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Making us make some sense of genocide: Beyond the cancelled character of Kuseremane in Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor's "Weight of Whispers"

Making us make some sense of genocide

This essay attempts a politically and ethically responsible, identity-focused reading of one of the central texts from the new generation of post-didactic Kenyan writers: Yvonne Owuor's extended short story, "Weight of Whispers", which deals with the post-genocide experience of a particular refugee who is the story's narrator. The interdisciplinary essay examines the way in which this first-person narrator is constructed alongside the extra-textual, postcolonial construction of Rwanda's "Tutsi" and "Hutu" as racialised groups, making explicit the parallels between these two "fictionalised" processes and ultimately concluding that Owuor's ostensibly depressing story can be read optimistically as a consequence of its democratic indeterminacy, in this way empowering the reader to contribute to post-genocide dialogue. **Key words:** Kenyan short stories, genocide, Rwanda, Yvonne Owuor (short story writer).

The Caine Prize-winning "Weight of Whispers", an extended short story by Kenya's Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor, has received neither local nor international critical attention since its 2003 publication. This is as surprising as it is disappointing, since, while retaining features that have become importantly conventional in postcolonial Kenyan fiction, it vitally extends the repertoire of what can be achieved in East African writing, and establishes itself as a central text in that new generation of Kenyan literature which has begun to emerge since the slow and still incomplete extension of the freedom of speech that followed both the repeal of the infamous sedition laws in 1997 and, perhaps more notably – as press freedom continued to be threatened by politicians *after* that date – the dismissal of the authoritarian Moi government in December 2002.

In this essay I intend to focus on issues of postcolonial identity that are raised by and *beyond* "Weight of Whispers", but to do this in an ethically and politically responsible manner, avoiding those merely playful aspects of the Western postmodern fascination with identity "politics" that, in the context of contemporary Kenya and the wider Great Lakes Region, are, as we shall see, distastefully untenable. The need for such a modification of celebratory, simulacra-obsessed studies of identity politics of the type criticised by, amongst others, Terry Eagleton, stems not only from the obvious concerns within the postcolonial "Weight of Whispers" itself, but also the seriousness of the recently historical event that silently yet constantly hovers before and

behind Owuor's fiction: the 1994 genocide in Rwanda (Eagleton 2003: 12). As Jeremy Hawthorn reminds us, perhaps alluding to Baudrillard's infamous postmodern commentary on the Gulf War, "playing with texts [and, we might say, textual identities] does not seem a morally adequate response to accounts of (...) holocaust" (Hawthorn 1994: 174). Again, it is Eagleton (2003: 140) who melancholically yet wittily points out in *After Theory* that no theorist nor critic today dare utter those words "morality" or "ethics", for these terms connote Puritanism and authoritarianism according to the ironically tyrannical mythology of postmodernism. And yet, the low-tech holocaust that was the Rwandan genocide requires that we politically debate, understand, reach conclusions and prevent – a moral imperative. While hoping not to overstate the importance of any *literary* text, I hope to demonstrate how "Weight of Whispers", despite never explicitly mentioning the genocide, can be constructively read in such a way as to contribute to at least that *debate* and *understanding*; perhaps in the same way that Joseph Conrad's 1902 extended short story, "Heart of Darkness", published almost exactly one hundred years prior to Owuor's, and which similarly never explicitly mentions the repulsively misnamed Congo Free State nor any specific colonial atrocities, can still, despite even Chinua Achebe's forceful dismissal of it as "bloody racist", be read as a piece that betrays at least a proto-critical attitude toward the High Colonial project.

I also hope to have attempted a post-holocaust reading that precludes the possibility of simplistic, emotional side-taking of the type that might, for example, and in another context, lead to the accusation of "holocaust denial" being unreflectively levelled at anyone who presumes to criticise the policies of, say, modern-day Israel.

In order to effect such a reading, I occasionally go "beyond the text" and take a generally interdisciplinary approach that is indebted to the sensitive and monumentally impressive post-genocide scholarship of social scientists such as Uganda's Mahmood Mamdani. This tentative crossing of disciplinary borders compliments those ubiquitous postcolonial issues of migration that occur both within and beyond the story: the crossing of identity and national borders.

