the authorities' (Ibid.). To this end, we find Scott's (1990) discussion of the 'public and hidden transcripts' especially significant. Scott explains how those who occupy subordinate positions in societies that are oppressive have an extensive social existence outside the immediate control of the dominant forces, positions that provide a healthy breeding ground for critiques of domination. He defines 'hidden transcripts' as 'discourse that takes place offstage, beyond the observation of the power holders, and which tend to confirm, inflect, qualify or contradict the public transcript' (16). Through these scripts, the dominated manage to archive and process a whole range of interpretations of their experiences. These 'hidden transcripts' include the use of rumour, humour and hearsay. Thus, for instance, to paraphrase Mbugua Wa-Mungai (2004) in Mutahi's humour is constituted a repertoire of irreverence to symbolically contest certain

'commonsense practices' as a critique of power. Rumour similarly becomes a site and a means of social and political critique.

We further acknowledge the analytical potential of Young and Turner's (2013) ideas of 'existence' in the African postcolony, a position shared by Michael Schatzberg especially in his discussion of political culture and social dynamics in Zaire, now the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Young and Turner classify the African postcolony into 'zones of existence' (politico-commercial class) and zones of 'non-existence' (the lower classes). The relationship between these two zones is not necessarily that pitting oppressor against the oppressed. In fact, belonging to either of these zones is not immutable. One belongs to either zone depending on his/her proximity to the centre of privilege at a given point in time. At once the subject population is a victim, at another a victor. The performance of power in Kenya is enacted in *Whispers* as a dialectic made possible through subjects' vacillation between and within the two zones described above. At play within this dialectic are variables such as class, ethnicity, gender, tribe.

Conclusion

To understand the 'popular' is therefore to recognize its multiple faces and characteristics. It is irreducible to class or class interests, to the margins or to only forms of political resistance with which it has always been associated. In Africa, this complexity takes an added dimension considering the non-linear forms of political and social organization that sustain collective and individual relationships. Indeed, the impact of globalization and urbanization has created even more complex identities, at once fragmented and composite. In Kenya, for example, you have the elite political class consort with the cappuccino-sipping middle classes in Nairobi's upmarket malls but retreat to rural villages to be installed as traditional Maasai elders over the weekend, dressed in cow hides. This contradiction speaks not only of the complex nature of the 'popular' but also of how it is imbricated in shaping the contours of Kenya's social and political cultures and practices. Through *Whispers*, we explore the various points of negotiation, of resistance and of collaboration between the 'popular's' various constituting elements and more broadly how such a study can help us understand the nature of the African state.

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Recuperating the 'Popular' in Kenyan Literature

Since the 1960s, fiction columns have regularly featured in Kenyan newspapers, and their resilience over the years, if nothing else, clearly points to their popularity with readers in the country. These columns also seem to offer a number of possibilities for newspapers. Historically, with a largely muted press, it is these columns that have kept the Kenyan newspaper porous. Through popular fiction, Kenyan newspapers have been able to provide alternative renderings of stories that do not make it to the more conventional subgenres of the newspaper such as 'news', 'features' or 'editorials'. In many cases, they discuss issues that are often 'spiked' by the mainstream press due to various institutional and political reasons. However, popular fiction within Kenya's mainstream press emerges from, but also informs, a broader literary culture in the country—popular literature. This chapter discusses the re-emergence of popular literature as a significant site of intellectual inquiry in Kenya. It revisits some of the debates that have characterized the place of the 'popular' within the country's intellectual and literary traditions, and how its significance has since been 'recuperated'.

Popular texts have previously been ignored in Kenyan literary scholarship for a number of reasons. Traditionally, criticism of Kenyan literature, and more particularly of the novel, has generally been located within debates around the idea of the 'popular', largely defined by the multinational publishers and university critics, themselves often a part of a

canonized group of writers. Jane Bryce argues that in Kenya, the process whereby texts were classified as 'elite' or 'popular' for a long time had been based on the evaluative procedures of the multinational publishers such as Heinemann, Longman and Macmillan (cited in Barber 1997, 121). These publishing firms privileged the already established canon. Not surprisingly, most popular writers in Kenya were for a long time only being published by less known and much smaller publishing firms or imprints of the well-established publishers such as Macmillan's *Pacesetters*, Heinemann's *Spear Books* and *Heartbeats*, and Longman's *Drumbeats.*

But the stature of popular culture and literature in Kenya is also to be seen against the main discourse traditions that have historically influenced African literary criticism in general. Kasongo (1992, 35–6) describes these as the 'Africanist discourse' and the 'African discourse', but which in more familiar terms have often been referred to as the Marxist/Socialist and the Realist traditions. The former is seen to judge the African novel on epistemological values based on Western literature, while the latter seeks a radical adjustment to these values. In sum, the debate, as Ogude and Nyairo (2007, 2) point out, has been 'underpinned by a highly prescriptive tendency… guided by a narrowly conceived idea of what constitutes utilitarian literature, an understanding which was often constructed around the moral war-heads of good and bad literature'. Thus, variants of the 'African discourse' have tended to define the 'well-made African novel' on 'literary-political terms'. In Kenya, therefore, the political novel of the late 1960s and 1970s, and later the 1980s, is still easily seen as the canon, embraced by both publisher and critic.

Even as the Kenyan novel gravitated towards a more popular vein in the 1970s through the 1980s, this trend was furiously criticized by a number of university-based critics. Almost synonymous with this group is Chris Wanjala, one of the most vocal exponents of 'committed' literature in Kenya. Wanjala particularly complained about the Kenyan popular writer's supposed infatuation with the romance genre, a key theme in popular literature texts published in the 1970s through the 1980s. He also criticized writers such as David Maillu and Charles Mangua for what he saw as their fixation with the banal. According to Wanjala, popular literature imitated the scabrous romance genre from the West, a genre meant for the entertainment mass market. Accordingly, it lacked the imaginative nuance required of the committed artist. Elizabeth Knight was another vocal critic of the Kenyan popular writers, accusing them of imitating Western potboilers. While not dismissing writers such as Charles Mangua

as inconsequential, Lindfors (1991) similarly complained that Kenyan writers of popular fiction 'deflated the literary value' of Kenyan literature. Lindfors talks about the

> deflation of literary value that is apparent in the gradual progression from Ngugi's serious historical fiction of the early Sixties to p'Bitek's amusing satirical poetry of the late Sixties to Mangua's frivolous proletarian potboilers of the early Seventies is now being duplicated in every genre as imitators with far less talent flood the market with insipid drivel. (51)

Lindfors wonders whether 'East Africa's best literary impulses will be drowned in a swamp of pulp' (ibid.). Lindfors' unease with popular literature in Kenya is to be found in his criticism of both Mangua and Maillu, whom he accuses of having vulgarized Okot p'Bitek's serious humour. The idea of 'committed literature', which increasingly gravitates towards the 'Africanist discourse' yet clothed as 'African discourse' has been a powerful criteria in the evaluation of Kenyan literature, although in my opinion a little disingenuous. The approach tends to conveniently ignore certain historical and social specificities as legitimate influences in the production of popular cultural forms in Africa. Scholars such as Barber (1997) and Newell (2002) have since demonstrated that popular texts which might be regarded trivial are in fact influenced by social realism as a major functional and fictional technique. As such, for these texts, the realist criteria should provide a useful tool for evaluation. Hence, serious socio-economic and political issues are addressed as much in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood* (1977) as in Charles Mangua's *Son of a Woman*. The difference is more a question of form than kind. Newell (2002) has particularly revealed the conceptual problematic inherent in the master narrative that has defined the well-made African novel. She argues that proponents of the so-called committed art believe that 'creative writing is not "fiction" if it presents scenarios that are edifying and educational' (2). She defends this writing arguing that it is such writers who 'understand the function of fiction and the ways in which local readers seek to organise their lives through popular narratives' (ibid.). Ogude and Nyairo (2007) in similar vein argue that Wanjala and Knight, among other critics, have failed to appreciate the different ways in which these writers of popular fiction reworked the Western modes of literary expression to fit their needs. Indeed, it was thus not so much an imitation as an appropriation of foreign literary forms.

There are several other conceptual contradictions within the 'Wanjala School' that we need to reflect upon. Smith (1989) provides one of the most revealing of these contradictions in the literary criticism of the Kenyan popular novel. Smith complains that novels that are 'successfully analytic and synthetic are comparatively rare [in East Africa]' (12). While acknowledging that African popular fiction deals with social and political issues, she is equally quick to point out that the number of East African novelists who succeed in providing 'an insight into the moving spirit of an era is, *of course*, small' (ibid.). Smith has categorized Kenyan popular literature into two groups. She distinguishes between 'popular' and the 'sensational popular' as 'types' of Kenyan popular literature. According to Smith, Ngugi's *Petals of Blood* is 'popular' literature, while Charles Mangua's *Son of Woman* and Mwangi Ruheni's *The Minister's Daughter* (1975) are examples of the 'sensational popular'. Stylistically, Ngugi's writings are not only markedly different from those of Mangua and Ruheni, they are also 'superior'. Smith's basis for such distinctions is, however, problematic. Criticizing Ruheni's writing, Smith describes *The Minister's Daughter* as a 'social document, a record of an attitude to fiction, and of a publisher's view of what would sell, but it does not provide an insight into an era' (16). She likens *The Minister's Daughter* to Mangua's *Son of Woman*, from which she cites and disparages the following excerpt:

> *Son of woman,* that's me. I am a louse, a blinking louse and I am the jigger in your toe. I am a hungry jigger and I like to bite. I like to bite women—beautiful women. Women with tits that bounce. If you do not like the idea you are the type I am least interested in. (Mangua 1971, 7)

The following is Smith's critique:

> [t]he limitations of the mode are equally evident from the first paragraph: the dated British slang (blinking, tits) combines *uneasily* with local words (jigger) and the grammar of American pulp fiction… Here we encounter a staple device of the eighteenth century British fiction in updated form; it is treated with *self-indulgent sentimentality* and a *bizarre* mixture of styles. (17)

Smith describes Mangua's writing as '*a kind* of popular fiction' (ibid.). She also argues that unlike Meja Mwangi, Achebe and Ngugi whose works require 'a participating reader', Mangua's writing is 'imitative' (ibid.). Here, one notices a similarity between Smith and Wanjala's criticism of

the Kenyan popular writer. To argue that popular writings do not require a participating reader is to ignore some of the things that make these writings popular. Indeed, one would argue that on the contrary, there is a tendency in popular fiction for authors to employ deliberate 'narrative gaps', which readers are expected to 'fill up'. The reader is then forced to actively participate in making meaning of the popular narrative. One may also in fact argue that the language and themes Ruheni and Mangua address are a reflection of the times in which they wrote. These works were products of an era, providing insights into what was then an emerging urban culture. It also appears that Smith and Wanjala have been keen on an undefined strand of syncretism in the Kenyan novel. The criticism of the 'dated British slang fitting uneasily with local words in *Son of Woman*' is a good example. Mangua borrowed from popular expressions circulating especially in Nairobi in the 1970s, and for his audience, it is unlikely there was anything 'bizarre' about the juxtaposition of the 'jigger with the bouncing tits'. This is the kind of appropriation Ogude and Nyairo (2007) refer to above. It is a deliberate synthesis of cultural imagery with the popular expressions from the urban space and Western thrillers. These writers are aware of the two worlds that make up their readers' lived experiences. These are readers possibly born and bred in the village with the jiggers, but have also been exposed to the urban thrillers of 'bouncing tits' published in Western fiction. Such a synthesis even in terms of language alone is not uncommon in Kenya's urban areas. Indeed, the emergent urban lingua in Nairobi and other urban areas in Kenya, *Sheng*, now increasingly used in Kenyan popular fiction and even in some mainstream tabloid newspapers such as the *Nairobian* published by the Standard Group, consists of expressions appropriated from both worlds.

These critics ignore what Granqvist (1990, 8) has noted as the 'narratological pluralism of African literature, its openness for narrative diversity, its extempore quality'. They fail to sufficiently appreciate the 'polymorphic line of narration, based on obliged interaction … and self-regulatory social interference' (ibid.). It is a point also made by Newell (2002) who notes that because African popular literature is produced outside the genre-determining relationships that characterize Western popular fiction, African texts are less rigid in their adherence to literary formulas and as a consequence 'authors remain receptive to wider varieties of intertextual currents' (3). From Ngugi's reliance on oral forms of narration and tales from the Agikuyu to Okot p'Bitek's rhythmic translations of Acholi poetry, to Mutahi's appropriation of urban lingua and circulating popular

expressions in *Whispers*, Kenyan popular fiction is receptive to the 'wider varieties of intertextual currents' that Newell talks about above. In terms of literary aesthetics, therefore, Kenyan popular fiction has a strong syncretic character that needs to be evaluated on its own terms.

Similarly, Smith's argument about the self-indulgent sentimentality of the popular novel echoes the now-contested claim about popular literature being necessarily carefree. The literary paternalism with which some critics look upon African popular literature particularly shines through in Smith's generous appraisal of the novels of Nuruddin Farah as a contrast to Kenyan popular fiction. Quoting Farah (1982), she writes, 'good writing is subversive, bad writing is not' (24). She agrees with Farah's interest in writers who 'explode conventions … writers and works that disturb preconceptions, whether artistic, moral or philosophical' (Smith 1989, 27). Ironically, this is in actual fact what Mangua does. Mangua 'explodes convention'. He experiments with the unusual. Smith praises Farah's works in part because they are peppered with 'quotations from and references to Soyinka, Blake, Melville, Achebe, Yeats, Dickens, Kierkegaard, Beckett and Conrad among others' (27). The irony here is blunt because while Smith criticizes Mangua and Ruheni, precisely because they 'break convention' by 'mixing the jiggers and the bouncing tits', a mixture of Soyinka, Yeats, Dickens and Conrad seems to be the kind of 'subversive' writing that Smith calls 'good writing'. It reeks of the kind of elitism that has for long defined African literary criticism in the continent and beyond.

The Kenyan example is certainly not unique. Similar conceptual contradictions have marked the criticism of Tanzanian literature, where, as Felicitus Becker in her translation of the Kiswahili novel, *Dar-es-Salaam Usiku*, argues, Kiswahili-speaking scholars distinguish between 'serious literature' and 'trash' in Tanzanian literature (cited in Newell 2002, 3). Newell further points out that these scholars are keen to 'protect the high quality (and commitment to political conscientisation) of literature produced within their language zones' (ibid.). Similarly, in Nigeria, Newell notes that popular Hausa literature has elicited such controversy. Apparently concerned about the upsurge of *soyayya* books, Sani Aba and Jibril Ibrahim (1995) protested against 'a kind of popular literature in Hausa literature' (cited in Newell 2002, 3), perhaps the Nigerian variant of the 'sensational popular' that Smith talks about in Kenya. They complain thus:

[t]he writing is conceived and executed in a rush. The author is usually the printer/publisher … these young authors, equipped with relatively low educational standards are putting to shame serious Hausa literary establishment. (ibid.)

The point we are making here is that the 'Africanist discourse' tradition that has dominated the criticism of African literature fails to recognize certain realities against which African popular literature should be judged or at least understood. The conflation of the popular with the 'uncritical and uncommitted' and the dichotomy of committed/non-committed literature, based on the theme of politics and a largely Western-influenced aesthetics as the only tool for the evaluation of African literature reinforced the marginal stature of Kenyan popular literature. But limiting quality literary output to aesthetic narcissism and its political orientation is itself restrictive. At the risk of sounding rhetorical, we want to agree with Ehling (1990) that evaluative judgements that have for long defined the canon in Africa are very often based upon the

prejudices of a minority, an aesthetically educated elite, which, on the one hand, rigidly seeks to employ its own—elitist—perspective, but on the other hand is not willing to acknowledge the fact that the different varieties of literature are but pictures of highly complex social formations. (156)

Popular Agency in Kenya's Popular Cultural Forms

In recent times, however, popular literature in Kenya is beginning to enjoy a fairly cordial relationship with the critic and the publisher. Critics such as Jacqueline Bardolph, Nici Nelson, Jane Bryce and more recently the 'Kenya School', a group of scholars mainly from the University of the Witwatersrand's School of Literature, Language and Media, now form an influential cohort who are increasingly reconceptualising the popular in Kenya's popular cultural forms and productions. They are instead interested, for example, in what makes popular literature 'popular' in Kenya. Such work has also been significantly supported by an emergent group of alternative publishers such as the Kwani Trust, which has become an important platform for creative writing in the country. There are also a number of writing 'festivals' such as the 'Storymoja Festival', which are now broadly accessible to established and budding popular fiction writers in the country. Academic literary journals such as *Jahazi, Social Identities,*

African Identities and more recently the *Eastern Afrian Literary and Cultural Studies* founded by Tom Odhiambo and Godwin Siundu are also enabling the publication of critical work on popular culture in Kenya. Significant work in this area has also been done by among others Ogude and Nyairo (2007), Ogola (2005, 2010), Ligaga (2013) and Ogude et al. (2012). These studies range from a focus on popular literature to other popular cultural forms such as popular music, theatre, radio drama and emerging internet cultures.

Other critics elsewhere such as Bardolph et al. (1998), for instance, note that a significant majority of the Kenyan popular texts tackle 'popular' or commonplace issues but also in a manner that is demonstrably didactic, hence their 'popularity' as readers apply these texts to their lives. She notes that popular texts in Kenya and East Africa in general rely heavily on 'referential interest' (126). The narratives generally 'hold a kind of mirror to the public in their sociological stocktaking, which is more likely to hold one's attention than commonplace intrigues' (ibid.). The narratives, therefore, immerse their readers in a life they already inhabit, providing templates for self-reflection and at the same time offering advice on how the readers can improve their lives. Besides, most of these popular texts revolve around the problems faced by their readers.

Bardolph also emphasizes the salience of 'moral narratives' in Kenyan popular fiction. She notes that most popular texts in Kenya revolve around moral points and stories, often reinforced by proverbs, tales and experiences appropriated from local cultures. To this end, most popular writings especially tend to revolve around the theme of 'crime and punishment', a theme also looked at by Ligaga (2013) in her interesting discussion of the image of the 'good time girl' as portrayed in popular media texts and platforms in Kenya. She argues, for example, that the 'good time girl' in Kenyan popular media should not be seen necessarily as a 'victim', but as 'a complex subject representative of competing discourses on gender and sexuality' (259).

Indeed, the publishing success of the popular novel in the late 1970s through the 1980s in Kenya can partly be explained by the relevance of the twin themes of 'crime and punishment'. Nelson (1996) on her part focuses primarily on gender representation, examining how gender is constructed within the dialectic of the urban and rural spaces in Kenya. Nelson sees this representation as providing a useful entry into the reading of the popular novel in Kenya. The topicality of gender relations especially in the context of changing social relations owing to rapid social transformation

makes gender issues notably 'popular'. The importance of this representation is also underscored by Gikandi (2003, 161), who observes that writers focus on the representation of the woman as an entry to reading the 'dramatic story of the new nation'. The popular novel in Kenya thus negotiates its themes, style and language with its reader. It is precisely because of this 'obliged interaction' between writer and reader that makes this writing popular.

But while it is true that since the late 1990s there has been significant interest in popular literature and popular culture more generally in Kenya after decades on the margins, there are gaps that continue to remain. There is still a paucity of critical work on popular fiction within the popular press in the region. This is despite the genre's versatility, resilience and 'popularity' in the region since the 1970s. A few notable exceptions, however, include Bodil Folke Frederiksen's study of *Joe*, a popular magazine in Kenya in the 1970s (Frederiksen 1991) and Richard Lepine's (1988) study of Kiswahili newspaper fiction in Kenya.

Popular fiction within the newspaper in fiction gained national prominence in the mid-1970s. Although these columns had been published in the Kenyan vernacular press, it is *Joe* magazine published by Hillary Ng'weno and Terry Hirst, among other popular magazines such as *Drum*, that can be said to have popularized this genre. Not only was fiction among the main features of these magazines, they also acted as spaces for apprenticeship for budding writers, giving rise to a corps who later published similar columns in mainstream newspapers and later, novels.

Joe was established in 1973 but went under in 1979 having nonetheless set a 'formula' that was to later define the 'popular fiction' genre in the newspaper and popular magazine in Kenya. Successors to the fiction published in *Joe* were few and far between and none as versatile and resilient as *Whispers*. Similar columns which ran in the mainstream press over the same period and after the collapse of *Joe* included *Masharubu's World, Norman the Nomad, Kibao, Benson's World* and *Urbanite,* among others.

The early 1980s in Kenya particularly marked the growth of this genre in the mainstream newspaper. This period was attended by significant developments in Kenya's political history, developments which impacted just as significantly the production of the 'popular'. This period witnessed a wave of ruthless state repression which especially escalated after an attempted coup to topple the government of President Daniel Moi in 1982.

In the process of consolidating its political power, the Moi government reined in on many writers, journalists, intellectuals and politicians

perceived as dissidents. Some were forced into exile, while others were incarcerated. In the early 1990s, for instance, many a time journalists would be arrested for publishing reports that were described as being 'likely to cause fear, alarm and despondency' (see *Kenya: Taking Liberties*, 1991). The Newspapers Act, introduced in the 1950s under the British colonial government and retained by both the Kenyatta and Moi administrations, ensured that the government kept tabs on the press without necessarily shutting them down. The Act required all publications to post a Bond with the government before they commenced publication. Copies of each issue of a publication would then have to be registered with the Registrar of Books and Newspapers. Magazine publishers were required to submit their annual returns and fill in a form for inspection by the Registrar General. Small print publications were constantly banned or fined for contravening these provisions of the Act although these normally provided the government the opportunity to ban hostile publications (*Africa Watch Report: Kenya Taking Liberties*, 1991). Later, numerous libel suits and defamation fines forced most of the small print publications to fold. Although some of these publications were unabashedly partisan, they still provide examples of the seriousness with which the government held the print media and certainly the very repressive nature of the political climate at the time. Among the publications banned in the late 1980s through the early 1990s included *Beyond*, a monthly magazine published by the National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCK), *Financial Review*, a weekly financial magazine, and *Nairobi Law Monthly*, *Finance*, *Economic Review* and *Society*. These magazines were edited mostly by human rights lawyers and journalists, who were also engaged in political activism. Among them were Gitobu Imanyara (*Nairobi Law Monthly*), Njehu Gatabaki (*Finance*), Pius Nyamora (*Society*) and Bedan Mbugua (*Beyond*).

Meanwhile, a national economic decline led to widespread disillusionment and political anxiety. Free speech was promptly muzzled even with certain apparently liberal legal provisions. It is through various forms of cultural production such as music, theatre and fiction that Kenyans began to create new expressive spaces. Although it is important to note that *Whispers* was not directly born as a result of the repressive nature of the 1980s, it was to later follow into the discourse of social and political reform. The column gradually acquired a reputation as a forum for the 'hushed, the scandalous, the mysterious', its character defined by its subversive streak (Wa-Mungai 2003). The column's narratives were located within a largely oppositional cultural and political aesthetic that seemed

to define various sites of cultural production at the time even though it is more appropriate to look at the column as a fiction of multiple narratives.

The 1980s through the early 1990s in Kenya also witnessed a form of 'cultural revivalism' and a resurgence of various nationalisms, especially those 'convened' around ethnic interests. Ogude (2007) argues after Said (1994) that forced exclusion from mainstream politics and economic development often leads to a desire for restoration—the longing for integration as a social group or community. It engenders a strong sense of communal nationalism in order to fend off exile and to deal with its ravages (261). It is the exclusionary practices of the political elite that in part led to the disillusionment of the 1980s in Kenya. Ngunyi (1996, 184) argues that in such situations, the state witnesses a precarious balance between polarized power centres, 'the authority of the state, compromised politically and economically and a political periphery formed from an alliance of (forces) marginalized by the state but still unable, as yet, to force the centre to devolve power'. Ngunyi further notes that in Kenya, struggles associated with this polarization have either taken on an 'ethno-regional form or, to a lesser extent, an ethno religious character …' (ibid.). Indeed, to emerge as a result of this state of 'internal exile' were radical groups that were at once cultural, sometimes political, yet other times religious. These included Ngonya wa Gakonya's *Tent of the Living God*, a quasi-religious group which oscillated between religious and political practice, and *Mungiki*, another 'cultural/political' posse of quasi-cultural Kikuyu activists. This group also flirted with religion, cultural activism and politics. Others like the Release Political Prisoners (RPP) also agitated for reform on a cultural plane (see Outa 2002). Musicians such as D.O Misiani, notes Ogude (2007), positioned themselves as voices of protest. Misiani's music, for instance, postured as a voice for the Luo community who for decades had been excluded from state structures. Ogude argues that Misiani used the Luo as 'a moral and political category … reconstituting them as an oppressed nationhood in need of liberation' (4). All these groups who for disparate reasons were enjoined in the agitation for social and political reform, made politics a powerful theme in a number of writers' literary agenda.

It is within this narrative locale that we want to situate *Whispers*. Not only was the column's resilience in a characteristically uncertain period unique, its mediation of the 'popular' informed largely by a sense of 'resistance' made it particularly popular. Although most of the issues the column discussed were mediated in other sites such as theatre, music and

other forms of cultural production, including fiction columns, this column stands out for a number of reasons. It appears to have struck a certain chord with its audiences, becoming a popular newspaper 'product'. It was 'marketed' as a unique product in the newspaper and was often boldly 'advertised' in the Saturday newspapers and on the front pages of the Sunday newspapers. Mutahi, like Misiani, postured as a voice of those who felt alienated from the centre. But it is also important to recognize the fact that this column benefited from institutional support of major media organizations unlike similar work published by small publishers. The Nation Media Group and the Standard Group both have elaborate production and distribution networks that ensure they are available in most parts of the country.

Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to briefly historicize some of the key issues that have attended discussions on popular literature in Kenya. While the legacies of the canon still loom large in the Kenyan literary landscape, there have been various attempts to give popular cultural forms agency and recognition. There is a corpus of work now emerging, supported in part through endeavours by new publishing groups, academic journals and literary festivals. But even with this development, there's still little research on such forms as popular fiction in local newspapers even when such columns remain notably popular.

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Popular Fiction and the Popular Press in Kenya

This chapter explores the emergence and growth of popular fiction in the Kenyan written press. It, however, begins with a broader discussion of the roles played by the universities of Nairobi (Kenya), Makerere (Uganda) and Ibadan (Nigeria) in the development of African literature in general. The chapter then looks at the emergence of popular literature as a category of critical literary exegesis in the early 1970s with the rise of writers such as David Maillu and Charles Mangua. The discussion then focuses on the popular press as a space for apprenticeship for a number of these writers and the emergence of popular fiction columns in the Kenyan popular press. The chapter also looks at the influence *Joe* and *Drum* magazines, arguably some of the most significant popular magazines in Kenya in the 1970s, had on Kenya's newspaper fiction columns. It is within these traditions that we locate *Whispers*.

In 1968, a group of the University of Nairobi lecturers, among them Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Taban Lo Liyong, Owuor Anyumba and Okot p'Bitek, called for the transformation of the university's English department. The lecturers argued that there was a need for an 'African narrative' to replace a syllabus they perceived as too European in orientation. They emphasized the need for a cultural reinvention and revival of Africa's cultural past to help address some of the emerging challenges in independent Kenya (Odhiambo 2004). This move, coupled at the time with the government's desire to establish a cultural policy in the country, was a

defining moment in both the intellectual and literary traditions in Kenya. The Kenyan government was keen on establishing a cultural policy that would go hand in hand with its development programmes (Ogot 1995). Accordingly, it established and promoted institutions such as the Kenya Cultural Centre, the Kenya Literature Bureau, and later even created the Ministry for Culture and Social Services (Odhiambo 2004). These institutions would celebrate Kenya's cultural heritage but in a manner that was in fact intended to emphasize the need for 'unity' in post-independence Kenya, then a part of the government's larger hegemonic project. Atieno-Odhiambo (1987, 191) argues that

> regimes that took over state power at independence were bound, at the beginning at least, to be responsive to the forces generated by the various peasantries that, presumably, were articulated at the level of contradictions which the state system and not in harmony with it, since peasants are guardians of their autonomy and therefore duty-bound to be wary of the state system. The state then had no choice but to create political structures capable of containing the divisive effects of these contradictions.

This argument may very well help us understand the Kenya government's desire to establish a cultural policy, indeed a policy that was later rejected by Ngugi wa Thiong'o, among other writers (see Ngugi wa Thiong'o 1993).

Apart from the University of Nairobi, Makerere University also played a significant role in the development of African literature in the region. Scholars such as Simon Gikandi (2003) have underscored the influence of Makerere University in East Africa's intellectual literary traditions especially in the nascent years of the Kenyan novel. Makerere had helped create a small but hugely influential literary elite in the region. This literary elite was heavily influenced by F. R. Leavis' 'Great Tradition' so that many pioneering works of writers followed this tradition. Indeed, writers such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o have acknowledged the extent to which they were influenced by Western writers such as D.H. Lawrence and Joseph Conrad, among others. Gikandi (2003) observes that it was from the 'Great Tradition' that East Africa's pioneer writers first got their real literary models of what a poem, a novel or a play was.

Towards the end of the 1960s decade through the early 1970s, there was a deliberate attempt by most of these writers to break away from the imprisoning tethers of English writing traditions. This shift partly gestured

towards the region's oral traditions. Writers such as Ngugi began infusing in their work local oral traditions in search of an African literary aesthetic. But it was Okot p'Bitek who almost single-handedly took this new form to a new level, particularly revolutionizing the use of the English language in the region's literature with his poetry/songs *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol* (1984).

Writers emerging in the early to mid-1970s pushed the limits of this 'literary revolution' to the extreme. Charles Mangua and David Maillu not only introduced a new literature directly sourcing its register and temper from its readership, they also moved away from the highly ideological writing of the 1960s, instead interrogating more immediate social issues that had been pushed to the periphery by the 1960s writers.

