



Beyond “This Is Kenya”

By K’eguro Macharia



Political thought looks very different when you make the human and not the economy the central figure of your thinking. Try it. It’s good. – Nanjala Nyabola, Twitter, 15 October 2017

Kenya’s official languages are English, Kiswahili, and Silence. – Yvonne Owuor, *Dust*

Africa has to mean a present and future home again for those who strive for a freedom linked to the freedom of those like – and unlike – us. – Pumla Dineo Gqola, *Reflecting Rogue*

i) “This is Kenya”

Political Theorist Wambui Mwangi says we should start from where we are, that place where we are standing. I start from here, where I am standing. I am black. I am gay. I am a feminist. I am in my 40s. I am the child of a professional couple, a doctor and a nurse. I attended Nairobi Primary when Daniel Arap Moi was president. I attended Lenana School when Moi was president. I am the child of a widow. I left Kenya in 1995 and returned in 2013. I was not in Kenya when a 2003 Gallup opinion poll declared Kenyans the most optimistic people in the world. And I was not in Kenya during the post-election violence of 2007 and 2008. I returned to Kenya after two ICC indictees, Uhuru Muigai Kenyatta and William Samoei Ruto, assumed office as president and deputy president.

I left Kenya when “this is Kenya” referred to Moi’s Kenya, and I returned to Kenya when “this is Kenya” referred to the Kenya ruled by Moi’s mentees. I missed the “this is Kenya” that assumed a post-Moi Kenya was possible. I am not old enough to know if Kenyans used “this is Kenya” when Jomo Kenyatta was president.

I have been struck by the power of “this is Kenya,” how it impedes imagination and action, how it creates resignation and indifference.

In many cases, “this is Kenya” is uttered at a scene of violation and exhaustion: after a demand for a bribe, after being told a file is missing from a government office, after being insulted by a state agent, after attempting to use legal channels and being frustrated, after being sexually assaulted and attempting to seek help from friends and family, after witnessing police brutality, while paying more for food, while struggling to afford private healthcare because the public system is broken, while trying to afford school fees for private schools because public education is broken, while reading yet another report about theft of public land, while reading yet another report about theft of public money, while trying to navigate Kenya’s rape culture, while trying to navigate Kenya’s heteronormative culture, while trying to navigate Kenya’s misogynist culture, while trying to navigate Kenya’s ethno-nationalist culture.

We experience “this is Kenya” as frustration. As exhaustion. This “we” is produced through these experiences of frustration and exhaustion. If you have said, thought, written, or heard “this is Kenya,” you have been drawn into the untemporality of that ongoing present. We learn, in primary school, that time is divided into past, present, and future. We learn that in the “to be” family, the term for past is “was,” the term for present is “is,” and the term for future is “will be.” We Kenyans rarely, if ever, say, “this was Kenya” or “this will be Kenya.” We remain at “this is Kenya,” a moment that names a present that seems never to end.

I have been struck by the power of “this is Kenya,” how it impedes imagination and action, how it creates resignation and indifference. The scene of resignation is familiar: if you try to seek redress, you will be told to calm down, to let matters go, because “this is Kenya.” The scene of indifference is also familiar: if you recount a violation or insult or injury to a friend or acquaintance, you will be told “this is Kenya.” Let it go. Nothing can change. Suck it up. Vumilia. Survive. Manage. Hustle. “You are not the only one.” “You are not special.”

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We know that the rich – those with access to power and resources – and the poor and minoritized – those without access to power and resources – use and experience “this is Kenya” in different ways. For the rich, “this is Kenya” affirms and naturalizes inequality. For the rich, “this is Kenya” is a gatekeeping strategy, designed to keep out those without access to generational wealth and elite connections. For the rich, “this is Kenya” is an Mbwa Kali sign, warning the poor and minoritized that those without the proper credentials will be savaged if they trespass. For the rich, “this is Kenya” naturalizes the order of things. It is not a critique. It is a way of normalizing an ongoing present that favors the rich. For the poor and the minoritized, “this is Kenya” expresses frustration, anger, fear, exhaustion. For the poor and the minoritized, “this is Kenya” is the beat that accompanies routine humiliation and unhumaning. For the poor and minoritized, “this is Kenya” names a persistent stuckness that recurs generation after generation: just as your grandparents were unable to get a national identity card, you, too, will be frustrated. For the poor and minoritized, “this is Kenya” names the very real possibility of debilitating life and premature death.

