



MOVING BOUNDARIES: Building bridges in a Kardashian world

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AS 2018

We live in a world where our certainties, including lines in the sand, the imagination of our boundaries, are crumbling. We are in a season where one of the most significant struggles is that of giving a name to the realities of our now. You know the landscape through which our metaphorical boundaries intend to creep: the rise and re-entrenchment of global tribalism—euphemised as alt-right (isn't that the new non-word being bandied about?), nationalism, Brexit, regionalism, partisanship, supremacy, tribalism, and its evil sister, the extensive, thorough, strategic demonisation of “the other”. Naturally, history repeatedly tells us how this will end – a human frenzy that accelerates into an unstoppable, diabolic rage that will result in some horrendous mass bloodletting that will lead survivors to another round of shame, guilt, regret, outrage and the promise (again) of “oh no, never again”.

Here is a world where an unrepentant sound-bitey demagogue has taken the seat of authority in the world's most powerful nation, his pointing finger just a breath away from an Armageddon nuclear holocaust button. He got there through a democratic process, a free and fair election fairy tale. In this we can read how the boundaries of “civilisational” paradigms now reveal themselves. This, friends, is supposed to be the apex of democracy, the great adventure our nations are walking towards.

Watching The Donald gloat and heckle his way across the United States to the roaring approval of enraptured masses beggars one's previous notions about America. The more things change, the more they stay the same. Adolf Hitler would have been impressed. For an African person from Africa, the scenes unfolding are uncomfortably familiar. As much as I enjoy (yes, I admit, it is petty) the discomfort of a few American acquaintances struggling to embrace the consequences of choosing that orange-hued leader of their free world, I am forced to contend with a Trump-led earth. (Mind you, there are also Teresa May and Marie le Pen on the sidelines.)

What the American election process points to is the reality of our limits. It indicates how dogmatic insincerity couched under political correctness and glossy branding will collapse under the pressure of the actual choices of the human heart. The fact that a tribal supremacist wins precisely because he is a tribal supremacist implies that there are far more hidden worlds within the imagined, idealised America, and indeed within our world and within the African continent. The questions that traverse the heart find answers one way or another, whether we want to hear the truth or not, even if, in the USA's case, the truthful answer is Mr. Donald Trump.

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Let us gesture to some of the questions that may be lurking within these present boundaries of the human heart. None of these questions are ever likely to be answered because to do so would demand that the myths and brands by which we insist on defining our worlds would have to be dismantled. Few are ready to do this. Here are some of those questions:

Would there have been an immigration surge and an ISIS if the United States had not moved boundaries, defied international protocol, manufactured lies to invade and destroy Iraq and Afghanistan and then continued blithely with the annihilation of Libya? Why is there such a massive build-up of war tools right now in so many corners of the world, including Eastern Europe? Is the world preparing for a gigantic-scale war? Why is Russia being turned into a global pariah using the same format that was created to justify the wars in Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria (which failed)? To what purpose? Who benefits the most from the wars in the world? Since all weapons carry serial numbers and if the United Nations is truly desirous of ending wars, why has the UN not been able to sanction the sources of these borderless weapons? Is it because the countries that manufacture these weapons are the UN's main funders?

Instead of confronting such questions, what we as a human race prefer to do is to bury these questions with our hysterical laughter at the antics of the gruesome Kardashians, who have been turned into a signal icon for human regeneration, aspiration and forgetfulness. We prefer Pollyannaish and Orwellian newspeak, with Tinker Bell descriptions, such as "collateral damage", to disguise and deny the reality of our fears, discontent, terror and confusion. Meanwhile, the earth is reeling. If it is not from angry persons plotting doomsday scenarios, then it is a climate woundedness that sees a never-before-experienced scenario of the melting of the North and South Poles. The seas are rising.

As a response to such existential global uncertainty, the UN, in its wisdom, appointed Wonder Woman - the pneumatic-bosomed illusory white female caricature with a wasp's waist who wears the American flag as underwear - as the honorary Goodwill Ambassador for something called the Empowerment of Women and Girls. It was a solemn ceremony. When this happened, the world should have realised that our world was truly and royally...buggered (if I may use this most

satisfyingly descriptive Anglo-Saxon expression).

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We are living in the eye of the storm of that popularised curse/blessing wrongly attributed to China: *May you live in interesting times*. The closest Cantonese expression refers to a clown in and of current time. Clowns. Rather apt. Still, the forces of nature, space, time and whatever else seem to have unleashed a whirlwind that is driving the world as flotsam and jetsam. We feel it, we see it, we read the signs, but do not dare to construct a lexicon for this.