Finally, I consider the effect of those narrative features of "Weight of Whispers" that arguably make obvious its difference as a "fictional" text – although its discursivity might function similarly – from those social science studies such as Mamdani's or Shannon Shea's: the use of a first-person narrator and the continual use of the present tense. I suggest that these techniques ingeniously further complicate the possibility of fixed and coherent identity for Owuor's increasingly fragmented postcolonial and ("post")genocide narrator, in this way ultimately passing the responsibility for his *and* his extra-textual, real-world community's identity formation, "liberation" and even existence onto the active East African and global reader. By – to put it flippantly – liberating the East African reader in this manner, and giving her/him a role in the construction of meaning, Owuor demonstrates one of her and other Kenyan New

Generation writers' fundamental differences to the writers of the post-Independence "Golden Age" generation: their post-didactic willingness to attempt literature that is politically charged and possessed of a responsible, conventionally Kenyan *social function*, yes, and yet not, in the Ngugian manner that Bakhtin frowned upon, monologically "committed" and egocentric.

"Weight of Whispers" is narrated by the story's central character, Boniface Louis R. Kuseremane, a "refugee" who seems already to have become, in the few journalistic mentions of the story, a "Rwandan aristocrat" of "Tutsi" origin – we will return to this in a moment (Fellows 2003: 46). Fleeing turmoil in his home country, he moves with his immediate family to the archetypal postcolonial African city, Kenya's Nairobi, on the fifth day following the assassination of the presidents of Rwanda and Burundi. Consequently, we can locate this fiction in historical time, remembering that the shooting down of Habyarimana's plane as it approached Kigali, possibly by extreme Hutu within his own circles, occurred on the 6th April, 1994. The reader subsequently follows Kuseremane's narrative as over the course of a few months he slips further and further into both identity crisis and squalor in an unwelcoming foreign land, eventually ending up in total anonymity and debilitation, possibly – although this is left ambiguous, as many endings in Kenyan fiction pointedly are – contemplating suicide, the ultimate erasure of self and identity.

Ostensibly, then, "Weight of Whispers" is a pessimistic story that simply charts the regression of a downwardly mobile character, an understandably common enough figure in Kenyan literary typology who is perhaps best represented in the novels of Kenya's most important novelist, Meja Mwangi, whose archetypal "Mwangian Man" has much in common with Kuseremane. According to J. Roger Kurtz, echoing Angus Calder, the Mwangian Man is "an intelligent, usually well-educated individual whose inability to find a job (...) leads him to ever greater cynicism, disillusionment and despair"; of course, we must bear in mind that whereas Mwangian Men are generally rural-urban migrants *within* the borders of Kenya, Kuseremane is a cross-border refugee (Kurtz 1998: 124). Yet Kuseremane, unlike Mwangi's characters, need not ultimately depress the reader, and might even as a fragmented subject have – *improbably*, at first glance – a liberating discursive function. In order to discover how this can be, we must first briefly study Kuseremane's often-discrepant origins as a subject both within the text and the wider discourse of the postcolonial Great Lakes, particularly Rwanda.

To only read Kuseremane as that "Rwandan Tutsi aristocrat" is to perform an irresponsibly violent simplification of a character whose provenance is consciously problematised in the text; a simplification that with brutal irony perpetuates the simplified and racialised discursive binary of Tutsi/Hutu that partially enabled the 1994 genocide, and which continues in the news media and "common-sense" popular consciousness today. Within the story, although aspects of Kuseremane's precise origins remain elliptical and indeterminate, and this partially because the narrative is a present

tense depiction of his *present* condition, it is clear that throughout the story, and particularly during his early days in Nairobi, there are certain putative identity-anchors onto which Kuseremane is wont to arrogantly cling. Consequently, his predicament might remind us of those early postcolonial Kenyan texts by writers such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Grace Ogot, whose first novels sought some form of idealistic recuperation of lost, precolonial cultural identity, and which read, as much early anti- and postcolonial literature does, more as works of anthropology than of literary fiction. Kuseremane's failure to maintain and live his own myth of origin - which, as we will later see, is ironically not *his* myth at all, but instead one mediated by Belgian colonialists and later republican "independence" regimes - signals in Kenyan literature the failure of the dream of the possibility of an authentic precolonial Eden, and the need to view postcolonial identities through lenses other than the merely imagined past.