“This is Kenya” impedes imaginations. It makes it difficult – but not impossible – to imagine that Kenya might be different, that we who intone and internalize Kenya, as rich and poor, might be different.

Black gay science fiction author and intellectual, Samuel Delany, writes, “The betraying signs that one discourse has displaced or transformed into another are often the smallest rhetorical shifts.” In Moi’s Kenya, the one I grew up in, the word “dissident” described those who critiqued the state. By the time I returned, in 2013, that word had disappeared. It had been replaced by activist and civil society. Delany teaches me to ask about rhetorical shifts and rhetorical persistence: what does the persistence of “this is Kenya” from Daniel arap Moi’s Kenya to Uhuru Kenyatta’s Kenya tell us about Kenyan systems and the everyday we inhabit and navigate?

Repetition produces habit, muscle memory. It generates and manages expectation: if I do this, then I expect that to happen. It teaches our minds and bodies and feelings and sensations how to respond. It shapes how we are able to imagine. To imagine differently, we must know how and what we are being told to imagine and unimagine. To imagine differently, we must know how “this is Kenya” teaches us to imagine and unimagine.

ii) Ethno-patriarchy

“This is Kenya” names a system that Professor Grace Musila has described as phallocratic. It is a system that represents politics as a competition between men. It is a system that frames men as legible and legitimate political actors. Presidential politics is framed as a competition between men. Electoral politics is framed as a competition between men. Civil Society leadership is framed as an affair among men. Activism is framed as an affair among men. Within this phallocratic system, women are considered trespassers.

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Phallocracy feels instinctual.

We learn in high school literature classes that repetition generates emphasis. We repeat words and phrases and sentences to give them additional weight. “This is Kenya” works through repetition. In more advanced classes, we learn that repetition produces the effect of inevitability. Phallocracy works through this inevitability. Of course, the president should be a man. Of course, the Chief Justice and Attorney General and Speaker of the National Assembly should be men. Women can be deputies. That “of course” is the rhetoric of inevitability. Inevitability shades into “the natural order of things.” In “the natural order of things,” men are in power and women are subordinate. “It’s natural.” “This is Kenya.”

Repetition produces habit, muscle memory. It produces something almost instinctual. It is that habit that kicks in when the word politics is mentioned and, almost immediately, those present track a patriarchal lineage: Mbatian, Lenana, Nabongo Mumia, Lwanda Magere, Waiyaki wa Hinga, Harry Thuku, Tom Mboya, Jaramogi Oginga Odinga, J.M. Kariuki, Jomo Kenyatta, Daniel Arap Moi, Charles Njonjo, George Saitoti, William Ruto, Raila Odinga, Uhuru Kenyatta. In the minor registers, we will hear about Babu Owino and Mike Sonko or Ferdinand Waititu against William Kabogo.

Occasionally, we will be reminded about Mekatilili wa Menza, Mary Nyanjiru, Grace Onyango, Phoebe Asiyo, Julia Ojiambo, and Chelagat Mutai, but these women will be framed as exceptional, not as representing what women can do, but as having transcended their limitations to join the men. These women, we will be told, “have balls.”

Repetition produces habit, muscle memory. It produces something almost instinctual. Phallocracy feels instinctual. It is the ease with which names such as Moses Kuria, Dennis Itumbi, Mutahi Ngunyi, Robert Alai, David Ndii, John Githongo, and Boniface Mwangi come to mind. It is the ease with which we move from Wahome Mutahi to Kwamchetsi Makokha, from Ngugi wa Thiong’o to

Kinyanjui Kombani, from Tom Mboya to Mutula Kilonzo. The names come easily, populating the encyclopedia of Kenyan politics. As this litany of names unfolds, we might pause to ask about the women. And then a few might be added.

Dr. Okech captures how the phallocratic order is made to seem natural, even instinctual, by being termed as “traditional.” Such an order, as she explains, spatializes gender: women have a “rightful place,” and they are to be kept in that “rightful place” through violence.

Repetition. Habit. Muscle Memory. Something almost instinctual. “This is Kenya.”

“This is Kenya” blossoms into a practice of phallocratic instincts: manels, politics as penis comparisons, displays of virility, threats against sexual minorities, agreements between gentlemen, militarized masculinities, policing women’s dress, policing women’s movements, policing women’s bodies, drawing a map of the political that frames women as subordinate, because men are natural leaders.