In a season of such terrifying flux, borders are a moot point. Frontiers will have to be re-imagined and probably called something else. The human person will also have to reconsider who or what it is. Pope Francis has dared to call this time as that of a piecemeal World War III. We freak out. Yet the possibility that an apocalypse has erupted beneath our living room couches while we keep up with the Kardashians is real.

Boundaries are already in movement; the future is in a state of uncertainty. You have already witnessed (the edited versions of) millions of humans escaping historical homes out of existential distress; they walk deserts, they cross boundaries, crash through frontiers, tear down electric wire fences and sail across wild seas in rubber dinghies seeking safety, hope and a home. The last mass movement of this kind – human journeys into harbours that throw up gates against them – was during World War II. But they keep moving. To what? Where? Transcending boundaries? You have seen the pictures of some of our Africans who have sought to leave for the imagined nirvana of elsewhere now turning the Mediterranean Sea into a cemetery. Meanwhile the African Union, among other African institutions, sustain their impeccable record for profound silences about matters that truly matter to their citizens.

There are other boundary movements that slip off the radar. I am not sure why this is the case, considering that these are bigger than any other migrations taking place in the world right now. I refer to the massive Chinese influx into Africa—official figures are one million, unofficial figures double that – persons now spread throughout the African continent. Mandarin is now a factor of African social and linguistic realities. The blend of cultures and the fruits of such a union through Sino-African children is more apparent now. I ask you then, is the next African decade a Chinese one? If you want to explore African boundaries, look to China. (I am being facetious.)

Great resource finds on our continent, coupled with an awareness of a lack of these resources in other parts of the world, have also increased the populations of persons of Caucasian descent living in Africa. The numbers are always disputed and minimised (the International Organisation for Migration has no figures for current European migration into Africa) because this sort of human movement does not subscribe to a favoured mythology. The figures for these are also in excess of a million, with Angola and Mozambique (in the time of the European economic crisis) receiving together over 700,000 young European economic migrants who settled there to start new lives. Migrant crisis, anyone?

Back to this season of wordlessness.

We feel, see, and hide from what we are most uneasy about. We prefer to draw a line across what does not conform to our delusion or brand of the world. We are silent before the unceasing

bloodletting. We skip past the news of the slaughters in Uganda, Congo, Central African Republic, Myanmar, Yemen, Syria, Iraq, and entire communities living within the Amazon. We ignore the water wars in the US and the soul-destruction in detention camps worldwide, including that generated by Australia's own Faustian pact with Nauru, and more significantly, in the Auschwitz-like American concentration camp in Guantanamo Bay - that grotesque giant stain on the human conscience that many of us who proclaim, study and articulate human rights choose to ignore.

How is this even possible?

What is the reality of lines drawn out in a world where the best resources available are dedicated to renewing, reinventing and valorising tools of human violence and destruction to which we have acceded power, and now, with reference to drone warfare, handed over a moral impetus to? A boundary-less machine can be directed to choose whether a human being anywhere in the world lives or dies. Is this the pinnacle of civilisation?

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For a long time, the greatest threat to civilisation was imagined as an invasion from a powerful galactic force: aliens. Yet all this time the alien was us - a strange race that both cannibalises and worships itself. The only ones capable of and willing to and particularly invested in destroying the earth in a cataclysm is us.... And we are willing to do so for the most spurious of reasons: to prove the primacy of our pitiful ideologies so that we can be emperors of a swamp.

Exceptional? *Ha!*

The world's latest atavistic impulse is one that is imbued by a virulent Islamophobia. It is unbelievable and unconscionable that the same world that not too long ago learned that an abhorrent depiction and dehumanisation of a peoples could lead to the slaughter of the human soul, the bestial behaviour of human beings and the destruction of the core of human decency can now regurgitate that evil to visit it anew upon others.

If 45 per cent of our African population is linked to Islamic mores, how can we allow this repugnant paradigm to take root unquestioned by our individual and collective sensibilities? Africans, with your endless silences as still as yoghurt, do you even comprehend what this means for your cultures and identities? What happens to being and belonging when by virtue of your facing Mecca in prayer you become defined as a "terrorist-in-waiting" by a culture and paradigm that prefers and perpetuates a most idiotic and ignorant lens to explain away an actual human and existential crisis, the primary purpose of which is the sustenance of a lucrative war and suffering ecosystem?