Kuseremane's anchors within the text, his misguided certainties, even toward the end of his decline, are these: he is a member of a divine-right royalty who at birth was "recognised by the priests as a man and a prince"; he is a former senior diplomat; he is a successful neocolonial elite partner in both a banking and gemstone business; he is a well-educated "universal citizen" with a Ph.D. in Diplomacy and a Masters in Geophysics (Owuor 2003: 12, 16). So firmly does he want to retain these aspects of his identity that even as this identity clearly unravels - something that the text's structural irony enables the reader to appreciate, while Kuseremane doesn't - and he is faced with an unhelpful and unsympathetic staff member at the American Embassy who denies him any rights to asylum since he cannot produce the correct papers, his having left his home country in a hurry, he still "want[s] to shout to the woman: I am Boniface Kuseremane, a prince, a diplomat" (Owuor 2003: 17).

Other clues in the text suggest the Kuseremanes' racial-ethnic and geographical "origins": they are at intervals described as being "very tall", "slender" and possessed of "high cheekbones". These pointers prompt the reader to recognise that Kuseremane is probably a Tutsi, even though the word "Tutsi" is not used in the text, for these are the physiological indicators that have been used since the days of John Hanning Speke and Henry Morton Stanley to racially (and racistly) define this Great Lakes group, and which have become commonly accepted even in the region itself, as we shall see.

However, matters become complex and problematic as we continue to read Owuor's fiction, which is rooted in historical time, alongside the postcolonial history of the region. The time and the places and faces do not add up, and not as a consequence, as some might state, of Owuor's inadequate research. Firstly, Kuseremane is implicated in the genocide (although the text leaves his real guilt ambiguous), and towards the end of the text his name has been added in his home country to the list of *genocidaires*; indeed, the "weight of whispers" in the story are these rumours of his improbable involvement that filter through to Kenya and that lead to him being

ostracised by his fellow refugees and to that symbolic act of self-abnegation, his inability to utter his own name in public. As a consequence of Kuseremane's royal lineage and physiological features, and the fact that there is genocide in his home country that has experienced the death of a president, we are almost obliged to take the simple option and conclude that he is a member of the Rwandan Tutsi Monarchy that was abolished just prior to the country's independence. And yet, the possibility that a Tutsi might have been involved in the genocide that victimised Tutsis and moderate Hutus in Rwanda is a nonsense bordering on the obscene; at least, the choice of only a Tutsi killer as central character by Owuor would have deflected blame from the real instigators, the "extreme Hutu", and have been a contribution to a damnable revisionist historiography. This, coupled with the near impossibility of Kuseremane having recently been a senior diplomat, bearing in mind that Habyarimana's Hutu regime in Rwanda could boast, as Shadrack Nasong'o reminds us, only a token *one* Tutsi ambassador in the entire diplomatic service, creates confusion (Nasong'o 2000: 49).

Avoiding falling into the liberal critical trap of reading Kuseremane as a real individual, we have to conclude that these are not mere inconsistencies of characterisation that may be overlooked for the sake of a "good read", but rather that they are problems that can not be resolved. In fact, the impossibility of Kuseremane's origins being what we are told they are, or what is heavily suggested by the text, is enough to draw attention to the fictionality of his "character", making him a version of Brian McHale's "cancelled character", one who lacks integrity and coherent identity, and whose textual constructedness is laid bare (McHale 1987: 105). Consequently, the reader is forced to avoid a reading that might simply evince a uselessly sympathetic tear for the disenfranchised Kuseremane as a person, an approach that Owuor in one interview implies that she would not approve of, if only because in her conception Kuseremane is a dislikeable member of the neocolonial African elite (Fellows 2003: 46). Instead, we have to consider the *function* of this non-character, "Kuseremane".

