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# ”In Defiance of Chaos”: Patterns of Disruption in the Language of Binyavanga Wainaina

Morgane Heyraud

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**“In Defiance of Chaos”:  
Patterns of Disruption in  
the Language of  
Binyavanga Wainaina**

**Morgane Heyraud**

**Sous la direction de Françoise Rémond**

**2023- 2024**



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# Table of contents

<b>Engagement au respect des principes d'honnêteté intellectuelle .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Acknowledgements.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Table of contents.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>A Note on the Text.....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Chapter 1. Situating Binyavanga Wainaina.....</b>	<b>16</b>
1.1 A brief history of publishing in Africa.....	16
1.1.1 Pre-independence years: from missionary books to local newspapers .....	16
1.1.2 Post-independence years: the struggle of independent indigenous publishing houses .....	16
1.1.3 Contemporary publishing landscape: the digital future of literature.....	18
1.2 Binyavanga Wainaina: a disruptive figure in Kenyan anglophone literature .....	20
1.2.1 Caine Prize: success and criticism.....	20
1.2.2 Setting up Kwani?, a literary magazine aiming to push forward young African voices .....	21
1.2.3 “How to Write About Africa”: an overnight international success.....	23
1.3 Labelling the artist.....	24
1.3.1 Post-colonial, Pan-African, or Afropolitan?.....	24
1.3.2 A diaspora writer? Or: who was Wainaina writing for? .....	26
1.3.3 An activist?.....	28
<b>Chapter 2. The Author’s Toolbox: What Makes Meaning?.....</b>	<b>30</b>
2.1 Binyavanga Wainaina’s english(es).....	30
2.1.1 English/english: a theoretical distinction .....	30
2.1.2 The construction of Binyavanga Wainaina’s english.....	32
2.2 Disruptive forms for a disruptive content.....	33

2.2.1	Categorising Binyavanga Wainaina’s work: beyond genres.....	33
2.2.2	The use of satire: disruptive uses of literature.....	37
2.2.3	Traces of disruption within the text: syntax and stylistics .....	40
2.3	“The sounds of onethings and the sounds of manythings”, or how sounds become words .....	42
2.3.1	Sounds, transcribed: integrating sounds into the text.....	42
2.3.2	Speaking through the page: accents and power relations.....	44
2.3.3	“Music as an alternative language for a fragmented identity” (Lucas 309)....	46
2.4	From meaning to intent: the role of the body in / as language.....	49
2.4.1	Body language and embodied language .....	49
2.4.2	Dance as an alternative system of meaning: intent .....	52
<b>Chapter 3.</b>	<b>Patterns Of Disruption: Revealing Fragilities And Ambiguities .....</b>	<b>55</b>
3.1	Disruption as a pattern.....	55
3.2	“He was somebody else, somewhere else, in another language”: linguistic plurality and ontological multiplicity.....	56
3.2.1	Different selves in different languages.....	56
3.2.2	“Everybody has to translate themselves”: translation of the self as a necessary compromise .....	59
3.2.3	Facing the collective: the influence of languages on relationships .....	61
3.3	Disruptive silences: constant sound as a guarantee of equilibrium.....	64
3.3.1	Types of silence: auditive and semantic.....	64
3.3.2	Illusions of a safe and secure collective .....	66
3.4	Music as a nation-building tool.....	69
3.4.1	Music as a political tool to build a nation: top-down movement.....	69
3.4.2	Music as a tool of resistance: finding community in resistance, a bottom-up movement .....	72
<b>Chapter 4.</b>	<b>(Re-)Articulating Disruptions: Formulating A “Common Body” .....</b>	<b>76</b>
4.1	A material “common body” .....	76

4.1.1	Cementing the nation.....	76
4.1.2	Introducing the common body .....	77
4.1.3	Performing the common body: the role of the conductor .....	80
4.2	Protection versus defence: from common to individual body.....	82
4.2.1	Dissolution of the common body in the face of reality .....	82
4.2.2	Emergence of the individual body as a tool of defence .....	86
4.2.3	Eventual failure of the individual body .....	87
4.3	Literature as the common body .....	90
4.3.1	Performing the nation: the role of literature .....	90
4.3.2	How literature matters: representing plurality.....	92
4.3.3	Shaping patterns: literature as a space for the exploration of the national community.....	95
<b>Conclusion</b>	.....	<b>98</b>
<b>Works Cited</b>	.....	<b>101</b>

## **A Note on the Text**

In *One Day I Will Write About This Place*, Wainaina uses the term “Gikuyu”, thus spelled, to refer to both the people and the language. In *How to Write About Africa*, the author, or more likely the editor, has made the choice to employ the spelling “Kikuyu”. Throughout this paper, the term Gikuyu is used, in accordance with the author’s spelling.