You and I have experienced the progressive and strategic framing of this horrible lie until it has acquired the semblance of truth—a post-truth that becomes a post-reality reality. And in this matter, not once have I heard an African reframing an African reactiveness. Not once. Africans, your boundaries of existence are receding and you are blind, deaf, dumb and stupid to it. Your governments have even designated your own soldiers to blow up a portion of your own population and to hold them in suspicion because they proclaim "Allahu Akbar".

The consequences of such extremes of human foolishness manifest in weird new cultural practices. Allow me to regale you with the tale of a rather senior World Bank official who upon arriving in Johannesburg - her first visit to Africa - showed up surrounded by six, giant, heavily- armed and

helmeted security guards who looked like pumped-up black beetles on steroids. The guards had been hired to protect her from the violence of her vivid imagination. I would have done anything to enter into her senses as her plane door opened to a view of the South African city. She proceeded to painstakingly sustain her delusions even as she trip-tropped, trip-tropped all over Sandton Mall like billy goat gruff, needing to justify the expenses of a psychosis created by a cultural commitment to wallow in profound benightedness. What is the language for these new modes of human strangeness?

This, our amputation from both reality and humanity, are the consequences of an investment in an unsustainable idea of the world and its humanity. It is a gross alienation from what should bond, bind and build. You speak of boundaries and bridges, tell me, what types of structures have you called forth to overcome a refusal to experience, even in difference, the humanity of another? What kind of boundaries are you proposing to transcend the now embedded human fear of other humans? We are pleased to invest in propaganda infrastructure to peddle disinformation. We define phrases like "collateral damage" to sanitise and conceal the reality of millions of wilful, innocent murders and the destruction of hospitals and homes for which there are no Nuremberg trials.

Donald Trump appointed the head of the Pentagon a man, who if the principles of Nuremberg were to be applied, should be hanging at the end of noose, until dead. But this man is to oversee the largest war arsenal in the history of humanity under the leadership of an erratic being. Behold your world.

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With this in mind, what does it mean for you and me to be a human being now? Even with enhanced consciousness of the cosmos and the universe, why are some more still more human than others? Nothing speaks so much to this than the visa application process to which most Africans are subjected. Name of grandmother? Bank account details? Are these people insane?

Even with new revelations shared with us by those seekers, in say, the world of quantum physics or cosmology, why is the prevalent operating mythology still epitomised by the vacuous Kardashians? Why do we prefer that? Even with what we have heard about the awesome wonders of human possibility, why is the inclination that of a willingness to be hypnotised into forgetting reality, to persist in the visiting of such gross wounds on an already suffering world today?

It is no secret that "human rights" are enforced by one set of people and directed at select others. Interpretations vary, of course. They do not stand a chance when confronted by the phrase "extraordinary renditions". In October 2016, a woman-crushing, human-beheading, Yemen- invading Saudi Arabia was voted into the UN Human Rights Council to replace the newly designated pariah of the Occident, Russia. All I will say about that is that it is only a matter of time before the collective human soul gets weary of its own hypocrisy and calls a time out. Wither your boundaries now? To you who live in these extraordinarily conflictual times, what language have you created to match its demands? What does "boundary" actually mean for a time such as this?

Language is a road map and a blueprint, a provider of impetus, a prophetic vessel. Yet we seem to be either too paralysed or far too implicated to be able to generate an intimately truthful lexicon that might transfigure this present, or at least allow us all to cross out of our present limits. Without language how do we intend to enter the depths of our present reality in order to even understand it?

The Kardashians are a colourful and hypnotic screen that shield us from reality. They are not alone. The latest poster child for our condition is poor Boris Johnson, the British Foreign Secretary. In October 2016, he declared that "Africa (the country) could do with some British values" so that the country Africa might join the league of humanity as structured by the vacuum of his imagination. I emphasise this, for in the delusional man's version of the story of English incursions into other lives and cultures, there are no shadow, no demons, no hollows, no genocides, really no messy bits. His eternal soundtrack is Elgar's Pomp and Circumstances No 1 in D minor.

He no doubt keeps up with the Kardashians.

