



Plotting Our Raging Hope

By Sam Opondo



“Each generation must out of relative obscurity discover its mission, fulfill it, or betray it. In underdeveloped countries the preceding generations... fought as well as they could... we must realize that the reason for this silence lies less in their lack of heroism than in the fundamentally different international situation of our time.”

Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*

Nairobi, 2003: Following the indefinite closure of Moi University due to a students' strike against the system that privileged self-sponsored parallel students over the regular ones, I teamed up with a friend who had graduated from Catholic University and set out to mentor and inspire primary and high school students in the name of Preparing Leaders Of Tomorrow (PLOT). However, we had limited access to the students owing to Michuki era matatu strikes and watchmen who, lumping us together with religious missionaries, turned us away or directed us to officers least interested in our proposals. While we contested the misrecognition and missed opportunities, the fact that we spoke to more watchmen than students and the contradictions of our own lives was also a cause for laughter at the time. However, with the insight of hindsight (mediated by significant ideological shifts), I came to learn that this was not a laughing matter.

Here I was, a public university student whose comrades were now serving long suspensions due to

resisting the privatization of higher education walking side-by-side with an unemployed private university graduate (then postgraduate) trying to prepare leaders of tomorrow while being ill-prepared to make sense, or inhabit the present effectively. Also significant for me was our inattention to the political lives of the readily accessible watchmen who, knowingly or unknowingly, had prevented our short-lived, and ill-conceived initiative from reproducing the same maladies that we were desperately seeking to break away from.

Reflecting on our inattentiveness to the watchmen's lives often returned me to childhood memories of an episode of the KBC TV drama/ situation comedy Plot 10 where the plot watchman Munai (Ronald Kazungu) reminds the caretaker Kajogoo (Joseph Njogu) of the cold nights he endures while the tenants sleep in their houses and the end-of-month hunger experienced due to salary delays while the tenants go for their monthly feasts. However, Munai's own suffering does not translate into empathy for tenants such as Adam (Thomas Onsongo) who requests for an extension on his rent payment due to his wife's medical bill.

Munai's lamentation and impatience with Adam was crucial in helping me to see differently, and in more politically perspicuous ways, the tragic inattentiveness that makes it difficult, if not impossible for urban inhabitants to compose lives in common even with those with whom we share a time/space — our contemporaries. From the intimate space of the plot, we learn of the multiple webs of assistance and resistance that tenants create in order to survive. We are also reminded of adaptation, self-help mechanisms, and resilience developed in response to the privatization of key services and amenities that make urban life more precarious.

Like actual multi-occupancy, low-rent, tenement spaces, the fictional Plot 10 is hospitable and hostile in equal measure. But this understanding of the word plot does not exhaust its meanings. Plot also has connotations of the designs/plans for a ravenous night out (*plot/ plan/mpango*) and an undeveloped piece of land. More recently, the desire to have a plot of land of one's own has turned associational life into a means of individual gain, credibility/creditworthiness, entitlement, self-actualization, and ultimately, pleasure. It is a guarantor of intergenerational hope for those who possess it and a cause for hopelessness and rage for the dispossessed.

With the moralization of plot ownership, being plotless or homeless is considered an individual rather than structural and systemic pathology related to the institutionalization of private property and disposal of unalienated land in ways that benefit those closest to the sites of power. Similarly, the plot, the dark underside of the colonial ideal of the green garden city that kept the black native quarters separate, unhygienic, overcrowded and male-dominated is normalized. In a postcolonial city characterized by fragmented rhythms and fortified enclaves the simultaneity of concrete plots and green gated communities make it difficult to imagine common times and a generational politics that is not predicated on class.

When inequalities such as those alluded to above create an existential rift between age-mates, the idea of generational mission becomes frivolous and unattainable. Accordingly, Fanon's call for each generation to find its mission and a politics attuned to the weight of international structures from the standpoint of time raises fundamental ethical/political questions regarding how to live (well) with those with whom one is in synchrony with. Better still, we are forced to ask what it means to be contemporaries, to share a time/space, or even a mission with others in a world characterized by alienation.

In cases where the ideal of the generation does not acknowledge how different people are situated in the world/time, it becomes difficult to imagine a new human due to fidelity to the land, to the (mother) tongue, *shibboleths*, oaths, bloodlines, race, or class. Generational lines here involve the passage of things and meanings between variations of the same in ways that maintain foundations

while disavowing foundational and other forms of violence. This desire to stay true to the name of the father, the son, and any other thing that they find holy, which in most cases is race, property, and group propriety, makes people inattentive to the lives of some of their contemporaries.