It is important, however, that one also looks at the intellectual and cultural magazines that were part of this 'literary revolution'. *Black Orpheus* and *Transition* were influential African literary magazines linked to Makerere University in Uganda (*Transition*) and the University of Ibadan in Nigeria (*Black Orpheus*), and played a significant role in the emergence of a new African literary narrative. Ulli Beir edited *Black Orpheus*, while Rajat Neogy published *Transition*. These two journals encouraged the development of an African literature that was markedly different from its earlier European references. John Thompson thus says of Ulli Beir of *Black Orpheus*:

> [He] … operated in a special field. He was a border operator—on the border between the European and the local, the traditional. And he could cross back and forth from one border to another and find things they had in common. Ulli was able to go back and forth like a smuggler … from avant-garde European art and avant-garde European literature, which at the time were still interested in myth and symbol, to modern traditional African art and literature. Thus seemed like a common meeting ground. For a time just as it had been in Europe, this was a tremendous fertile field for painters and writers. (cited in Benson 1986, 17)

Neogy's *Transition* also attempted these 'border operations'. According to Benson (1986, 107), *Transition's* first issues were 'egregiously arty, bohemian, meant to challenge conventional sensibilities' but also provided 'a medium for the editors' own feelings of alienation'. Clearly, although these two magazines were both interested in a new African literary aesthetic, their intellectual leanings meant that popular literature was

still significantly muted in their pages. Several contributions from outside the academy barely made it to the pages of the magazines with the exception of a few emerging writers. Benson (1986, 10) has noted that there was a 'deliberate effort to reserve domination of the new African literature for a group of writers …'. Commenting on *Transition*, Abiola Irele similarly notes: 'One sensed the pull towards a restricted university periodical that the Makerere lecturers, thrilled with the appearance of an intellectual magazine at their doorstep, were exerting on those early numbers' (cited in Benson 1986, 103). While it is important that we acknowledge the role played by these magazines in the development of African literature, we should at the same time note that they created a small intellectual elite who excluded the popular fiction writer. Benson, thus, notes that instead of nurturing new talent, it was Rajat Neogy, Gerald Moore, Jahnheinz Jahn, Wole Soyinka, Abiola Irele, Ali Mazrui, Es'Kia Mphalele, Paul Theroux and Christopher Okigbo who dominated the pages of *Transition*. Neogy's taste for the avant-garde literature, argues Benson, was curiously selective. Beier was not any different. Although he gave space to emerging literatures such as Nigeria's widely popular Onitsha Market literature, he is said to have been interested in this literature mainly for anthropological reasons—'its vast reservoir of untrained but creative talent' (Benson 1986, 54).

In effect then, although *Transition* published new writers from East Africa, it cannot be credited with having produced the region's 'popular' writer. The 'popular' writer in Kenya was therefore neither directly fathered by the university nor mothered by the elite cultural magazines such as *Transition*. He was, in my opinion, the bastard child of a literary revolution.

By the early 1970s, a number of local publishers had warmed up to popular literature having realized that there was a market for this kind of work. The rapid growth of urban areas such as Nairobi had created a modest but vibrant working class that was not only literate but also had disposable income. Urbanization had intensified social problems and this group found popular literature capable of responding to their popular concerns besides being a source of leisure. With a ready market for the literature, multinational publishers launched local imprints to produce work by popular writers while a group of local publishers also emerged. Henry Chakava, one of the most influential editors at Heinemann Kenya at the time has noted that in the early 1970s, he was receiving manuscripts mainly on romance, crime and adventure. He recommended to

his employers in London that they should start a new series for leisure reading and was allowed to start 'Spear Books', which became a huge success. His idea was soon picked up by Macmillan who came up with their 'Pacesetter Series' also achieving instant success (Chakava 1996, 51). Other publishing houses such as The East African Publishing House (EAPH) introduced the 'Modern African Library', which published Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol* as well as Charles Mangua's popular *Son of Woman*, while Longman launched 'Drumbeat Series'. Oxford University Press (OUP) established 'New drama from Africa' and 'New Fiction from Africa Series'. Writers such as David Maillu also launched their own series. Maillu launched 'Comb Books' after having his manuscripts rejected by the major publishing houses. He self-published popular titles such as *After 4.30*, *My Dear Bottle*, *Unfit for Human Consumption* and *Diary of a Prostitute* among others. Foundation Books, TransAfrica, Bookwise among many other small publishers also rolled out thrillers, romance fiction and crime series. Although prior to this 'boom' several works of fiction had been published in the country, the developments in the early 1970s marked the beginnings of popular fiction in the modern publishing industry in Kenya.

The 'fat years' of publishing, as Chakava (1996) described the 1970s in Kenya, did not, however, go down well with a number of critics. A debate over quality ensued, and some scholars, notably Chris Wanjala as we argued previously, criticized popular literature for being aesthetically wanting and incapable of the 'commitment' required of Third World literature. Wanjala (1978, 18) accused writers of popular literature of merely seeking to 'please the audience'. He described Maillu's writing, which was seen to be representative of popular writing in Kenya, as '… a trashy and scabrous imitation of brothel and low life especially yarned for the low-brow reader in this country' (136). Maillu had especially popularized this emergent literature, writing about what had previously been considered taboo topics. To Maillu, sex, for instance, was literary fodder and a number of his books including *After 4.30*, *Unfit for Human Consumption* and *My Dear Bottle* contained lurid accounts of sexual encounters in a language that Lindfors (1991, 56) contemptuously describes as 'presenting zesty love scenes with enthusiastic attention to extra-ordinary anatomical particularities'. Yet Maillu's books were easily best sellers. Lindfors (1991, 55) notes that Maillu sold between 10,000 and 50,000 books in a year or two. Maillu's popularity crossed borders and in Tanzania he sold over 10,000 copies within six months before his books were banned in 1976.

Although Lindfors ([1991](), 99), in hyperbolic overkill, calls Maillu a 'primitive pioneer and intrepid trailblazer', he acknowledges that Maillu helped release 'an embryonic literary culture from the confining sac of taste and judgment'. Maillu and other writers, notably Charles Mangua, Mwangi Ruheni, Meja Mwangi, Sam Kahiga, among others, popularized a genre that had for many years operated in the shadows of canonical writings. Although this group is by no means a discrete category, their distinctive style of writing signified an important shift in direction in the development of Kenyan literature.

The Popular Press as a Space for Apprenticeship

It is important to note, however, that the popular press played a particularly significant role in the growth of popular literature in Kenya. Almost all the notable Kenyan writers who emerged in the 1970s began their writing careers, and were nurtured, within the Kenyan newspapers and popular magazines. The popular press provided a useful space for apprenticeship. It is in the popular press that many writers first published their work, while others had their fiction serialized, a tradition that had been especially popular in Europe and in South Africa. Writers such as Sam Kahiga, Meja Mwangi, Sam Akare, Wahome Mutahi, David Maillu, even Ngugi wa Thiong'o were partly shaped either by the Kenyan newspaper or popular magazine.

Chakava has noted that in the 1970s and particularly in 1976, there were on average 36 periodicals that were published regularly in Kenya. These included *Drum*, *True Love*, *Men Only, Trust*, *Viva* and *Joe*, among others (Chakava [1996]()). Among the most popular of these were *Joe* and *Drum* magazines, especially in the 1970s. *Joe* was published regularly between 1973 and 1979, and can be credited for exposing the works of a number of popular fiction writers in Kenya. The magazine was named after a character 'Joe' who had been popularized by writer/publisher Hillary Ng'weno in a satirical newspaper column *With a Light Touch* published in the *Daily Nation*. Ng'weno co-founded *Joe* with Terry Hirst, a former lecturer at Kenyatta University. *Joe* defined the place of popular fiction in the newspaper and magazine genres by moulding what one may call a 'narrative frame' for this genre. According to Frederiksen ([1991]()), *Joe* served three main functions:

> it was a mouthpiece of the new African middle and lower classes, it acted as a socialising agent, educating people on how to be urban and it contributed

to a fairly democratic public sphere in which issues of importance to the urban population of Kenya could be voiced and discussed. (cited in Newell 2002, 101–2)

Kupe (1997, 140) provides a similar argument about the role of the popular magazine in Zimbabwe noting how it "seeks to create a public sphere that is in principle accessible to all who have basic literacy skills to read and write … reporting a wide variety of issues across multiple genres, they seek to appeal to everyone". The fiction writing in *Joe* significantly influenced the popular novel in Kenya, too. For instance, in terms of thematic orientation, *Joe*'s major concerns revolved around the everyday problems of the urban population, told in a language that was equally 'urban'. Both Maillu's and Mangua's work reflect these features.

Joe was partly modelled on the successful South African magazine *Drum*, arguably the most successful popular magazine yet in Africa. *Drum* was established in the 1950s in South Africa to cater for the black urban population. In a foreword to Dorothy Woodson's *An Index to Africa's Leading Magazine 1951–1965*, Anthony Sampson, a former editor of the magazine, describes the 1950s in South Africa as a time when 'the tensions and sufferings in townships pressed blacks both to laugh and protest at them', a situation that naturally engendered the emergence and politicization of various forms of cultural production including theatre, music and fiction.

Historically, the 1950s saw the rigorous enforcement of the apartheid system in South Africa following the National Party's ascension to power in 1948. The period also coincided with the stepping up of defiance against the apartheid regime by the African National Congress (ANC). The black popular media among several forms of popular arts gradually evolved into sites of popular protest. Founded by Robert Crisp, *Drum* was edited over successive years by Anthony Sampson, Sylvester Stein and Tom Hopkinson. While originally published only in South Africa, the magazine later published separate editions for East, West and Central Africa. *Drum's* approach to social and political commentary was through investigative exposés, photography and fiction. The magazine also featured personality profiles, local news, gossip columns and literary essays.

In its early years, *Drum*'s writers included popular names such as Henry Nxumalo also known as 'Mr. Drum', Can Themba, Todd Matshikiza, Arthur Maimane, Casey Motsitsi and Nat Nakasa. Others who worked at the magazine but were already emerging literary names in the coun-

try included Ezekiel (later Es'kia) Mphahlele and Lewis Nkosi. Several contributors from other parts of Africa were also published in the magazine. Woodson (1988) argues that individually and collectively, these writers developed a new form of journalism, which she has called the 'Drum School'. It was a kind of writing that 'had a certain immediacy and vibrancy to it … in spite of their own frustrations, the writers were capable of laughing at themselves and this gave a particular bittersweet ambiance to the magazine, at least through the 1950s' (4). Rabkin (1975, 108) describes the fiction in *Drum* as having been marked with a 'distinctive style and flavour of its own … so often unorthodox in its execution … it reflected both naiveté and sophistication to an unusual degree'. Today, *Drum* is considered the prototype of the popular magazine tradition in Africa and its influence was easily discernible in *Joe* magazine and later in fiction columns such as *Whispers* in the mainstream newspapers.

Drum featured a number of genres: poetry, short fiction, cartoons, gossip columns, letters column, among others. Some of the columns which were to have a lasting influence in the magazine tradition in Africa included *Speak up man* (letters to the editor) and *Ask Dolly* (a column that handled readers' personal problems, often of a sexual nature). This has turned out to be one of the most enduring columns in the popular magazines and newspapers in Africa even today. The *Nation* newspaper, for example, has such a column 'Ask Cindy', while the *Standard's Nairobian* has 'Ask Uncle Ted'.

The fiction columns, also known as the 'thematic columns', included Todd Matshikitza's *With the Lid Off* described by Woodson (1988, 5) as a 'kind of social work type column specializing in tough luck stories'; and Casey Motsisi's *On the Beat*, which was part factual, part fictional and featured the writer's escapades in and around shebeens in Sophiatown (ibid.). Motsitsi also wrote *If Bugs Were Men*, a highly satirical condemnation of apartheid. Among the columns written by foreign contributors was *West African Whispers* by Nelson Ottah who wrote under the pseudonym Coz Idapo for the magazine's West African edition, but also featured in the Johannesburg edition (ibid.).

The Kenyan popular magazine and especially *Joe* featured an array of genres similar to those published in *Drum*, among them, and perhaps the most popular, the fiction stories and thematic columns. It is especially the thematic columns that Frederiksen (1991) finds definitive of *Joe*'s 'excellence'. *Joe* carried an original short story in every issue, a number of part fiction, part factual columns and a letters column similar to *Drum*'s

Speak up Man. The letters column in *Joe* was titled *Dear Joe*. To encourage dialogue and discussion, readers were encouraged to join in debates, and responses were often solicited. *Joe* would ask readers to 'drop me a letter expressing your feelings about things—even about me? I might print it—and then again I might not' (Frederiksen 1991, cited in Newell 2002, 98). *Joe* also featured plenty of visuals but more particularly graphics. Where *Drum* used photographs, *Joe* used graphics perhaps owing to its comparatively modest budget. The graphics in *Joe* appeared in many forms including satirical drawings, comic scripts and illustrated jokes. Most stories were also illustrated. Indeed, illustrations were to become a permanent feature of Kenyan newspapers' visual culture. Some of the most featured cartoon strips included *City Life* by Edward Gitau, which comprised tales of the new arrivants in Nairobi. Gitau was also the creator of *Juha Kalulu*, a popular cartoon strip in Kiswahili-language newspapers *Taifa Leo* and *Taifa Jumapili*. Others included *O.K, Sue! A City-Girl's View* by Kimani Gathingiri and Terry Hirst's *Daddy Wasiwasi & Co* and *The Good, the Bed and the Ugali*, a bastardization of 'The Good, the Bad and the Ugly' (Frederiksen 1991 cited in Newell 2002, 101). Most of the fiction was illustrated mainly to amplify narrative meanings and assist in decipherment. In subsequent years, especially in the newspapers, illustrations were to become permanent features in the Kenyan newspapers' visual culture.

Among the thematic columns in *Joe* was Hillary Ng'weno's *My Friend Joe*, a column that interrogated social and political issues much like Matshikitza's *With the Lid Off*, Nelson Ottah's *West African Whispers* and Casey Motsitsi's *On the Beat*. *My Friend Joe* inspired similar columns, both in Kiswahili and English-language newspapers in subsequent years. For instance, we see the column's influence in the early issues of *Whispers*. Below is an excerpt of *My Friend Joe*

> Wait a minute. Drinking is the most African problem thing God created after creating the African race. Look around you. What do you see? Drunks. African drunks. I tell you that's the most African thing on earth, drinking. (*Joe*, November 1974, cited in Newell 2002, 97–98)

Addressing a social problem, just like Ng'weno above, Mutahi writes in *Whispers*:

> If you are like other many strong-willed men who constantly defy an animal called the 'annual budget' and his son called 'price increases' and insists

on having a pint regularly, you must have an acquaintance with charming Virtue, Mapenzi. You see, Mapenzi is a master illusionist. However, she is not a witch. Even the worst of whisper-mongers credit her with at least one virtue—comforting lonely hearts and making sure that your pocket remains balanced towards a deficit. (*East African Standard*, May 14, 1983)

Quite apart from the fact that thematically both columns are addressing a social problem, there are other notable similarities. The truth is served with a smile, but in a way that demands self-reflection and calls for positive remedial action. The ironic mode intensifies the problem. The columns are also conversational almost as though the writers are 'conversing' with people they know. Ng'weno tells his readers: 'Look around. What do you see?' Mutahi does the same: 'You see, Mapenzi is a master illusionist'. Both writers also use the third-person voice, assuming the role of a 'teacher'. Later, however, Mutahi's *Whispers* would drift away from the 'third person' narrator to the first person voice. In the latter, the narrator occupies the same position as his readers, speaking not 'for' them but 'with' them.

Ng'weno left *Joe* magazine in 1974 to set up the *Weekly Review*, arguably the most successful political magazine yet in Kenya's history. In an interview with Berth Lindfors cited by Frederiksen in her discussion of *Joe*, Ng'weno claimed that one of his reasons for leaving *Joe* was because "he felt it was important to tell people what was happening before making fun of what was happening" (cited in Newell 2002, 94). Although it appears Ng'weno was dissatisfied with the effectiveness of humour as a way of making important social and political injunctions, this is not to suggest it was necessarily ineffective. Ng'weno's departure did not significantly affect *Joe*. By using articles and graphics from contributors, *Joe* had helped nurture a corps of emerging talent, among them Sam Kahiga and Meja Mwangi, while writers like Ngugi also occasionally contributed to the magazine. Some of these writers such as Kahiga were particularly popular with readers. *Joe*'s co-founder Terry Hirst called Kahiga 'the representative *Joe* writer' (Frederiksen 1991, cited in Newell 2002, 100). Hirst describes Kahiga's style as a 'touch lighter than Ngugi's and Mwangi's even though these two helped set the standard of high quality, which most stories at least approach' (ibid.). Kahiga found his metier in the short story. While at *Joe*, he was particularly notable for his capacity to 'turn any topic into a pointed humorous narrative, with a human angle' (ibid.). Kahiga would, in Frederiksen's parlance, often use 'an autobiographical form, making available his own fictive experience with *matatus* (commuter taxis), sec-

retaries of the law, and in brief sketches and description bring to life the quick and hard qualities of urban existence' (cited in Newell 2002, 100). This autobiographical type of writing also featured prominently in *Drum* and especially in Casey Motsitsi's *On the Beat*. For instance, in *The Beedee Stuff*, Motsitsi writes:

> I have been running into dead ends since last month that I am beginning to have a lot of worriation. Spells of bad luck … Only three days ago some wise guys got my absence and made off with all the stuff I cover myself with when coming town—two shirts and a pair of trousers I bought in a jumble sale. They also guzzled the bottle of hooch I always keep for medicinal purposes … (*Drum*, November 1958, 73)

Motsitsi always combined fiction with fact and wrote from sometimes 'imagined' personal experiences. With little variation, the autobiographical style was adopted by Kahiga and several other writers of popular fiction in the Kenyan popular press who were to emerge in the late 1970s and 1980s. Kahiga later wrote the fiction column *Kibao* in the *Standard*, while other writers such as Kenneth Watene wrote *Masharubu's World* in the *Sunday Nation*. Benson Riungu started *Life on the Low* and later *Off the Wall*, a column which was originally written by Brian Tetley. Riungu later wrote *Benson's World*, which was another satirical look at life in Nairobi. Those who broke into the mainstream newspaper in the 1980s included Wahome Mutahi writing *Whispers*, Yusuf Dawood with *Surgeon's Diary* and Gakiha Weru, who wrote *Urbanite*. There were several other short-lived experiments in the late 1980s through the 1990s.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided a general background to the emergence of popular fiction in the Kenyan popular press. We have noted the role of the academy, particularly the University of Nairobi, the University of Makerere and the University of Ibadan, and of the intellectual and cultural magazines *Black Orpheus* and *Transition* in shaping East African literature. We have also demonstrated how pioneering literary narrative emerging from the university, which hesitantly engaged in 'border operations', was later radically revised by an emergent group of writers who engaged in the writing of popular fiction. The chapter has argued that these writers contested the canon by adopting a style of writing and themes that

resonated with readers and spoke to their more immediate experiences. Most of these writers started their writing careers in the local popular press, which, we stress, acted as an important space for their apprenticeship. We also particularly underscore the influence of *Joe* and *Drum* magazines in much of the popular fiction that was published in the popular press in Kenya in the 1970s through the 1980s.

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Whispers and the Politics of the Everyday

This chapter examines the characters in *Whispers*, focusing specifically on how the characters are bound to discourse and therefore how they mediate the everyday. The chapter reads Mutahi's characters and the narrative structure he adopts as allegorical and, therefore, as standing for things 'bigger than themselves', to use the words of Clifford (1974, 10). The chapter begins with a brief discussion of the role of characters in fiction, after which we look at allegory as a narrative mode, examining the possibilities it provides the writer and also the constraints associated with its use. The chapter then offers a critical reading of the main characters, including the eponymous character Whispers, Thatcher, "The Investment", also known as "Pajero", and Whispers Jr. We then discuss some of the column's more transient characters such as Fr. Camisassius, Teacher Damiano, Uncle Jethro, Appep and Aunt Kezia and their roles.

In the essay "The Tragic Conflict in Achebe's Novels", Abiola Irele argues that

> [a] good novelist deals with not only situations but also individuals … [a]nd it is precisely the cycle created by the responses of men to the pressure of events, their evolutions at significant levels of feeling and thought that makes the real world of the novel. (1967, 177)

Irele notes that the importance of Achebe's novels derives not simply from his themes, 'but also from his complete representation of men in action, in living reaction to their fate, as well as from his own perception that underlies his imaginative world and concerns upon its relevance and truth' (ibid.). This statement affirms the character as a carrier of discourse in fiction. Indeed, in a discussion of characters in the African novel, Ogude (1996, 1) developing on the contributions of such theorists as Walter Allen, George Lukacs, Boris Tomachevsky and Rowland Barthes, points out that often critics forget that 'political and social concerns, which find their expression in themes are in fact best grasped by exploring the life and experience of characters in novels'. Ogude argues that there is a symbiotic relationship between the dominant narrative discourse and the use of characters. These points significantly inform our reading of characters in *Whispers.* To begin with, we want to agree with Tolson (1996, 10) that for readers it is easier to 'visualize a person than an idea, a process or a structure … an interview can personify an abstract idea or clothe an idea in living flesh'. Yet it is also true that it is for different reasons that writers use characters in their work. For Mutahi, we explore these reasons later in this chapter.

Significant in our reading is Mbugua wa-Mungai's (2004) argument that *Whispers*' principal appeal on the public imagination in Kenya was partly because of the column's subversive streak. As such, the column was stylized to 'perform' certain roles. To do so, however, meant that Mutahi's narrative possibilities were inherently constrained. For this reason, he made use of allegory.

The use of allegory in literary fiction has a long history. Clifford (1974) has noted that in the medieval and renaissance periods, allegory was a vehicle for explanation and provocation. In the latter part of the twentieth century, she argues, while allegory retained these characteristics, its uses were transformed to include the sceptical, the subversive and the solipsistic (116). Clifford especially notes that allegory is now popularly used for political critique. The use of allegory for political purposes is primarily because 'obliqueness equals security'. Subterfuge, she argues, 'becomes the only way of setting out certain values if these values are regarded as subversive by those in power' (50–51). While definitions of allegory vary, we want to define it, and use it after Clifford as an 'extended metaphor' subsuming many different genres and forms. Among these is the symbol—of objects or events or persons standing for something greater than themselves (11).

Clifford also explains that writers of allegory usually invent objects to suggest essentials of the concept they wish to explore but 'these must be susceptible to the sort of description that tells us what it means, it should not suggest so many meanings that the dramatic continuum is shattered, for it is on this continuum that the overall sense of the allegory depends' (10). Clifford also observes that the strength, but also the limitation, of allegorical symbols is that they tend to be static, with all the ramifications of the meanings focused on the symbol. This statism is also manifest in the incompatible tendencies of many allegories. Since the form involves repetition, the repetition of structurally similar incidents produces the effect of immobility (11). Clifford argues that when allegory relies primarily on a single form of action, be it a battle or a debate, it has clarity often at the expense of subtlety. It will tend to be 'dualistic, if not almost Manichean, in that Good has to be presented in terms comparable with Evil if it is to engage with it at all' (ibid.). This gives the impression of a closed system, yet a writer's concern, she notes, is with process, progression. She notes that allegory is therefore best utilized when a writer incorporates, for instance, the metaphor of the 'journey' with other devices such as the masque, debate or battle. She explains that in a journey,

> [t]he traveller is an instrument whereby systems can be explored. Because he is an outsider, he often possesses a special kind of objectivity about the newly encountered system as a whole, while the sequential nature of his experiences provides for explaining its peculiarities. Everything encountered is new and strange and so the questions asked by the traveller are a natural pretext for explanation whether he is naive or not. (23)

We will shortly explore how Mutahi employs this narrative mode of the journey in *Whispers*. Mutahi's adoption of the allegorical structure of the family was because the family is an easily recognizable template for reference across Kenya's multiple cultures. The family is also important because of its allegorical import, which provides a number of narrative possibilities for a writer. For example, the family is a politically innocuous narrative space; hence it provides possibilities for exploitation as an allegorical space to engage with political issues especially of a sensitive nature. In the column, there is a sense in which the writer collapses the domestic space with the public space so that what is discussed within the family is read against the backdrop of national issues. McClintock (1995, 357) provides a good discussion of the allegorical potential of the family by arguing that nations

are 'symbolically figured as domestic genealogies' and that the 'nation' is frequently figured through the iconography of familial and domestic spaces. Indeed, she notes that the word 'nation' is derived from *natio* which means 'to be born' (ibid.). The family in *Whispers* is used allegorically to mean the 'nation'. Mutahi thus engages with the everyday problems of his readers using the family as a template, while simultaneously interrogating issues affecting the country at the national level. Within the family, or more appropriately 'the domestic space', the column discusses the familiar. It is essentially a 'popular space'. We get a glimpse of the commonplace intrigues of the Kenyan family, the struggles to survive the challenges of living in the city; we see the anxieties resulting from the rapid urbanization and its unsettling effects, the challenges of reconciling 'traditional' ways of living with modern lifestyles. These are narrated through images of confusion, feuds, debates, violence and frustrations. The characters Mutahi employs codify not only the society's fears and anxieties but also their aspirations. The domestic arena is therefore exploited as a narrative space within which Mutahi is able to explore wider sociocultural and political issues in the country.

The family in *Whispers* comprises the eponymous character Whispers, his wife Thatcher and their two children "The Investment" and Whispers Jr, as well as several transient characters, including Teacher Damiano, Father Camisassius, Appepklonia, Rhoda, Aunt Kezia and Uncle Jethro. It is, however, through the character Whispers that much of the column's concerns are discussed. Below, we examine the main characters Whispers, Thatcher, their children and some of the transient characters in the column and how they are implicated in the discussions of the everyday.

Reading the Family in *Whispers*

Whispers, also referred to as 'Son of the Soil (SoS)' is the main character in the column. He is a semi-urban Kenyan man trying to make a living in Nairobi. He is one of the millions of rural migrants in Nairobi who now call the city home. But he is not 'weaned' off his village upbringing yet. Using the allegorical form of a journey, we see this character move back and forth between the village and the city both physically and psychologically, what wa-Mungai (2004, 4) has called the 'the cultural and spatial crossings of the postcolonial Kenyan subject'. Through his journeys we are exposed to the existential dilemmas of this subject. As noted by Clifford above, it is through the character that Mutahi explores the unsettling effects of

urbanization. We experience his traumas and predicaments as he attempts to make sense of his two worlds, the village and its 'ways' and the city with its own. Whispers is symbolic of Mutahi's subject—Kenyans. The author's use of the personal voice, of Whispers as the narrator, is particularly telling of his role as a collective voice in the column. Even without the use of the collective pronoun 'we', one still gets a sense of plurality in the narrator's first person voice.

For Mutahi, *Whispers* is not a celebratory narrative; it is a lamentation of 'things falling apart'. It is a narrative of dislocation: culturally, socially and politically. The character is, therefore, to put it rather loosely, the living theatre of these various dislocations. This character plays multiple roles in the column, which does suggest as a consequence that he is to be read in a number of ways. We want to draw on three main readings, aware that various other readings do in fact exist.

At a social level, Whispers helps the writer discuss some of the effects of social transformation in Kenya. The writer particularly focuses on urbanization's impact, for example, on gender relations. What does it now mean to be a man or woman in Kenya? The description of Whispers as a 'Son of the Soil' is revealing in many respects. Indeed, it helps shape the readers' expectations of the character. The title inscribes the character with certain characteristics. To be sure, one is reminded of Okonkwo, 'the roaring flame' in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* ([1958](#)). Whispers' image as a 'Son of the Soil' provides a reservoir from which to draw the character's characteristics and his roles in the column. The title encodes various readings, one of which is the gesture towards a 'restorative narrative' being 'recalled' at a time of crisis. The soil evokes what might pass as a nativist or nationalistic discourse. The soil partly signals the authentic; it connotes a reverence for and a symbolic attachment to a tradition. The use of this image should be understood within the context of the prevailing political and social conditions of the 1980s through the 1990s in Kenya. During this period, the feelings of exclusion from the state by many Kenyans forced some to articulate their resistance in various ways. These included looking in the past as a way of defiance, rebelling against the state's unitary narratives, but also to make meaning of the present. Socially, the effects of social transformation similarly forced a backward glance as a way of fending off the encroachment of a new culture perceived as threatening.

At the social level, *Whispers* mainly revolves around the effects of urbanization, narrated as very unsettling. Among these effects are the anxieties resulting from the destabilization of various long-held identities.

Whispers, for instance, represents a masculinity under threat in the face of an emerging new ethos in gender relations. The character's insistence that he is 'Son of the Soil' betrays some of these anxieties. A constant reaffirmation of an identity often betrays an anxiety over a perceived threat to that identity. Mutahi shows how the place of the man in modern society is being radically redefined in Kenya. In exploring this change, the writer forays into the tradition of patriarchy. The reference to Whispers as the 'Son of the Soil' suggests a reading of the character as being rooted in a distinctly mascularized gendered discourse. Whispers is portrayed as unapologetically chauvinistic. In much of this column, Mutahi deliberately dramatizes patriarchy and portrays Whispers as the quintessential patriarch. The intention, one would assume, is that this is a reflection on certain traditional norms and practices and their place in society at a time when emphasis is increasingly being placed on individual liberties. The chauvinism is, however, more a representation of the state of things rather than a celebration of patriarchy. Indeed, Whispers often cuts the image of a failed patriarch within the family, unable, for instance, to borrow from the violent pages of his grandfather, the 'legendary' Nyaituga. He cannot 'discipline' his increasingly 'independent' wife, since although he is the 'Son of the Soil', he also wants to pass for a 'modern' man. 'If you wanted peace in the house', Whispers often said, 'you obeyed Nyaituga or you faced the mallet,' reminding his readers of his grandfather and the mascularized discourse which shaped relations between men and women when Nyaituga was alive. Mutahi's wife Thatcher has become his 'tormentor-in-chief', emasculating his potency. He complains thus:

> Nyaitugaism is about to become history. I am being told that I can sneeze if I want. I can even cough my lungs out if I wish but nobody will take notice in my house. I am being told that the philosophy of Nyaitugaism has become past tense *nipende nisipende* [Trans: whether I like it or not]. The army against Nyaitugaism is led by a woman who forgets that I delivered a whole beehive full of breathing bees to her clan so that she could become my Thatcher. (*Sunday Nation*, April 27, 1997)

Whispers seeks refuge in bars and in alcohol to escape from his wife. Mutahi thus gives us a character who enacts the anxieties of a society in flux and who quite often finds himself a victim of this flux.

Whispers is deeply paranoid about social transformation precisely because this also means he loses his privileged place in the social hierarchy.

Quite revealing of his frustrations are his inexorable arguments with Thatcher. Their unending quarrels range from her disapproval of his weekend escapades—he is legendary for his drinking—to his failure to adapt to the 'ways of the city' and live like a 'modern' man, one able, for instance, to occasionally buy roses for his wife, and his inability to provide for his family. The following examples may shed some light on these issues:

In 'Woes of liberalised airwaves: SoS voice of reason drowned in a domestic war of words' (*Sunday Nation*, August 18, 1996), Whispers narrates his tense relationship with Thatcher who is up in arms about his drinking sprees. Thatcher disapproves of her husband's habits and prays for his salvation. But while Thatcher sees her husband's drinking habits as reckless and potentially destructive for the family, the 'Son of the Soil' recalls how his grandfather Nyaituga would drink himself senseless and have his five wives carry him home. Curiously, Whispers at the same time also regards his drinking 'a constitutional right' and accuses Thatcher of transgressing this right. In 'SOS massage mission ends in a showdown with Thatcher' (*Sunday Nation*, April 14, 1996), Whispers' decision to visit a massage parlour becomes problematic when Thatcher turns up and finds him with a scantily dressed woman. She accuses him of marital infidelity. In 'Hotlines turn up the heat on the home front' (*Sunday Nation*, January 28, 1996), Whispers complains that because of cell phones, Thatcher is able to track his movements since her friends who suspect him of being a serial philanderer report on him whenever they see him with a woman. On his relationship with Thatcher, he constantly talks of having been given a last chance '… to keep order and be of good conduct otherwise I would face the wrath of the law that prohibits marital infidelity in my country of domicile where Thatchers have more say than men' (*Sunday Nation*, October 29, 2000). Giving yet another example of Thatcher's new found independence, he says:

> [t]he other day she refused to open the door. When I threatened to walk in with the door, she welcomed me to go ahead. (*Sunday Nation*, April 27, 1997)

Against the background of the Whispers' family feuds, Mutahi discusses the many anxieties facing Kenyans and particularly men in a society that is rapidly changing culturally. Exposure to new lifestyles has seen the appropriation of new habits (visiting massage parlours), of social and political discourses of freedom (constitutional rights) and of new gadgets (mobile

phones). Sometimes these are seen as empowering, yet oftentimes modernity is also portrayed as a conflicted monster that can only be slayed by 'returning to source'.