"Kuseremane's" own myths of origin and stable identity are, then, insupportable and seem to be increasingly delusional as the narrative processes, constructed only to be deconstructed in the postcolonial city and reformulated into that global victim, "The Refugee", by the discursive power of institutions such as foreign embassies, Kenyan law(lessness) and those flat-character Kenyan shopkeepers and landlords who symbolise the tragedy of global capitalism. Owuor's fiction discursively parallels this with the insidious historical postcolonial construction of the Rwandan Tutsi as a group – an identity construction that, as mentioned, partially enabled the genocide, and which led to Tutsi being the majority of refugees who were forced to flee Rwanda at the time "Kuseremane" does. By problematising the fictional individual, "Kuseremane", and by featuring by implication the historical genocide as the serious issue that can not be immorally played with and, in traditional fashion, "enjoyed as a good yarn", Owuor's text obliges us to focus on the problematic history of his Tutsi

group and debate the holocaust. On the level of discourse, the construction of postcolonial Tutsi identity works in the same way as the construction of “Kuseremane” – only, actual history led to genocide.

A brief overview of pre-to-postcolonial Rwandan history shows us that during pre-colonial times a Tutsi monarchy existed in central Rwanda. As C. Young points out, when the Belgians arrived they extended the realm of the monarchy as they defined colonial borders, bringing under Tutsi control an increasing number of Hutu (and Tutsi) who had not previously experienced serfdom in this way (Young 1994: 227). In typical colonial fashion, the Belgians interpreted what they encountered through the lens of Western racial theories of the age, and began the perpetuation of the arrogant myth that the Tutsi’s existing political power implied their superiority as a *race* different to the Hutus. Mamdani writes, “Though wholly indigenous to Africa (...) the Tutsi were constructed by colonial ideology as well as law as nonindigenous Hamites”, following the biblical-scientific Hamitic hypothesis which led to the Tutsi being racialised as foreigners who had caucasoid geo-racial origins in Ethiopia (Mamdani 2001: 28). Throughout the colonial period, the Belgians supported the Tutsi, using them as a comprador class, and began a formalised rigid distinction between Hutu and Tutsi through such policies of reification as the introduction of identity cards; and, in typical colonial fashion, the Belgians gave their chosen elite access to a “better” colonial education (in French, which “Kuseremane” speaks) and jobs.

The Church similarly, and perhaps unsurprisingly, reinforced this hypothesis of descent from King Solomon. For example, as the organisation *African Rights* points out, one colonial period cleric, “Mgr Classe, the first Roman Catholic bishop of Rwanda, described the Tutsi as ‘having something in common with the Aryan and Semitic types’” (African Rights 1994: 26). It is not improbable that the historical role of churches in the questionable formation of Tutsi racial identity was one factor that enabled sections of the Church’s now infamous participation in events relating to the 1994 genocide. It is no surprise that “Kuseremane” in Owuor’s story can not bring himself to attend church during his time in Nairobi, for how can an institution that has *politically* contributed to his refugee status, and therefore turned its face way from its professed spiritual mission, possibly offer him succour? He cannot bring himself ‘to express allegiance to a God whose face [he does] not know” (Owuor 2003: 26).

What, then, was at base a coloniser-occasioned class distinction became a distinction that even those Hutu who were forced into labour during the colonial period could only read as, primarily, a racial distinction. From this we can see that those Western and even Kenyan readings of the genocide as “tribal warfare”, such as that given by Arthur Luvai, or “ethnic conflict”, such as that given by Kenyan-based Hannah Carew, are inadequate, especially if we bear in mind that Tutsi and Hutu spoke the same indigenous language, intermarried and possessed many of those cultural similarities that can not justify their simplistic and irresponsible binary segrega-

tion into two different, let alone opposing, *ethnic/tribal* groups (Luvai 1997: 22; Carew, 2000: 197). By the time of Habyarimana's regime, it was clear that the Hutu were able to be convinced by their leaders that the Tutsi (identity cards were still required by law) were *racially different* and indeed *foreigners* in their Hutu country of Rwanda. This postcolonial continuation of racist and racial hatred was in part enabled by the fact that as their colonial rule drew to a close, the Belgians in a cynical volte-face shifted their support from the Tutsi to an emerging middle-class of Hutu, in this way deflecting, as Dixon Kamukama suggests, the basis of late colonial conflict from class (in which case the Belgians would have been seen as equally guilty) into race, in this one move turning the racialised Tutsi from ally to enemy (Kamukama 1993: 25). This turn was possible, and ultimately terribly successful, because many Hutu Rwandans experienced colonialism in the way that the subjects of some other European colonies did – as Ania Loomba writes, "some never even saw Europeans in all their lives, and for them authority still wore a native face", in this case the face of those Tutsi who had been themselves coerced to act as the repressive arm of the Belgian colonial apparatus, subjugating the Hutu and, it must be remembered, the poor Tutsi (Loomba 1998: 179).