Dr. Awino Okech describes the shape of this phallocratic approach in Kenyan politics:

Women and girls in Kenya have been mobilised as mothers, child bearers, and nurturers to contribute to de-radicalising young men and to sustain peace. The image of politicians’ wives wearing white clothes and praying for peace at rallies ahead of the just-concluded general elections are a critical part of this public imaginary. Yet at the same time, public spaces occupied by women are constricted through attacks on women in public office, on the streets through stripping, and, most potently through the failure to fulfill the gender equality provisions in the constitution. These actions are demonstrative of how fear of violence serves to discipline women into accepting traditional gender roles. The daily insecurity faced by women is justified by our acceptance of violence as synonymous with security and an accompanying structural belief that women who have “strayed” away from their traditional roles should be violently guided back to their rightful place.

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According to constitutional expert Ms. Marilyn Kamuru, the failure of Kenya’s Supreme Court and the 12th Parliament to meet the constitutional requirement that “not more than two-thirds” of any one gender should occupy elective and appointed positions discriminates against women. This failure, Ms. Kamuru writes, “has the effect of questioning women’s citizenship by silencing women and by affirming that women’s illegal exclusion from positions of leadership is acceptable and that their rights are a secondary priority.” As Ms. Kamuru writes, these failures to comply with constitutional provisions about gender composition place Kenya at a crossroads. Will we “accept to be governed and guided by the Constitution of Kenya 2010”? Or, will “we precipitate further political instability by breaking the legal and moral compact we agreed to as a nation on August 27, 2010,” when the constitution was promulgated?

As Ms. Kamuru points out, Article 27(8) and Article 81(b) of Kenya’s constitution require that “not more than two-thirds” of any elected or appointed body be of the same gender. These requirements challenge a phallocratic order that imagines men should be in charge. They enable us to imagine that Kenya’s phallocratic order is neither inevitable nor natural.

iii) Imagination-work

Black lesbian poet Audre Lorde writes, “Right now, I could name at least ten ideas I would have found intolerable or incomprehensible and frightening, except as they came after dreams and poems. This is not idle fantasy, but a disciplined attention to the true meaning of ‘it feels right to me.’ We can train ourselves to respect our feelings and to transpose them into a language so they can be shared.”

Dr. Joyce Nyairo has documented how Kenya’s popular music has helped to shape Kenyan imaginations, making the unimaginable less frightening to imagine.

Anyone who has ever tried to unlearn a habit knows that it is difficult. You must train your body to imagine itself differently. You must retrain your appetites. You must rearrange how you experience pleasure and relief and pain and sorrow. You must re-imagine your relationship to yourself and to the social worlds you inhabit and build.

Popular music has been the poetry that runs through, engages, interrupts, and redirects our political imaginations. Dr. Joyce Nyairo has documented how Kenya’s popular music has helped to shape Kenyan imaginations, making the unimaginable less frightening to imagine. In an article co-written with Dr. James Ogude, Dr. Nyairo writes, “Popular forms have the capacity to forge, clarify, and articulate the bonds between cultural affairs and political existence.” For the Kenya of 2002, Gidi Gidi Maji Maji’s [song](#) “Who Can Bwogo Me?” which soon came to be called “Unbwogable,” articulated the hope of a nation moving into the promise of a post-Moi world. The singers, Joseph Ogidi (Gidi) and Julius Owino (Maji) wrote against the fear that saturated an uncertain future, insisting that they were “unbwogable,” unafraid, undefeatable. This statement, directed toward their own precarious futures, soon became a political anthem, a soundtrack for the new, post-Moi Kenya.

Popular cultural forms, especially music, work through our bodies, compelling us to move and be moved, to acquire new habits, to experience ourselves differently, for the length of a song, and beyond. We move our shoulders or hips or necks or hands or feet, sometimes without choosing or knowing. Beats and rhythms shape and reshape our bodies, shifting our orientations to ourselves and to others around us. Our imaginations are engaged. We lose our “rightful places,” our “traditional places,” the places created through repetition as inevitable, natural. We leave “this is Kenya” and enter into the space created by the cultural form. I emphasize the political work, the imagination-building work, the body- and instinct- and emotion-retraining work of popular cultural forms because mainstream Kenyan politics has placed cultural work outside the frame of the political. The political is about laws and policies and commissions and task forces and reports and civil society and funding and corruption. The occasional cartoonist is allowed into the fold of the political.

Against the persistent beat of the phallogocentric “this is Kenya,” the interrupting, imagination-creating, imagination-building, imagination-sustaining, imagination practices of #WeAre52pc are daring to imagine freely.