A number of narratives in the column also seem to revolve around the effects of the money economy on the postcolonial subject. Mutahi works around the impact of what Lars Johansson (1990) calls the capitalist ethos of accumulation or what Ogude (1996) has termed the 'acquisitive spirit of capitalism'. The character Whispers is constantly looking for money. Almost every week, he is depicted as trying out a new scheme to make money. Although in gainful employment as a journalist, his income is barely adequate, indeed a common experience of Nairobi's working class. The situation has forced him and his like to become what he calls 'men with wardrobes of chameleons'. They have to 'wear many faces' to survive the city. His moneymaking schemes range from the bizarre to the impossible. Shrinking economic opportunities has made life a constant struggle for many Kenyans. Among Whispers' weird ventures, for instance, are his plans to start his own Church and cash in on the frustrations of those like him who seek refuge in religion. There are times when he smuggles illegal goods; other times he even plans to sell air! Only with such ridiculous ambition can one survive the vagaries of modern existence in postcolonial Kenya. In one such example, Whispers says,

> If by some miracle the Son of the Soil suddenly acquired the blood of the man from Milano, that is Father Camisassius and became Fr Whispers, no right thinking Kenyan would entrust the baptism of his child to him because that would entail several risks. One of them would of course be that a fellow whose hands have been made unsteady by *Kanywaji* (alcohol) cannot be expected to aim water on the baby's face right. That is why I think there is a very lucky baby somewhere in Kenya not because I am not Fr Whispers but because I failed to become one when I tried to do so a week ago. I, the Son of the Soil, a former altar-boy, attempted to become Fr Adonikus Whis not because there is a shortage of priests but because there is a shortage of the Kenya shilling. You would have done what I did had you been in my position. My position was that the landlord and his thugs were threatening to auction me and my entire tribe consisting Thatcher, the Investment and Whispers Jr for failing to understand that he is not the Salvation Army or such other charitable organisation. In the same circumstances, Thatcher was beginning to question her wisdom in agreeing to be married to a man called Whispers the Son of the Soil instead of one who answers to the name Goldenberg. She was not keeping quiet about it but was broadcasting my

failures to God every morning and night through prayers in a voice that left the neighbours knowing that in the midst was a *kahusband* who was unable to do many things including making sugar available in the house. (*Sunday Nation*, August 8, 1993)

A number of narratives above are anchored on the relationship between Whispers and Thatcher, broadly hinting at several social, economic and political texts. In the excerpt, Whispers constantly reaffirms his identity, referring to himself repeatedly as 'Son of the Soil'. As noted earlier, it is a reaffirmation necessary in the face of an emerging threatening culture that seeks to de-mascularize, a culture where an attachment to the soil, to tradition, does not necessarily make him a man anymore. We read that the 'Son of the Soil' is unable to pay his rent because of 'scarcity of the Kenyan shilling'. He therefore fantasizes that had he the 'blood of the man from Milano', he would have tried to become a priest, if only to make ends meet. Yet a bad priest he would have become because *Kanywaji* has 'made his hands unsteady'.

The character's plight is a direct result of the country's ailing economy. We see the effects of urban poverty which has pushed many Kenyans into alcoholism. While a number of social and economic problems associated with urbanization are introduced in the example above and which can be discussed at length more critically, the primary focus in the excerpt are the anxieties that now mark the male-female relationship in Kenya as a result of social transformation. Because Whispers cannot pay his rent, the 'Son of the Soil' has now become a *kahusband* rather than a husband. The prefix *ka* literally means 'small' and is used here derogatively. It not only marks failure, it actually castrates maledom. Whispers thus becomes a 'small husband'. An old gender type is in the process of being reworked on the basis of the new social order, one that focuses more on material acquisition than on 'traditional' gender types. This excerpt also demonstrates the contradictions of a new culture that seems to extol material individualism and accumulation, yet makes the society poorer.

Another significant reference made in this excerpt that further emphasizes the writer's representations of accumulation and material individualism in Kenya is his utilization of a significant template of corruption in the country—Goldenberg. In the excerpt, Whispers complains about Thatcher rethinking her 'wisdom' in marrying him by using a locally widely recognizable template, 'Goldenberg', to dramatize the emergent acquisitive culture. The name 'Goldenberg' refers to arguably one of the worst

financial scandals yet in post-independence Kenya. Briefly, 'Goldenberg' was a financial scam that involved false gold exports and compensation claims by a number of high-ranking government officials and businessmen that cost the Kenyan taxpayer billions of shillings. The name has over the years become what Jenny Kitzinger (2000) calls a 'media template', which she defines as major social issues that have attracted intense media interest at the time and which continue to carry powerful associations. According to Kitzinger, these events routinely highlight one perspective with great clarity and serve as rhetorical shorthand to writers. They are also seen to be instrumental in shaping narratives around particular social problems. In much of the column, Mutahi used this template as a symbol to denote the ethos of accumulation as well as being a rhetorical shorthand for infamy.

Another template that informs Mutahi's discussion of gender relations and one that recurs regularly in the column is what we want to call the 'Beijing narrative' after the Fourth World Conference on Women held in China in 1995. This template is used to demonstrate some of the anxieties that have arisen because of the rapid social changes in Kenya. The Beijing Conference on Women was a site of intense debate in East Africa from mid to late 1990s. The Conference made visible tensions around the changing male-female relationships in the region as it opened up debate on women's rights. Before and after the Conference, many a time the 'Beijing power' or 'curse' was invoked in everyday conversations. In Uganda, over the same period, men referred to women's issues as 'this gender thing … *katonda Wange'* (Luganda for 'my God!') (Mills and Ssewakiryanga 2002, 393). Beijing became, in the words of Mills and Ssewakiryanga, an 'iconic metaphorical shorthand for gender issues' (ibid.). Below is an example of how Mutahi engages the 'Beijing narrative' to discuss the changing 'gender tensions'.

> When I married Thatcher, her clan assured me that the only geography she knew and she intended to continue knowing was that of the kitchen. This is to say that in exchange for the goats I gave her clan, I was given a guarantee that she would know only those matters involving moving to and from the kitchen and managing the affairs of the kitchen … Now I know that her clan conned me about her knowledge of geography. The same woman ended up learning the geography of my wallet and has been discovering its hidden corners. She has also learnt the geography of my head so that when I tell a lie, she no longer nods in agreement like a lizard in the sun but instead gives

me a look to say that there is a difference between her and her daughter the Investment. Thatcher is now talking even more geography. She is talking about a town called Beijing as if it is the same village on the Slopes of Mount Kenya where she was born and brought up. It is all the work of this 'Sect of many waters' to which she belongs. The sect members normally talk about a city called Heaven whose mayor is Angel Gabriel, but of late, Beijing has been on their lips. They have heard that thousands of skirts will meet there to talk about big things about how to manage men, and so they imagine that after a city called Heaven, Beijing comes next. (*Sunday Nation*, August 6, 1995)

This article was written against the background of the euphoria that preceded the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. Mutahi shows the anxieties that this conference caused. Like their counterparts in Uganda, there was an attempt by many Kenyan men to 'de-gender gender issues or inflect them in a way that did not directly challenge dominant masculinities' (Mills and Ssewakiryanga 2002, 393). In the column, women's rights are thus deliberately portrayed as unreasonable, quixotic and therefore unachievable. The article reveals tensions that attend the negotiation between notions of African modernity and its attendant discourses such as gender equality on the one hand and traditional African life on the other with its own versions of normative masculinity. We see the 'Son of the Soil's' unease with a 'liberated' Thatcher. Women's 'liberation' is considered by the men as potentially threatening their privileged position in the now highly contested social hierarchy.

Mutahi's portrayal of Whispers is stereotypical and melodramatic. But this only serves to intensify ordinary experiences and therefore forces debate or critical reflection on them. By focusing on the everyday, Mutahi creates a shared universe between his readers and this character through whom he is able not only to live but also to interrogate their anxieties and travails in pursuit of a better life, their confusion when confronted with social transformation and their reaction to ensure they are not overawed by change. Mutahi shows how Kenyans have a way of appropriating what transformation has to offer. Times are uncertain and unsettling but they have learnt to survive these times. This, however, does not mean he endorses the modernization process in toto. Mutahi's backward glance hints at a loss, a point possibly shared by a number of his readers. Perhaps it is because they are confronted with a present they cannot fully grasp and a future they cannot predict.

While the character Whispers is an iconic metaphor for reading the man and on occasion the postcolonial Kenyan subject, Thatcher also broadly helps the writer discuss social transformation. She particularly helps explore the changing gender relations within the context of a new era that privileges individual liberties in postcolonial Kenya. We have already noted in the previous chapters that Thatcher derives her name from the former British Premier Margaret Thatcher. We have observed that the former Prime Minister was a particularly visible figure in the Kenyan popular press and was especially known for her aggressive political style. Thatcher thus became a symbol of the 'new woman' in Kenya and perhaps the arrivant femininity. Her fictional character in Whispers subverts those traditional practices which deny her agency and make her subordinate to men. She also revises the negative inscriptions associated with the person of the woman in Kenya. It is instructive to note that the female character has been stereotyped in several African popular texts, most often as 'the good time girl'. Although notable exceptions exist, the dominant narrative depicts female characters as social pests always out to gain from men and destroy them in the process. In Kenyan fiction, again with a few notable exceptions, Eleanor Wachtel writes,

> The modern woman was continuously associated with the evils of the city such as drinking, violence, temptation and prostitution. She is depicted as a contemptuous parasite against the cherished background of the ideal traditional mother image. (cited in Ogude 1996, 173)

This image of the 'good time girl' is discussed at length by Newell (2002), Okome (2012) and Ligaga (2014). Ligaga, for example, reads this image as one emblematic of moral anxiety relating to the performance of female sexualities, while Okome discusses it within the context of the social and cultural values emergent within the modern African city. The traditional typecasting ensures the African woman's 'narrative marginality', to use Okome's (2012) words, but more recent popular fiction and other expressive cultures such as film (Nollywood for example) give her agency effectively contesting this marginality.

In *Whispers*, we see a near reversal of roles. It is the woman both as wife and mother who plays the role of the man's moral guide. Mutahi intimated to the author that one of Thatcher's major roles in the column was to 'prop up wayward Whispers'. It is Thatcher therefore who steers Whispers towards a life of responsibility and integrity. She rejects

his drinking habits, his supposed philandering ways and his patronizing attitude towards women. Thatcher asserts her authority in the face of overwhelming societal expectations, most of which are designed to keep her subordinate to her husband. She is able to stand up to Whispers in their marriage. Indeed, Whispers admits that Thatcher does not 'simply nod like a lizard in the sun' anymore. She spells out her aversion to certain traditional norms openly even when Whispers pretends to only partly acknowledge her power.

But Thatcher's assertiveness also partly transforms her into a matriarch. She becomes the centre of power in the family, almost a female version of her patriarchal husband. Whispers lives in constant fear of his wife, who fittingly takes the title of 'Iron Lady'. Mutahi uses this character to provoke debate on individual liberties and the shifting gender relations. How do we reconcile the emerging gender tensions? How do we ensure we don't replace patriarchy with matriarchy?

The characterization of Thatcher, however, has a particular narrative weakness. Although Mutahi attempts to give his female character agency, he privileges discourse to character development. Unlike writers such as Grace Ogot who privilege the female voice to give it moral authority, Mutahi privileges Thatcher as a character but denies her narrative voice. We refer to some of Ogot's writings, which include *The Strange Bride* (1989) originally published as *Miaha* (1983) in Dholuo, *The Island of Tears* (1980a), *Land Without Thunder* (1968) and *The Graduate* (1980b). In *Whispers*, Thatcher predominantly speaks through the voice of Whispers. Although in both Ogot's work and in *Whispers* we see patriarchal ideology/authority exposed as sexist bias and a space created for the female subject, Mutahi's narrative mode of allegory weakens his female character. Thatcher enters the narrative already 'constructed' as a matriarch, limiting the writer's ability to develop the character and explore other possible identities.

Whispers' children, "The Investment" and Whispers Jr, on the other hand, stand as a negation of their father. The two are symbolic receptacles of the youth. Whispers complains that he and Thatcher 'brought forth two problems in the form of Whispers Jr and The Investment' (*Sunday Nation*, April 27, 1997). He complains that Whispers Jr 'has been at war with his Creator and wishes to correct the mistakes of nature. That is why he sees it wise to wear certain items on his nose. Those items are otherwise used to fasten nappies and they are called safety pins' (*Sunday Nation*, June 22, 1997). Their dressing, language, mannerisms and other

interests are attributes of the modern-day rebellious teenager. Hebdige (1979) argues in a study of the American punk subculture that dress and décor are key to expressions of latent anxieties and desires of the youth. It is partly through the dress sense of "The Investment" and Whispers Jr that Mutahi explores the modern Kenyan youth culture. But let us first explore the relevance of the name of the character The Investment.

We noted earlier that "The Investment's" name gestures towards certain narratives which Mutahi explores in the column. She introduces the idea of the daughter as a commodity. "The Investment" therefore personifies certain sociocultural realities, particularly the fact that young girls in Kenya are seen as commodities and therefore as 'investments' by their fathers. But the name also hints at a primarily modernist notion—investment. There is a sense in which tradition here is shown to reside in modernity where it is merely given a new face. Mutahi shows how certain traditional norms are 'abused' by modernity. In a revealing article, 'Whispers' encounter with mother-in-law', Whispers complains about an emerging group of mothers-in-law whom he describes as 'hawkers in search of the highest bidders for their daughters'. He says:

> [w]hen I started to imagine that I was warrior enough to get a Thatcher of my own, I was told to fear three things if I wanted to get married. These were lightning, hot porridge and my mother-in-law. I was told that my mother-in-law was tougher than lightning and hot porridge combined and so I was supposed to fear her more than the other two dangers. I was told that she was tough mainly because were it not for her wisdom and gallant efforts, the woman I call my wife would not have come to this world. Now I think that kind of mother-in-law is an endangered species like the white Rhino and if it is not saved soon enough, she will become extinct. This is because for one, she is no longer just the mother of a marriageable girl. The modern mother-in-law is first and foremost a hawker who looks for the highest bidder for her daughter. She is the type of hawker who will go on spying missions to the home of the eligible bachelor to make sure that there are more stone houses than grass thatched ones … (*Sunday Nation*, September 18, 1994)

In the excerpt, the writer demonstrates how practices such as marriage have been transformed. The example illustrates how bride price has been commercialized. Trapped in the emerging culture of material accumulation, mothers-in-law now 'hawk' their own daughters by consciously looking for wealthy potential husbands.

"The Investment", however, rejects her treatment as a trophy for sale and seeks to establish her independence. Mutahi particularly uses the 'Beijing narrative' to show the youth's rejection of their parents' claim on their futures. In an evocative article 'Why I now hate Beijing' (*Sunday Nation*, August 6, 1995), Whispers complains about the 'tragedy' that has befallen his family because "The Investment" seems disinterested in getting married. Whispers complains thus:

> I am not impressed by her imagination and would like to know from the women going to Bei Chini (a Kiswahili corruption of the name 'Beijing' which means cheap but used here cleverly to show a 'devaluation' of the daughter as an investment) why this same girl has been behaving as if she has something against her father. She seems to be suggesting that my chances of getting dowry worth a Pajero (a four-wheel drive car) from a fellow lucky enough to marry a girl who imagines being a rival of Eden are Zero. If you were a father, you would get the message when your daughter starts reading certain things in a way that she wants you to know what her eyes are encountering. The Investment has been doing exactly that. Last week she was reading a book called *How to Manage as a Single Mother*. Before that she was reading another book called *When there is no Husband*. I have seen her read another called *Managing Without Him*. In her bag is yet another one called *Single but Able*. (*Sunday Nation*, August 6, 1995)

Whispers is deeply concerned about the fact that he will be unable to cash in on his 'investment'. He mourns how new society denies him returns to his investment. The writer then subtly introduces related debates on feminism. Note the book titles that "The Investment" is allegedly reading. These titles show how the idea of the daughter as an 'investment' is being challenged by a range of feminist discourses. It is these discourses that The Investment mobilizes to lay claim on her right to define her future. In the same article, the writer also broaches a discussion on single motherhood and the perceived threats to the nuclear family. In a hilarious yet biting story, Whispers says:

> [a] girl cannot be more unkind to her father. Denying him dowry big enough to buy a Pajero is bad enough but planning to bring forth little ones when she has no husband is sentencing her old man to death. … [w]henever I go to wet my throat … tongues will wag … there goes the Son of the Soil. He calls himself a man and yet he cannot get even a sweet potato in exchange for his daughter. There goes Son of Appep who claims he is a total

man and his daughter has been breeding in his homestead as if there are no more husbands to take care of children. (*Sunday Nation*, August 6, 1995)

Mutahi demonstrates the latent anxieties that the daughter's newly found freedom and assertive individuality raise. He introduces for discussion the tensions relating to what it means to be a girl in modern-day Kenya and the conflicting expectations of society. While on the one hand, he uses The Investment to satirize and implicitly condemn the 'commodification' of the girl child in Kenya, he also raises questions relating to the constitution of the family. The dilemma facing Kenyans now is how to reconcile the conflicting cultural values as the traditional normative is being reconstituted.

As noted earlier, Mutahi also addresses some of the latent anxieties of the youth through "The Investment" and Whispers Jr's way of dressing. Whispers incessantly complains about his children's dress sense. As wa-Mungai (2004) notes, their dressing is a source of anxiety for the parents because they threaten the 'norm'. "The Investment's" dressing particularly reveals these anxieties, which sometimes take the form of a generational confrontation. In one example, Whispers complains:

I would like to know why she (The Investment) is trying to outdo that woman of the Garden of Eden called Eve in matters of going about naked in broad daylight. If what she is wearing in the name of a skirt is not equal to being naked then I have no idea about nakedness. She has this idea that whoever created the skirt had no business creating a piece of cloth that stretches from the waist to the knees alright but which should be split at the back. She walked with those splits for some time and was still not satisfied. She ended up making that skirt a matter of ribbons which she now wears the same way Eve used to wear a leaf in the Garden of Eden. (*Sunday Nation*, May 29, 1994)

The allusion to the Bible here gives us an idea of how Whispers' generation views the emergent youth culture. It is not just an affront to the cultural norm; it is also inconsistent with the normative moral economy. The sexual allusion is only thinly veiled and serves to show a section of society, especially the old, rejecting this modern youth culture. For the youth, however, it is similarly a rejection of a culture of 'parental management'. Being 'scantily' dressed in no way suggests promiscuity; it is instead a form of rebellion and liberation. Whispers describes his children as captives

of the American youth culture. He cannot disguise his contempt at the 'hommies' and 'yoyos' and describes them thus:

> [a] Yoyo is a character who was fed on a liquid called Nyayo milk. It means he learned what a handkerchief is for just the other day …. The yoyo walks as if he has springs under his feet and leans on the side as he walks like the Leaning Tower of Pisa. He wears trousers as if he is scared of them so he does not know where his waist is. That being the case, his trousers hang in between the waist and the knees. His shoes are the size of beer crates and he thinks that a pin on the nose is a very good idea. He is often wearing a string vest because he imagines that he is the younger brother of Kobe Bryant. (*Sunday Nation*, July 23, 2000)

Nyayo milk was a school feeding programme introduced by the Moi government in the 1980s. Schoolchildren were given free milk once or twice every week. The programme was often parodied and in popular speech instead signified dependence hence its association with the youth above.

In the excerpt are references to the American culture narrated as having significant impact on the Kenyan youth. Kobe Bryant, for example, was at the time arguably one of the most popular basketball players in the United States. American basketball was widely covered in the Kenyan media and became quite popular with the youth. But these examples must be understood as metaphors that codify a whole range of issues that emphasize some of the effects of the rapid social transformation in Kenya.

There are a number of other transient characters in *Whispers* who are introduced in the column only when the writer discusses specific issues. The most notable of these characters include Fr. Camisassius, a Catholic priest; Damiano Wambugu, a schoolteacher; Appepklonia; Aunt Kezia; and Uncle Jethro. These characters provide the writer a natural access to the past. There is a tendency in *Whispers* to search for answers to present queries in the past. Introduced mostly through flashbacks, Mutahi uses these characters to draw on allegorical stories, on communal tales and sayings to comment on the present. This communal corpus of reference provides Mutahi with a solid base from which to view and comment on the present world. One is easily reminded of Lindfors' (1991) argument that the past often provides writers with a grammar of values. Even then, it is instructive that Mutahi does not claim the past has monopoly over that which passes as virtuous**.** The allegorical stories and communal lore

drawn upon carry lessons which the community esteems but also the vices which it condemns.

Fr. Camisassius and Teacher Damiano are particularly important transient characters in *Whispers*. Mutahi is interested in unpacking the 'traditional' centres of authority in Kenya, such as the Church and the school, which he does through these two characters. Mbugua wa-Mungai (2004) makes a similar argument noting that through an engagement with Kenya's 'missionary past', Mutahi is able to examine the 'dual tyranny' of the Church and the school as centres of authority and how this 'tyranny' constitutes a formative phase in the process by which citizens are variously and collectively socialized in Kenya. Mbugua notes that having been taught by both the priest and the teacher to never (seriously) question the nature of things, one becomes malleable to manipulation. He suggests that one of Mutahi's aims is to show the need for Kenyans to be more sceptical, especially towards institutions of power, in order to respond more effectively to their tyranny.

Narratives around Fr. Camisassius and Damiano largely revolve around Christian religious practices and experiences in Kenya. As noted earlier, Fr. Camisassius is a Catholic priest of the Consolata Order. But the character displays the tyranny of the Church and is a common subject of the writer's satirical barbs. He displays instances of arrogant paternalism, racism and the inability to accept the legitimacy of other world views other than his own. Through this character, readers are exposed to this eccentric priest and his lackeys such as Damiano and how they constituted a powerful force of socialization. But there are also times when Fr. Camisassius becomes a vehicle for discussing present society's moral degeneration. For instance, in the article 'Bye Kenya, S.A needs Whis too', Mutahi engages with issues of morality in the modern Catholic Church. He writes:

> [n]ow very loud whispers are saying that the men in cassocks are very busy doing the opposite of what they profess. The whispers from the Vatican are saying that the men in dresses, sorry, the men in cassocks, are doing things that should make them end up in Kamiti Prison. They are waiting for nuns in dark corners and then applying tactics that are seen in the World Wrestling Federation matches. I don't need to tell what follows after that except that some of the nuns have found themselves ready for the maternity hospital. Since no nun has ever been accepted in a maternity hospital except as a nurse, they have been forced to put little ones in dustbins. If you don't believe me, ask Ndingi son of Nzeki, the one who says that "kondoms" are

manufactured in the devil's workshop. It was all on Pope FM and in the newspapers last week.

Father Camisassius must have threatened to rise from the grave to murder a few men in cassocks when he heard the news. This is because he could have forgiven you for committing murder but not for breaking the commandment that says you should not eye your neighbour's wife in a manner to suggest that she ought to have married you instead of being the Thatcher of the fool next door. As I have whispered to you before, Fr Camisassius thought that when he saw a skirt-wearer, he saw total sin. That's why if he met a woman when he was alone, he either shut his eyes or changed direction. Now I hear that when the eyes of those who wear cassocks see a skirt-wearer, they start blinking and their eyes pop out. I hear the same eyes say things like this: Beautiful one, although I wear a dress in the name of a cassock, I am actually not a woman. I'd be happy to prove this to you. (*Sunday Nation*, April 1, 2001)

The above excerpt was written against the background of accusations of sexual impropriety within the ranks of the Catholic Church in many parts of the world including Kenya. Ndingi Mwana a'Nzeki cited in the excerpt was an Archbishop of the Catholic Church in Kenya in the 1980s through the 1990s. He was routinely ridiculed for his stance on the use of condoms at a time when HIV/AIDS was a major public health problem. He also had a very strong ethnic Kamba accent and had a peculiar way of pronouncing the word 'condom'. It is this pronunciation that Mutahi employs above for comic relief. The author draws his lessons from the days of Fr. Camisassius' evangelization in the 'Slopes'. The 'good' Father believed in the 'integrity' of priesthood so much so that to avoid temptation, he 'shut his eyes whenever he saw a skirt-wearer'. In much of the column, we also read that Fr. Camisassius 'feared and hated sin'. Mutahi dramatizes this past as a commentary on the present. Although portrayed as eccentric, Mutahi uses the Father, for instance, as portrayed above, to impart moral lessons. In the excerpt above, the writer is concerned with the general moral degeneration he sees in modern Kenya. The severity of these problems is underlined by the fact that the Church, which ought to be society's moral guide, is now implicated in the supposed moral decay.

The other characters Appepklonia, Aunt Kezia and Uncle Jethro represent the surviving voices of a generation effectively being replaced, and of traditions under siege. They are the writer's link to the traditional past. Their communal world is contrasted with the new world where individuality now defines social life. Indeed, Mutahi's emphasis on the nuclear

family is indicative of the changing definition of the African traditional family. These three characters are part of his main character's extended family but are often portrayed as encroaching into the Whispers' family space. Whenever Appep or Uncle Jethro visits the Whispers household, the visit is no longer a source of happiness and especially so if it lasts more than a couple of days. Mutahi shows how the extended family in Kenya has collapsed and with it the disintegration of certain values. We want to point out that this collapse of the extended family should be seen as yet another example of the changes that have resulted from the rapid social transformation that Kenyans now have to come to terms with. But it could also at the same time hint at the general collapse of certain values that are perceived to have once held together society.

Although the use of allegory provides Mutahi with several narrative possibilities, the constraints associated with this approach are just as evident in the work. For instance, Mutahi's characters are static and never seem to change. Mutahi's characters can never be different. They enter the narrative as particular character types; linear, typological and unchanging. For nearly a decade, these characters remained the same. While it is true that these characters help shape the readers' expectations, they also provide no form of regeneration because one already knows what to expect when they encounter a particular character. We also mentioned the fact that a character such as Whispers can be given many readings. This character is loaded with far too many roles and responsibilities. Apart from complicating the narrative structure, this can also be a source of confusion to readers.

We further want to argue that Mutahi's discourses appear to be constrained by the narrative framework of the family. One may want to question both the representation and the validity of this family. It is important to note Croteau and Hoynes' (1997) observation that 'traditional expectations that a family include two parents, that the parents be married, that they be heterosexual, that a woman work only in the home, and so forth have changed dramatically' (16). Indeed, single parent families, blended families, to name but a few, now supplement the 'traditional' family. The family structure and the pattern of behaviour associated with families have changed considerably. The use of allegory in *Whispers* therefore opened up both structural and thematic possibilities for Mutahi but also significantly constrained his work.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has attempted a discussion of how Mutahi uses his characters to explore the everyday. We have argued that it is through the personal dramas of characters that Mutahi explores his thematic concerns. Mutahi deploys an allegorical narrative mode in his work, using the family as a convenient foil and characters as allegorical types. For easy reference, familiarity and the narrative possibilities it avails a writer, Mutahi structures his work around a Kenyan family and characters that readers can easily identify with. In other words, he locates his readers within a world they already inhabit. The characters he deploys are not just people his readers know; the readers are in fact the characters. We have also demonstrated the limitations of this narrative style especially the unchanging and typological nature of the characters. The fact that these characters 'enter' the column already formed make them static and unchangeable and thus incapable of engaging with the more complex and fluid challenges facing the postcolonial Kenyan subject this column explores.

In sum, however, at the heart of the column is the struggle for an elusive consensus between an emergent powerful modernizing discourse and a resilient cultural normative. We are thus confronted with characters dominated with a sense of ambivalence towards the past and present, conflicted values and a palpable fear of an uncertain future.

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Whispers as a Political Text

This chapter discusses *Whispers* as a 'political text'. It is particularly interested in how the column explores but also 'intervenes' in the political process in Kenya. The chapter looks at how the column opened for Mutahi a space within which to discuss a number of political issues hitherto forbidden by the state. The intention, however, is to broadly look at the relationship between popular culture and politics. We begin with a general reflection on the relationship between popular culture and politics, discussing the legitimacy or otherwise of popular culture as a site of political engagement. We then briefly map out some of the historical developments in Kenya in the 1990s, focusing especially on the 'politics' of political pluralism and how Mutahi uses this era to discuss Kenya's political transition in the 1980s through the 1990s. The latter part of this discussion focuses on how Mutahi mediates the 'ethnic', using it to generate discussions on its centrality in Kenya's political culture.

A number of scholars of popular culture typically characterize the relationship between politics and popular culture in terms of 'cause and effect' (see Street 1997). Mbembe's (1992a) ambivalence towards certain forms of popular culture such as the use of laughter as a means of ridiculing power being necessarily fatalistic is a case in point. This chapter does not examine what *Whispers* 'caused'. Instead, we want to try and tease out how the political, or more appropriately, how the 'dramaturgy of power' is enacted in the column. We argue that the public face of power in Kenya

is 'a performance', 'a drama', and hence our adoption of the term the 'dramaturgy of power'. Our idea of this 'performance' is perhaps best captured by Mbembe's (1992a, 8) description of the postcolony as a '*simulacrum*', which he defines as a regime of 'unreality'. Within this performance, we are particularly interested in how *Whispers*, to paraphrase Street (1997, 12), sheds its pleasures and becomes—through the uses to which it is put and through judgements made of it—a form of political practice. We want to examine how certain cultural forms can encode forms of political consciousness. Scott (1990, 19) reminds us that popular culture makes public 'hidden transcripts' in which are written 'the anger and reciprocal aggression denied by the presence of domination'. Scott notes that these 'hidden transcripts' can be found in rumour, gossip, folktales, songs, rituals, codes and euphemism—a good part of the folk culture of subordinate groups (ibid.). According to Street (1997, 12), such a culture 'becomes part of a political struggle to establish a particular view of the world, one which challenges the conventions of the dominant common sense'. But it is to be noted that the 'hidden transcripts' are not just statements of suppressed emotions; they are in themselves a kind of action. Indeed, as Scott reminds us, it is important to think of the 'hidden transcripts' as a 'condition of practical resistance rather than a substitute for it' (191). Similarly, through popular fiction, one is also able to see how 'public transcripts' are also used by subject populations to question and critique power.