It was easy for the Hutu middle class leaders, who by the 1990s had entrenched themselves in positions of political and economic power following Habyarimana's policy of "reverse discrimination", to use this popular ignorance of "who was to blame" to themselves perhaps deflect accusations of creeping neocolonial elitism amongst their ranks into, once again, the issue of race rather than class. This return to racism can perhaps be illustrated by the fact that in 1992 a Hutu Power leader was able to deliver a speech in which, as Shea reminds us, "he called on Hutus to send the Tutsi back to Ethiopia by way of the Nyaborongo river. In April 1994 the river was choked with the bodies and reddened by the blood of tens of thousands of dead Tutsis" (Shea 2002: 144). It is powerfully symbolic, an indication of his near-total subjection to the power of racialised discourse of the region, that "Kuseremane" by the end of "Weight of Whispers" finds himself living in Hurlingham, an area of Nairobi known for its population of Ethiopian refugees; indeed, his neighbour and sister's lover is an Ethiopian refugee with whom she produces a perhaps equally symbolic still-born baby.

Which returns us to "Kuseremane", his identity and his status as a refugee. Clearly, it was that genocide of almost a million Tutsis and moderate Hutus with which we ended the last paragraph that occasioned the massive exodus of predominantly Tutsi refugees from Rwanda, an exodus that had happened historically, in smaller numbers, but which on this horrendous occasion constituted, as Hannington Ochwada points out, a "crisis estimated in hundreds of thousands from Rwanda scattered all over the sub-region" (Ochwada 2000: 210). Clearly, the causes of the tragedy must equally be traced, amongst many other factors, to the political blindness of those

capitalist donor countries which, as Majid Rahnema reminds us, supplied “Rwanda (...) with one of the highest per-capita supplies of arms and ammunition on the grounds that the country had been recognized as a particularly ‘successful’ model of [capitalist] development”, and yet the power of identity discourse when misappropriated and disseminated through channels such as the Rwandan mass media, and feeding upon popular misconceptions and fear of foreign racial oppression, can not be underestimated, particularly in the postcolonial context where Manichean theories of simple white/black and related coloniser/colonised binaries had recently passed like wildfire through the continent and, importantly, met with some success, occasioning the nominal “independence” of many nation states (Rahnema 1997: 387). The difference was that in Rwanda, the colonial Belgians were not the ones who at any time suffered the primary backlash, but instead the indigenous Tutsi. The ensuing refugee problem engulfed the region.

We have seen that “Kuseremane”, on arriving in Kenya as a refugee, persists in clinging to certain identity anchors that, as the previous paragraphs have suggested, are untenable. Forced to responsibly read his mythology of personal origins alongside postcolonial discursive constructions of the Tutsi as a racialised group, we can conclude that his identity prior to, beyond and within “Weight of Whispers” is in a constant and chaotic process of becoming, and this invariably beyond his control or comprehension. “Kuseremane” is, in terms of *original* identity, an orphan, despite his desire to will himself a fixed authenticity, albeit a *syncretic* fixed “authenticity” that hybridised the royal and the capitalist member of the neocolonial elite. Although the postmodern insistence upon the impossibility of any essential or authentic self is traditionally thought of as politically irresponsible, for it is believed to overlook and trivialise the Fanonian angst occasioned by the colonial encounter, Owuor’s foregrounding of “Kuseremane’s” multiple-fractured (not just dual) and processual identities is potentially liberating. Not for “Kuseremane” the character “himself”, but because of what the reader may do with a recognition of his condition. For, having foregrounded her cancelled character’s constructedness, and having demonstrated the fragility of his fictional construction within the narrative, and having shown how his encounters within the postcolonial city of Nairobi deconstruct “Kuseremane’s” own misguided certainties – from the theft of his “ring of the royal household” to his impoverished tenancy in the squalid River Road area of the city – the reader is presented with the optimistic, corresponding fact that the enforced and colonially-vulgar discourses of antagonistic Hutu/Tutsi racial identity outlined above can be similarly deconstructed and some form of more harmoniously reconstructed communal identity emerge in a new Rwanda.