Against this backdrop, now let me touch on aspects of my literary life. I am a citizen of an imagined space called Kenya, whose frontiers were created by an English cartographer when Kenya, the colony, was a British project. What changed in 1963, the day those who became "Kenyans" call independence day? I stated in a different forum how my experiences of the nation only assert to me that the infrastructure and edifices of the colonial state established after the genocidal invasion designed in 1884-5 in Berlin (purists get irritated when I persist in referring to this as the First World War) are still intact. The colour of the skins of the taskmasters may have changed but everything else progresses as it has for over a hundred and fifty years. For example, there is no day that trains stop taking Congo's mineral resources towards the sea to the waiting ships of many foreign nations; not once have these trains stopped moving, even in the throes of serious bloodletting. Remarkable, isn't it?

The people who receive the money are in former colonial capitals, while we waste time and energy asserting... what? Independence? From what?

I live in an Africa experiencing a second-wave invasion - a massive resource grab enabled by our amoral leaders who are mortgaging bounteous landscapes and signing up to massive unpayable loans with strangers. It is likely that within fifty years the great underclass on the continent will be, again, Africans themselves, newly bankrupted vassals of a new set of foreign masters deliberately invited in under our bemused gaze. It is said that history repeats itself especially when lessons first offered remain unacknowledged, unlearned and unresolved. The problem is not with the stranger. It is with us.

Anyway, given this, what moves storytellers of Africa? I don't know about the others, but I shall tell you something of my own compulsion to search dimly lit places of the world and my continent; to live and then walk through the valleys of peoples' shadows in order to try to make sense of the time in which I find myself; our framing, our place, our future in the face of so much.

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I love the gift of being human and sharing life. I love humanity. I love ideas that challenge, invite, inspire and grow life. I also wonder about, worry and want to fix life's fragile and broken places, because something of this time inhabits me and sheds pieces of its ghosts upon my own story. I have a very Catholic urge to name demons, and stare at faces of the enemies without and within before seeking, as part of a collective, to exorcise these. I love the earth. It is a privilege to be here. I love the continent of my heritage. I love my country. The bigger arc of my literary life is a love story that

craves a “happily ever after”.

So I roam the disciplines, a bit like a pickpocket. I eavesdrop into the thinking from everywhere; silos bore me. I work with words like a mechanic tinkering with leaky places in a marvellous machine. I am a bit of a pathologist, diagnosing a corpse for its cause of death, imagining that I might prevent a similar fate for myself and for what I love. I have wondered why post-colonial Africa became stunned and inarticulate about its world and stopped writing itself into the world with pens of fire. I try to witness those silences. I want the silences to give up ghosts and names so that I can write them as stories and offer them to light, and then with them find the treasure of peace.

My works also interrogate the notion of the nation. I do not believe it exists. In this post-truth world does that even matter, given the reality of the march of super companies and the fetishisation of money? More seriously, I also often wonder if a nation like Kenya and its people suffer a grievous moral injury in their core and memory. Do societies experience collective post-traumatic stress that is not yet framed in a socio-political lexicon? Some of the frameworks of Holocaust studies profoundly resonate with me as they explain much of Africans’ secret angst, all the things of shame, guilt and grief that remain unspoken.

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My book *Dust* set me on that path when, after Kenya’s descent into hell in 2007-8, I needed to kick open painted-over tombs where we had nurtured our demons. It led me to wonder if ancestral trauma caused by a violence inflicted on the humanity of another lives out its irresolution by haunting succeeding generations. For most African nations, a horrible war was consolidated in 1885 in Berlin, and imposed itself upon them. It has never really stopped, despite the theatre of changing flags.

How do you move when all your energies are expended in circling, hiding and avoiding a grievous and existence-questioning wound? Do we imagine that the resonance of horror embedded in memory simply fades away? What do you imagine was and is the state of the soul of a man of old Africa experiencing the crushing deceptions and the betrayal of his hospitality by strangers? Who watches his known world disappear and experiences the total powerlessness and betrayal-by-silence of once favoured deities? I see no archiving about this by our people. This absence, I imagine, damages all parties. We have held no memorials for the destroyed. We use our boundaries to shield us from the past and its unrequited ghosts – people who are our brothers, mothers, fathers, ancestors, accusers. There is no “long ago” in the consequences of human deeds.

As a world and as a continent we have never grieved our excesses or our losses of self, families, community, worldview, gods, goods, stories, time, spaces, lands, archetypes and imagination in word, deed and thought. I posit that these live out their lack of resolution to the present. Is it from these too that we seek to escape through our boundaries? What does the now mean to a continent that was massively defeated in an undeclared brutal and genocidal war; a place where defeated men and women could do nothing when their wives, husbands, parents, lovers, sons, and daughters were seized, raped, sodomised, brutalised, mutilated and hunted in their presence?