This chapter, however, concedes that not all popular culture can be treated as forms of political resistance. Although we are interested in oppositional practices within popular fiction, we are also aware that this site is necessarily a space of contradictory voices, at once oppositional at another phoney and, as a matter of fact, complicit in the domination of those whose voices it apparently represents.

We have argued that in the late 1980s, *Whispers* gravitated towards the political, evolving as it were into a column with a reputation for discussing the subversive. *Whispers*' predilection towards the political cannot be overstated. As stated earlier, this 'political' bent can be explained on a number of factors not least the fact that the period within which Mutahi was writing was highly politically turbulent. The late 1980s through the 1990s witnessed the re-introduction of political pluralism in Kenya, ensuring what Haugerud (1995, 15) has described as 'the shattering of previously held silences' as a 'lively opposition culture stormed the public domain'. There was an increased visibility of the political, and particularly the diffusion into the country's public culture of oppositional political discourses.

These discourses increasingly began to frame popular debates. Thus, for instance, there was a notable integration of local and international discourses on political and social freedom which were then used to legitimize calls for reform. The fall of the Soviet Union, the end of the Cold War and the collapse of Communist governments in Eastern Europe had significant political influence in Africa. These changes in the East helped sustain a discourse of political reform in the continent. Their visibility in the media ensured politics was part of the everyday in Kenya, inescapably becoming the stuff of Kenyan popular fiction. A number of 'cultural workers' became involved in the political reform agenda then sweeping across the country. Mutahi was one such a 'worker'. An avowed political activist, his artistic works sometimes unapologetically reflected his political interests. In an interview with Inter Press Services (IPS) after the banning of his play *Ngoma cia Aka* (The Whirlwind), Mutahi explicitly stated the political context within which he writes, a position which no doubt authorizes a (particular) political reading of the column.

> I sincerely feel, as an author, I have a social and political role to play. My satires have a political agenda and what I have done has had an effect on the minds of the people. (IPS Feature, April 13, 2002)

One notes Mutahi's explicit intentions to intervene in the discussion of Kenya's political issues. However, the writer's claim about his work having had an effect in the minds of his people betrays a common misunderstanding that Street (1997) explains above. What *Whispers* perhaps confirms, however, is how cultural production intensifies during moments of political turmoil and the fact that conditions of turmoil invariably engender the production of the popular (Smith 1989).

It is difficult, perhaps even impractical to want to give a complete inventory of what *Whispers* discussed at the political level. This is typical of most popular writings in Africa. They often discuss numerous issues, most times (apparently) unrelated. But Fabian (1978) argues that these deceptively unrelated, sometimes even contradictory discussions can be a form of resistance. Fabian points out that incoherence is an old cultural tactic that ensures the producer is not caught (see also Fiske 1989). Rather than outline the numerous political issues Mutahi discussed, this discussion instead focuses on Kenya's transitional politics in the 1990s, a period whose representation in *Whispers* vividly captures what we want to refer to as the 'public face' of power in Kenya.

The year 1992 is especially significant in the reading of Kenya's transitional politics in the early 1990s. It is in 1992 that Kenya held its first multi-party elections following the re-introduction of political pluralism the previous year. This new political order led to some nominal freedom that allowed open public dissent. *Whispers* captures how an oppositional cultural and political aesthetic 'flouted' the norm (of silence) even amid the various constraints on not only the 'expressible' but also the 'thinkable'. Among the most salient issues that emerge from his stories are instances that reveal the tyranny of the state, political betrayal, the emergent culture of acquisitive accumulation, tribalism … It is a catalogue of all that had gone wrong with post-independence Kenya. As one of the templates used in discussing Kenya as a failed political state, Mutahi focused attention on the multiple faces of the 'politics' of pluralism. The following stories, for example, reflect as much as they reveal popular indictment of the polity and of the then emerging political order:

> 'SOS, Madd *defect: The greener the grass the better*' (*Sunday Standard*, January 5,1992), 'SoS *multi-party* mouth pays off' (undated), 'Trouble over Kislopes', 'Scared mouth goes on *strike*' (*Sunday Standard*, March 29, 1992), '*Ethnic Clashes* in Whis' neighbourhood' (*Sunday Standard*, April 26,1992), 'SOS thinking of *defecting* from the shilling economy' (*Sunday Standard*, June 28, 1992), 'Whispers offers *hire services*', (*Sunday Standard*, August 2, 1992), '*Total man's House* divided: *Agip House* raring to go to war' (*Sunday Standard*, September 13, 1992), 'Ambushed by mean *warriors*' (*Sunday Standard*, October 4,1992), '*Operation Whispers Out*', (*Sunday Standard*, November 15, 1992), '*Secret Weapon* exposed' (*Sunday Standard*, November 22, 1992), 'The *Mheshimiwa* Culture and *eating*' (*Sunday Standard*, December 6, 1992), 'Meet the *Rigging* Master: When it's hard to play fair game' (*Sunday Standard*, December 20, 1992). (Emphasis mine)

These titles quite literally hint at discourses revolving around political pluralism in Kenya in the 1990s. They paint images of violence, of betrayal, political division, corruption and poverty in the country. In 'SoS, Madd defect: The greener the grass the better', Mutahi narrates as well as comments on party defections and the formation of political alliances which were particularly in vogue at the time. The defections and political alliances are narrated as demonstrative of political betrayal of the masses by the country's leaders. The alliances are narrated as selfish dealings among

the political class. Between 1992 and 1995, *Whispers* especially examined the centrality of class in Kenya's transitional politics as it became evident that class-based political dealings had replaced genuine political reform. This period witnessed numerous discussions on the legitimacy of political coalitions in the country, often pejoratively called the 'politics of cooperation', a term coined following the decision by two political parties, the ruling party Kanu and the opposition National Development Party (NDP) to 'co-operate'. The column narrates this 'co-operation' as an alliance of convenience among the elite. Such coalitions in Kenya have been what Throup (1987, 37) calls 'ephemeral accommodations' often short-lived because they lack a firm ideological base. Mutahi interprets the coalitions as a political strategy by the ruling political class to safeguard the status quo.

Other stories that illustrate this problem include: 'Thatcher's unity pact flops: *Co-operation* with Son of the Soil comes unstuck' (*Sunday Nation*, October 24, 1993), 'Tricky task of retrieving "*defecting*" husbands' (*Sunday Nation*, August 29, 1993), 'Trouble for outdated elder. SOS finds the going tough as *sheng* rocks delicate *negotiations*' (*Sunday Nation*, October 30, 1994), 'Thatcher, SOS, breaks links: *Co-operation* resumes as rhino horn brings the promise of a bright future to the family' (undated). (Emphasis mine). The words we emphasize—c*o-operation, defecting, negotiations*—were popularly used by the mainstream press to discuss the emerging political order and practices hence are words that were familiar to readers. When used in the column, they came loaded with particular histories and quite often inflected with negative political connotations. Mutahi exposes these terms as euphemisms used to hide more specific class interests. Scott (1990, 53) reminds us that 'such euphemisms on the 'public transcript' mask the many nasty facts of domination, giving it a harmless or sanitised face'. In the stories, Mutahi revises and recasts these euphemisms/words within the family space to critique the political class. Alliances are thus struck between man and wife at the expense of their children or between daughter and mother at the expense of the father. The stories are narrated as normal domestic feuds but they mirror prevailing political developments at the national level.

Being able to solidly muster an ethnic constituency (the Luo), Raila Odinga, then leader of the NDP, was an important player in the schemes by Kanu to maintain its grip on power. Similarly, for the NDP, 'co-operation' with Kanu was seen as a way through which to access power and state largesse. Mutahi thus echoes Lonsdale's (1981, 162) argument

that politicians see the state itself as a resource and that 'ready access to state institutions is literally what makes classes dominant'. Sklar (1979) has equally argued that 'shrewd rulers will seek to ally the class interests of potential ethnic mobilizers to their own by granting them access to the state, thus decapitating and demobilizing potential ethnic trouble spots' (cited in Schatzberg 1988, 23). Markarkis (1974) similarly points out that ethnicity can very ably be used to bulwark class and factional privilege rather than comprehensive ethnic goals (cited in Schatzberg 1988, 23). The column thus exposes these political alliances for what they are; acts of political betrayal of the masses when in fact the key players are fundamentally interested in the self-preservation of the political class.

In the story of the 'Rigging master: When it's hard to play fair game', Mutahi once again criticizes the political polity through a deceptively simplistic story. The story enacts how the incumbent government maintains its grip on power through fraudulent elections. The story is a recreation of a fable that describes the possibility of Kanu and Moi orchestrating a sham election. In the story, *Whispers* draws on a hilarious 'youthful experience' about the way they rigged football matches in their favour by overfeeding their opponents. Part of the story reads:

> They (their opponents) cleared it (food) as fast as locusts eating through a field of wheat and soon they were asking for water … They would have given up their meals for the next two days just to get a drop of water. (*Standard on Sunday*, December 20, 1992)

Through this story, Mutahi enacts the 'politics of consumption' in Kenya. The story is not so much about football games and locusts as it is about voters and opposition politicians giving in to the allure of state largesse. The writer dramatizes the culture of primitive consumption in Kenya, echoing Bayart's (1993, 238) arguments about the 'politics of the belly', that in fact, 'contrary to the popular image of the innocent masses, corruption and predatoriness are not found exclusively among the powerful. Rather, they are modes of social and political behaviour shared by a plurality of actors on more or less the same scale'. But the story also demonstrates the 'patron-client' political relationships in Kenya, where the centre monopolizes the largesse of the state. It then uses that largesse to 'buy' support, which in turn perpetuates a culture of political patronage. The 'Mheshimiwa (Trans. Kiswahili title for an honourable member of Parliament, for example) culture and eating', which is not merely a title

but a summation of a political practice in Kenya, further emphasizes this point. It hints at the predatory tendencies of the Kenyan politician, and how the state and elective politics open up the doors to 'eating'. But it is also a reminder of how loyalty is commoditized, advertised and bought in what has become the political marketplace. In one of the stories, the writer humorously enacts these practices using the 'domestic space' of the Whispers family.

> … I have discovered that indeed they want to finish me totally using both open and secret weapons and if I don't do something, my toughness in the house will be no more by the time that a child will be born in Bethlehem, that is this Christmas. I don't know how I will survive when even my aunt Kezia has joined forces with those who want Son of the Soil out. The same lady who has been benefiting from my wallet in the form of sugar, tea leaves and Kimbo (a popular brand of cooking oil) gifts whenever I go home has joined Operation Whis Out (OWO). (*Sunday Standard*, November 15, 1992)

He continues:

> … What worries me are the domestic forces since they are the ones spreading the propaganda about me including that I have ruined the domestic economy by not just looting the kitchen budget but by also having foreign accounts in Rhoda's place. (ibid.)

Mapped against the political process in the 1990s, the author is satirically indicting the Moi administration for ruining the economy by looting the country's coffers and transferring money to offshore accounts. In the article, this looting of the country is figuratively narrated as Whispers looting the 'kitchen budget'. The Moi government was literally scavenging on its own entrails. The writer also intrudes in the article, reminding his readers of the fact that members of the Moi government have foreign accounts where they siphon away public money. These are issues that were often discussed only in hushed tones in Kenya and which could not be reported through the newspapers' more conventional genres such as news, news analysis pieces or editorials.

Another important narrative in the example is how the dominant create clients through 'gifts' and promises and how subject populations equally feed this culture of patronage. This was a popular political practice in the country. But it further demonstrate show this practice in unsustainable.

Those who gained from the centre's patronage have in fact now turned on the centre hence the calls for 'Operation Whis Out'.

The examples noted earlier also show how the state is capable of resorting to violence as one of its instrumentalities of survival or as a way of imposing what Atieno-Odhiambo (1987) calls the 'ideology of order'. The mention of ethnic clashes were a commentary on the regime's role in encouraging ethnic divisions and conflict in the early 1990s to validate its claim that multi-party democracy would be an invitation to political anarchy in the country.

Whispers also takes stock of the various political (pseudo)ideologies, myths and political metaphors that are constantly employed in the 'performance of power' in Kenya, using these to satirize the hollowness of their invented majesty. Scott (1990, 18) has noted that 'rulers who aspire to hegemony in the Gramscian sense of that term must make an ideological case that they rule, to some degree, on behalf of their subjects'. He explains that although this claim, in turn, 'is always tendentious', it is 'seldom completely without resonance among subordinates' (ibid.). Providing a similar argument are Michael Schatzberg (1988) and Mamadou Diouf (1996) who note that in 'Middle Africa', state-sanctioned ideological myths and imagery are crucial in the performance of power. These myths and imagery help in the 'invention of traditions' and in legitimizing domination. Diouf (1996) reminds us that political hegemony in Africa is characterized by various colonial and postcolonial fictions and fables. These entail a range of state-sanctioned and state invented ideological myths, motifs, histories, memories and imagery but which find resonance within subject populations. Through various 'modalities of management', the state 'manipulates and continuously reinvents this range of traditions …' (cited in Young 2003, 141). In Kenya, especially in the first and second republics, state ideologies, myths, histories, memories, motifs and imagery were continuously (re)invented and manipulated as important instruments in the performance of power. Although often variously consumed, they were employed by various actors both within and outside the state to define social and political relationships. Among the most persistent in this range of constructions was the (il)legitimacy of paternal systems of authority, drawn directly from the family and the various 'ideologies of development' invented by successive administrations such as Kenyatta's '*Harambee* motto' and Moi's famous political slogan of 'Peace, Love and Unity', which was a part of his so-called Nyayo philosophy.

In Kenya, the existence of the family often implies the presence of a father—imagined at the top of the social hierarchy and children at the bottom, even if this assumption has become increasingly tendentious with the emergence of different 'model families'. Being at the top, the father is also associated with authority and wisdom. The paternal construction of authority was thus a particularly common feature of the Kenyatta and the Moi presidencies. It is also a popular theme addressed in *Whispers*. This paternal imagery in political power relations can also be traced to several 'pasts': pre-colonial, colonial and early postcolonial periods. The colonial period was, however, especially significant in the diffusion of the imagery. The Church played a particularly important role in this regard, being the colonial state's premier ideological apparatus, having had almost absolute control of the school system (Schatzberg 1988). One task of the Church was to inculcate respect for authority. The 'native' was taught that he was not an equal to White Christians and the colonial authorities even when he became a convert. Ali Mazrui (1975) also offers some interesting observations.

> The ritualistic language of Christianity in terms of "children of God," and the whole symbolism of fatherhood in the organizational structure of the Catholic Church all the way from the concept of the 'Pope' to the rank of 'Father' among some priests took an additional significance in African conditions. The metaphor of fatherhood within the Catholic hierarchy reinforced filial tendencies among African converts. Again the repercussions went beyond the particular members of that denomination, and reinforced the dependency complex in the society as a whole. (80)

At independence, Kenya's Jomo Kenyatta and in later years Daniel Moi, just like Mobutu Ssese Seko in Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo), emphasized the validity of the metaphor of a united family with the father as head. Kenyatta was referred to as *Baba wa Taifa* (Father of the Nation). But it is Moi's case that is especially informative in this chapter. Moi, it must be noted, to paraphrase Bekhisizwe Peterson (1994), was 'an ogre of a theme' in *Whispers*—forever present, expansive and melodramatic. The political issues in the column mainly revolved around him. Like Kenyatta, Moi too became *Baba wa Taifa* and, when discussed in *Whispers*, is parodied as such. As Father of the Nation, Moi had to assume the title *Mzee*, just like Kenyatta, a title which is as honorary as it is functional. In Kiswahili, *Mzee* literally means 'an old wise man' and is used to

show respect to elderly men. But this title is also significant in structuring relationships in Kenya. Moi, a fairly youthful politician in 1978 when he came to power following Kenyatta's death soon became *Mzee*, in effect fabricating and legitimizing his 'wisdom' despite his youthful age. As *Baba wa Taifa*, Mzee Moi was able to rule over 'his children'—the public. As Aguilar (1998) would say, possible alternatives to leadership were swept aside through the invocation of (African) traditions that uphold rules of deference and submission between social and generational juniors and seniors. But Moi went further than just being *Baba wa Taifa*. When his party Kanu adopted the same filial metaphors and became *Baba na Mama* (Father and Mother), Moi assumed the same titles. He was the patriarch and matriarch all in one. He became the virtual provider. It was to be the apogee of his political domination and repression. Moi, like a number of other African leaders at the time, such as Mobutu Ssese Seko, Kamuzu Banda in Malawi and Ahamadou Ahidjo in Cameroon, having failed his subjects had to qualify his domination. Crucially, he added to his two titles a more powerful one, almost as though he was now above the political. He became *Mtukufu* (His Honourable) Rais Mzee Daniel Arap Moi. His stature was now to be seen as messianic. He was Moi the messiah, Moi the president of the republic and of course Moi the elder. As messiah, Moi was ageless. The idiom of age was pushed to vulgar extremes to legitimize domination. Underlying this appropriation certainly was the 'accepted' relationship between age and gerontocracy in Kenya. Age and gerontocracy have always been inter-related in much of Africa. To create a perception of a *Mzee* despite one's biological age confers certain rights to an individual, if at the same time it also implies certain obligations. *Mzee* is therefore inherently an important cultural and social category but one manipulated by the state to legitimize domination. Culturally and socially, it allows for several privileges and rights to the holder. Being *Mzee* confers respect from others, but perhaps even more importantly it also confers supposed wisdom and knowledge. It is in this sense that political leaders manipulate this title and its 'appurtenances'. The image of *Mzee* therefore naturally generates a hierarchy and legitimizes domination, which is not only politically sanctioned but also culturally legitimate. Those who are not *Wazee* (plural of Mzee) especially in the political arena are children in the presence of a *Mzee*. Even when biologically older they are obliged to do as they are told. The postcolonial leadership in much of Africa, especially at independence, had (re)invented the myth of a gerontocratic leadership as the only legitimate leadership.

The transference and affirmation of the legitimacy of gerontocratic leadership also includes the adoption of 'accessories of power'. Kenyatta and Moi like other *Wazee* also physically 'performed their titles', Kenyatta with the flywhisk and Moi with the *rungu* (club) which he used to call '*Fimbo ya Nyayo*' (Nyayo's club). As noted above, in Kenya leadership is in most part a performance. A leader therefore has to invest in various accessories of power to effectively perform his leadership. These accessories or symbols contribute in no small measure to the wide and sometimes wild myths about their bearers' legitimacy as leaders, drawing in most cases on what the majority of the subjects know from traditional or folk knowledge of leaders and leadership while at the same time confusing the subjects by defying any attempts at presenting a widely accepted set of interpretations. For instance, just how many myths have been weaved around the *rungu* may never be known, yet predictably most interpretations touched on the near magical powers of its owner.

Another interesting addition to Moi's stock of political imagery appropriated in *Whispers* and equally significant in our reading of the 'dramaturgy of power' in Kenya was the symbol *Jogoo* (rooster). *Jogoo* was the party symbol of the ruling party Kanu, although it was constantly used to refer to Moi. Just as the rooster crows and lords over other chicken, so was Moi supposed to lord over the country. Once again, through this symbol, Moi portrayed himself as the benevolent father who knew how and when to crow, and what was best for his 'children'. In a general sense, the state adopted the paternal imagery in a manner that seems to suggest that invariably; the head is male, masculine—and old, and therefore must be revered. It would appear then that in Kenya, political power was constructed to wear a male face, was paternal and invariably elderly. Through these myths, the political leadership attempted to saturate the public space with their presence and such symbols and to legitimize their domination in the form of a fetish to use Mbembe's (1992a) words.

Just how these constructions are used from below is an important aspect of this chapter and a significant theme in *Whispers*. From the way these constructions are used in *Whispers*, we want to disagree with Schatzberg (1988, 23) that those outside the state 'unthinkingly accept the metaphors and the image they conjure up as a normal code of communication …' We agree with Schatzberg only to the extent that these images are accepted as a 'part of an easily grasped template', but question the notion that they are necessarily 'unthinkingly accepted'. Below are a few examples that demonstrate the public's more complex engagement with the 'template' and

how Mutahi appropriates some of these symbols in his stories in a manner that questions and critiques authority. In an evocative article titled 'The antics of the next "Big man"', Mutahi reproduces the state's symbols but demonstrates how they are ironized by subject populations. Narrating the 'performance' that is orchestrated whenever the president arrives at public functions, the narrator takes the place of the president to tell the story:

> I have called one Emoite Opotti back from retirement and he is telling the world how wise I am. He is saying: *Mtukufu Rais Papa Whis, the very muthoniwa* is scheduled to arrive any time now. *Hapa kuna vifijo na nderemo* [Trans: His Honourable President Father Whis … Here there is great applause] awaiting the arrival of His Excellency Papa Whis. *As usual, atakuwa amevalia ile suti yake ya rangi ya udhurungi na ua nyekundu* [Trans: As usual he will be dressed in his Argyria (blueish-black) coloured suit with red flowers]. His Excellency will be received with thunderous applause by the thousands and thousands of Kenyans who are gathered here. Our beloved president is addressing his first rally after his official visit to the People's Republic of Kyrgystan. (*Sunday Nation*, February 17, 2002)

While the excerpt above may read as fiction, interestingly, apart from the name Whis, the rest of the 'performance' is very much a part of the language of Moi's Presidential Press Service. In fact the 'ritual' has been reproduced almost verbatim. Yet it becomes obvious that the very metaphors of the state here are being used to ironize power. In a more obvious vein, part of the article also reads.

> Opotti is saying, *Naona msafara wa Mtukufu Rais Papa Whisi* approaching [Trans: I can see His Honourable President Father Whis' convoy approaching]. Yes, the beloved father of the nation, the Taliban of Talibans, is about to arrive. Pararararaparaa! Paraparaa! *Mtukufu Papa Whisi ndiye huyo. Ndiye* … [Trans: there comes the President … applause!]

Once again the ritualistic language of the public 'performance' is appropriated. But note the curious allusion to the Taliban. It adds to the hilarity of the description yet at the same time this could be a deliberate attempt to compare this regime to the murderous Taliban regime in Afghanistan. What is clear is that although a range of revised traditions are appropriated and reproduced by subject populations, it is not always the case that they are accepted as they are. The way in which the said traditions are appropriated and reproduced by subject populations is such that they are

unmasked and portrayed as merely camouflaging repression. Below is another revealing example.

> I think you have an idea that there is some sort of multi-party democracy in my house, which came not because I did not want to remain the only *jogoo* in my house but since there was too much pressure on me to introduce it. The democracy in my house came about because the internal forces led by my Thatcher demanded it. She was joined in the effort by all the people: Whispers Jr, the same fellow who was swearing before that he is *dadi damu* (true father but used rhetorically to express loyalty) and that his loyalty to me was total and direct. The Investment alias Pajero did not require much to join Thatcher in demanding for democracy in the house. The external forces were led by members of the "Sect of many waters" of which Thatcher is a life member. They are the same people who don't believe in secret weapons. Instead they choose a loud weapon called drums which they insist on beating when my head is feeling like a war drum itself on account of having too many at the right temperatures at Rhoda's place. (*Whispers*' local bar). (*Sunday Standard*, November 15, 1992)

The political relevance of the above passage is palpable. The excerpt is a reading on the introduction of multi-party politics in Kenya and generally counters a major official narrative. The narrator argues that Moi was coerced into accepting political pluralism in Kenya. He observes that Moi capitulated to national and international pressure, reconstructed in the article as 'internal and external forces' and should therefore not present himself as the benevolent father, or *jogoo*. Narrated as a family feud, the national or internal forces are represented by Thatcher, The Investment and Whispers Jr who have apparently ganged up against Whispers. They are said to be working in cahoots with 'external forces' notably 'members of the sect of many waters' to be read in the figurative sense as representing the Church as well as the international community. By pointing out that political pluralism was forced onto a recalcitrant government, the narrator implicitly dismisses attempts to legitimize notions of pious benevolence of the father. More importantly though, note the use of the symbol *jogoo*. That it is used disparagingly is not in question. It seems to be associated with autocracy. Whispers (*jogoo*) monopolizes the 'crowing' in his house. '… I did not want to remain the only *jogoo* in my house but since there was too much pressure on me to introduce it …'. Note also that in this particular case, the *jogoo* actually failed its people by failing to crow. In other words, the paternal logic is actually seen to have failed—the father

failed to provide. What is perceptible is the element of reciprocity in this relationship. You are only accepted as a father if you are also able to provide for your children. One may thus want to dispute Mbembe's (1992a, 4) suggestion about the 'mutual zombification' of both the dominant and those whom they apparently dominate robbing each other of their vitality leaving them both impotent (*impouvoir*). Among the conclusions one is able to draw here is that there is, for instance, a 'moral matrix' to being a father. A father must provide for his children otherwise he becomes an emasculated father, a *Kamzee* (a derogatory reference to an elder, as popularly used in *Whispers*). In other words, even when subject populations buy into the state's myths, they have particular expectations which must be fulfilled. You are only accepted as father if you partake in a reciprocal and dialogic relationship. The rejection of Whispers, particularly by an 'ally', can similarly signal a rejection of the state's desire to weave unitary narratives regarding their subjecthood. Whispers Jr's attacks on the state's 'modalities of management' marks, to use Diouf's (1996, 145) phrase, 'a radical refutation of the modes of political framing' of the youth as social and political marginals. We must also note that the youth here connote not only its literal reference but also those assigned this age and place by the state as marginals.

In another revealing example, Mutahi 'gives' former president Moi's appointed heir Uhuru Kenyatta, then in his mid-forties these very titles of the state. In 'My role in the court of Jomo's son', Mutahi tells of how 'one Joseph Kamotho' (one of Moi's most loyal political lackeys at the time), famously known in the column as 'Kathuku' (Kikuyu for parrot), will be addressing Uhuru as President. The ethnic accent, which is unmistakably Kamotho's, confirms the subject of the parody:

> *Uhuru Bamba, hata wakati ulikuwa mtoto, baba. Wakati nilijuwa natembelea bamba yako bamba, nilinjua Mungu alikuwa amekuamua bamba, ukuwe mtukufu bamba.* (*Sunday Nation*, August 11, 2002)
> Translation:
> Uhuru father, even when you were a child, father. When I visited your father, father, I knew God had decided father, that you be the president, father.

The excerpt demonstrates how the very metaphors of the state are used to disparage the hypocrisy, even absurdity, of their appropriation by the state. Note, for example, here that Kamotho was much older than Uhuru, in fact

old enough to be the latter's father and yet the titles had been inverted. Besides, as several other examples reveal, we see how these invented traditions are reproduced by subject populations, but then to 'penetrate the state's ideological and symbolic façade to see where these images originate, how the powerful manipulate them, and most importantly, whose interests they serve' (Schatzberg 1988, 73). As Mbembe (1992b, 10) explains, 'people whose identities have been partly confiscated have been able, precisely because there was this pretence, to glue back together the bits and pieces of their fragmented identities. By taking over the signs and language of officialdom, people have been able to remythologize their own conceptual universe while in the process turning the *commandement* into a sort of zombie'.

Also satirized in much of the column is Moi's political slogan of 'Peace, Love and Unity'. Professed by the polity to legitimize its rule, Mutahi enacts how this slogan is given new meaning outside the official script. The polity's notions of peace, love and unity are constantly quoted amid instances of violence and discord in the country. The way in which this imagery is appropriated in the column is such that it loses its official meanings as it is unmasked and portrayed as merely putting a benign face on a decaying political system.

Mbembe has nonetheless argued that the process of 'remythologising' does not in any way 'increase people's subordination or their levels of resistance; it simply produces a situation of disempowerment (*impouvoir*) for both the ruled and the rulers' (10). He further notes that 'the process is fundamentally magical: although it may demystify the *commandement* or even erode its legitimacy, it does not do violence to the *commandement's* base. At best, it creates pockets of indiscipline on which the *commandement* may stub its toe, though otherwise it glides unperturbed over them' (ibid.). That may be true, but as we noted earlier, our concern is whether there is a sense of critical consciousness perceptible in these relationships. Remythologizing the state's language may or may not perturb the *commandement* but it is a critique nonetheless. One would also want to refer to Mbembe's (1992a, 10) argument about the masses 'joining in the madness and clothing themselves in cheap imitations of power so as to reproduce its epistemology and the power in its own violent quest for grandeur making vulgarity and wrongdoing its main mode of existence'. It is a spectacle quite evident in the examples above. But we want to argue that as the examples demonstrate, by engaging in the 'presidential carnival'

the subject population does not necessarily endorse this spectacle. On the contrary, it is a critique of the absurdity of it all.

Whispers further becomes a form of political practice in its appropriation of rumour and gossip. Rumour and gossip are some of the 'hidden transcripts' extensively utilized in the column. They are, as Scott (1990, 141) notes, 'forms of protest which dare not speak in their own name'. Scott has talked of gossip as representing a form of 'safe social sanction' (142). Gossip normally has no identifiable author, 'but scores of eager retailers who can claim that they are just passing on news' (ibid.). Gossip, Scott observes, is 'a discourse about social rules that have been violated … [W]ithout an accepted normative standard from which degrees of deviation may be estimated, the notion of gossip would make no sense whatever. Gossip in turn reinforces these normative standards by invoking them and by teaching anyone who gossips precisely what kinds of conduct are likely to be mocked or despised' (142–3). In a society where free speech is muzzled either by force or through indirect control of public channels of communication, rumour and gossip are 'hidden transcripts' that become ways of disseminating information but also spaces where people process reality. Mutahi also exploits the fact that rumour resists narrative closure. Scott argues that as a rumour travels, 'it is altered in a fashion that brings it more closely into line with the hopes, fears and worldview of those who hear it and retell it' (145). Quoting Gordin Allport and Leo Postman, Scott notes that deletions and additions are added to fit the 'general gestalt of the messengers' (ibid.).

In Kenya, rumour has in the past taken a very specific political role. Haugerud (1995) and Atieno-Odhiambo (1987) have discussed how rumour-mongering became one of the informal oppositional institutions in Kenya, which offered the *mwananchi* (citizen) a democratic space to express their frustrations at the regime. This was a common practice in many African countries. In West Africa, for example, *radio trottoir* (or pavement radio) was particularly popular in the discussion of the apparently subversive (see Ellis 1989). Indeed, in songs by popular groups such as the famous Congolese group 'TP OK Jazz band', we hear of references to '*songi songi*' (rumours) in their discussion of a range of political issues.

As we noted in the introduction, in the late 1980s through the 1990s, various public spaces of expression were monopolized by the Moi regime. But Atieno-Odhiambo also points out that the state also found in rumour a tool for governance. The ruling party Kanu actually turned the rhetoric against 'rumour mongering' into a political campaign tool to discredit its

political opponents. They would very conveniently circulate rumours and then act on them. For instance, most 'Mwakenya activists' were victims of state rumour. Once labelled an activist, the state would then act on the activist for the 'good of the nation'. In his collection of essays *How to be a Kenyan* (1996), Mutahi describes how rumours spread in Kenya.