And the need is pressing, for the tragedy of “Weight of Whispers” is not that the previously privileged and fictional “Kuseremane” can afford to escape by plane to relatively distant Kenya, but that those poor Tutsi, who constitute a determinate ab-

sence on the level of content within the text, who can not be ignored, and who must be considered if "Weight of Whispers" is to be understood, were left in place in Rwanda, where they were massacred, or fled to unstable exile in a host of often antagonistic immediately neighbouring countries such as Burundi, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo. All of these are places where they continue to suffer not only the perpetual fear and reality of violence – the August 2004 massacre of over a hundred Tutsi by Hutu in a Burundian refugee camp springs to mind – but also the rupturing of their desired identities and the impossibility of any stable and peaceful identity since each of these countries assigns to these refugees identities that take, as Mamdani traces, countless conflicting and confusing forms according to fabricated, yet ever confusingly fluid, distinctions of race, ethnicity and citizenship, there being precious little agreement between governments of the Great Lakes region on how refugees should be treated, or even whether they should be treated as anything at all.

The tragedy suffered by "Kuseremane" within the text and those poor Tutsi who constitute "Weight of Whispers" determinate absence, and which is in both cases occasioned by their migration, brings into sharp focus the insupportable nature of that postmodern-postcolonial "cult of the migrant" which emanates from Western academies and which retains such force in postcolonial discourse. As Robert Young (2003: 54) writes: "Some western postmodernists have tried to characterise nomadism and migration as examples of the most productive forms of cultural identity, emphasising the creative performativity of identity (...) This may be all very well for cosmopolitan intellectuals..."

Possibly, we can understand the obsession with positive and productive migration when it stems from formerly colonial subjects who are now comfortably "out of place" in privileged, wealthy Western universities in peaceful countries, and perhaps we can view it as a treacherous modification of that painful psychological two-placedness that the similarly "out of place" Frantz Fanon felt when in the genuinely downtrodden Algeria, but none of this changes the awfulness of the present postcolonial condition of the fictional "Kuseremane" or the average Tutsi "subject in place".

The politics of migration become an issue in "Weight of Whispers", for in rare moments of homodiegetic analepsis, "Kuseremane" narrates how he once had the freedom to circumnavigate the globe, showing an especial fascination with Europe, and this as a consequence of his university studies at the Sorbonne, his diplomatic postings and his global business interests, all of which were enabled by his wealth. Similarly, when in Nairobi he encounters "authorised" and welcome migration in the person of a former Sorbonne colleague of his, the Frenchman Yves Fontaine, whose capitalist usefulness for Kenya enables him to acquire privileged "expatriate" status. Indeed, Owuor's text explores at length the differences and hierarchies that exist between categories of postcolonial migrant, and how it is *existing* wealth and privilege ("Kuseremane", in his rush to flee, had to leave his wealth and certain

identity documents in Rwanda) that determines how productive and pleasant the experience of migration may be. Whether a person is viewed by authority as an expatriate, an exile, a national, an immigrant, an asylum seeker, a refugee or a combination of these within the nuanced semantic field of *The Migrant*, all of which distinctions are mentioned in "Weight of Whispers", determines the freedoms that s/he can enjoy within the postcolonial state. Should the migrant fall into the wrong category, then as surely as the colonial powers created this Fanonian class, the independent African state will similarly consign him/her to the non-status of the wretched of the earth.

As we have seen, it is only by responsibly reading "Kuseremane's" experience of migration alongside and within the specific postcolonial history of Rwanda that we can hazard to suggest that something positive might in future come from the experience. We must understand that the non-status and non-identities of the refugee are ones of agony and angst that must be prevented from continuing and from happening again.