The national languages of Kenya are Swahili and English. The former is spelled Kiswahili by speakers of the language (this is the spelling that appears in Wainaina’s texts), and is spelled Swahili by non-speakers: this is the spelling that is used in this paper.

## Introduction

In her review of Binyavanga Wainaina's memoir, Elizabeth Lowry wrote: "*One Day I Will Write About This Place* is not so much about any single country or even about a continent as it is about language and the possibilities it allows for shape-shifting, the way it can anchor you to or cut you adrift from your surroundings" (Lowry). Like many other reviewers and readers, Lowry was struck by the author's use of language. This is consistent with the fact that language is often seen as a key aspect of so-called post-colonial literature: in their seminal work on the subject, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin highlighted "[t]he crucial function of language as a medium of power", which "demands that post-colonial writing define itself by seizing the language of the centre and re-placing it in a discourse fully adapted to the colonized place" (Ashcroft et al. 38). The question of language in relation to formerly colonised nation-states is also intrinsically linked to the right to determine themselves, both geographically and politically. Indeed, the geographical existence of most of these nation-states has no historical justification, other than the colonial powers' abstract drawing of borders on a map. In the case of Kenya, Hornsby states that "[n]one of the country's borders matched local languages, communities or physical geography; Kenya was an artificial creation, delineated by the British for their purposes, lumping together neighbours, enemies and some communities that had previously had no contact whatsoever" (Hornsby 21). Upon independence, Kenya was left with borders and a name that had both been chosen for them: "The [British] protectorate [had been] renamed Kenya Colony in 1920" (Hornsby 21). Though the country "is named after Mount Kenya" ("About Kenya – History"), this name was attributed by Ludwig Krapf (Ratcliffe 42), a German missionary ("Ludwig Krapf's Story"). If Ratcliffe deems Krapf's transcription of the name "careful" (42) enough to be exact, some do question the missionary's accuracy:

The Kikuyu people who lived around present day Mt Kenya referred to it as Kirinyaga or Kerenyaga, meaning mountain of whiteness because of its snow capped peak. Mt Kirinyaga which was the main landmark became synonymous with the territory the British later claimed as their colony. The name Kenya arose out of the inability of the British to pronounce Kirinyaga correctly. ("About Kenya – History")



What transpires through this biting commentary are the links that exist between language, the “right to name”<sup>1</sup> (Calvet 80), and identity. The inhabitants of this nation-state have then seen their identity of *being Kenyan* imposed to them, as a result of geographical and toponymical decisions made outside of their territory(ies). Such a dispossession of space and of the right to name themselves according to pre-existing tribal delimitations amounts to a form of linguistic violence, described by Calvet in the following terms:

Ce mépris des appellations autochtones relève d'un mépris plus vaste pour les peuples ; les territoires et les habitants n'existaient pas avant l'arrivée du colonisateur (puisqu'ils n'avaient pas de nom, ou du moins puisqu'on se comporte comme s'ils n'avaient pas de nom), et l'on nomme lieux et peuples comme bon nous semble. (Calvet 81-82)

The colonisers' disrespect for indigenous names is arguably similar to their disrespect for pre-existing geographical boundaries, which, as Hornsby put it, “lump[ed] together neighbours, enemies and some communities that had previously had no contact whatsoever” (Hornsby 21). Aside from the blatant dehumanisation behind this process, a consequence of this “lumping together” (21) was the necessity to find a common vehicular language. Swahili turned out to be one of these languages, along with English. One of the factors that put “English in the position of national language in many parts of Africa” (Achebe 57) was colonisation, which “did bring together many people that had hitherto gone their several ways. And it gave them a language with which to talk to one another” (57). Hence why, according to Achebe, “those African writers who have chosen to write in English or French are not unpatriotic smart alecs with an eye on the main chance – outside their own countries. They are by-products of the same process that made the new nation states of Africa” (57). And because “[t]he choice of language and the use to which language is put is central to a people's definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environment, indeed in relation to the entire universe” (Ngugi 4), this has led scholars to question the consequences of colonial (linguistic) practices for the people who were subjected to them: “How does this affect their understanding of their own identity and of the ‘other’? How has colonialism maintained power over its former subjects through language?” (Ravishankar 1).