> Kenya is a land of 'true' rumours and of fertile imagination. It is also a land where despite the arrival of the satellite, the bush telegraph sometimes works more effectively than the mass media … By the time what started as a rumour is published, it will have been refurbished so many times that it will have no resemblance to what has been passed on by the rumour mills. (55)

In an interesting example of how Mutahi appropriates rumour in the column, he writes:

> Over the last month, Kenyans have become very economical with the truth … They belong to the species of humankind (not mankind) called *Homo Rumapithecus* that peddles merchandise called rumours. One characteristic of *Homo Rumapithecus* is to possess lips that tremble uncontrollably when he finds two or three Kenyans gathered. Of course you can be sure that when two of three Kenyans are gathered, the subject is not prayer. They are most likely talking opposition politics. This is what I heard such a *Homo Rumapithecus* say every morning in December. 'Don't say I told you this, but God is not a fool. Why else do you think he has sent the El Nino towards our direction if not to sweep Daniel (Moi) from his seat in State House?' … At that point he looks right and then left as if he is looking for Congo and says; 'That cousin of my aunt's husband has come with the news that the man from Sacho (the president's birthplace) will head for Congo to seek exile …. (*Sunday Nation*, January 11, 1998)

Note the manner in which political issues are introduced as rumours. The rumours encode certain anxieties but also seek to explain them. The excerpt above reflects on fears over Moi's plans. Having refused to indicate whether he would step down as President in the event that he lost at the polls, there was widespread anxiety over the country's future. Circulating rumours included Moi's possible exile, a takeover by the army, war and many other frightening possibilities. Through rumours, people attempted to find for themselves the answers to questions that would help them address their fears.

But quite apart from the fact that Mutahi had explicit intentions that this work is read at least on one level as political, we also want to argue that *Whispers* can be understood as constituting a critical political forum 'outside the text'. Street (1997) has argued that state intervention in the production of works of art can turn them into political gestures. Giving the example of Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*, Street notes that the book became political only after the Muslim world declared a *fatwa* against the author. Similarly, in Kenya popular music such as Albert Gacheru's *Thina wa Muoroto*' (The troubles of Muoroto), a song that referred to a slum in Nairobi demolished by the government, only became political after being banned by the Moi government (Outa 2002), while in East Germany, Wicke (1992) observes that by imposing control on various forms of expression in the former East Germany, the GDR government politicized these forms of expression such that the musician's ability to make a difference, for instance, stemmed from the fact that the government gave their music, every gesture and symbol, political significance. Klopp (2008) notes that urban displacement in Africa has always been fundamentally political. In Kenya, she argues that demolition of slums like Muoroto 'reveals the simultaneous use of targeted displacement and 'land grabbing' as a political technique for closing political space' (295). Yet acts of censorship need not be as severe to make a work of art political. The fact that *Whispers* was forced to rely mostly on satire, parody, jokes and rumour, rather than deny the column political agency, emphasized this agency. The 'hidden transcripts' of which rumour, gossip and satire belong are forms of critical political interventions. The reliance on 'hidden transcripts' makes possible representation of political interests within a system that ordinarily suppresses those interests. We further want to argue that it was precisely because certain forms of expression were disallowed—the inability to discuss Moi by name, the inability to say the King is naked—that *Whispers* and similar sites of popular expression become sites of political gestures. This argument thus does suggest that the state partly made *Whispers* political.

WHISPERS, ETHNICITY AND POLITICS IN KENYA

We noted in the introductory chapter that in the late 1980s through the 1990s, because of the exclusionary tendencies of the state, many Kenyans retreated into alternative identities which they felt could best represent their fears and aspirations. This in part led to the intensification of ethnic

nationalisms. Schatzberg (1988) observes that in situations where people feel excluded from state structures, the 'excluded groups may come to identify themselves as disadvantaged ethnic minorities and perceive the state arena in ethnic rather than class terms' (23). Mutahi introduces in *Whispers* the patently 'ethnic' but to discuss the place of ethnicity in Kenya's political culture. Through this discussion, we get a sense of the tensions between ethnic and national citizenship. It is important to draw attention to draw attention to Ngunyi's (1996) observation that popular claims in society have tended to become ethnicized as the process of democratization matures and that these forms of ethnicity are to be seen 'not as pathologies in the usual/typical sense but as bona fide expressions of the desire of social forces to fight the monolithic structures of the state and the exercise of power' (184). Ethnicity thus, Mutahi seems to suggest, can be one possible response to political repression; it can provide 'a framework within which repressed ethnicities can renegotiate their position in the unitary project of the state' (ibid.).

George Outa's (2002) doctoral thesis 'Performing Power in an African Postcolony: drama and theatre in modern Kenya', a discussion that partly interrogates vernacular theatre within the context of Kenya's transitional politics in the 1990s, asks whether cultural workers such as Mutahi by resorting to using ethnic idioms in its various and expansive forms 'succumbed to a new form of ethnic parochialism, which is analogous to the nationalist quest of the 1990s' (106). We want to argue that if the salience of ethnicity in Mutahi's work is located within the context of the political dynamics of the Moi era, then the answer to the question Outa asks is negative.

Atieno-Odhiambo (2004, 32) has described Kenya as an 'ethnic state' and that the treatment of political power as an 'ethnic resource' became legitimized as a practice of politics and was routinized during the Jomo Kenyatta years. Regimes in Kenya have therefore become known as 'the Kikuyu government under Kenyatta and successively as the Kalenjin government under Moi and as the 'Mt. Kenya mafia' under Mwai Kibaki'. He consequently concludes that ethnicity is the 'fulcrum around which African politics turns' (41). Mutahi privileges the various 'ethnic nations' in *Whispers* potentially to demonstrate how various ethnic communities use their ethnic identities to (re-)negotiate their position in the political polity. But we must also consider the literary, aesthetic and ideological explanations. As an example, we can draw attention to the use of certain discursive practices, particularly the use of cultural idioms drawn from

various Kenyan ethnic outgroups in the column to demonstrate how, first, they help hail publics, and here we are referring specifically to the use of particular ethnic stereotypes; second, to show how these practices demonstrate the tensions between ethnic and national citizenship in Kenya particularly within the context of the nation's exclusionary tendencies; and, third, to underscore what seems to be Mutahi's point that there is need to debunk the myth of the 'nation' as the only site where true citizenry can be forged because such a position oversimplifies the layered and contested nature of Kenya's history.

Atieno-Odhiambo (2002) has argued that patently ethnic practices are a lived reality of daily life in Kenya. Since people use the ethnic as a practical vocabulary of politics and social organization in the country, when issues to do with the tribe or cultural idioms are appropriated in *Whispers*, it is a grammar that readers easily understand. But we also want to submit that cultural idioms as appropriated in daily discourse are not neutral vehicles for popular expression. As Brubaker (1992, 16) notes, cultural idioms 'constitute interests as much as they express them'. Quite often, they are symptomatic of ethnic fears. Indeed, Omolo (2002) has noted that ethnic outgroups in Kenya embraced democratization in the early 1990s mainly as an opportunity to overturn a system widely perceived as antithetical to their (ethnic) political and economic aspirations. The use of cultural idioms that are patently 'ethnic' in nature is thus suggestive of struggles over power both horizontally and vertically. Let us, for instance, look at Mutahi's appropriation of certain cultural struggle idioms, attributed to the character Thatcher in the column to illustrate our argument.

> I hear that she is telling the donors of support who happen to be members of the 'sect of many waters'. I fought for this husband of mine. *Nilipigania*! [Trans: I fought for] I was not given the husband on a silver platter. *Nilipigania na jasho* [I fought with my sweat] and that is why I cannot allow this kawoman called Rhoda to disorganise our domestic budget. (*Sunday Standard*, November 15, 1992)

Even without detailing the context against which to make sense of the excerpt, the intended readership will be aware that this imagery casually draws on pre-independence images of resistance in Kenya. *Nilipigania, Nilipigania na jasho* are rhetorical idioms of resistance used during Kenya's fight for independence. But they also remind one of Jomo Kenyatta's speeches in defence of Kikuyu nationalism and at the height of political

opposition in Kenya's first republic. Kenyatta was as much concerned with Kikuyu nationalism as with Kenyan nationalism. Throup (1987), among others, have thus argued that as editor of the Kikuyu newspaper *Muigwithania* (The Reconciler) in the late 1920s and in his book *Facing Mount Kenya* (1938) Kenyatta had created 'a Kikuyu subnationalist ideology … within the framework of a revitalised traditional mythology' (36–7). Indeed, Haugerud (1995, 18) asserts that 'Kenya's early political struggles in the 1990's spring in part from opposition political structures that have been sporadically visible in the past, and that have deep historical roots both within Kenya and across its borders'. The struggle was a part of what Isaacman (1990, 49) calls 'a long oppositional history which over time took many shapes and forms, part of a larger engagement in the political world' but which, as *Whispers* demonstrates, finds relevance in times of (current) political upheavals. Mutahi therefore at once appeals to Kikuyu nationalism but at the same time to a 'nationalist past' that provides a grammar of resistance which people can use to confront present challenges.

But one must also note that although this resistance past is sculptured as a narrative that should appeal to all those dominated, it privileges the dominant ethnie. Eyoh (1999, 281) has observed that 'although nationalist discourses aspire to homogenous and linear ethnic pasts, the stock of symbols, cultural traditions, historical memories etc. with which national mythologies and public ideological cultures are sculptured, are commonly supplied by the dominant ethnie within multi-ethnic nations'. The excerpt thus demonstrates some of the tensions around the mobilization of cultural idioms in Kenya. The appropriation of subnational symbols as national symbols alerts us to how ethnicity is part of a complex web of factors that are 'implicated in and regulate struggles over arrangements of economic, political and symbolic power of multi-ethnic societies' (272–3). The appropriation of cultural idioms in fiction becomes part of a political struggle, a struggle to remember and retain a populist past against a dominant view, which either denies or reinterprets that past. Yet even this populist past may always be contested. It is an example of what Lipsitz (1990, 163) has called 'true lies—depictions of the past and present that are comprehensible to us and that locate our own private stories within a larger collective memory'. This is done because of the need to create 'a community around which people establish similarities and differences (identities), communities that exist in memory and in the passage of time' (39). But it is part of a collective memory whose validity is nonetheless

contestable. Coplan (2000) in a study of Basotho creators of aural texts argues that these (mis)representations of the past are able to attain social authority precisely because

> they transport the salience of their previous applications into new contexts each time they are reapplied. In this form history gives meaning to the present as much as the present reconstitutes the nature of the past. Further, successive reapplications of established metaphors resonate with one another and gain force from new metaphors juxtaposed against them. These metaphors, at once historical and experimental, endure, wax or wane depending upon their capacity to interpret the actual in terms of a more durable social and moral meaning. (137)

It is in this sense that subnational symbols work and it is because of the need to create a certain 'imagined community' around a common problem that Mutahi borrows from this past.

In a discussion of Mutahi's portrayal of Jomo Kenyatta in his theatre productions, Outa (2002, 118) cites notable 'convenient deletions' and deliberate 'historical gaps' that sometimes render the appropriation of history in Mutahi's fiction in the 1990s highly tendentious. Wahome's Kenyatta, Outa argues, is 'designed to pass moral judgement on the entirety of Moi's tenure as leader' (ibid.). Similar deletions and historical gaps equally feature in *Whispers*, where Moi's era is often judged against Kenyatta's 'laudable' if sometimes curiously uncontested reign. Below is a good example.

In one of his articles 'Jomo's big Jamhuri Day encounters' (*Sunday Nation*, December 17, 1995), written to mark Kenya's Independence Day, using his alter ego Whispers, the author takes the reader through decades of stocktaking and shows how Kenya has degenerated since the country's first president Jomo Kenyatta died in 1978. Using the dream motif, the writer 'resurrects' Kenyatta on the eve of Kenya's Independence Day and imagines him taking a walk in the city. Kenyatta's resting place is a mausoleum built next to the Kenyan Parliament in Nairobi. In the article Kenyatta's journey begins with a visit to Parliament. There he finds MPs engaged in fisticuffs rather than debate issues for which they are in Parliament. The article likens the Kenyan Parliament to a 'livestock auction'. In the period 1992–1997, many a time Kenyan parliamentarians unabashedly settled scores physically in the parliamentary chambers. Kenyatta then walks towards City Hall and on his way he meets university

students protesting against the murder of a government minister Robert Ouko, a former foreign affairs minister in Kenya in the late 1980s. He was murdered in February 1990, igniting one of the country's worst political crises. Testimonies given at a commission of inquiry set up to investigate the minister's murder implicated top-ranking government officials. The commission of inquiry was later disbanded before it released its findings.

As Kenyatta nears City Hall, he stumbles on potholes and wonders aloud whether these roads were deliberately built with potholes to reduce car accidents. Once at City Hall, Jomo finds the city mayor shouting at his councillors. The mayor can barely communicate in English and demands that because of his status as mayor, he now deserves to own a house in *Kiririchwa* (a corruption of the word *Kileleshwa*), an affluent suburb in Nairobi.

On his way to the city's public bus station, where he intended to take a bus to his home district, he meets street children who demand that they be 'sponsored'. He declines to give them money but shortly afterwards, he is mugged by three men. Kenyatta is concerned that even as he underwent the harrowing experience, nobody bothered to help. They instead watched with curious disinterest. He tries to rally those on the streets to his cause shouting out *Harambee!* (spirit of 'togetherness'). He is taken aback by their reply. They respond shouting *Nyayo!* (Kiswahili for 'footsteps' but which became a political slogan popularized by the Moi administration) and he wonders what has suddenly gone wrong with his footsteps. After Kenyatta's death, Moi vowed to follow in Kenyatta's footsteps (*Nyayo* in Kiswahili). *Nyayo* later became a defining narrative of the Moi's presidency. Deviation from Moi's *Nyayo* was met with the full brutality of the state. The result was the emergence of a corps of sycophants who notably 'performed' this 'philosophy'.

As Kenyatta tries to comprehend what is it that is wrong with his footsteps, a Kanu supporter comes over to him, professes his loyalty to the party but reminds him that he also has needs and therefore demands that he pay him for his loyalty. Kenyatta declines to give him money and continues with his walk. He meets a group of policemen and reports his encounter with the thugs, but instead of being helped, he is labelled a 'Hutu militia' because he does not have an identity card. He is asked to 'jitetea' (Kiswahili for 'defend yourself' but a word commonly used by the police as a way of soliciting for a bribe). Although the former president recalls once defending himself when the British colonial government arrested him during the fight for independence, he realizes the word has a different

meaning in the 'new Kenya'. The police rob him of his money because he cannot 'defend himself'. He decides to return to his mausoleum but, on his way back, feels the urge to go for a short call. However, where there once was a public toilet, he finds a kiosk. When he asks what happened to the toilet, the woman at the kiosk wonders whether he is 'from the planet Jupiter' and tells him that with the right amount of money, he would get himself a place at Lang'ata Cemetery or even a public school to build a kiosk. The reality then hits him that an 'enterprising' Kenyan might decide to auction his mausoleum, and so he sprints back to his grave.

Using the dream motif, the narrator has incredibly taken the reader through years of stocktaking of the gradual degeneration of Kenya and offered a picture of the 'Kenya becoming'. Virtually every facet of the country's life is now degenerate. Respectable institutions such as Parliament have become akin to livestock auctions, political murders are common, the country's infrastructure has collapsed, while the presence of street children along the city streets serves to show the breakdown of the family institution and of the debilitating poverty in the country. Corrupt officials who are concerned more about their personal aggrandisement rather than serving the city occupy City Hall. Thugs roam the streets and policemen, supposed to be the custodians of law and order, have become the 'thugs in blue', robbing the common man with impunity. Land is grabbed indiscriminately, including public toilets and cemeteries, showing the level of corruption in the country.

Mutahi's most important point here is that there is nothing to celebrate to mark the country's independence. Ultimately, it is the political leadership that is censured. Although there is no reference to Moi, certain familiar symbolic markers such as *Nyayo* and his party Kanu are used. This attests to the former president's indictment as an author of this decay of a once comparatively prosperous country. There are various other stories in which the Kenyatta era is deliberately padded. Mutahi's representation thus sometimes passes as largely rhetorical and populist with curious deletions that makes his fiction's recourse to historical revisionism problematic. It is thus true that while the popular narrates alternative histories especially when dominant histories appear repressive, the popular also suppresses other competing histories. The selective appropriation of history should therefore alert us to the place of 'political populism' in popular culture, one that, Street (1997) cautions, allows cultural workers to claim that popular culture expresses the wishes and desires of the people (17). In achieving dominance, Laclau (1977, 18) argues, 'populist rhetoric adopts

a variety of codes and genres. It can, for example, appeal to past myths or future fears; and it can dress them in different styles—hectoring or homely, grandiose or folksy. But what each is intended to do is to link its audience to a vision which in turn legitimates a particular course of action'. The deletions in *Whispers* might be seen in this light. There is a sense in which recourse to a populist past provides an identity that helps people comfort feelings of exclusion. This does not, however, mean that the populist past is necessarily free of its own forms of exclusion.

We want to further argue therefore that the appropriation of cultural idioms in popular fiction can open up our understanding of how competing cultural claims are part and parcel of the 'popular'. The struggle therefore is not only vertical but also horizontal. This horizontal struggle is also manifest in the concept of 'ethnic othering', which plays a major role in the creation of political hierarchies in Kenya. *Whispers* reveals how as products of human agency, ethnicity is 'valorised and transformed in the context of struggles over structures of power …' (Eyoh 1990, 272). Robert Bates reminds us that ethnicity can be a strategy for survival and can involve the cultivation and then politicization of old and newly invented primordial sentiments. *Whispers* reproduces these constructions, demonstrating how various Kenyan societies have taken to 'othering' as a strategy not only for the creation of political hierarchies but also for their very survival. We find useful Werbner and Ranger's (1996) argument that in the fight for political space, communities exclude each other by 'animalising the Other in their midst' (20). Circumcision, for instance, has for long played a significant role in the 'othering' of communities by most Bantu communities in Kenya. Among the Kikuyu, circumcision is an important rite of passage through which a boy symbolically becomes a man. The 'othering' therefore is such that the Luo, a dominant tribe from Western Kenya, cannot rule over the rest, much less the Kikuyu, because they are uncircumcised and thus are 'little boys' (ibid.). An interesting example of this 'othering' in *Whispers* is an article titled 'Ethnic Clashes in Whis neighbourhood'. A woman threatens to 'expose' her husband to the 'world' that he is not circumcised should he refuse to agree to her mother's visit to the city and to buy her 'a new dress and sweater'. Apart from touching on the issue of 'ethnic othering', the story is written against the background of ethnic clashes in Kenya. At the same time, the story also reveals the tensions between the nuclear family and the extended family. In the article, the man initially discourages his wife from inviting his mother-in-law to visit the family, knowing only too well what such a visit means. He will

have to spend way beyond his means to please his mother-in-law. But he capitulates to his wife's threats when she threatens to 'expose' him. The woman says:

> What would the men you drink with say if they learned that you feared the knife? Hehee! A 40-year-old *omusinde* (Luhya for an uncircumcised man) from the slopes of Mount Kenya where Whispers 'Son of the Soil' says there are many warriors. Maybe even that Whispers fellow is like you, a *kihii* (Kikuyu for uncircumcised man). (*Standard on Sunday*, April 26, 1992)

Note the political agency given to the idea of circumcision. Circumcision makes you a warrior and, in some ethnic groups, legitimizes your right to lead. Those who are uncircumcised are portrayed as weak, easy to manipulate and effectively denied the right to lead. Mutahi uses many of these stereotypes which although taken for granted, in fact, encode certain intra-ethnic struggles, tensions and anxieties among Kenya's many ethnic groups. The Luhya community are, for instance, characterized by their excessive culinary appetite especially for chicken and *ugali* (Kiswahili for maize meal, but a word equally used to mean a bribe) which marks them as a weak and an easily compromised people. The Kikuyu, on the other hand, are to be noted as enterprising but greedy and selfish thus cannot be trusted with the country's political leadership by other communities, while the Kisii are a dangerous ethnic group because of their 'short temperament'. Those from the coastal areas are stereotyped as lazy, while tribes such as the Maasai are stereotyped as illiterate and warlike. Mutahi quite often introduces these stereotypes in *Whispers* in a manner that seemingly reinforces these stereotypes. Renowned leaders from various ethnic groups are constantly stereotyped with 'known ethnic traits' while newspaper caricatures emphasize the stereotypes.

We want to argue, however, that while on the one hand this stereotyping is used in the column to hail publics, on the other hand it opens up discussions on social conflicts and shows how communities subject each other to many 'tacit, uncodified, internalised classificatory schemes and ethno-cultural markers in the political and economic arenas' as part of an ongoing social and political struggle (Atieno-Odhiambo 2002, 242–3). Ndegwa (1997, 602) calls these negative stereotypes 'rituals of exclusion' which 'establish a hierarchy of power and status that when combined with other icons of power and status in the modern state, enable elites to mobilize within the ethnic community …'. We want to therefore argue that

besides the visible political struggles at the vertical level, what *Whispers* also reveals are the tensions and struggles at the horizontal level as ethnic groups also jostle for space in the social and political hierarchy. Subject populations should thus also be noted for their shrewdness in the manipulation of stereotypes to 'negotiate conditions of political representation and participation within the wider political system' (Eyoh 1999, 288). Quite clearly, this calls for the need to problematize the province of the 'popular' and to look at it as also representing a number of competing popular interests.

But could Mutahi's appropriation of 'the ethnic' be an indication that the artiste in him succumbed to a new form of ethnic parochialism as Outa (2002) suggests? My answer is that the premise upon which the question is based can be persuasive but potentially misleading. By appropriating 'the ethnic' knowing only too well that this is stigmatized territory, Mutahi acknowledges a political reality; the fact that many Kenyans now find refuge in their ethnic identities, which in fact indicates their alienation by the state. But he also implicitly demonstrates the rejection of the unifying narratives of the state about what and who constitutes the 'nation'. Furthermore, the discussion of ethnicity in *Whispers* serves to show the silent fights between the various competing ethnicities in the country.

It is, however, important to ask why if the column was political, indeed if it was largely oppositional, it was left to exist for two decades in the Kenyan popular press when similar works of popular arts were either censored or banned. Street (1997) and Barber (1997), among several other scholars of popular culture, have observed that popular culture can become a form of political management. Laughter generated through popular arts can be a safety valve for hidden feelings, which can be a form of political containment. Even then this in no way robs popular culture of its political agency. In fact, such humour can be a useful strategy for introducing certain taboo topics into the mainstream eventually altering the political normative. It is in this sense that *Whispers* seeks political agency.

Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to demonstrate why it is necessary to examine *Whispers* as a critical political forum. We have tried to tease out some of the political texts that were inscribed in the apparently apolitical stories. We have noted the column's engagement with Kenya's complex political script but one which equally delineates the country's political transition

particularly from the 1980s through the 1990s. Through the column, we are invited to confront emergent political practices including a culture of political corruption, acquisitive accumulation, political clientism, the paradox of ethnicity in Kenya's political culture and other. We also note the tensions between ethnic and national citizenship and how these manifest themselves within the realm of the popular, through 'ethnic othering', for example. In sum, this chapter fundamentally complicates our reading of the realm of the popular and of popular cultural forms as political texts.

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Christianity and the Construction of Popular Agency in *Whispers*

One of the most characteristic features of *Whispers* was its elaborate reliance on and reference to Christian religious practices and experiences in Kenya. Mutahi considered Christianity central to the column's thematic aims and acknowledged it as an inalienable part of Kenya's public culture. Indeed, Ndzovu (2005, 276) points out that 'references to God are embedded in the national fabric such that Deistic concepts are woven into the mix'. He cites the example of the country's national anthem, which opens with a 'prayer to the Ultimate Reality Oh God of all creation …' (ibid.). This chapter thus examines how *Whispers* interrogates the popular concerns of the Kenyan subject through manifestations of Christian religious practices. The chapter seeks to demonstrate how these practices reflected many Kenyans' popular concerns, particularly at a time of significant social and political upheaval.

Within the context of the 1980s–1990s 'moment', we want to argue that Christianity occupied a central place in Kenyans' popular imagination. Its various manifestations offered alternatives and possibilities both to the political process and to the more mundane interpretation of everyday experiences. At once it provided people with what Johannes Fabian (1978) describes as 'moments of freedom', at another, it became an ideological instrument strategically stylized for domination. In *Whispers*, these different, even disorienting, faces of the religion are explored in two main ways. First, Mutahi intervenes in the political process through a strategic

appropriation of biblical hermeneutics. This way he is able to demonstrate how oppositional discourses were structured to 'talk back' to the regime. Second, Mutahi simultaneously reflects on the 'darker face' of Christianity, using particularly his Catholic background to show how the Church was complicit in the repression of the subaltern through its problematic relationship with the state. In fact, it is portrayed as the state's ideological tool used to sanitize processes of political domination. While he recuperates his own childhood past to make this thematic incursion, it also stands as an allegorical reading of the present where processes of political domination are normalized through apparently non-political institutions and persons. The chapter also examines the (re-)emergence of popular Christian religious movements in the country such as the African Independent Churches (AICs) and the Pentecostal Charismatic Churches who openly rebelled against the supposed separation of religion and politics and thus exercised their faith to demonstrate how these two were entangled. The column further demonstrates how these Churches offered many people immediate solutions to their present-day problems associated with declining economic opportunities and the disorienting impact of globalization by linking them with global circuits through, for example, the 'Prosperity Gospel'.

With the Moi-state monopolizing political space in the 1980s through the early 1990s, alternative spaces of expression outside the state's control emerged. Religion provided one of these expressive spaces, offering succour to people's political concerns but also answers to their spiritual and material needs. In Kenya, as indeed is the case in many other African countries, decades of colonialism and missionary evangelism ensured that Christianity is integrated at a very basic level in the social, cultural and political fabric of the country (Twaddle 1995). The Church has continued to maintain a physical presence in the everyday life of many Kenyans. Throup and Hornsby (1998, 55) have thus described Kenya as a 'deeply religious society'. John Mbiti (1969, 2), on the other hand, is famously known for his argument that the African is 'notoriously religious …. wherever the African is, there is his religion; he carries it to the fields where he is sowing seeds or harvesting a new crop; he takes it with him to the beer party or to attend a funeral ceremony'. Similarly, Stephen Ellis and Gerrie Ter Haar (2004, 2) argue that it is 'largely through religious ideas that Africans think about the world today. Religious ideas provide them with a means of becoming social and political actors'.

For many Kenyans, religion and particularly Christianity is a means through which they are able to make sense of their everyday existential concerns. As such, the Bible is a widely popular text whose stories and teachings many Kenyans are deeply familiar with. Indeed, in a research conducted among the Luhya community in Western Kenya, Kanyoro (1988, 1) discovered that if a Christian family owned only one or two books, it was likely that these were a hymnal and a Bible. Kanyoro notes that most people in Kenya read the Bible 'with the eyes of their contexts … Sometimes the Bible helps to read their context, sometimes their context gives meaning to the texts of the Bible' (ibid.).

Christianity, however, continues to hold a rather problematic place in Africa's political imagination. Historically, it is a religion that has on occasion been used to legitimize ideologies of domination. In many countries, the Church continues to support and even sustain some of the most despotic regimes, precisely because both are often keen on maintaining the status quo (Ellis and Ter Haar 2004; Kalu 2000; Haynes 1996). Haynes (1996, 99) observes that in extreme cases such as South Africa, Christianity was even used to legitimize apartheid. The Church's rather problematic relationship with the state even in such repressive political systems is also in part a belief in the spiritual world ordaining political leadership (Kalu 2000; Haynes 1996; Schatzberg 1988). But there are also manifestations of Christianity that are used to challenge power. Most popular religious movements of the Christian faith in Africa fall within this group. Haynes (1996) argues that ethno-religious movements in particular often emerge as a challenge to power and especially when a community, possessing both a religious and an ethnic identity, perceives itself as increasingly powerless or alienated from the centre. Religion in this sense is used as a counter ideology for the creation of an alternative social and political narrative denied by the dominant forces in society. It is important, however, to underscore the complex contradictions that characterize these ethno-religious groups for they are not always necessarily concerned with genuine political reform. Sometimes their interests are principally sectarian. Haynes provides a useful explanation of these contradictions using Schatzberg's metaphor of the 'triple-stranded helix' (a framework which looks at the interaction between state, class and ethnicity in Africa's political organization). Haynes' 'triple helix', however, comprises religion, ethnicity and politics. He argues that 'each is present within an individual's worldview; and in certain situations, at certain times, one element will dominate. Sometimes religion serves to form the context for political action; that is,

political concerns will be imbued with religious notions, which help determine the nature of a group's collective response' (139). Similarly, 'spiritual and material concerns interact within very fluid boundaries in a context where many Africans relate to religion as a means of solving a number of personal problems, some of which concern material issues' (ibid.). These observations throw light to the multiple faces of Christianity in Kenya. It is historically a double-edged sword, its ambiguity lying precisely in its ability to empower but also to disempower, to be used by those apparently dominated but also by the dominant.

With the exception of a few Churches such as the Africa Inland Church (AIC) and the Legio Maria Sect, which were openly supportive of the Moi regime, towards the late 1980s, the Church increasingly became part of 'the surrogate opposition' (Haugerud 1995; Holger and Twaddle 1995). Church leaders, politicians and writers began to mobilize Christian discourses to legitimize political reform. Moi himself was a practising Christian and his Church attendance was often the first item on national radio and television news every Sunday. He was therefore much more tolerant of the Church than the political opposition. Still, during his reign as President a number of Church leaders were mysteriously killed in what many believed were political assassinations. These included Fr. John Kaiser of the Catholic Church and Bishop Alexander Muge of the Anglican Church of Kenya. It was widely suspected that having been fierce critics of the Moi government, both were killed by state agents.

Kariuki (1996) has observed that since gatherings of more than three people were proscribed in the heady years of Moi's leadership, the Church was one of the forums where public meetings could take place without the fear of arrest or political reprisals. Kariuki further notes that it was because sermons are privileged speech that they were less subject to official censorship. Haynes has pointed out, for example, that Church leaders such as David Gitari, John Gatu, Timothy Njoya, Alexander Muge and Henry Okullu, all helped 'focus popular concerns on the erosion of civil liberties, human rights violations, the stifling of opposition and the drift towards totalitarianism in their sermons' (113–114). They played a central role in generating and sustaining a public discourse on democracy and change in Kenya during this period (Ngunyi 1995). Even then, one cannot still possibly talk of a well-organized 'theology of power' in Kenya such as was the case in countries like South Africa. Instead, criticism was largely limited to the use of biblical hermeneutics. Torrance defines biblical hermeneutics

as referring to 'the rules one uses when seeking out the meaning of the scriptures … questions about the nature of knowledge, the use of language, and the scientific and ontological presuppositions operative in the mind of the exegete' (Torrance cited in Benson 1995, 188). According to Benson (1995), hermeneutics recognizes that the interpreter brings a pre-understanding to the text, which partly controls the reading of the text. A 'hermeneutical circle' is thus often deliberately set up by writers to manipulate the reading of the text. Reverends Njoya and Gitari particularly used biblical hermeneutics in their sermons to criticize the Moi regime. Benson (1995) provides some interesting examples, which we find particularly useful to this discussion. He gives the example of Gitari, who was among the most vocal critics of the Moi regime. In one of his sermons, quoting from the book of Daniel, Chap. 6, Gitari uses the Persian Empire as a setting whose exegetical context is contemporary Kenya.