Yet, if we are to think with the promise of the first Article of the constitution – “All sovereign power belongs to the people of Kenya and shall be exercised only in accordance with this Constitution” – we must think with forms that can speak to “the people of Kenya.” We must think about the work of popular culture to build imaginations, to create political orientations, to build our freedom dreams, to energize our pursuits of freedom and economic justice.

iv) #WeAre52pc

On 26 September 2017, the #WeAre52pc collective filed a petition with the Chief Justice demanding that parliament be dissolved because it does not meet the constitutional gender standard that not more than two-thirds of the members should be of the same gender. While the petition – publicly available [here](#) – embeds itself in constitutional clauses, it is grounded in an African feminist ethics and imagination.

Professor Pumla Dineo Gqola describes the African feminist imagination in *Reflecting Rogue*. The “African feminist imagination,” she writes, “is explosive against patriarchal doublespeak.” Whereas, for instance, the 2/3 gender requirement may have been inserted as a formality, the #WeAre52pc collective has refused the form without the action, and is demanding that the constitutional requirement be fulfilled. The “African feminist imagination denotes and resides in the evocative, the suggestive, the world of the experimental.” This imagination has to be “experimental” because it intervenes in and interrupts a world that takes the phallocratic order as inevitable and natural, a world that trains bodies and minds and feelings to respond to the phallocratic order with obedience, if not reverence. Professor Gqola writes, “Taking seriously African women’s worldviews opens up creative universes, political analyses, and ultimately reforms genres.” #WeAre52pc is not simply trying to activate constitutional requirements, but, more broadly, asking what happens if we embed Kenya’s constitution without an African feminist imagination. How might that Kenya be more livable for girls and women and trans* and gender-non-conforming Kenyans who live under a phallocratic order?

In *A Renegade Called Simphiwe*, Professor Gqola challenges, “Picture what we can *create* if we dare give ourselves permission to imagine freely.” #WeAre52pc grounds itself in a radical African feminist imagination, an imagination that emerges from and sustains collectivity. Radical, because #WeAre52pc tackles phallocracy at the root, as a problem at the foundation of how Kenya is imagined and experienced. Against the persistent beat of the phallocratic “this is Kenya,” the interrupting, imagination-creating, imagination-building, imagination-sustaining, imagination practices of #WeAre52pc dare to imagine freely.

v) Toward freedom, toward the human

Beyond “this is Kenya,” as repeated rhetoric, as persistent beat, as phallocratic insistence, as inevitability, lie freedom dreams. Professor Robin D.G. Kelley writes, “Without new visions we don’t know what to build, only what to knock down. We not only end up confused, rudderless, and cynical, but we forget that making a revolution is not a series of clever maneuvers and tactics but a process that can and must transform us.”

Elite Kenyans – those with access to good educations, resources in difficult times, strategies to navigate bureaucratic processes – are not very good at listening to non-elite Kenyans.

Politics can seem very abstract. Much-discussed concepts such as “rule of law” and “constitutional order” and “rights and freedoms” rarely, if ever, translate to the ordinary ways most Kenyans experience the state. If, following Professor Wambui Mwangi’s injunction that we start from where we are, that place we are standing, then that means we have to ask about everyday life. If we are to discuss imagining freedom and pursuing freedom and practicing freedom, all of those have to be grounded in our everyday experiences of the world.

Elite Kenyans – those with access to good educations, resources in difficult times, strategies to

navigate bureaucratic processes – are not very good at listening to non-elite Kenyans. We can afford to speak in abstractions: rights, freedoms, constitution, rule of law, anarchy, good governance, civil society. We are not very good – and might be very bad – at asking how non-elite Kenyans experience the state. We collect data, write reports, share statistics, generate outrage, but we rarely ask how we can work across difference, how we can listen and learn, how we can build a Kenya that is genuinely more livable and shareable for all of us. How we can attend to the quotidian ways we all experience Kenya.

To the extent that we do not know how to listen and to the extent that we do not how to learn and to the extent that we abstract from how lives are actually lived, our understanding of Kenya is impoverished. The ways we imagine and pursue and practice freedom are truncated.

I had hoped to end on a less critical note, to offer something that might put freedom rooted in care in our collective vocabularies and practices. From here, where I stand, doing so would be impossible. To practice freedom rooted in care requires daily work, working across difference, knowing that such work will be difficult, that it will stretch our imaginations and capacities, that we will disagree, sometimes intensely. It requires knowing that freedom is a practice, not a state, something we do every day, something we build every day, something we nurture every day, and as we engage in freedom practices every day, we make our worlds more possible, more livable, more shareable.

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