However, it is possible to compose a dissensual sense of time, 'other' contemporaries, and a common world with those who we are told are carriers of an insurmountable difference. In the Kenyan context, this involves refusing colonial inscriptions and narrow crisis-based sympathies that invoke old bloodlines as moral lines and even lines on the map. It is also a refusal to join alliances that invoke elite destiny/destinations and origins while being inattentive to our co-presence, people's material conditions of existence, and ambiguous ethical relations.

Unlike co-presences that bring together multiple lifetimes, there are conceptions of the contemporary and generational times that fetishize a consumption of the present that erases the past and ruins the earth. These presentisms makes life in the present intolerable for many and the future improbable for other generations of human and non-human beings. They also invoke alternative histories and family stories that treat past injustices, dispossessions, and broken promises as anachronistic threats that call up ghosts that are too old for us to be concerned with today. So, they go on their knees and call on us to Forget! Forgive! They want a chance to develop the present without the burden of the past and responsibility to the future.

This is the mantra of the leadership of 'our' generation. In its quest for reconciliation, it shies away from the truth that the dry bones from the past constantly throw at it. It remedies the quest for justice, or dissenting voices through violence first and then development projects underwritten with human blood. With blood-soaked hands, they point upwards invoking gods of forgiveness. Downwards, they point to rails and roads that project today's debts into the future. Pointing east, they contract comrades who pour concrete over the blood-soaked lands quickly entombing the dry and not so dry bones. To cover up their tracks, they accelerate time. They turn history into ethnology; compare one group to another, crunch numbers, and then project them into a perverse developmental scheme. Schools, roads, hospitals, language and other common entitlements become communal favours and bribes that individuals can plot to plunder.

In defence of this time of development and/as plunder, young tongues are sharpened. They sing praises and lick crumbs from the floor. They silence their own multi-lingualisms and disavow their impurities. These young tongues traffic in diglossia—two versions of the same language—one for the people that they now want to constitute as a single and unproblematic whole, and another for those that they consider part of their proximate, exclusive, and intimate world. A world that, even in the face of gaps in material conditions of existence and incommensurate world-views, considers itself to be one with the potentate, the potentate in waiting, or the one who is robbed of the status of potentate and pursues it perpetually.

As committed presentists, the figureheads of generational wars and cleavage stand hand-in-hand. They claim to be forming something new but only speak the old language of Peace, Love, and Unity now recast as grand projects of anti-graft and neoliberal development. In this monolingualism, the oneness of tongue ensures that only a few lick the bones dry. For them, being a contemporary is a perverse gastronomy. It involves eating together and then devouring those who serve them. It is a potential cannibalism that turns away from the cries of their contemporaries - "*Watameza mate sisi tukikula nyama.*"

During this orgasmic feast, we are told to suspend politics in the service of the economy. For these brothers turned foes, and then turned brothers again, the present is "our time to eat." Others, other generations, must wait for their turn. In the meantime, their tongues can be put to better use...speaking in tongues, singing praises, and hurling abuses. After all, we are a generation of

forgivers.

For the impatient, the generation of leaders-in-waiting, and those whose time has come and passed, they are summoned to hustle! Gamble and speculate. To be a plotter of one sort or another. To learn many trades and always throw their eyes askance. To learn how to wink and lick their lips. Engage side-hustles, side-kicks, and 'side-dishes' "...you never know which one will land on your lap. You never know which one will be an economic boom, or which one will make your loins 'burst.'" They are told to plot and have no time for the plotless.

Beyond the shared games, our generation is forced to ask what it means to inhabit a rift between oneself and those with whom one shares a living space but whose rhythms of life, recent tongue-waggings, and eating habits, make it impossible to share a common world/time? Are they still your contemporaries? We are forced to speculate on how we can live with those who, owing to their dealings, do not only live in an exclusive space, but have fractured our present such that they can afford to live in another time. Those who shared our childhood but, in order to secure the future of their own children, have accelerated accumulation and destabilized the present for today's children.

Speaking of our times in common involves breaking hegemonic temporal rifts between those who declare that it is their time to eat and those who live in perpetual hunger. Between men, women, and all others. Between those who are made premature elders complete with ceremonial adornments irrespective of their age and experience, and those subalterns who remain perpetual children. It involves disabusing ourselves of the times of otherness that is assigned to those who, according to Johannes Fabian, are located allochronically - in another time of human development (infantilism) or of social development (primitivism) and therefore must be represented, converted, developed, and brought into national or capitalist time even if they resist. For, according to the owners of our time, these people from another time do not know any better. If they resist, *watajua hawajui*.