> King Darius chose three ministers who were to receive reports from 120 administrators. We might describe them as Ministers in the 'Office of the President', responsible for provincial administration … If Daniel was an administrator in Kenya today, he would sell Kanu tickets to every citizen who qualifies and he would not register anybody as a voter who was not supposed to be registered … [T]he conspirators having failed to find faults in David's work had to look for faults elsewhere. After much consideration, they decided to remove Daniel by changing the constitution … King Darius made the mistake of allowing the constitution to be changed before this matter, which affected fundamental human rights was thoroughly discussed by all those concerned. (193)

Ancient Persia is used to mask the subject of the sermon, Kenya, but listeners/readers are nonetheless offered several clues that point towards a preferred reading. They are warned of a similar destructive end that befell Persia. Benson argues that 'such a reading of the text makes it speak with prophetic immediacy' (193). He notes the salience of an eschatologically centred hermeneutic in contemporary African, and specifically Kenyan theology where much is written in the shadow of an impending judgement—not as a 'supernatural apocalypse but national, social and economic catastrophe …' (190–191). This sermon, as did many others, rattled the government. Benson revisits the then Kanu national chairman's complaints soon after Gitari's sermon. The response was carried in a news report published in the *Daily Nation* newspaper.

> The KANU national chairman, Mr. David Okiki Amayo yesterday accused Bishop David Gitari of the Church of the Province of Kenya (CPK—now known as the Anglican Church of Kenya) of 'seeking to create chaos, confusion and incite *wananchi* (Kiswahili for the 'public') against their popularly elected leaders … Bishop Gitari's biblical reference to the Book of Daniel Chap. 6, about Darius and Daniel, has no parallel in Kenya. Such comparison can only be made with the aim of confusing the God-fearing and peace-loving Kenyans …' (*Daily Nation*, June 27, 1987)

In the government-owned *Kenya Times*, the response was even more livid.

> Preaching in Nyeri recently, the Rt. Reverend Dr. David Gitari … misinterpreted parts of the Old Testament in a vain effort aimed at justifying his own radical disposition … The Bishop glibly talked about King Darius of Persia adducing a patently irrelevant argument which cannot justifiably be applied to present day Kenya. (*Kenya Times* Editorial, June 29, 1987)

A few points stand out in these two examples. Amayo's reference to 'God-fearing Kenyans' underscores the fact that biblical discourse struck a familiar chord with readerships in the country and hence their likely religious but also political interpretation of the story. Moreover, Amayo's furious denial in fact confirms that parallels to this story did exist, hence the government's anxieties. In other words, these stories are applicable to its referents. The *Kenya Times* editorial similarly betrays officialdom's anxieties and seems to confirm the same arguments.

Biblical stories were popularly used in sermons by Church leaders, newspaper columnists, even politicians and then later appropriated in *Whispers*, sometimes verbatim. Mutahi would at times merely republish such sermons. Other times, he too deployed biblical hermeneutics. Mutahi routinely used biblical imagery and allusions in the column. In the story below, for example, he draws on the biblical story of 'Balam and the donkey that spoke back to its master' as a frame for his critique.

> Balam, according to Fr. Camisassius, was riding his donkey one day when it decided to behave like my whispermobile (The old family car driven by the character Whispers). That is, it suddenly developed all kinds of ills and refused to move. The warrior in Balam rose and he hit the donkey once. The animal decided to live up to its reputation and became stubborn. Balam called his ass a few nasty names and promised himself that he would sell it and acquire a new model, perhaps an imported one. He therefore gave

the donkey another kick. The ass did not rise an inch […] Then the least he expected happened. Instead of the ass rising in anger and giving him an *asante ya punda ni mateke* (a donkey's kick but also a Kiswahili expression criticizing one for being thankless) kick, it decided to talk although its clan knew only how to bray. If I remember right, Balam did not wait for the donkey to say another word. He did a Ben Johnson (the famous Canadian sprinter who was once a world 100m Olympic champion) and I guess he went to shop for another mode of transport that did not talk. (Mutahi 2002, 28)

This story has been considerably altered, yet it still remains fairly accessible to many who are familiar with the biblical story of 'Balaam and the donkey'. The biblical storyline is used here to tell a story whose object of critique is the state. The story can be variously interpreted, but it distinctly reads first and foremost as political commentary. The argument is fairly basic, perhaps even simplistic, yet it is in this apparent simplicity that it communicates most effectively. This is an example of one of Mutahi's techniques of understatement. The tyranny of the oppressive political class is likened to Balaam, while the oppressed are symbolized by the donkey—commonly known as the historical beast of burden, which is a fairly familiar reference. The political class is warned of the capacity of the oppressed to resist its exploitation.

In a similar example, 'Thank God, Jesus was not born in Nairobi' (*Sunday Nation*, December 22, 1991), the writer appropriates the biblical story about the birth of Jesus to comment on the corruption and poverty that Kenyans face especially in Nairobi. In the story, the narrator tells of how Jesus would have suffered living as a carpenter in Nairobi. He also talks about the tribulations Joseph, the husband to Mary, would have faced taking his wife to a maternity hospital in the city. For instance, he talks of how Joseph would have been forced to pay bribes to get Mary into a hospital and the frustrations he would have encountered using a *matatu* (commuter buses) as do many poor Kenyans living in Nairobi. Mutahi would always transport Jesus to the present, making him experience the Kenyan life in all its unsettling uncertainty. In one example, he argues that Jesus would not have lived to the age of 33 arguing that he would have probably died at the age of 17 in 'one of the High School fires in the country' (ibid.). If he survived these fires then he would have most likely been murdered by thugs in one of Nairobi's dangerous streets. Incidentally, this story was written at a time when there was widespread

unrest in secondary schools in Kenya with students burning down their dormitories. Meanwhile, insecurity was rife in Nairobi where murderous thugs were on the rampage, robbing and killing innocent people with wanton abandon. Mutahi used these biblical stories to discuss easily recognizable social problems Kenyans faced every day.

Equally notable is the point made by Lonsdale (2009, 60) that in Kenya, 'the Old Testament is generally regarded as the main biblical archive in which to search for prophetic statements of truth to power' while the New Testament is used as the 'source-book of personal and societal salvation'.

Rereading Kenya's Christian Missionary Past

It is important to recall our earlier observation that the normative desire to seek stability and thus preserve the status quo has often led to a rather convivial relationship between the state and the Church in Africa. Haynes (1996) argues that leading members particularly of mainstream religious hierarchies are often intimately bound with state representatives keen to maintain hegemonic control over society. In Kenya, the Church has historically worked closely with the state. In *Whispers*, Mutahi reflects on this relationship through his appropriation of his childhood experiences and particularly his Christian missionary background. The column thus provides some interesting insights into the workings of the mainstream Church and its relationship with the state. The manner in which Christianity is appropriated in *Whispers* is such that Mutahi collapses the past with the present in pursuit of a particular narrative vision—an indictment of the polity but also the role of the Church, both directly and indirectly in supporting the state and its repressive policies.

In recuperating the past, Mutahi locates his stories around his childhood years in the Mt. Kenya region, where he was born and brought up. This region had a huge missionary presence especially in the 1950s. Not surprisingly therefore, in reflecting on his past, there is a pervasive presence of Mutahi's own Catholic background in *Whispers*. This is principally mediated through two characters, Fr. Camisassius and Teacher Damiano, characters drawn from Mutahi's early interaction with the Church. The colonial economy of cultural conversion, done primarily through education, Christianization, and the introduction of new material cultures, is portrayed as having played a significant role in shaping the converts' worldview and indeed post-independence Kenya. Mutahi's Catholic past is thus an archive of popular history, one which he invokes to process present

realities. It is a history many of his readers are familiar with either due to its re-interpretation or having gone through the same experiences. Many of his readers are therefore aware of the curious relationship between the colonial administration, the Church and the school in the 'making' of the Kenyan as a subject for domination. In the column, there are hilarious accounts about the daily interactions between the early converts and the Christian missionaries. Revealed in these interactions are cases of clashing traditions, failed evangelization, the subversion of Christian teachings, conflicting moralities and so on. It is generally a love-hate relationship between the converts and the missionaries. This relationship, for example, is reflected in the often tense meetings between Whispers' grandfather (Nyaituga) and Fr. Camisassius. Nyaituga often described the Father thus:

> That man with the skin that looks as if it has been bewitched. One, how can he pour water on a man's nose and then give him a name given to cows where he comes from? Two, how can that man speak ill of good wine when he himself drinks some while saying *ngururia*? (A corruption of the Christian praise words Glory! Glory!). (*Sunday Nation*, March 12, 2000)

When one of Nyaituga's friend's daughters was converted to Christianity and went to live at Fr. Camisassius' convent, Nyaituga went to demand dowry from the Father. *Whispers* narrates an altercation that soon ensued between Nyaituga and the Father. The Father asked Nyaituga, 'My Son what brings you to my house?' Incensed, Nyaituga responded, 'Don't call me your son. I can only be your father because you have taken one of our daughters' (*Sunday Nation*, March 12, 2000).

One notes two conflicting worlds contesting for legitimacy. Both Fr. Camisassius and Nyaituga appear ignorant of each other's worlds. Notable too is the language of the priest, which is particularly revealing of the kind of paternalism that attended the missionary enterprise, an issue we discuss below. In other examples, the narrator talks of how cheeky young converts would also teach the Catholic Sisters especially one named Rosa, circumcision songs, which she would then sing 'like a weaver bird' in Church. Since she did not understand the Kikuyu language well, she would mistake such songs for religious praise songs. Enraged, Fr. Camisassius would reportedly 'turn into all the colours of the Italian flag' (*Sunday Nation*, March 12, 2000).

Although most of the stories narrated in the column are comical and melodramatic, beyond this hilarity lies significant images against which

contemporary social and political issues are mapped. *Whispers* especially reveals how the Church and the school work together to promulgate ideologies of domination both in pre- and post-independent Kenya. Especially discussed are the patterns of authority that emerge as a result of a systematic indoctrination that is now taken as a common-sense practice. A reading of the relationship between Fr. Camisassius and his converts, which we do below, especially uncovers how the colonial state diffused a paternal system of authority. How those who 'manned the outposts of the empire often extended overseas a system of rule patterned on the relationship of authority which existed in the metropole between parent and child, and school and child' (Cohen, cited in Schatzberg 1988, 85). Schatzberg (1988) has argued that in countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, and we want to extend this argument to Kenya, the Church by virtue of its near monopoly over education acted as the colonial state's premier ideological apparatus. It reinforced the idea of the convert being no more than an overgrown child. This brings to mind the political leadership's invented ideological myths such as the reference to the political leader as a 'Father of the Nation', a myth used by the polity to populate the public space, turning it into a fetish that effectively legitimizes its domination. The Church is thus seen as offering, either wittingly or unwitting, institutional support that helps reinforce the structures of domination. A few examples are in order.

Narrating the excitement that attends the release of national primary examination results, which has over the years become something of a ritual in Kenya, Mutahi subtly reflects on patterns of authority in colonial Kenya but which find resonance in the present. The narrator tells of how news was passed to successful candidates in his village.

> [W]hen the results came out, the same fellow with jiggered toes became somebody in the village. The news became known that I was somebody when the slopes of Mount Kenya education officer, the same fellow who was famous for terrorizing teachers when he caught them asleep in class drove his Second World War Ford Anglia into Appep's compound. He was accompanied by Damiano and Fr. Camisassius who would be smiling as if he had just received a telegram from heaven telling him that his reserved seat there was still waiting for him. (Mutahi 2002, 14)

The presence of the education officer, Damiano and Fr. Camisassius in the excerpt is symbolic of the relationship between the colonial administration,

the Church and the school as active participants working towards the success of the colonial project. In another article 'Whis Attempts to Woo Thatcher', the narrator apparently talks about his teenage years, how they seduced girls and how Fr. Camisassius disapproved of such relationships. He says:

> [I]f you are wondering what usually happened in the kitchen, let me tell you the biggest thing that happened was I holding Thatcher's hand for a minute. That was very rare though because teacher Damiano and Fr. Camisassius had taught us that young warriors and young skirt-wearers who had not seen the altar and joined in marriage would end up in hell when they died if they committed the sin of holding hands in the dark. (Mutahi 2002, 20)

The teacher and the priest are portrayed as allies working towards the success of an absurd morality, used here to emphasize the Catholic Church's inflexible doctrines on morality and also to demonstrate its understated tyranny. Indeed, in several articles, we are told of how converts were 'not allowed to sleep on their stomachs lest they fell into temptations', how they were supposed to 'hate and fear sin' so much so that if they met a 'skirt-wearer' who was not their sister, they were obliged to 'turn back or close their eyes'! Of course the stories are deliberately stretched and dramatized but this is done mainly to emphasize the absurdity of Christian morality, which isn't dissimilar to the current forms of political 'morality'. The stories serve to show the Church's attitude towards African moralities and the ironic mode Mutahi adopts in a sense hints at his rejection of these practices enforced through the working alliance of the Church, the state and the school.

Fr. Camisassius is further portrayed as having created a network of loyalists who terrorized converts to gain favours from the Church. Mutahi shows how the Church was involved in the politics of patronage and clientelism. In the column, emphasis is especially put on the client-patron relationship between Fr. Camisassius and Teacher Damiano. It is also useful to call attention to the place of the African Teacher Damiano in this relationship. The relationship between Fr. Camisassius and Teacher Damiano is uneven and akin to that of a father and child. The same applies to Fr. Camisassius' relationship with his African Christian converts, whom he 'came to save from the devil', as the narrator often intimated. Indeed, those who did not tow the Father's line were rebuked as 'Bastardo Kikuyuensis', which the narrator translated as 'this Kikuyu who does not

know his father', a description of an 'illegitimate child', a product of the kind of immorality the Church was keen to 'address'.

Other insidious signs of this paternalism are the names we read of the villagers living around the Slopes; Appepklonia, Damiano, Valentino and similar. Indeed, in one of the articles 'Priest Caught in Trap' (*Sunday Standard*, May 17, 1992), we are told how Fr. Camisassius renamed the whole village giving them Italian names.

He used baptismal water to name one of our neighbours Gibetting, another Scammogia, another Bacciga and yet another Rondela. The wife of the Catechist could not accept anything other than Anselma while her husband settled for Peponne (*Sunday Standard*, May 17, 1992).

Here we note the lack of separation between Christianity as a religion and the European colonial mentality of racial superiority that considers it improper that Africans should have their own names. Naming imposes identities, and to an extent presupposes emptiness. But these narratives are not quite about the past, they are used to give meaning to the present. The aim is to demonstrate how the disempowered are regarded as children to be shown the way. In Mutahi's Kenya, the citizenry is regarded by the state as children perpetually in need of guidance. Mutahi's intention thus is to provoke key questions regarding this relationship.

Meanwhile, the converts were all forced to learn 'the language of God—Latin' so that every morning and evening, converts had to say innumerable 'Ave Marias' and 'Deo Gratias' at the whims of the Father (*Sunday Standard*, May 17, 1992). Fr. Camisassius is portrayed as not only eccentric, but every bit a tyrant. The tyranny and hypocrisy of the Church and of the Father is allegorically likened to present political administrations.

Mutahi's discussion of the Christian missionary past helps him raise questions about the relationship between the Church and the state if it also underlines the institutionalized processes of indoctrination that turns individuals into subjects for domination. Mutahi's own refusal to become a Catholic priest can partly be seen as a rejection of this indoctrination.

We need to reflect on the fact that these stories cast the mainstream Church in a light that lends suspicions over its ability to question the dominant class precisely because it is a part of this class. But we also want to agree with Derek Peterson's (2012, 243) idea that there is just as much need to look at how the missionary enterprise was subverted by the converts; how, for instance, 'missionary words and phrases were taught, translated, recomposed and deconstructed in vernacular discourse'. In an interesting study of creative writing in colonial Kenya, Peterson demonstrates

how converts appropriated Christianity within their own universe without necessarily deserting their worlds. He also gives other examples in Africa—such was the case of the Ngwato Kingdom where royals, clergy and Tswana women used prayer groups and Bible lessons to bind disparate people together under a political regime. In Nigeria, he talks of how 'cultural nationalists imagined the Yoruba 'nation' by re-interpreting missionaries' historical ethnography', while in Natal, South Africa, Isaiah Shembe gave shape and form to his Zulu-centred Church by retranslating the Christian scriptures (244). It is important therefore to observe that while the entry to the past re-creates the brutality and tyranny of the missionary enterprise, Mutahi also demonstrates how converts, to use Petersons' words 'extended, retranslated and deconstructed' (ibid.) the Christian universe, a call perhaps to do the same in present-day Kenya. This 'deconstruction' is partly addressed in the author's reconstruction of the 1990s with the re-emergence of a number of popular Christian religious movements such as the reconstituted AICs and Pentecostal Charismatic Churches, a discussion we carry out below.

Popular Christian Religious Movements and the Public Sphere in *Whispers*

The repressive political conditions and declining economic opportunities in Kenya in the late 1980s through the 1990s not only coincided with but also led to the rise of popular Christian religious movements. These movements were thus partly products of social and political disillusionment. As Ranger (1993) has argued, popular Christian religious movements such as the Pentecostal Charismatic Churches and AICs 'constituted a form of politics'. It is a politics which, as Birgit Meyer (2004, 463) argues, 'was broadened so as to encompass the everyday'. Similarly, Comaroff (1985, 191) has given the example of South Africa, where the Tshidi Zionism constructed 'a systematic counterculture, a modus operandi explicitly associated with those estranged from the centres of power and communication'. But these popular religious movements have also been noted as 'linking up their born-again believers with global circuits' (Meyer 2004, 448). At a time when many suffered from the effects of declining national economies, these Churches preached hope in the form of the 'Prosperity Gospel' and were therefore far more responsive to the lived realities of converts. The mainstream Church was largely seen to have failed in addressing their faithful's immediate social concerns besides ignoring the political contexts

of these problems. The charismatic Churches thus assumed a powerful social and political dimension in Africa (Ellis and Ter Haar 2004).

Among the most notable characteristics of these charismatic Churches was their very visible presence in the public space in the form of a multiplication of places of worship, their love for public ceremonies and parades and the use of new media for spreading their messages (Ellis and Ter Haar 2004, 2). Meyer (2003, 3) has observed that Pentecostal Churches, for instance, were characterized by their 'impressive capacity to push its expressive forms into a wider arena, reaching beyond the sphere of religious institutions'. Andre and Marshall-Fratani (2001, 5) have on their part noted that most charismatic Churches generally have almost 'a complete absence of any overarching structure or authority according to which orthodoxy may be determined and policed, or any institutionalized mode of legitimizing leadership'. Their collapse of these hierarchies meant that they were accessible to converts who were able to build more horizontal relationships with each other, which in itself was a demonstration of an alternative form of relationship.

These Churches could mobilize Christianity for political ends but simultaneously use the religion to provide them with answers to their spiritual and material problems and needs (see also Meyer 2003). The faithful could commune from their living rooms, the bars, stadia and parks focusing on the everyday. Kalu (2000) has argued that because of their charismatic character, many people saw these new Churches as capable of addressing their immediate problems. They offered 'a more 'user-friendly' alternative to those now less attracted to mainstream Churches both as belief systems but also as forms of community organisations that offered solidarity and group togetherness especially at a time of serious social and political upheavals'. (23)

We also want to reiterate that the argument that the exclusionary tendencies of the state forced many Kenyans into a state of 'internal exile'. In an attempt to fend off feelings of alienation, those on the political periphery retreated into alternative identities. In the late 1980s through the 1990s Kenya witnessed a resurgence of various nationalisms, some taking an ethno-regional form while others an ethno-religious, in part, to gain leverage in their quest for power (Ngunyi 1996). It is within this context that one also needs to understand the emergence especially of the Christian revivalist movements.

But Meyer (2004, 463) makes another important observation regarding these charismatic Churches. She talks about their 'disorienting, unset-

tling, and destructive implications … the contradictions on which it thrives and the disappointments it generates'. This is a familiar narrative in Mutahi's discussions of Christianity and its entanglement with the political and the social.

In *Whispers*, Mutahi uses the character Thatcher to examine the emergence of these new religious movements and demonstrates how Christianity is used to mobilize the faithful around the politics of the everyday. In the column, Thatcher belongs to a religious organization called the 'Sect of Many Waters'. This Sect represents the charismatic Churches in Kenya that broke away from the mainstream Churches some as early as the 1960s. The name of the Church is reminiscent of the famous *Ndini ya maĩ maĩgĩ* (the faith of much water), a Kikuyu name coined following the emergence of Churches which practiced adult baptism through deep immersion in streams and rivers. These Churches were at once religious, at another cultural and political.

Thatcher and members of her Sect constantly borrow their idioms of expression from the past especially from Kenya's struggle years. This is an archive that helps them provoke calls for social and political justice. Ellis and Ter Haar (2004, 6) suggest that such borrowing is intended to 'emphasize their connection to, or difference from, other groups, in ways that have to be considered in historical depth'. In one example, Whispers says that Thatcher's Sect members sing various songs, including "*Matatizo nimeyazoea* and *Ana sauti njiani na kwake nyumbani kunguni*" (Trans: 'I'm used to problems' and 'He flaunts his success while his house is infested with bed bugs')'. These songs are appropriated from secular music, in part suggesting the overlaps between the sacred and the secular but equally demonstrate how politics, religion and the everyday are entangled. The songs are a political and social commentary on the present. Similar songs by the Sect's members were also taken from familiar independence struggle songs.

Among the most notable characteristics of the new religious movements was their emphasis on individual biblical study, a practice we see a lot in Thatcher and a key characteristic of charismatic Churches. Liturgical texts, especially the Bible, were increasingly used to interpret the everyday. But it is important to note that among the various interpretations they made, people saw in the Bible a powerful struggle text. Thatcher draws a lot on this reading of the Bible. Biblical stories are reconstructed by Thatcher in the column and brought to readers' immediate life-worlds, dealing with their everyday encounters and thus becoming sources of social and

political criticism as well as explaining certain everyday dilemmas. Haynes (1996, 17) has argued that when these religious movements emerged, they offered 'a scripturalist form of religious piety which affirmed the central relevance of the Bible to the day to day activities of their followers'. This in part provided their members several possibilities denied by mainstream Churches. Religious discourse thus became 'disturbingly public' (Meyer 2004), pushed into the realm of popular where it began to address a number of everyday concerns. Scholars such as Wilson (1982, 122) note that the new approach even allowed for a 'radical re-examination of the premises on which established procedures had been justified'.

In Thatcher, Mutahi gives us a character who is notoriously religious. Indeed, she sometimes cedes her independence to the Church even when her very name suggests otherwise. Thatcher seems to find a site of relative freedom in the 'Sect of Many Waters'. She is capable of confronting her husband on a number of issues quite effectively from the vantage of her religious background. Thatcher easily draws from her Church, from Christian teachings and the new (political) possibilities availed by the new religious sects to confront Whispers. She is said to constantly hold fellowships with other members of the 'Sect of Many Waters' with whom they pray for the salvation not only of her husband but also of the country. They use liturgical texts especially to criticize patriarchy, which in itself is a social sanction but could also be an allegorical criticism of the state. Because the family unit in *Whispers* is used as an allegory of the nation as we have observed earlier, Thatcher's criticism of her husband's wayward ways can be seen as social and political commentaries of a national nature. Indeed, it is important to underscore the fact that Whispers was a character type who oscillated between a protagonist and an antagonist in the column. So that at the political level and especially in the context of political reform, he is at once 'the people' and at another, the privileged Other. Barbs directed at the character are therefore targeted at 'the people' and the polity depending on the context.

But one also notes Thatcher's sometimes near fanatical reliance on Christianity as problematic. It is here that we should borrow from Meyer (2004), particularly her argument about the 'disorienting, unsettling and destructive implications of born-again Christianity'. Thatcher sometimes uses Christianity not as a 'vehicle for cognition' to use the words of Ogude (1996, 57), but as an imprisoning culture of dependence. In fact, her religious fervour is constantly satirized by the consciousness of a sceptical narrator, who doubts her strand of Christianity's redemptive ability.

For instance, we are told of how Thatcher constantly 'broadcasts her husband's failures to God every morning and night' (*Sunday Nation*, August 18, 1996). In one example, she is said to be telling members of her sect the following.

> Before I discovered Jesus, that beast of mine used to arrive home at three in the morning. Now I see him at one in the morning. The Lord works in mysterious ways. His wonders to perform! (*Sunday Nation*, August 18, 1996)

In another article titled 'The spirit is willing but my throat's weak' (*Sunday Nation*, December 3, 1995), Thatcher is said to have prayed relentlessly that Whispers stops drinking. When she read in a newspaper report that bars were to be closed in Wajir, a town in the North Eastern part of Kenya, she is said to have

> … taken a drum and sang a number of hymns of the Sect of Many Waters … The hymns said something to the effect that God loves her so much that he had finally closed the river from which her husband drank the demon drink.

Like Mrs. Hill in Alice Walker's *Meridian*, Thatcher takes refuge in religion, which sometimes becomes, to paraphrase Pauline Uwakweh (1997, 53), 'a mask and an escape mechanism for her frustrations'. Yet this is not pure fiction. Indeed, in the 1980s–1990s decade, religion and especially Christianity provided a means of spiritual escape for many Kenyans particularly the most vulnerable groups such as women. Problems were often 'left to God'. It is in religion that many Kenyans began to seek refuge and in *Whispers*, Mutahi seeks to demonstrate how this particularly denied them political agency.

But Mutahi also humorously discusses how the country's declining economic opportunities made religion a lucrative business. Many Churches emerged in many parts of the country with evangelists and average conmen claiming to be 'prophets' and 'bishops' to feed on the desperation of poor Kenyans. Below is a hilarious example of Mutahi's alter ego Whispers' plans to become a prophet and cash in on this sense of desperation which is fundamentally a parody of the trend.

> [T]he best way of spreading the gospel is by robbing other Kenyans and there is no better way than declaring yourself the agent of Jesus Christ by naming yourself a prophet or a bishop …. [I] will hold that brick size Bible high and declare: "The Lord Jesus came to me in a dream! Say Amen! He

said to me, Whispers son of Appep! Whispers husband of Thatcher! Say Halleluya! The Lord said to me, Whispers, I have chosen you to preach my Word among your kind that believes tea is poison … I have chosen you so that you can become an example to all those who have been agents of the devil that I can indeed work miracles. Say Amen!"

The crowd will of course say Amen and Halleluya as if they have been paid to do so. In the meantime, I will be looking at the mob in what is called a feasibility study. A feasibility study includes checking out the faces of those present and deciding what to say so that you can touch their wallets. I will say 'gaspol' (this is a poor imitation of an American accent. Most of the preachers of charismatic Churches shown on Kenyan television were in the main American) as they all say instead of gospel because 'gaspol' sounds mysterious. I will continue and say, "the 'gaspol' must be spread from Mogotio to Garbatula. From Sondu Miriu to Tala, from Kiima Kiu to Maua. So give to the Lord. Give him that five thousand. Give your God that twenty thousand for what does it benefit a man to gain the world and lose his soul. *Neno litaendeleea* …" (Trans: The Word will spread). I will receive it in the name of our saviour in whose blood we are washed. One thing will lead to another and soon I will start the Bishop Whispers Ministries. (*Sunday Nation*, March 26, 2000)

Mutahi also notes how charismatic preachers target the streets where sinners allegedly confess their sins, a practice he mocks. But while it might even suggest the vulnerability of the Kenyan subject to conniving conmen, it is also important to note that those who flock these meetings similarly have their own agenda and the charismatic Churches open up the opportunity to realize these. A member of these charismatic Churches apparently confesses thus:

[B]efore I saw the light, the devil was my assistant … my specialization was adultery. Other people's wives were not safe at all. Their daughters were not safe either. Halleluhya. Now I am sticking to my wife and other husbands can now consider their wives safe. Once again, there is a mountain of halleluyas from the 'brothers and sisters in Christ'. If you asked me, a man who has really seen the light should go further than that. There is need for full disclosure. (*Sunday Nation*, August 27, 1995)

These examples are at once a commentary on a number of social problems but also a way of restating how declining economic opportunities made Kenyans desperate for answers to their problems. Mutahi thus demonstrates how through exploring manifestations of Christian religious experi-

ences we can see how agency is acquired both to confront power and also to comment on everyday issues faced by many Kenyans.

Conclusion

Mutahi, much like other writers such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o, David Maillu, Grace Ogot and Margaret Ogola, acknowledged what according to Max Weber is

> … religion's tremendous consolidating power … [and] [t]he peculiar ability of religious metaphors, places and rituals to sum up and intensify experience … by joining everyday events to a sense of supernatural intervention and by reinforcing religious ideas with material resources. (cited in Levine 1986, 100)

As a religion so deeply integrated in Kenya, Christianity is part of Kenya's public culture, and the Christian discourse not only helps construct a 'public', it also offers an expressive space and material suitable for addressing a whole range of issues. Thus, to paraphrase Ellis and Ter Haar (2004), Christianity provides a frame of reference capable of assimilating and incorporating reflection on important spiritual and secular developments (112). Christianity in Kenya remains a site that easily binds disparate groups together. Indeed, this discussion demonstrates how Christianity served to bring together a group that felt excluded from the political centre, providing them a new identity and archive from which to borrow to address their concerns. It is clear that in Christianity, Mutahi finds as a rich and potent reservoir for the 'popular'. Through biblical hermeneutics, the column intrudes upon readers' religious predisposition by offering highly selective groups of facts as a necessary preparation for engaging with a range of issues that affect their lives. Christianity provided a metalanguage for the embodiment and narration of these issues. Mutahi's appropriation of Christian discourses is such that they provide useful templates for legitimizing criticism, both social and political. Besides, it appears that when criticizing while drawing on these discourses, the writer's work transcends the voice of the narrator and assumes much greater authority.

Mutahi also attempts to show how manifestations of Christianity in the 1980s through the 1990s were more than just about the Church providing space for alternative social and political imaginations as has been suggested by a number of scholars. Instead, the very content of

Christian discourse was revised and recast as part of, and (re-)configured as relevant to the political process. To borrow Meyer's (2003, 3) arguments describing similar developments in Ghana, 'religious forms and elements fed existing concerns and reproduced them within a new framework'. Christian discourses were thus effectively combined with cultural and political discourses to inform social and political actions and debates.