Linked to this was the economics woven into intricate trade networks. Global monsoon networks reached into the continent’s own heart before reaching into China and Azerbaijan where an African diaspora has long existed. There was the trans-Saharan trade, the southern circuit that moved gold, ivory, gemstones to the coast. The space that is Africa has largely been made up of a people and

culture in and of movement as a path to wealth, adventure, humanity and encounter.

What is the impact and implications of such losses of economic wherewithal that offered so many African cultures an access to the world on their own terms? These cultures were violently taken over by assorted European trading companies that are the parents of the conglomerates we are familiar with today, who own, manage and control the resources of a continent that keep the world afloat. We do not talk often about this; if the conversations occur, I have not been a party to them. The responsibility for this lack of questioning rests squarely at our assorted African doors.

I wonder why in most cases, after fifty years of supposed independence, it is easier and cheaper for me to travel to Paris and live there for two months than it is for me to travel to Ouagadougou from Nairobi. Why? We are a people who seem to have not only lost agency over our resources, but have also lost the endless scope of their actual and imagined existence in the basic of ways. For example, most Africans today have no idea that coffee is not all about Starbucks or Colombia and that the coffee culture - its identification and its use and consumption as a beverage, medicine and ritual substance - was originally, intrinsically and creatively African (Ethiopian, to be precise). Again, when I define the African milieu as encompassing all our seas and discuss African maritime imaginaries, many gawk at me as if I am speaking to them in hieroglyphics.

What bothers me the most as an artist is our wilful African unknowing, our wilful constraints - boundaries - to imagining, thinking, hearing and seeing. Are we then to move from ignorance to ignorance, a floating people disconnected from our own humus and unable to speak of it, not only to the world, but more painfully, to ourselves? A people whose story is limited, constrained framed and only retold by others, a story so small that ours becomes an existential battle of making our lives miniscule enough to enter into the categories created in order to not again suffer a brutal fate worse than death. Hovering above our psychic heads is the real fear of a return to the diabolic violence that can be unleashed at the whims of one culture that for the most part—apart from the Germans - has declined to examine its conscience and review its consciousness of life and humanity in the face of its impulse to atrocities and the denial of these.

I do worry about a post-independence Africa that lost its voice so much so that it is inarticulate before the realities of Libya, Somalia, Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Russia, Colombia Ukraine, Brexit or Trump. Only bystanders, or victims of fate, have nothing to say about their destiny. Only the long-dead have a right to such silence. How do we proceed to traverse into the present and future through the unknown territories of our being where there are neither bridge builders nor bridges?

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There is a phrase we popularised in Kenya during election 2013: **“Accept and Move On.”** Moving on. It was assumed that the diabolic violence of the post-election violence of 2007-2008 could be commanded into silence. But the violence and its ghosts keep interfering with our present and feeding from it; we have known no psychological peace. We are caught in a death-roll of a putrefying form of corruption; we are consuming ourselves and are subject to a disgusting inner corrosion that emanates from a refusal to give a name to our horrors. You who speak of movement and boundaries, do you ever imagine that one of the keys to the future is buried in our many darkneses that require courage and humility to excavate in order to extract roots embedded in the past? Given that movement points to two directions, do we dare step into deep truth-telling in order to repopulate the

present with what will set the future free?

Now, on a more optimistic note. The African continent plays host to the youngest of the world's populations. It is called the youth bulge, or the demographic dividend. This lot looks at the world through other eyes. They host each other in their rooms. They travel fearlessly. They set up online literary platforms like Jalada.com—look it up - that think beyond boundaries and have, for example, translated a story by Ngugi wa Thiong'o into over a hundred languages, including Urdu. They code. They regenerate vocabularies. They milk sacred cows. They live, for the most part, an expansive imagination that has no lexicon attached to it yet.

The influx of new souls and cultures into a continent that thrives on variety is a great portent in more ways than it is challenging. Unlike the popularised consensus - not necessarily articulated by Africans themselves - I can also read the influx of the Chinese people into Africa through hopeful lenses. Cultural renewal through the intermingling and exchange of people has always been a force of transformation in the world. These combined forces - the youth and migrants - present an atypical movement impetus on the continent that perhaps promises a transformative idea of place that just may be able to bear the weight of this agitated world and guide it, maybe, into a more wholesome future.

This essay is adapted from a keynote address by the author at the 39th AFSSAP conference in Perth, Australia, on the theme "Africa: Moving the Boundaries" in December 2016.

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