This brings us back to Ashcroft (et al.)'s understanding of language as “a medium of power” needing to be “seiz[ed]” and “replac[ed] in a discourse” (Ashcroft et al. 38) that

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<sup>1</sup> « Le droit de nommer » (Calvet 80), my translation.

necessarily involves a re-evaluation of power dynamics between the former colonised state and the colonial centre. To them, “language becomes the medium through which a hierarchal structure of power is perpetuated, and the medium through which conceptions of ‘truth,’ ‘order,’ and ‘reality’ become established. Such power is rejected in the emergence of an effective post-colonial voice” (7). The post-colonial voice, which emerges in part through literature, is thus necessarily political: “any reading of African literature or, for our purposes, autobiography must be both specific and global—and must account both for the synchronic realities that emerge from the localized experience of specific writers and for the diachronic, historical developments that presented different imperatives for different historically situated writers” (Berger 47). For Berger, then, the apparent necessity to be both utterly intimate and inevitably situated, at least in the eyes of scholars, can be the source of an anthropologisation of African literature. This is a pitfall that has been identified by Egoro, in her piece entitled “How Not to Talk about African Fiction”. If Berger’s comments may apply to fictional and nonfictional literature, though his argument mainly concerns autobiographical writing, Egoro focuses on the perception of fictional texts as “lay[ing] claim to some truth about Africa”, in the eyes of “[p]ublishers and critics” at least (Egoro). She writes: “This practice has gone on for so long that we – readers, reviewers, publishers – have forgotten how to engage with African novels except from the standpoint of the social or political issues they address. African fiction is invisible except when it is reflected on a mirror of social ills, cultural themes and political concerns” (Egoro).

The danger of confusing fiction and nonfiction, and to some extent fact and fiction, is all the more relevant in the case of Binyavanga Wainaina. Indeed, as an author of fictional, autobiographical, and essayistic texts, Wainaina often plays with the lines between reality and imagination. As such, studying his work as a political commentary is a risk: while inevitably “localized” (Berger 47) in a specific time and place, his texts are also a reflection of his evolving perceptions of what surrounds him. His memoir, *One Day I Will Write About This Place*, unfolds over the span of thirty years – the opening chapter covering his seventh year (Wainaina, *One Day* 3) and the last dated 2010 – and therefore deals with some of the major political events that took place in Kenya and Africa during these years. Additionally, most of the literature about the author’s work focuses on his memoir, and indeed often looks at it as a “coming of age in post-colonial Africa” (Sunday Times), focusing on the more political aspects and themes of the text (Krishnan, Kopf). Krishnan proposes a study of “Affiliation, Disavowal, and National Commitment in Third Generation African Literature” which aims to highlight

and understand the various approaches to the nation adopted by contemporary authors. She points out that their attitude is different from that of their predecessors', who wrote and published directly after independence. Krishnan complexifies the relationship between the nation and the individual which, as years passed post-Independence, evolved from a strong "commitment to decolonization, independence, and the nation-state" (Krishnan 75) to "a site of plural belonging [that] does not necessitate the wholesale disavowal of the nation as a site of belonging and negotiation" (75). Her examination of Wainaina's memoir is then primarily centred on the author's depiction of the national community, and is therefore inherently political. Similarly, Kopf offers an analysis of the author's memoir as "a form of situated knowledge that enables readers from different regions of the world to understand their locatedness within power asymmetries in global development at a particular historical moment" (Kopf 325). Her study of Wainaina's life story as a narrative of what she calls the "IMF-generation" is therefore taken not only as a comment on "neoliberal globalisation and the related expansion of Western humanitarianism" (325), but also as a teaching tool. To her, the author's perspective is not just an account of his own, individual experience which happened to take place in a specific historical context; it also holds a didactic purpose. Pedagogy is an aspect of Wainaina's writing that has been studied in particular by Wenske, who suggested that the author's "writing, much like his efforts to publish a new generation of Kenyan authors, attempted to revolutionize East African literature by introducing this kind of teacherliness as an aesthetic and pedagogical foundation of creative writing" (Wenske 62). Relatively similarly, McPherron and McIntosh investigated the benefits of teaching "cross-cultural memoirs" (McPherron and McIntosh 196), including *One Day I Will Write About This Place*, in "university courses that introduced students to the complex identities that form both inside and outside of language classrooms" (196). They, too, have placed the author in the position of a teacher, his experiences and perceptions a pretext for students to reflect critically on "their complex identities as participants in both local and global English-speaking communities" (197).