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The Text and Its Publics: 'Making' the Audience in *Whispers*

As a site that galvanized people around certain 'popular concerns', *Whispers* called into existence certain 'publics', which, though heterogeneous, were imagined as homogenously accessible. To 'make' these publics, Mutahi employed a number of narrative strategies. The primary focus of this chapter is to explore some of these strategies and particularly to discuss the place of 'publics' in 'texts'. The chapter begins with a reading of 'publics' and how readers are 'sewn' into texts. We first seek to establish the centrality of 'publics' in the writing of popular fiction and then proceed to examine how Mutahi hails his 'publics', looking at how he imagines, constructs and even manipulates these 'publics'.

This chapter is predicated on the premise that writers do not write to an anonymous public. Instead, they imagine their 'publics' and define/construct them through various strategies. It is important to note at this introductory stage that this is not an attempt at audience research. Rather, we only borrow from audience research traditions because they are useful in our analysis. To be sure, audience research traditions generally revolve around two main strands of thought. The first strand takes audiences as 'obedient subjects of texts' (Hofmeyr 2001, 332), while the second strand posits audiences as active participants in the process of meaning-making. The latter tradition, where we situate this study, argues that 'publics and consumers are not simply people waiting out there for something to consume, but on the contrary, they are brought into being as consumers

and publics' (Hartley 1996, 47). The first view, largely attributed to the Frankfurt School of Theodor Ardono and Max Horkheimer, argues that the media, for instance, makes audiences 'cultural cretins … unable to make any sensible discriminations of value' (cited in Tester 1994, 66). The Frankfurt School, for example, sees the media's relationship with audiences as one way: a monologue. They generally regard the audience as a passive mass, not active in and for itself. It is a suggestion that has, however, been roundly discredited. Indeed, the very process of 'making' audiences cultural cretins itself involves an active engagement of the audience. Tester (1994, 66) thus argues that 'activity is required of the audience if the audience is actually to be passive. The audience has to be able to respond to media texts in a way that denies the possibility of a response'. A similar argument is made in Voloshinov's (1988, 118) influential essay 'The Construction of Utterance' where he explains the 'dialogic nature of utterance'. He argues that 'the utterance looks for his agreement or disagreement, in other words, for a critical reception on the part of the listener' (ibid.). Fiske (1987) similarly underscores the dialogic nature of the 'text', arguing that the potential for multiple interpretations of a text such as a television programme suggests that a dialogue exists between the text and its audience.

This chapter does not agree with the idea that texts 'create obedient subjects'. Nonetheless, it does acknowledge that texts are, to quote Hofmeyr (2001, 323), 'imbued with extraordinary powers' and are therefore able to imagine, construct and manipulate audiences. Among the questions that have informed discussions on audiences and texts, and which we are persuaded should be significant to this discussion, are those posed by Shaun Moores (1994, 256). With little variation, the same questions guide this discussion:

1. How do media texts construct for their readers particular forms of knowledge and pleasure, making available particular identities and identifications?
2. How do readers' differential social positioning and cultural competencies bear upon their interpretation or decoding of texts?

Moores argues that texts 'produce ways of seeing the world and thereby organize consumption in certain ways. They construct the look or gaze of the spectator binding her or him into the fiction and into a position of imagining knowledge' (ibid.). Studies by Hall (1980) and Barthes (1974,

258) also demonstrate how 'readers are sewn into the text in an ongoing and constantly renewed process'. In Hall's illuminating study 'Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse' (1980), he argues that texts are encoded with certain meanings although the codes of encoding and decoding 'may not be perfectly symmetrical' (131). One explanation for this, to quote Moores (1994, 131), is that texts are all 'to some extent polysemic. There are always several possible readings of the text especially at the connotative level of signification—the realm of what Roland Barthes has called "second-order or associative meanings"'. But Hall (1980, 135) also observes that 'polysemy must not be confused with pluralism … there exists a pattern of preferred readings'. The text is therefore not open to just any kind of reading since 'encoding will have the effect of constructing some of the limits and parameters within which decoding must operate' (ibid.). He calls these parameters 'significant clusterings' (ibid.), a strategy we note in *Whispers*.

Owing to its centrality to this study, it is important to give a working definition of 'publics' or the sense in which we use the term in this discussion. Quite importantly, one must note that by audiences, we are not referring to 'measured markets'. We are guided by Warner's (2002, 51) definition of a public as 'never just a congeries of people, never the sum of persons who happen to exist'. A public, he explains, always has a way of 'organising itself as a body and of being addressed in discourse. Publics are therefore different from persons' (ibid.). Warner (2002) further observes that 'a public' is imaginary, yet this is not to suggest that it is unreal. Moreover, by acknowledging reading as a discursive practice, we share Warner's argument that 'an individual will sometimes be called into being as an audience, sometimes not' (67). In other words, not all readers even of the same text can be part of the text's audience. This chapter therefore perceives of the audience as a 'discursive community' brought into being by the text. Although *Whispers* may be ultimately aimed at *the public*, it only constructs *publics*. Against this background, we attempt to analyse how, in *Whispers*, audiences are imagined, constructed and even manipulated by the writer. Among the elements that we examine include the use of stereotypical characters, the use of certain modes of address such as 'synthetic personalisation', techniques of understatement, the use of 'hidden transcripts' such as rumour and gossip, the deployment of narrative gaps, media templates and the use of a demotic register in the column.

At its inception in 1983, *Whispers* read more like an instructive manual relying heavily on stock mannerisms. This placed several constraints on

the column's narrative possibilities. We have argued that these constraints partly forced the writer to adopt a new narrative framework. As already discussed, Mutahi adopted an allegorical narrative framework, deploying an allegorical family and characters. These characters were to become determinative tropes, discourse and symbolic markers for the column's publics. They acted as points of reference and cognition for audiences. These were characters that readers would relate with for they encoded familiar traits and values, represented familiar conflicts and told their readers' stories.

As discourse markers and social symbols, the characters in *Whispers* were particularly modelled on certain prevailing stereotypes. The use of stereotypes, Barber (1997, 357) remarks, is a way of 'making models that can be applied to readers' own specific circumstances …' Barber also notes that the function of 'stereotype clichés and formulas in African popular culture generally could fruitfully be treated as the point at which individual experiences and shared concerns intersect' (ibid.). Similarly, Catherine Cole observes that stereotypes act as points where 'models of behaviour (representation) become models for behaviour (warnings, advice) …' (cited in Barber 1997, 357). Other scholars like Bjornson (1990, 21) argue that stereotypical characters reflect the public's assumptions about individual identity more accurately than do heroes in many novels in the canonical tradition. Stereotyped characters, to borrow Barber's conclusions of Yoruba theatre characters, 'embody moral messages specifically for spectators of the same gender or occupying the same social role …' (Barber 2000, 220). The creation of publics is about collectivizing experiences and in *Whispers*, these stereotypes collectivize experiences hence publics.

There are two ways in which stereotypes are used in the column. First, Mutahi employs stereotypes about the Kenyan society in general and the Whispers' household is portrayed as embodying these stereotypes. These stereotypes provide a shared archive of Kenya's history and cultural pool, hence a very familiar site of reference. Second, he routinely draws upon ethnic stereotypes. This he does as a way of hailing his publics while simultaneously problematizing their 'performance' as the dominant form of social and political organization.

Whispers, Thatcher, The Investment and Whispers Jr are some of the characters deliberately loaded with recognizable stereotypical traits. We have already discussed how Whispers is stereotyped as the quintessential chauvinistic Kenyan male and can only stress that the character is a caricatured distortion of what is assumed to be a typical Kenyan male. While

the portrayal of this character is mirthful, he is without doubt a character with whom readers can easily identify. Indeed, according to the writer, there was a trait of Whispers in every Kenyan male (Personal interview by author. Nairobi, February, 2003). Incidentally, with all his bigoted irreverence, Whispers was among the most popular characters in the column. Bjornson (1990, 33) has argued elsewhere that such representation is not always gratuitous 'but serves to rip the veil of respectability from the attitudes that people regard as normal. It challenges people to laugh at it, for if they reflect on the cause of their laughter they will recognize that such assumptions also obtain in the real world'. We note Whispers' chauvinistic traits in his relationship with Thatcher. According to Whispers, Thatcher is not supposed to know much else than how to 'manage the kitchen' just because he paid dowry to her clansmen. He expects Thatcher to 'nod like a lizard in the sun' and never to question any of his decisions. Mutahi gives us the face of male patriarchy in Kenya. The payment of dowry has structures of male-female relationships and has traditionally made women subordinate to men within the context of marriage. But when this patriarchy is dramatized in the way Mutahi does with the character Whispers, he is ripping that veil of respectability that Bjornson talks about. People begin to see the absurdity of these attitudes. Thatcher, on the other hand, is stereotyped as a heavy-handed matriarch, emboldened by circulating narratives about individual freedom and her religious faith. She is almost the female face of the husband she disavows. She is bold but also disturbingly aggressive. On the one hand, she is capable of holding her family together even in the most exacting of situations, but on the other hand she is also a tyrant. Although she transcends normalized traditional expectations of the woman/mother, her transformation is not without fault. It is in some way a reflection of the anxieties inherent in African modernity.

Whisper's daughter, The Investment, and his son, Whispers Jr, are partly stereotyped as social outlaws. They represent the youth in their quest for space in a society undergoing rapid transformation and one that refuses to understand them. As noted earlier, their dressing, language and interests are meant to index the modern day rebellious teenager. But The Investment, we argue, also personifies critical cultural markers. The very reference to girls as investments and therefore a source of wealth for their fathers restates the prevalence of this belief. It is a cultural reality that cuts across Kenya's various ethnic groups and therefore a powerful way of hailing publics. But in The Investment, we also see an emerging woman

confidently defying tradition and in search of new ways of defining the self and her place in society.

As noted above, the other way in which stereotypes are used in *Whispers* to hail publics is to use certain ethnic stereotypes. Mutahi sometimes deliberately loads his characters with known 'ethnic traits'. In popular Kenyan lore, the Luo community, for instance, are taken to be and therefore depicted in the column as arrogant, the Kikuyu are described as having an insatiable appetite for wealth, the Luhya are typified as easily compromised because of their supposed love for food, while the Kisii are imagined as being uniquely temperamental. Meanwhile, communities resident along the Kenyan coast are stereotyped as being lazy. Atieno-Odhiambo (2002, 230) argues that in Kenya tribalism in particular is an everyday experience and that people use ethnic stereotypes as a practical vocabulary of politics and social movements. These ethnic stereotypes are a part of Kenya's popular traditions capable of hailing publics. Yet, quite apart from being used to hail audiences, they are also used to reflect the nature of social and political conflict in the country. Stereotypical characters are thus used to intensify the familiar. This way, not only do readers identify with the characters, they are also drawn to those issues making such distortions necessary.

Debates on the use of stereotypes, however, remain varied. Some critics point out that it becomes a problem for those who gain no further knowledge about the group being stereotyped and that potentially damaging assumptions remain intact. Yet others like Barker (1989) argue quite the opposite. Barker notes that the use of stereotypes is a normal tendency to categorize and that this is how we make sense of our social world. Barker further contends that replacing stereotypes with more positive characterization 'render invisible the map of social conflict and inequality that stereotypes put up' (207). Similar arguments are made by Taylor and Willis (1999, 44) who argue that stereotypes 'serve to show the distinctions at work in society, acting as indicators about power structures and existing social conflicts'. In *Whispers*, stereotypes act as reference points and as points of cognition while at the same time demonstrating social and political conflicts in society and how it is in fact these that necessitate such classifications in the first place.

The use of stereotypical characters also means that Mutahi relies heavily on social history or what Green (1997, 10) describes as 'subject matter that privileges the average, the ordinary, the everyday ...' *Whispers* deals with the commonplace, the everyday dilemmas of the Kenyan subject,

which Mutahi uses to mediate and comment on life in modern day Kenya. The weekend escapades of Whispers are a common phenomenon in most urban centres in the country. Yet it is a phenomenon which is in fact a form of escape for many city residents struggling to cope with the challenges of the emergent realities of city living. These challenges include feelings of emasculation as men lose their authority as the seat of centralized power in the family, the impact of the country's economic decline, feelings of cultural and political alienation and so on. Through stories of their everyday existence, these characters reflect these challenges. Publics are thus brought together through the use of familiar characters and situations. They share in their fears and hopes.

Weaving this fictional universe of *Whispers* into a rational contemporary discourse are the author's styles of narration or what we want to call 'modes of address'. One of the most significant of these styles is what Fairclough (1989, 62) calls 'synthetic personalisation'. Through this strategy, text and reader are 'synthesised in a friendly relationship' (ibid.). The column's public or imagined public, though anonymous, is engaged in debates by personalized references and dialogue. A space is defined in which the writer and reader engage in a friendly, or sometimes an antagonist relationship on various issues of common interest. Through this kind of address, both the social and temporal distances are shortened. Talbot (1995) has observed that if an actual reader has a great deal in common with the reader implied in the text, they are likely to take up points comfortably. But if the distance—social and temporal—increases between the two, so does the negotiation. Mutahi therefore attempts to shorten the social and temporal space through this style of narration. This 'personalization' can also be discerned in the narrative voices adopted by the writer. In the column, although the writer tells his stories in the first-person voice, he often shifts to the oral narrative mode, inviting his readers to a dialogue hence creating familiarity and personalizing the relationship. In an excerpt demonstrative of this style, Mutahi writes:

> … [D]id I hear someone say, "Thank God the bore is gone"? Did I hear someone say, Please Whis don't go … (*Sunday Nation*, April 1, 2002)

The writer merely imagines a response and actually impresses upon the readership to respond. He imagines communication as a dialogic process of meaning-making. Equally significant is the fact that the writer also intimates that story telling is a weaving process that involves both the narrator

and the audience (Ogude 1999, 56). But one also notes the element of understatement in the example above and in the column as a whole. Why does he, for instance, call himself a bore? In various other instances, he calls his column 'a third-rate column' and refers to his readers as 'readers of the third-rate column'. Meanwhile, he often says he is 'neither too clever nor too stupid'. His brains, on the other hand, are 'reconditioned goat brains'. Mutahi 'downgrades' in order to elicit participation. Through this kind of understatement the writer and reader create a shared space of and for the 'ordinary'. But the subtexts of these understatements are powerful commentaries on very profound issues.

It is also interesting to note that although the column employs the first-person narrative voice, the writer equally assumes the narrative powers of an omniscient narrator—the third-person narrator. Mutahi combines first-person telling and third-person observation. Knowledge is gained through introspection and information by reportage. His use of the third-person is essentially to maintain control of the narrative's point of view. The use of the third-person is an attempt to also 'dominate the subject'. We have noted that there are elements of New Journalism in Mutahi's work, a style in which dominating the subject in the first-person voice becomes difficult. The occasional use of the third-person gives the writer some control. While the writer engages the audience and calls for their involvement in the process of meaning-making, he subtly takes control of the narrative and defends certain positions.

Mutahi also makes use of 'narrative gaps' or 'silences' as a strategy to construct his publics. The taciturn, almost report-like style of the column restricts internal monologues but creates appropriate silences in the narratives. The reader is asked to read diacritically across these 'silences'. The targeted audience is therefore actively involved in the narrative. Through the creation of these deliberate 'silences', a public that shares in the experiences being narrated is imagined by the writer. The reader is forced to actively engage with the text's 'unconscious'. We can also argue that through this strategy, the writer exploits the element of dramatic irony in which both the author and audience share knowledge of the subject. Similarly, the element of ambiguity that is very much a part of this column finds a vent in the strategy. For instance, Mutahi barely mentioned then President Daniel arap Moi by name in the column. Instead, Moi was simply the 'man who was born and brought up in Sacho'. Kenyan readers share in the knowledge of Moi's birthplace, Sacho, a rural outpost in the depths of the Rift Valley. This kind of description served several purposes.

First, it underlined the ordinariness of the former president, undermining his elevated status as *mtukufu* (Trans: Kiswahili for 'an honourable person') and making readers engage with him on a more ordinary level. This displacement of authority onto the narrative space allows both the reader and the writer to 'finger, touch, ridicule and laugh' at authority to use the words of Bakhtin (1981).

An interesting comparison can be taken from Scott's (1990) discussion of 'concealment' in the dramatization of power. Scott gives the examples of Genet's *The Screens*, set in Algeria. In it, labourers 'kill their European overseer when his Arab maid discovers he has used padding on his stomach and buttocks to make an imposing appearance. Once he is reduced to ordinary proportions, they are no longer intimidated' (50). Scott argues that 'by controlling the public stage, the dominant can create an appearance that approximates what, ideally, they would want the subordinates to see. The deception—or propaganda—they devise may add padding to their stature but it will also hide whatever might detract from their grandeur and authority' (ibid.).

There are also times when Mutahi would merely use certain phrases that had become part of Moi's vocabulary and which he knew his readers could easily recognize. For instance, he would use the phrase, '[M]y friends, nobody likes the black man. The white man is dangerous' (*Sunday Nation,* May 14, 2000). Quite often, whenever he was under attack from the international community, Moi would play the race card to appeal to racial sympathies. He would claim such attacks were racially motivated and remind Kenyans of their 'blackness'.

Below is another illustrative excerpt of some of the instances of the silences we are referring to:

> There are certain enemies of peace, love and unity led by one Castro son of Aringo, who have been saying seditious things recently. He is the same man who one day looked at the man who was born and brought up in Sacho and instead of seeing a man of flesh and blood, he saw Jesus Christ. So he said things to the effect that the man from Sacho was the prince of peace …. (*Sunday Nation*, May 13, 2001)

The text assumes certain shared knowledge between the writer and his readers. 'Peace, Love and Unity' was Moi's (in)famous political slogan, widely diffused to populate the public space in an attempt to legitimize his power. Atieno-Odhiambo (2002, 188) argues after that for the most part

of its post-independence history, Kenya has been 'a guided democracy, a situation in which the ruling regime knows what is in the best interests of the citizenry'. Atieno-Odhiambo further argues that in Kenya 'the instrumentality for depoliticization has been the state while its justifying ideology has been order' (ibid.). Through political slogans such as Moi's 'Peace, Love and Unity', dissent was not tolerated ostensibly for the 'good of society'. Yet, one sees this argument as one contrived by the state to justify its hegemony. In the example given, Mutahi deliberately subverts and ridicules the usage of this political slogan. Indeed by 2001, 'enemies' of the Moi regime were considered politically progressive by the country's underclass following years of political repression. Moreover, Kenyan newspaper readerships remember Aringo, whose pet name was 'Castro', as one of the most eloquent ministers of the Moi regime. More importantly, however, Aringo also gained notoriety as one of the most sycophantic of Moi's ministers. In a famous speech where he virulently castigated the Opposition for their criticism of the regime, he called President Daniel Moi 'the Prince of Peace', words the Christian faithful use while referring to Jesus Christ. Aringo's speech was particularly significant and necessarily amplified not only for this comparison of man and God but also for the fact that it came at a time when various parts of the country were engulfed in ethnic turmoil for reasons attributable in part to the policies of Moi's government. Mutahi dramatizes the absurd and his satirical representation of Moi and Aringo is parodied in a manner that suggests an indictment of this polity. The expression of the political in religious imagery also indicates that the interlocutors are assumed to be familiar with the worlds of both religion and politics. Haugerud (1995) captures the preponderance of such examples in Kenya in the late 1980s through the early 1990s thus:

> Indirect messages float between orators and hearers, speakers manoeuvre within constraints of what is and is not publicly speakable … Listeners know their own references, construct their own interpretation … a philosophical tale of winks and shrinks. (1–2)

It is, however, equally important to note the influence of the medium of the newspaper on the column. Constrained by space, the use of narrative gaps become necessary as the writer does not have the kind of space found in other literary forms such as the novel to express himself in more detail. This certainly has consequences on the way one writes hence the need for certain narrative gaps.

Closely linked to the previous discussion is Mutahi's use of rumour in the column or the use of 'whispering' as a narrative technique. We have already noted that the period in which *Whispers* was written was highly repressive with the government monopolizing public sites for expression while criminalizing organized opposition. We have thus argued that it for this reason that many Kenyans turned to what Scott (1990) has called 'hidden transcripts', as trusted sites of legitimate discourse. Rumour and gossip are some of the 'hidden transcripts' extensively utilized in the column. We noted how Scott (1990) outlines ways in which we can read these transcripts; as forms of protest which dare not speak in their own name, as safe social sanctions especially when social rules have been violated but also a site for group problem solving. Gossip and rumour reinforce normative standards of behaviour so that those who deviate from these standards are mocked or despised. As a site that provides space for group problem solving, a public is easily constituted around a rumour. Ramotsu Shibutani, an influential voice on studies on rumour, argues that rumour develops as 'people caught together in an ambiguous situation attempt to construct meaningful interpretation of it (the situation) by pooling their intellectual resources' (cited in Rosnow and Fine 1976, 97). Usually, the presence of leaders and other higher status of individuals help build publics around rumour. Rumours are also juxtaposed with hard news, a strategy which Rosnow and Fine (1976, 97) argue is used to give rumour 'credibility by association'. In Kenya, 'hidden transcripts' and especially rumour played a very specific political role. Haugerud (1995), Atieno-Odhiambo (1987) and more recently Musila (2015) have separately discussed how rumour became one of the most trusted vehicles of legitimate discourse in Kenya during the Moi regime. With numerous legal and institutional impediments to free speech, rumour provided an alternative way in which Kenyans processed reality. Many potentially subversive statements thus hide under Mutahi's popular phrase 'it was whispered to me'. Apart from being a cue to the fact that what officialdom denies may not necessarily be untrue, publics are constructed around these rumours. Below are a few examples:

Dr Richard Leakey, a world-renowned archaeologist, was at one time widely regarded as a potential presidential candidate in Kenya. The Moi administration did not take this kindly and unleashed its political machinery on Leakey, who had fallen out with Moi despite having been the Head of Civil Service in Moi's government. This has traditionally been one of the most powerful government posts in Kenya. Apart from being

physically assaulted, the state was said to have circulated rumours to discredit Leakey's possible candidacy. The narrator in *Whispers* comments thus:

> There is a man in a lot of trouble because some people say that he wants to be *juu zaidi* [Trans: Kiswahili for "high up" but used here as a satirical reference to Moi. This was a famous chant that was often 'performed' to announce Moi's arrival at public meetings. It sought to elevate him to near deitly heights]—that is the main headmaster of this country. Now that they don't want him to be worker number one and farmer number one, they have remembered many things about him. They are saying that a man who goes to London to have his legs aligned and balanced just like the wheels of a car, cannot be the main headmaster of this country … (*Sunday Nation*, June 11, 1995)

Leakey had just been involved in a plane crash which he survived but lost both his legs. He had therefore been regularly going to London for treatment. In the column, the narrator's description leaves no doubt as to the man being described. References to his supposed intentions to be the 'main headmaster' in the country equally leaves little doubt as to who the antagonist in this case is, for readers are aware of the various names Mutahi used to describe Moi. Besides, chants such as *Juu Zaidi* were part of the rhetoric that the Moi administration used to enhance his stature as a powerful leader.

In another example, the narrator talks about the rumours that Moi would be offered a hefty pension or a 'golden handshake' as it became popularly known following the retrenchment in the civil service forced on most developing countries by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. Again, the narrator introduces certain issues as 'whispers'.

> If the sun does not suddenly start rising in the West, the man who was born and brought up in Sacho and who has been the main headmaster in this country will be handed a golden handshake come year 2000. I hear whispers it will be a major handshake. However, I wish he could receive the same baby handshake that other characters who are being retrenched are getting … (*Sunday Nation*, August 13, 2000)

The message is relatively clear. The column attempts to address the political question regarding Moi's future while at the same time demonstrates the unfairness of the retrenchment process in the civil service which saw thousands of Kenyans lose their jobs.

Satirizing the habit of government ministers always rushing to see off the President whenever he is leaving the country for overseas trips, the narrator dramatizes the absurdity of this practice using the following example:

> There are whispers that when the undisclosed people heard where the boss was, they abandoned their tea without paying their bills and did a Wakiihuri and Kamanthi (these were very popular Kenyan athletes) to where *Baba wa Taifa* (Father of the Nation) was. There are whispers that one of the most senior ones was seen carrying the red carpet meant for the boss towards him and mumbling things to the effect that the carpet walked away on its own and should have been there from the very beginning. The said characters then lined up like schoolboys and wore smiles that said they had proper report forms ready for inspection by the headmaster before he left for the land of frog-eaters (France). After boarding the plane, I hear they waved at it until it reached Addis Ababa. I hear that some of them stayed behind fearing that Baba might return and find no one waiting to show him the way back to State House. (*Sunday Nation*, August 20, 2000)

Related to the above discussion is the creation of an interface between journalism and fiction writing, the merging of fact and fiction. These two merge into a powerful hyperbole, which the audience is then forced to confront. These are issues that people could not ordinarily talk about but once placed in the fictive narrative space, Mutahi is able to narrate them without fear of any retribution.

Significant in the column's consolidation of publics is also the attempt to construct narratives that draw on a familiar past. Through this is created an imagined common space brought forth by shared histories and experiences. It is not unusual that most of the column's themes find their thematic antecedents and parallels in the country's past and that of the column's characters. To draw these parallels, Mutahi, like Ngugi in *Petals of Blood* (1977) and *A Grain of Wheat* (1986), as Ogude (1999, 52–53) so fittingly puts it, 'explores a specific time scheme in which the narrative swings from the past time of action to the current time of telling or retelling. In each of the two time zones, the experiences of the past are in themselves a parallel and a commentary on the present situation'. The circulating discourses that populate the column are often manipulated to echo familiar past experiences which then act as constituents of narrative meaning in present situations. The allusions create a shared field of reference between writer and audience. Below is a typical example of this strategy:

Come this Wednesday and I am supposed to go insane. I am supposed to go insane by going to a shop to buy a bunch of weeds in the name of flowers and in the name of a character called Valentine. Valentine is not a member of my Nyaituga clan but all the same I am supposed to buy those wild things in his name and hand them over to Thatcher.

I am supposed to dress in red as if I am a Kanu youth winger. After that I am expected to hold those wild things in one hand, go down on one knee and tell Thatcher that I love her more than the frothy stuff that I drink at the right price and temperature. I am supposed to tell her that if she cuts my veins, she will not find blood. Instead, she will find my love for her flowing in them like River Chania during floods … When we first met, wild leaves in the name of flowers were not part of saying that love was flowing in your vein like River Nyando during floods. There were other ways of doing so. One of them was proving to your potential Thatcher you were not a coward. Proving that you were not a coward involved many things. One of them was taking her to the village dance at the local K One, our village Choices. Our K One and Choices (these were the names of some of the most popular nightclubs in Nairobi) were places where we hang out once in a while to dance to the tunes of the time.

In those days, we did not have musicians barking like dogs in the name of music. Instead, they played twist. They did not sing songs to make your mother-in-law shut her ears as it happens these days in the name of a character called Shaggy. They sang songs that advised young men to marry otherwise they would spend all their lives sharing food with cockroaches … (*Sunday Nation*, February 11, 2001)

The excerpt above uses the trope of romance, particularly the notion of Valentine's in a relatively modern Kenya to compare two different epochs, an unidentified but very familiar past, and the present. By 'presencing the past' to use the words of Masolo (2000), the column subtly attacks modern Kenyan society's acceptance of the 'Valentine's phenomenon', one of the many new lifestyles that Mutahi debates. But there are other micronarratives weaved in the same story. For instance, the red colour associated with Valentine's is equated to the red uniform of the Kanu youth wingers, henchmen of the Kanu regime during the Moi era. Even in such apparently innocuous tropes such as romance, the writer is still able to explore the political. Equally significant are the hints at two generations through the description of the music included in the excerpt. According to the narrator, contemporary musicians 'bark like dogs'. The narrator takes a swipe at Shaggy, the popular US-based Jamaican ragga artist, accusing him of singing songs that would make 'your mother-in-law shut her ears'.

Evidently, this discussion is used to augment some of the writer's major thematic concerns such as the tensions between past and modern lifestyles. This excerpt is suggestive of the past as offering a parallel to confront the challenges emerging in the present. This past provides an important 'clustering' upon which decoding of the stories is done.

Mutahi was part of an emerging group of political reform activists in the country in the early 1990s. One of the most significant characteristics of this 'reformist agenda' was the sense it in which it convened the past to bring together fairly disparate groups. Jean Pierre Vernant notes that memory 'creates the unity to ensure that a heterogeneous group has an identity at all' (cited in Terdiman 1993, 108). Collective memory of the past, especially drawn from the struggle years in Kenya, became increasingly important to the reform agenda and is generously appropriated in the column. As Terdiman (1993) observes, dominance and subjecthood are both sustained by memory. In fact, both are 'sustained by memory—but a selective highly ideologized form of recollection that brackets fully as much as it restores' (20). For instance, in Kenya, the Moi regime 'fostered political nostalgia' as part of its moral armament to legitimize its rule. Werbner (1998, 5) argues that the 'cultural past, socio-political traditions and the colonial struggle were and are deliberately fetishized …' Just like the political class, subject populations equally make this past a fetish upon which to process the present. It provides them a form of identity. So that as Terdiman explains, though memory sustains hegemony, it also subverts it through its capacity to recollect and to restore the alternative discourses that the dominant would simply bleach out and forget. In times of crises therefore, counter-discourses to a large extent employ only that memory that subverts dominance. The privilege of counter-discourses, Terdiman notes, is 'the obverse of their limitation: because they have not yet become triumphant or transparent, they have an analytic power and a capacity to restitute perception and comprehension that their dominant antagonists cannot exhibit' (20). It is in this sense that sociopolitical and cultural traditions are used in *Whispers;* to give voice to suppressed histories as a counter discourse to domination. *Whispers* manifests a predilection towards these histories, which are exploited because of their capacity to critique and confront power and other forms of dominance. In *Whispers*, the past is deliberately, if selectively, remembered as part of the column's 'grammar of resistance'. The past is appropriated through what Cole (1998) calls 'conversational remembering', which is the use of the past as a discursive resource intended to persuade and engage the interlocutors. The past is

merged with the present in such a way as to keep us firmly focused on the present as history (Green 1997, 24). In most of these stories, memory signifies loss, which manifests itself in feelings of betrayal. This is used as a strategy to coalesce readers around feelings of failure that help manufacture forms of dissent. In such times, to use Terdiman's (1993, 35) words, 'memory recollects and restores. Its representations promise conservation and continuity in the face of time's entropic drift'. A good reference here would be the appeal to struggle idioms repeatedly used in the column such as *Nilipigania*, *Nilipigania na jasho* (I fought for, I fought for this [freedom] with my sweat). These idioms locate the reader within a familiar past. More specifically, it locates the reader within a 'community of the oppressed'. The past thus gives meaning to the present while at the same time helping the writer construct a public on the basis of their position as a repressed community.