But hope persists. Not due to a panglossian optimism that always announces that "all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds," or a focus on the soul (for which it is well) even when things are evidently broken. Hope persists because we believe it is possible to compose new, ethical, and more equal ways of being-in-common while refusing to adapt and live with otherwise intolerable indignities. For a generation that had its hopes domesticated through the mantras of positive thinking, the fetishization of the hustle, funny memes, fancy civil society themes, and the language of adaptability and resilience rather than resistance against the intolerable, a new and raging hope becomes an imperative. One that breaks up with those children of the first and second liberation who salivate waiting for their turn to sit at the table as it is currently constituted. Like the South African *Rhodes Must Fall* and *Fees Must Fall* movements, this hope that is all the rage invokes old names and devises new revolutionary games for the dispossessed who refuse to be crushed any further.

This hopeful rage for a postcolonial age exists in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's novel *Matigari* where Matigari ma Nijirũngi returns from the bush and finds a new generation of neo-colonial collaborators such as Johnny Boy Junior (the son of the colonial collaborator John Boy). With new contemporaries from another generation— Muriuki, a poor boy who lives in the wreck of a Mercedes, Guthera, the sex worker, and Ngaruro wa Kiriro, the leader of the workers' strike—, Matigari imagines and works towards a dissensual, yet more life-affirming present and future. These dissenters, children-turned-comrades do not only tell us what is amiss but point out that what we think is a gap, is really a gaping abyss. They make it apparent that the land problem, police brutality, education, and exploitation of labour, are not things to be solved through individual effort or some perverse form of self-help. They can be addressed by composing a more affirmative commonwealth.

Like the old laws of the fathers that Matigari contests, an old bifurcation is descending upon us

today. One where familiar and familial handshakes on screen or behind the scenes are presented as solutions to 'our' problems without acknowledging their spectral character, their sacrificial logic, and their global connections. Standing hand-in-hand, the sons vow to get over with politics and return to economics (not political-economy) as if the economy were a domain devoid of politics.

But 'our' generation should know otherwise. Having lived through the tragedies of structural adjustment programs, the explosion of neoliberal self-help and occult economies, we know the violence of moves to naturalize the separation of the market and the state. We know that the economy is political and that the public / private split has been mobilized for the ruination and privatization of the commons as part of our neoliberal common sense. We know what IMF letters of intent mean and tremble when the appetite for borrowed money pushes us to live in borrowed space and borrowed time.

We have seen how the things we "cannot not want"; development, democracy, life, have been projected into the logic of sacrifice, enmity, and abandonment where some lives have to be given up in order for 'our' democracy or development to survive. For those who lived through the Moi years, we know the death-deploying force of emergency measures geared towards getting rid of traitors and 'treasonous plotters' by constantly asking people whether they want to be free or secure. Whether they want peace and security or free and fair elections. Whether they want politics or development. Whether they want peace, love, and unity under a single party and the 'stability' it guarantees or chaos and disorder of democracy and pluralization. These false choices affirm the sacrificial logic and sovereign violence that has always been part of our national plot.

A logic of sacrifice holds multiple generations captive. It asks them to choose between friends and enemies, politics and economics, modernity and tradition, good and evil with violence being deemed permissible if not necessary for the maintenance of order. As liminal figures, the uncertainty-generating youth become a problem to be solved through uncritical pedagogy, entrepreneurial services that turn them into a lootable resource and discipline. To maintain order, youth disorder or dissensus is dealt with violently at home, on the streets, at school, and across the border. Putting the youth in their proper place becomes a state fetish that 'our' generation silently condones or loudly cheers on in the name of restoring discipline, certainty, preserving the sanctity of property, and securing the nation.

But loss of certainty is more than a youthful concern. The uncertain times that 'our' generation is living through are tied to larger displacements of certitude on one hand, and the emergence of new forms of certainty or resurgence of old ones on the other. Under such circumstances, familiar political codes and coordinates do not hold. Calls for peace serve as a moral alibi for pacification, and developmental encroachment on wetlands and accelerated ventures into extractive carbon economies (like oil and coal) cover up the slow violence, corruption, and environmental destruction that is already here and that which is yet to come. They also pave way, not only for the end of the world as we know it (as Immanuel Wallerstein put it), but for the possibility of a world without us. A world marked by more drought, floods, smoke, choked seas, and more blood owing to backhand plots that decimate spaces that human beings (not a generation) share with other non-human beings.

These are the signs of our uncertain times where seemingly small acts in this small part of the world have effects elsewhere. After all, aren't the fault-lines in Mai Mahiu causing speculation about continental drifts in the anthropocene — an epoch where man is recognized as a geophysical force. As UoN's Amollo Kenneth Otieno (2016) states, we cannot continue relating to the land and construction in the same way in light of increased flooding and subterranean erosion along the existing fault line as well as the fissures arising from the liquefaction of less cohesive soils. However, the hustle continues. We people of the plot, even in the face of the earth opening up see opportunity

in the weak volcanic ash/sand from Mai Mahiu. With this sand, we mercilessly build the ever-collapsing vertical plots of Huruma.