Knighton takes a different approach to the works mentioned above, though she does not completely detach from the political aspect of Wainaina's memoir. In her article entitled "Refracting the Political in Binyavanga Wainaina's *One Day I Will Write About This Place*", she highlights politics as "becoming a stereotypical feature of African writers" (Knighton 34). About Wainaina's practice specifically, she argues that his "portrayal of the political moment in contemporary Kenya is filtered through an exposition of the sensory, which is used to convey

his consciousness as a child and his sensibility as a writer” (34). What is key in her inquiry is her treatment of the political: she does not focus on what events are depicted, but instead focuses on how the political manages to permeate the text. Her emphasis on the sensory aspect of Wainaina’s writing is echoed by Lucas’s own take on the memoir, which mainly centres on the uses and roles of music in the text. She shows how music is used throughout the memoir to convey “the complexity of life” as well as to “counterac[t] simplifying representations of Africa” (Lucas 317), allowing the author to present conflicting memories (both national and personal) and an undefined sense of identity (again, both collective and individual). Wainaina’s connection to the sensory, and the strategies he deploys to depict the political (in all senses of the term) are what this paper aims to explore. Indeed, what is central in this study of Wainaina’s body of work is the literary aspect of his prose. Political and social themes do weave their way through the various narratives, but they surface amidst an abundance of visual snapshots, eclectic metaphors, and profoundly intimate moments. In Wainaina’s texts, the political is personal: it permeates every aspect of an individual’s identity, sometimes standing at the core of who they are. More than that, the act of writing is in itself political for Wainaina: “I want this generation of young parents to have their kids see Africans writing their own stories, printing their own stories, that simple act, I think that’s the most political act that one can have” (Wainaina, “We Must Free Our Imaginations (1/6)” 00:00:27).

Because most of the scholarship published about Wainaina’s work is primarily concerned with his memoir, it seems pertinent to widen the scope of analysis of this research: *One Day I Will Write About This Place* is studied together with *How to Write About Africa*, a posthumous collection of some of Wainaina’s other publications. Edited by his friend and fellow writer Achal Prabhala, the collection assembles various pieces of fiction and nonfiction, some of which are being published for the first time (Wainaina, *How to* 349-350). This expanded corpus will help us get a wider perspective on the author’s relationship to literature, at times allowing us to confront his more critical and metaliterary essays to his practice as a writer. In Adichie’s words, Wainaina was “one of those rare people whose unique complexity is so difficult to fully express that I cannot help but resort to boring language: he was an original” (*How to* x). For this reason, labelling Wainaina or his work seems a futile endeavour: the following study will therefore adopt a text-focused approach, offering a thorough examination of the author’s texts without aiming to associate them with a particular artistic or literary movement. To do this, I will primarily rely on scholarship that deals with the specific texts that constitute my corpus, and on stylistic and linguistic devices of literary analysis.

Broader approaches to post-colonial theory, African literature, Afropolitanism, and at times different disciplines such as linguistics, history, or even psychology, have largely contributed to enrich my understanding of Wainaina's prose. This approach is both the cause and the consequence of my choice to partly set aside the political angle of his work. Indeed, in Wainaina's texts, the political emerges from the text, through implicit signs incorporated within the language crafted by the author. By placing a direct emphasis on the personal, almost intimate aspects of the author's works, this paper aims at avoiding the pitfall of anthropologisation identified by Egoro and at respecting Wainaina's resistance to "becom[ing] a poster boy for liberal literary Africa" (Sigrid Rausing, *Granta* editor, qtd. in Flood) and "turning himself into anything other than what he was: a writer, and an editor" (Rausing, qtd. in Flood). And a writer he was: he authored a number of short stories, plenty of essays, weekly columns for the South African *Mail & Guardian*, and had worked on a novel for almost twenty years before his untimely passing in 2019.