As we have stated, that possibility of prevention, or at least understanding, is passed in this particular work of fiction onto the East African reader, whose responsibility it becomes, having perceived "Kuseremane's" constructedness and considered this alongside the genocide, to go beyond the narrow discipline of literature and strive toward some form of (non)racial harmony between Tutsi and Hutu. And, of course, this endeavour is not only necessary for Rwanda, but perhaps even for the Kenya of Owuor's Kenyan reader, since as both Peter Amuka and Nasong'o, amongst others, point out, the ostensibly ethnic conflicts and antagonisms that are a constant feature of Kenyan postcolonial politics are arguably similar elite distractions from the reality of class antagonisms. Amuka mentions a notorious and illustrative event from 1994: "It is (...) well-known (...) that behind the eviction of the Kikuyu from Maela and Enoosupukia is the conviction that they are 'foreigners' on Maasai-land", and he further suggests that this entrenched conviction was rearticulated forcefully by "certain politicians" (Amuka 1997: 94). The fact that this potted analysis reminds us so clearly of the discursive historicising of the Tutsi as a foreign race should give us pause to realise that "Weight of Whispers" might have, in addition to its specific concerns, wider postcolonial significance.

Certain narrative features of "Weight of Whispers" further enable us to realise that we have an active part to play as regional and global readers, rather than the passive role we are usually thrust into by monologically "committed" Kenyan texts. These features include the use of the first-person narrator and, more significantly, the continuous use of the present tense. Although a handful of Kenyan works have appeared that use a first-person narrator, I know of none that is written exclusively in the present tense, and certainly am aware of no work of Kenyan fiction that so subtly and effectively employs narrative devices to reinforce or even constitute the issues at stake.

We have already mentioned the structural irony that enables the reader to gener-

ally appreciate more about the fact of “Kuseremane’s” disintegration of “original” identity than he does. This of course makes him an unreliable narrator of sorts. But his ultimate unreliability stems from the fact that his character, as we have seen, is cancelled and massively fragmented. A textual construct of the type that “Kuseremane” clearly is, and one that at no time has a coherent identity/subject platform from which to speak, is not only “unreliable”, it is impossible – it is a narrator that not only can not understand itself, but that also can not possibly articulate itself. “Kuseremane” is what I might call a *cancelled narrator* whose voice dissolves into the text much as his fictional body dissolves into the squalor of Nairobi. His “I” itself becomes an overt fiction, and we are left asking ourselves this core question: Who is Kuseremane? It is this question, one that the text vitally leaves indeterminate and perhaps undecidable within the parameters of the story alone, that obliges us to seek the answer elsewhere, perhaps, for example, by moving into another disciplinary area such as the social sciences and, consequently, the important work of Mamdani, Kamukama, Shea or the organisation, African Rights.

Working in tandem with the first-person narrator as a device that denies the possibility of us reading “Weight of Whispers” as an autotelic text, is the use of the present tense. It is clear that “Kuseremane’s” constant use of the present tense creates an immediacy that enables us to read his disorientation at the same time that “he” experiences it. The structural irony works on the following level only: we appreciate that his identity, say, is collapsing while *he* importantly does not, but this is as privileged as the present tense allows us to be. We still cannot as readers coherently order or make sense of that disintegration – we merely observe that it *is* happening. This is because all narrative coherence depends upon a certain distance in time from events, something that the Foucauldian philosopher of history, Hayden White, pointed out with regard to all traditional liberal and conservative historiography, which he suggested was narrated or “emplotted” in the manner of fiction (White 1978: 84). In the midst of events at any one moment, and this as a consequence of the present tense, the reader is presented with a narrative that cannot be coherent in itself, for “Kuseremane” lacks the distance from which his story might be ordered and in any way understandable to him. The reader is in the same position, thrust into events as they happen, in this way experiencing much of the disorientation that “Kuseremane” experiences.

As we read, then, we can not order the narrative any more than the cancelled character who narrates, and consequently we must seek aids to understanding elsewhere, again beyond the covers of “Weight of Whispers”, especially bearing in mind the serious issue of genocide that is the story’s *thematic* determinate absence. Owuor has made the reader, all of us, partners in the construction of meaning and, ultimately, partners with the responsibility for future reflective identity (de)construction within the region and, to this extent at least, partners in the search for a solution to the continuing violent refugee problem.

“Weight of Whispers” is an extraordinary and an extraordinarily innovative piece of postcolonial fiction, one that continues to voice the socio-political concerns of what has become the Kenyan literary tradition, but that also substantially extends this tradition by creating a responsible indeterminacy that enjoins the reader in an extra-textual battle for meaning regarding some of the most pressing, fundamental and immediate issues of the time and the region. If issues of migration and identity were once the playthings only for academics, Owuor has made them issues of serious importance for us all.

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