Mutahi's use of 'media templates' is also a significant feature in the column. He routinely reconstituted stories which had received widespread media attention as to be not only universally familiar but had also become common reference points for readers. These media templates were particularly instrumental in shaping narratives and publics around particular social problems. The retrospective references helped define and consolidate publics around present problems. To demonstrate this point, a reading of *Whispers* in 1992 offers some notable examples. At the height of the clamour for multi-party democracy in Kenya in 1992, the discourse of democracy in the country revolved around the repeal of Section 2A of the Kenyan constitution. This section of the constitution had made Kenya a *de jure* one party-state and precipitated the crackdown on perceived political dissidents. Democratic rule in Kenya was 'popularly' regarded as dependent on the repeal of this section of the constitution. The need for a constitutional amendment was debated for a great part of the year and became a major referential point of interest in the discussion of the country's social and political history. Section 2A and the attendant discourses on democracy were quickly appropriated into common speech. In some examples of the column published in 1992 when the Section was finally repealed, Whispers the eponymous character talks of 'liberating his wallet from Section 2A of the cash economy'. He talks of wanting to make his wallet a 'multi-currency notes affair'. He also says he wants to make his wallet 'experience freedom of association and assembly'. These are expressions directly appropriated from the arguments that led to and followed the repeal of Section 2A of the Kenyan constitution. The consti-

tutional amendment was symbolic of freedom and therefore was regarded of redeeming historical interest. It signalled the ushering in of democratic ideals such as freedom of speech, freedom of association and freedom of assembly. We might in fact borrow from Young's (2003) very insightful observation cited in Haugerud (1995, 17) that such notions invested with a sense of legitimacy such as 'democracy' can be used to legitimize certain demands. Publics easily relate to such media templates, sometimes because they are stakeholders in the political process, other times because these templates help them make sense of their immediate concerns.

Another good example of these templates is what we have called the 'Beijing narrative' in the column. It is a narrative that descended from the famous Fourth Women's Conference held in Beijing, China in 1995. Because of its widespread coverage and visibility in the media and the debates around it, the Beijing Conference as it became popularly known soon became a media template upon which issues around gender relations could be discussed. This was such that whenever Beijing was mentioned, it was a cue to particular publics. Other examples draw on moments of political turmoil such as the ethnic clashes that had sporadically erupted in various parts of the country since the introduction of political pluralism. There were also templates that drew on the various political assassinations that have marked Kenya's post-independence history. Instances of grand corruption such as the infamous 'Goldenberg scandal' also became a rhetorical shorthand for infamy. Media templates generally draw on the spectacular, events that for various reasons have attracted and sustained media and public attention.

Finally, we want to reflect on the language used in *Whispers*. While a look at the language used in *Whispers* might of necessity involve a rereading of the debates on the language question in African literature, it is a debate we will deliberately avoid and only focus on its more relevant strands. The crux of the discussion here revolves more around the demotic register used in *Whispers* and how it allows the building of a diverse yet composite public.

In Kenya, writers of popular fiction have tended to creatively use the English language in a way that represents popular speech patterns in the country. Mutahi's column reflects the extent of linguistic hybridization. In a very significant way, it helps him out of the 'language problem' enabling him to expand his publics. Indigenization of the English language in *Whispers* involves more than just having a sprinkling of local words, phrases or proverbs. It also involves decentring the very heart of the language—its

structure. In *Whispers* is a demotic register that is able to represent local dialects and, to borrow the words of Zabus (1991, 4), represent the contesting worlds of which they are a part.

Key to understanding the process of indigenization in Anglophone literatures is often the idea of polyglottism, which Zabus describes as the result of a 'social situation' (ibid.). The Kenyan writer, like the West African writer, to use the words of Zabus (1991, 16), is 'a polyglottous writer writing in a situation of acute diglossia in a multi-lingual state'. In such a situation, Zabus notes, in his case referring to West Africa although we note a similar trait in East Africa, the language of literature produced will be the result of 'the interplay of linguistic codes or registers in the social arena or a literary aesthetic medium that bears no relation to the current uses of the European language in the social arena or both' (16). The 'culture contacts' in Kenya and the resultant hybridization is such that a demotic register has been developed that is intelligible to a diverse yet composite public. Although *Whispers* is written in English, it gravitates towards this demotic register. The column reflects prevailing popular forms of speech. The writing further undermines the dominant practices in fiction by reworking and subverting grammatical conventions of the English language. But this register also socially constructs a particular group.

The use of a demotic register in *Whispers* should thus be understood as simultaneously aesthetic and ideological in both character and intent. It does not merely reflect popular speech patterns, it also makes very specific interventions in the column's narrative discourse. Apart from confirming Stephen Slemon's (1989, 12) idea about the 'post-colonial text advancing its own oppositional reading of English cultural imperialism … within the rhetorical or tropological apparatus of its figurative language itself', the way the English language is used in *Whispers* is also a means through which to assert difference. This language 'imagines a particular community', those Mutahi described as readers of 'the third-rate column'. Bourdieu (1977, 21) argues that the 'constitutive power which is given ordinary language lies not in the language itself but in the group which authorises it and invests it with authority'. The ordinary language in *Whispers* is invested with authority by the repressed majority largely operating from the margins.

Whispers contains instances of linguistic code-switching and code-mixing, reflecting a case of both diglossia and polyglottism. A particular public is created, that which is interpellated not by English but by an

imagined 'Kenyanness', shared specific historicized experiences, and thus able to operate mixed codes. Below is a good example:

> I fear that my Investment, alias Pajero and the sister to the domestic thug called Whispers Junior, will come over to me and say, *"Buda, chota chapaa za kutosha si I am sure you know I need a ka-tumbo cut that is major.* [Trans: Father give me enough money, don't you know I need that tiny top] How do you expect me to pass my degree if my lecturers don't see most of my geography? … *Faza, koma kulalia chapaa. Chomoa zingine"* (Trans: Father, stop being mean with your money. Give me some more …). (*Sunday Nation*, January 16, 2002)

Three 'languages' are in use in the excerpt, namely, Kiswahili, English and *Sheng*. The language attributed to The Investment, commonly referred to as *Sheng*, combines English, Kiswahili and a motley of other Kenyan ethnic languages. *Sheng* 'mutates' quite regularly and, although associated with the youth, is increasingly becoming definitive of a polyglot Kenyan nation. Githiora (2002) has argued that such languages have a particular functional role. A language such as *Sheng* 'empowers a certain group of speakers by providing a 'closed' in-group means of communication. In this way it also acts as a means of establishing group identity, expressing solidarity and creating prestige among insiders' (174). Critics like Roger Kurtz (1998) have similarly attempted to theorize code-switching and code-mixing. Kurtz argues that the use of code-switching in fiction is necessitated by speaker is more comfortable discussing in a given language, an aside comment made for a listener other than a primary addressee, the arrival of a participant whom the speaker wants to include or exclude or shifting attention to a new listener (cited in Newell 2002, 125). These ideas fairly represent the use of this mode of address in *Whispers* where the writer uses multiple registers to gesture at the different persons in conversation with themselves and with others. It is also through these registers that one gets a sense of who these stories represent and who they are talking to or with.

But one must also note that over the years, Mutahi also developed his own comic idiom through which he defined his readership. He 'invented' a unique grammar of the English language, adding to it several of his own word coinages and dramatized certain forms of popular speech to intensify narrative experiences. He willed both language and idioms into being and invited his publics to travel along with him. Indeed, in one of the comments published following his death, a leading columnist in the *Sunday*

Standard, Maina Muiruri (*Sunday Standard*, July 28, 2013) noted the 'lively imagination of language' in *Whispers* as one of the column's most engrossing features. As discussed earlier in this chapter and elsewhere in the book, in the column, former President Moi was simultaneously referred to as 'the man from Sacho', the 'main headmaster', 'Uncle Dan', *Jogoo* (rooster), *Mtukufu Baba* (His Eminence Father), among other titles. Whispers, the writer's alter ego in the column, was 'Son of the Soil', 'Man from the Slopes of Mount Kenya', 'Man Whis', 'Whispero' and 'Son of Nyaituga'. Meanwhile, the character's legs resembled 'the arrow root tubers on which I was fed by Appepklonia (his mother)'. Beer, which Whispers was known to love, was referred to as 'Ruaraka waters, Kanywaji, Kiereini liquids, Hobsonian waters, and Jeremiah's liquids' (the latter two named after two former Managing Directors of Kenya Breweries Ltd, the country's biggest brewery). To die was to 'become past tense', the naked body became 'one's geography', a girl was a 'skirt wearer', while anything 'serious' was instead referred to as something 'major' and Whispers' car was 'Whispermobile'. Meanwhile, Rhoda, the bar maid, was so good at her job she could take a single order of 'four Tuskers, three of those cold, two Pilsners, one warm, three green ones—Citizen, four Embassy sticks, one SM and a match box' and deliver them with correct change without missing an item. Below are samples of the 'familiar' sentences and the unique grammar that the column used:

> Thatcher opened the door and I thought I could see her last molar, the way I used to see it in those days when her body did not protest at being dressed in a mini skirt and when I wore such high platform shoes I looked as if I was walking on nine by nine concrete blocks.

Meanwhile, driving on one of Nairobi's pot-holed roads, Whispers describes the rickety state of his car and the state of the roads in Kenya thus:

> The Whispermobile, with its distinguished cargo of Baba and Mama Investment, waded deeper into Lake Juja Road and I thought I heard something like a belch as if the car was protesting it had drunk more water than the Kiereini liquids in my stomach.

Writing about Valentine's Day, the character Whispers complains:

I do not know whose brother a fellow called Valentine is. I do not even know if he is a man or woman. I have no idea if this Valentine is real or a clone. I do not know whether he is a Maragoli or a goat trader from Mogotio. All I know is that come February, he makes me see red. I see red because my Thatcher seems to know quite a bit about this Valentine fellow and come the beginning of February, there is no other talk except about him. It begins to seem as if he is the one who took a beehive full of breathing bees to Thatcher's clan. (Examples cited from *Sunday Standard*, July 27, 2003)

After attending a funeral of a friend, the narrator describes the friend's death as follows:

To cut a long story short, the deceased put so much frothy stuff into his alimentary canal that by eight in the night, he could not tell the difference between day and night. He actually could not tell between his left and right leg. So as he was driving home, the car he was driving did a major dance and argued with a lamppost. The lamppost won the argument and the man we are burying lost it. (*Sunday Nation*, March 14, 1999)

Once cornered by thugs in Nairobi, the narrator describes how one of the thugs threatened to kill him.

Mzee, chota ama tukupe visa ya kwenda kwa Sir God! [Trans: Old man, give us your money or we give you a visa to see God!]. (*Sunday Nation*, March 10, 2002)

While contributing to the comic effect of the column, this kind of language also constitutes a specific public. The constant use of particular idioms, phrases and sentences ultimately intensify experiences being discussed but at the same time helps consolidate publics around the column.

Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to demonstrate how Mutahi constructs his publics. The discussion took as its point of departure the fact that audiences are inherently diverse. Mutahi is thus only able to access them as a composite group through the strategic use of the column's generic features. The chapter focused on how he draws on a pool of familiar resources to construct these publics. He, for example, draws on stereotypes, media

templates, deploys the use of rumour, narrative gaps, 'silences' and other narrative modes to ensure his publics are a part of the stories. While most of these strategies work successfully in 'constructing' his publics, they are not necessarily unproblematic. The use of stereotypes, for example, can reflect, articulate but also intensify social conflict.

Importantly, however, this chapter argues that Mutahi recognizes and privileges the context within which he writes, the social and political situations he is explaining and the cultural positioning of his readers. He then wills into being particular narrative styles which help him bring together and access an otherwise heterogeneous readership.

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Conclusion: Popular 'Futures'

On February 23, 2003, Wahome Mutahi wrote what was to be his pen-ultimate *Whispers* column. Ominously, the column revolved around his alter ego Whispers' impending demise. Titled 'My futile prayer for small miracles', the 'Son of the Soil' was on his deathbed having contracted malaria. In a state of delirium, while 'waiting for St. Peter to make that final call and end my contract with this world' (*Sunday Nation*, February 23, 2003), the character hallucinates about his time on earth. Meanwhile, different religious sects urge him to repent his sins to be 'allowed' to 'enter the Kingdom of God'. Parts of the column read as follows:

> I heard another voice over an even louder microphone: *Desting, desting! Hii ni sauti ya Muinjilisti Saulo wa Kanisa la Pwana. Nchooni muone miuchisa* (Trans: Testing, testing. This is the voice of Evangelist Saul of the Church of God. Come and witness miracles) … Then I heard another voice, booming like a bomber, over a microphone: *Hii ni nafathi yako ya mwicho kutumbu thambi sako. Kama unafikiri Mungu ni kumbafu akungoje kira siku wewe ndiwe mujinga ya mwicho* (Trans: This is your last time to repent your sins. If you think God is stupid to wait for you every day, you are the stupid one). … I heard a noise say: *Mungu alisemako, kama mtu anatumieko pombe hataikia pikuni kwa papa hata akitupu. Atachomwa na achomeke katika moto wa milele na milele* (Trans: And God said, for those who take alcohol will burn forever even if they pray). (*Sunday Nation*, February 23, 2003)

In the humorous self-deprecating style characteristic of the column, Mutahi was immersing his readers into the familiar, using distinctive accents with which different Kenyan ethnic groups speak Kiswahili, to comment on various moral issues. He appropriates almost verbatim what had become the typical themes of preachers and evangelists of the charismatic Churches to make hilarious what were significant moral and social sanctions. As fate would have it, two weeks after the publication of this story, Mutahi actually lay on his deathbed. On March 6, 2003, Mutahi went to the Thika District Hospital in Central Kenya to undergo what was supposed to be a minor surgical operation to remove a lump of fat at the back of his neck. But the operation was bungled and the 51-year-old writer lapsed into a coma. He was later admitted to the Kenyatta National Hospital, Kenya's main referral hospital, where he was to remain unconscious for the next 137 days. He passed away on July 22, 2003.

Mutahi had, however, given life to a new narrative form. *Whispers* had grown into a formidable art form in the region. At the time of his death, he had introduced similar columns into neighbouring Uganda. It was a pointer to the column's success both as a literary genre and as a media product in East Africa. *Whispers'* 'journey' is thus an engaging study of the genesis, growth and perhaps even the future of popular fiction in the popular press in the region.

The book has traced the emergence of popular fiction as a subject of mainstream critical literary exegesis partly to the 'cultural nationalism' started by lecturers at the Universities of Nairobi and Makerere and the Kenyan government's desire to establish a 'national' if political cultural policy in the country circa the 1960s. This period was a watershed in literary developments and can be said to have marked the beginnings of the rise of popular literature in Kenya. But we noted that these lecturers were a small and detached intellectual elite, writing not particularly for the 'popular' audience. Instead, they were keen on dialoguing with mainstream literature, indeed, 'talking back' to the Empire. While not denying that they contributed immensely to the growth of a new literary aesthetic in Kenya and the region as a whole, we have argued that it is with the emergence of writers such as Charles Mangua and David Maillu that popular literature gained prominence in Kenya. The popularity of these writers convinced local and international publishers that there was a market for popular fiction in Kenya, leading to the unprecedented growth of the local publishing industry in the 1970s. We have also argued that it is wrong to talk about the growth of Kenyan popular literature

without recognizing the role of the popular press in Kenya in the 'making' of the Kenyan popular writer. The Kenyan popular press provided the space for apprenticeship to a number of writers of popular literature and thus to the development of this literature. More importantly, they used it as a form and space through which to tackle the everyday, the anxieties and dilemmas that faced the nouveaux arrivants in the city and more broadly to document and explore the impact of urbanization and elements of African modernity. It is in the pages of popular magazines and newspapers such as *Joe*, *Drum*, *The Nation* and *The Standard* that most of these writers were first published and where they later honed their writing skills. Writers including notable names such as Charles Mangua, David Maillu, Meja Mwangi, Sam Kahiga and Sam Akare were nurtured within the popular press. But we also underscored the influence of other literary traditions such as the 'Market tradition', the famous '*Drum* tradition' as well as 'New Journalism' on these writers and on the mainstream Kenyan newspapers. The introduction of the fiction columns into the mainstream newspapers was a notable development in the 'opening' up of new discursive spaces in mainstream public platforms.

It is against this background that the book located *Whispers*. It was part of an emergent expressive tradition. But we also observed that the column *Whispers* had its own peculiar characteristics and indeed roles, especially when it took a particular political turn and significance towards the late 1980s as a reaction to the Moi regime's ruthless political clampdown on dissent. Accordingly, the column became one of the few 'sites of freedom' at a time when the state had all but monopolized public spaces for expression.

We argued, however, that despite the proliferation of popular literature, it remained a genre on the margins of Kenya's literary culture. Many critics ignored, indeed some have continued to overlook what makes the literature 'popular'. Locating our arguments within recent scholarship on African popular culture, we have argued that the Kenyan 'popular' writer as we see in Mutahi's *Whispers* speaks the language of his readers, lives their lives, knows their fears and dreams their hopes. This book thus argues that Mutahi locates his readers within a universe they actually inhabit. His characters are his readers' brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, friends and enemies, neighbours and leaders. Their experiences are familiar everyday experiences. To establish this relevance, we noted Mutahi's adoption of a narrative framework that was familiar to his readers—the allegorical narrative structure of a fictional Kenyan family. We

underscored the centrality of the family across Kenya, which made it not only a familiar referential template for readers but also underscored its allegorical import in fiction. Having recognized the allegorical potential of the family as a space capable of narrating the nation, Mutahi collapsed the domestic space with the national space so that domestic issues were discussed against the backdrop of national politics. We pointed out that Mutahi's characters were created in such a way that they acted as points of reference and cognition for readers, living the life of your ordinary Kenyan subject, suffering the everyday vagaries of postcolonial (urban) existence and expressing the subject's fears and hopes. Instead of the ideological peasantry one encounters in previous canonical works such as Ngugi's *Petals of Blood* (1977), readers encountered the 'Son of the Soil', a man born and bred in a village on the slopes of Mt. Kenya, stripped of any ideological baggage. It was a characterization which made his 'politics' at once ambiguous and particular. He was a rural migrant in the city trying to eke out a living and make sense of African modernity that had completely transformed his world. It is this kind of representation that endears readers to popular fiction. Mutahi's predecessors such as Maillu, Mangua and Kahiga among many other writers of popular fiction became publishing successes primarily because they moulded characters that easily resonated with their readers' worlds. Besides, Mutahi rather than merely become a detached narrator also became part of the narrative, immersing himself in a world that he too lived. However, this is not to deny the fact that Mutahi's narrative mode is on occasion problematic. We argued that being allegorical, Mutahi's characters are static and unchanging. They are linear and typological. They enter the narrative already constructed, which means that they cannot be different. Yet *Whispers* is concerned with change, which is a process. Characters that are static may not fully represent or capture the transitory nature of change.

The book has argued that it is impossible to give a complete inventory of themes that sustained *Whispers* for nearly two decades. We have nonetheless teased out some of the issues that can be said to be representative of the column's key concerns. While generally dependant on circulating discourses, or topical issues, it is clear that most of the themes revolved around everyday existential concerns—be they social, cultural or political issues. At the sociocultural level, the column focuses mostly on issues related to the unsettling effects of the process of urbanization. The process of urbanization is narrated particularly as an unsettling experience. The Kenya(n) becoming is torn between conflicting worlds and values.

Whispers demonstrates the continuous if fractious negotiation of varied cultural values all seeking legitimacy. This is necessarily a process fraught with tensions, anxieties and struggles. The process is expressed through the mundane experiences and relationships within the *Whispers* household, for example.

At the political level, the book argued that *Whispers'* principal appeal on the public imagination in Kenya in part lay in its mediation and discussion of political issues and particularly the subversive. We discussed how Mutahi engaged the political in *Whispers* and how the column became 'a form of political practice', constantly deflating the majesty of power through a satirical 'disciplining' of the excesses of the state. This shed some light on the relationship between popular culture and politics. We argued that in *Whispers*, Mutahi gave us the many faces of power. The public face of power in Kenya, as Mutahi demonstrates, is a performance, one aptly captured in Mbembe's (1992) description of the post-colony as a '*simulacrum*'. In *Whispers*, we see how the subject population is portrayed as deceptively complicit in its own domination. We discussed how they dramatize their resistance even when they seem to happily engage in the rituals of the state. We demonstrated how such simulation encodes forms of resistance. Mutahi's use of what Scott (1990) calls 'hidden transcripts' such as rumour and humour similarly confirms how those on the margins decode and subvert the state's modalities of management. The book thus demonstrates how the column reveals some of the resistance practices encoded in popular cultural forms. But in our reflection on these resistance practices, the book also attempts to complicate our reading of the province of the 'popular', which it portrays as a confluence of many, sometimes contradictory voices, indeed as a site of various interest groups both at the centre and on the margins all seeking legitimacy.

Our focus was particularly on Kenya's transitional politics in the early 1990s. We argued that this particular epoch provides a reliable basis upon which to examine *Whispers* as a form of political practice. The debates around Kenya's adoption of political pluralism provide one of the most telling templates through which the performance of power in Kenya can be discussed. This period reveals Kenya's post-independence failures manifested in part through Mutahi's engagement with instances of political betrayal, rampant corruption, political patronage and the impact of ethnic competition on the nation-state as the pre-eminent form of political organization. But we are also exposed to the creative ways in which people react to these problems.

In our other discussions on how the 'popular' mediates questions relating to the exercise of power, we have also looked at Mutahi's appropriation of Christianity in his work. We have argued that Christianity is now part of Kenya's public culture and therefore a widely diffused popular tradition. The appropriation of manifestations of Christian religious practices and experiences in *Whispers* was because they offered a shared field of reference. Through these practices, Mutahi was able to reflect yet again on the politics of the everyday. We discussed, for example, how he used religious discourse to confront the state by drawing on Biblical hermeneutics, allusions, imagery and stories. In addition, we also emphasized how he used Christianity to trigger discussions on the various centres of authority in Kenya such as the Church and the school and their problematic relationship with the state. Through the prism of Christian practices, we also demonstrate how Mutahi managed to reflect on the impact of a failing economy on many Kenyans. The emergence of charismatic Churches and their focus on the 'prosperity gospel' enabled us to demonstrate how Kenyans borrowed from global circuits to frame and make sense of local challenges both practically and discursively.

The institutional and political environment upon which Mutahi wrote *Whispers* should be seen to have shaped his writing. *Whispers* worked by dramatizing the limits of its genre. Although *Whispers* had a potential readership in the form of newspaper readers, Mutahi still had to call into existence a 'community of readers'. While the media does 'bring' an audience to a writer, indeed this is one of the reasons why most writers who begin their writing careers within the popular press are often relatively successful in Kenya, it is not entirely correct to assume there is a ready-made audience for a work of fiction in the popular press. Although the newspaper makes available the fiction text, it does not necessarily mean the text is read by the newspaper buyer. A writer is still forced to construct his 'publics'. This calls for creative use of a number of narrative strategies to 'construct' one's 'public'. An audience is not necessarily 'created' because issues addressed concern them. Themes do not always 'make' readers. Writers of popular fiction have to also consciously construct their 'publics'. Mutahi thus had to 'invent' ways of calling into existence his column's 'publics'. Among the strategies he used were those which helped shape his readers' expectations. For instance, he established a powerful relationship between discourse and characters in his column. The characters in popular fiction cannot be considered marginal to the discourse of which they are a part. Indeed, without these characters, it is unlikely popular fiction would

remain 'popular'. Equally, there are various possibilities that characters offer a writer, especially in a situation where such writing is constrained by both institutional and external factors such as finite space and a harsh political environment. Mutahi creatively negotiated these limitations in a number of ways. There is need, for example, to pay attention to Mutahi's modes of address in the column and how these helped him hail his publics. We established that the popular press facilitates a number of narrative possibilities for a writer of fiction, making it demonstrably convivial for popular fiction. First, the newspaper gives greater freedom to improvise and comment and to make possible what is otherwise not possible in more conventional forms of writing. For instance, one noticeable feature in the relationship between the newspaper as a site of expression and *Whispers* as a 'means of expression' is that Mutahi was not strictly bound by the demands of the conventional genres such as the novel, the short story or even the conventional newspaper column. For instance, the short story form was significantly altered in the column. Although the column was loosely written in the short story form, *Whispers* only ended with Mutahi's death. It was thus not a short story. In addition, with the exception of a few transient characters that were phased out of the column particularly in the mid-1990s, most of the column's characters introduced in the late 1980s 'did not develop'. 'The Investment' and Whispers Jr, for example, did not 'grow up'. They remained teenagers throughout the column's 'life-time'. Similarly, neither Whispers nor Thatcher changed, although as noted above and elsewhere in the book, this character representation also imposed various limitations on Mutahi's ability to effectively document what was in fact a period of rapid social transformation.

We could further argue that in the context of the harsh political environment in Kenya in the 1980s–1990s, fiction within the popular press allowed both the fiction writer and the popular press to successfully challenge the bounds of the expressible. In Africa, most leaders have created what Mbembe (2001) has called the *une'tat the'ologique*—a 'theological state' where leaders are almost deified and through such institutionalization in public spaces of communication such as mainstream newspapers and broadcast media. While the case was not perhaps as serious in Kenya as it was in countries such as Mobutu Sese Seko's Zaire, Louise Bourgault (1995), among other critics, still accuses the Kenyan media of paying excessive homage to authority. In many instances, especially during the Moi regime, the conventional media was a source of official misinformation. Other times it was forced into self-censorship because of legal and

political restrictions. The government remains the single most impor-
tant advertiser in the Kenyan media and quite often exercises this power
by withholding advertising from media houses deemed too critical. As
such it was cultural forms such as popular fiction that kept the popular
press porous. This fiction allowed for criticism of the state from within.
Mutahi's use of excessive platitudes heaped on authority was instead used
to satirically parody some of the absurdities of the polity. '*Mtukufu, Baba
wa Taifa, Jogoo* (rooster), Farmer number one …' as used in *Whispers* thus
easily meant the very opposite, the reader already aware of the need to
read the subtext of such expressions. Writing under circumstances par-
ticularly exacting on the expressible, through *Whispers*, Mutahi was able
to examine issues which could not ordinarily be tackled within the more
conventional genres of the newspaper form such as news or editorials.
Through such parody, Mutahi tested the limits of various social and politi-
cal taboos. He was able to puncture the state's (and people's) swollen pre-
tensions, to use the words of Paton et al (1988, 37). Although the novel
form provides for this possibility, fiction within the newspaper is more
audacious and immediate. Although Mutahi continued a tradition, which
Ruganda (1992) has referred to as 'transparent concealment' and utilized
earlier by writers such as Francis Imbuga, he did not necessarily have to
distance his context or setting like Imbuga. The preferred reading was
more immediate with cues provided within the same site—the newspa-
per. For instance, when Mutahi talked about 'the man who was born and
brought up in Sacho', this was unmasked in the news genre where a reader
would have possibly been told that Moi was born in a place called Sacho.
Text and context were therefore provided within the same meta-text—
the newspaper. These deliberate gaps, which we referred to as 'narrative
gaps', also called for the involvement of the reader in making meaning of
the narratives in *Whispers*. To this extent, *Whispers* and popular fiction in
the popular press considerably contributed to the expansion of what was
expressible in the country. Institutions that had become inviolable in the
mainstream press gradually lost their veneer of invincibility. Indeed, as
Paton et al. (1988) say of humour, it became a foundational stage in the
process of introducing controversial subjects into serious discourse within
the formal vein.

Further to the argument above, we may point out that the mainstream
news production process is structured in such a way that stories from
the margins quite often struggle for attention. *Whispers* offered a partial
corrective. It went beyond middle-class anxieties, which often populate

mainstream newspapers. While these are no doubt present in the column, *Whispers* also told very ordinary stories, those that carried the popular concerns of the economically and politically marginalized. This is, however, not to suggest that popular fiction is itself a 'democratic space' that gives voice to all. We need to rethink that assumption. Marginal discourses are themselves often fragmented even though they are typically narrated as unitary narratives from 'the people'. Our discussion of Mutahi's narratives on ethnicity in Kenya provided some notable insights in this regard. Indeed, some critics have questioned the 'morality' of the 'popular' when it is itself bereft with numerous contradictions.

This book, therefore, underscores the need to examine the 'popular' without the populist rhetoric with which it has long been associated. If canonical literature is uncritically valorized as committed, popular literature has for long been uncritically valorized as necessarily coherent and as a site of positive resistance. Without denying it agency, political or otherwise, we argue that there is need to rethink the populism with which popular cultural productions are approached. This populism ignores broader critical issues that attend their production and consumption. We have noted that although it was Mutahi's intention that this column is read at least on one level as political, it is important that our understanding of this assertion is located within the context of the historical epoch within which the column was written. Mutahi's work cannot be discussed without regard to the historical moment within which the work is situated. Exclusion from mainstream politics and economic development fuelled oppositional forms of cultural production in the late 1980s through the 1990s. Popular fiction and other cultural sites of expression can therefore only be usefully examined when due recognition is given to the other forces of reform from which they derive their language, character and purpose. Whether *Whispers* did something 'tangible', especially in the reform process, is a question not answered by this book, neither was it our intention. What we do know, however, is that works of fiction barely directly challenge domination at which they are aimed. It is precisely for this reason that scholars like Mbembe maintain a notable ambivalence towards the emancipatory potential of popular culture. But as we demonstrate in the book, this does not render popular culture apolitical. We want to agree with Scott (1990, 142) that artistic work can 'offer some practical redress, it gives voice to a critique of domination, and, in the case of cults of possession, it frequently creates new social bonds among those subject to such domination'. We further want to agree with Peterson (2012, 14), who convincingly argues

that texts make claim on people's loyalties, calling communities of activists into existence.

The book makes a number of proposals, some of which we need to reca-pitulate. We agree with Street (1997) that it is only when we begin avoid-ing the populism with which the study of popular culture is approached that we will be able to interrogate its complex textures, else we fall victim to the very problematic thesis that the study of popular culture is now legitimated on; that it is *ipso facto*, a site of resistance and nothing else. Moreover, this study demonstrates the need to carry out more research on the popular press in Kenya and particularly on those subgenres largely considered unconventional media 'products'. The fact that *Whispers* sur-vived the rigours of the media market, a highly selective and increasingly differentiated audience for nearly two decades, does suggest that Mutahi did and got something right. *Whispers* clearly touched a chord, articu-lating something which addressed the needs, hopes and the fears of its audience. At the time of his death, as noted above and in my introduc-tion, Mutahi was writing similar columns in a Ugandan newspaper, *The Monitor*. Meanwhile, Kenyan television stations developed 'products' similar to *Whispers*. Local comedy acts such as 'Reddykyulass', 'Tru Klass', XYZ, among others, gradually replaced the Western sitcom on Kenyan TV stations. These groups' pet topics include themes around familiar social and political issues, narrated with ironic humour à la *Whispers*. In the mainstream press, both *The Standard* and *The Nation* have over the years made attempts at 'reincarnating' *Whispers* with possible surrogates. Benson Riungu, one of the most popular features writers in Kenya, rein-troduced 'Benson's World' in the *Sunday Standard* after Mutahi's death. This column, like many others, prominently featured narrative styles developed and popularized by Mutahi in *Whispers*. Mutahi's death may therefore have marked not the end but the beginning of a new era for new forms of cultural production in the Kenyan popular media. This evidently calls for more critical research on the subject.

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Erratum to: Popular Media in Kenyan History

George Ogola

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