The episodic killing of contemporaries is part of the political imaginary we grew up with. It is not merely part of the assassin state's extra-judicial violence, it is also a *demotic* people-sanctioned violence. Today, we cannot be critical of the militarization of the police in Kisumu without seeing its connections to the violence in Kismayu and the martialization of society. All the talk of "Our boys in uniform" in Kismayu intensifies hatred of the enemy without and prepares the ground for the violence, preemption, and revenge of 'Our boys' in Kisumu. The scandal, the tragedy, is that 'we' cheered on the KDF when they ravaged the Somali as part of *Operation Linda Nchi*. We turned a blind eye when they threatened to close Dadaab and deport the refugees. Silence...when the police ransacked Eastleigh and incarcerated the Somali in Kasarani as part of '*Usalama Watch*.' 'We' are silent when Boni forest is bombed as part of *Operation Linda Boni*. We cheer politicians who wear military fatigues and dare each other to a fight.

Now that the guns are turned inwards and contemporaries deported, we put our faith in the handshakes of the sons of founding fathers even though we know that they conceive violence narrowly. With each embrace, with each song, with each prayer, we see new capitulations each generating a narrower sense of those one considers their contemporaries. These capitulations show that the old games do not work. The political appeal to the human conscience and moral good sense of the state and the 'international community' is falling on deaf ears. The Kenyan democratic order, borne out of popular struggle in concert with allies is now being sacrificed based on business and security interests. Based on the imperatives of the War on terror, AFRICOM strategies, Chinese business partnerships, and a gluttonous political elite that misreads diplomatic codes and trivializes the suffering of Kenyans, and non-Kenyans in Somalia, Palestine, and elsewhere. In their dealings, they reproduce the complicities of a previous generation that sat silently, exploited, and turned a blind eye, to the violence of apartheid in South Africa.

Whither the reformers of yester-years? They are both the subject and object of betrayals. In their perpetual calculations, capitulations, and political realignments, they too lost the plot. They betrayed the cause. The liberal democracy they summon is no longer compelling for it is taking place in an era when liberal ideals and the neoliberal economic order is in its terminal crisis globally. An age characterized by what some call illiberal democracy. An age that privileges resilience over resistance and as always, holds Africans and African politics to a lower standard... "rigged peaceful elections are good enough."

We have been betrayed. Like their predecessors, the younger leaders remain inattentive to precarious lives at home and abroad. They reproduce the *phallic logics* of an older generation rather than composing something totally new. Because we are held captive by the law of fathers (*patria*) and the fetish of the fatherland (patriotism), both elite and subaltern classes articulate a phallic logic of comparative entitlement: "My suffering is bigger than yours, we are a bigger community than you are, our cut is deeper than yours." The resultant phallocracy, if we are to borrow Grace Musila's words, haunts Kenya's politics. It is transgenerational and involves one generation of men learning the phallic logic from the other men in their lives. It permeates institutional and popular narratives about the 'return to tradition', fidelity to 'our son/ our people', the impossibility of co-habitation or *mwanaume ni kujisimamia*. The contest of sons, and protection of 'our' corrupt sons/daughters has become the basis of new friend/enemy distinctions. It is the basis of moral calculations about lesser or necessary evils and ultimately, the possibility or impossibility of co-habitation with those contemporaries marked by an insurmountable difference. It is the basis of the desire for more virile versions of an old self as a guarantor for 'our' survival. It is a most tragic and self-perpetuating sovereign 'cock-fencing' based on anxieties over 'spending power.'

Can we, in search of a different plot, in the name of a new hope, dis-identify with the familiar/familial categories through which we are counted today? Can this generation, this composition of contemporaries, betray the forms of affiliation, phallic logics and fantasies, as well as the violence, and desires cultivated by the generations past? Can we decolonize our bodies and minds? Can we proceed in ways that question rather than merely assert what it means to be a part of a community (broadly conceived) or to be contemporaneous with others? Can we compose commons rather than seek our seat at the table farthest away from the commoners?

To do any of the above requires the betrayal of some of the things 'our' generation holds dear; its plots, its hopes, and speculations. It involves dis-identifying with the ideal of the generation and composing new contemporaries. From Matigari, a man who composes new contemporaries in the struggle against oppression, we learn that struggle and hope in struggle and life is vital. That victory, if there is one to be won, "is born of struggle" and even in crushed times and moments of darkness; "There is no night so long that it does end with dawn."

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