To Wainaina, creating a fictional, alternative world was never the goal: "reality is a better aesthetic" (*One Day* 155). In his fiction as in his nonfiction, he aimed at portraying characters and protagonists in all their flaws and contradictions. As a writer, he thrived in indefiniteness: nothing, aside perhaps from his hatred of Kapuściński, is ever clearcut in his prose. This is where the concept of disruption becomes an interesting lens through which to look at Wainaina's work. As a writer known for his satire ("How to Write about Africa") and the founder of a Kenyan literary magazine and publishing house (*Kwani?*, Kwani Trust), Wainaina himself stands as a disruptive figure, both on the Kenyan and worldwide literary stages. What is most striking, however, is the way Wainaina uses disruption(s) as a stylistic tool to represent his world, fictional or real, in a way that refuses any kind of globalising interpretation and thrives on meaning many things at once, on uniting and fragmenting the world in the same motion. The author does not use disruption as a narrative tool: events do not trigger a radical change in the plot, causing a "violent dissolution of continuity" ("Disruption, N., Sense 1."). Rather, disruption weaves itself into the text through traces of instability, small incoherences and incongruities in the language of the texts. The violence caused by these disruptions may not be as explosive as suggested by definitions of the term, but it does create a sense of rupture and separation ("Disrupt"). But what exactly causes this sense of disruption upon reading Wainaina's texts? What are the mechanisms at work behind his use of language? How does he manage to construct a widely readable text while maintaining disruption at the core of his practice? We may also wonder about the meaning of this constant state of disruption

within the author's texts: what does it seek to reveal? To conceal? And where does it lead us: are there attempts at solving, or rearticulating what is disrupted? If so, what shape do these attempts take? To answer these questions, this paper will begin with a contextualising chapter, aiming to provide an overview of the Kenyan publishing industry and to situate Wainaina in a national and international literary landscape. I will then examine the author's particular use of language, and argue that throughout his literary career, Wainaina crafted his own English. A detailed study of the various strategies he uses to create meaning will lead me to discuss the patterns that emerge within his texts. These patterns, that reveal ontological fragilities and ambiguities, exist in Wainaina's texts because he feels this is the only place where he can control, or shape, them. The concluding chapter of this paper will then compare the various strategies implemented by the author to deal with the disruptive aspects of the ontological instability he perceives. From the creation of a material "common body" (*One Day* 196) to the recourse to an immaterial one, I will argue that for Wainaina, literature offers the possibility to explore the workings and definitions of both his individual identity and the national community.

# Chapter 1. Situating Binyavanga Wainaina

## 1.1 A BRIEF HISTORY OF PUBLISHING IN AFRICA

This brief overview of the history of publishing in sub-Saharan Africa aims at situating Binyavanga Wainaina in an African literary landscape, whose emergence and development was widely shaped by British colonisation during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. This will help us understand his involvement in the creation of the Kwani Trust and *Kwani?*, a Kenyan literary magazine, as well as his status as an internationally recognised contemporary Kenyan writer.

### 1.1.1 Pre-independence years: from missionary books to local newspapers

George S. Gundu, assistant librarian at the Moi University Library, situates the early days of the publishing industry in Kenya during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Christian missionaries began importing papers and presses to locally publish religious texts and hymns for new converts (Gundu 154). Also imported from Britain at the time were newspapers, “taking at least four months to reach Kenya” (154) by sea. “As the demand for newspapers increased and readers became impatient with the long delays in receiving them from Britain, local newspapers and periodicals began to be established” (154). Such newspapers multiplied in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, though at the time these publications “catered mainly for European and Asian interests” (154). With key materials and equipment already being imported, “some of these newspaper publishers also began printing and publishing books” (154).

### 1.1.2 Post-independence years: the struggle of independent indigenous publishing houses

But the publishing industry only began growing on the African continent during the post-independence period. Bgoya and Jay date the establishment of indigenous publishing houses back to the 1970s and 1980s. In 1990, Gundu wrote: “Publishing activity in Kenya today is divided between indigenous companies and those which are associated with, or subsidiaries of, foreign firms” (154). This separation of the publishing industry into two categories, local- and foreign-owned, quickly became an obstacle to the growth of indigenous publishing houses. “A survey in 2000 by the Association for Development of Education in Africa (ADEA) and the African Publishers Network (APNET) estimated that up to 95% of books published in Africa were educational” (Bgoya and Jay 22). This figure may not be exactly the same for Kenya today, but the situation was similar in 1990: “About 85 percent of

the market for books in Kenya is for educational books, and local publishers account for only about 10 percent of the market” (Gundu 156). Indeed, foreign-owned publishing firms were quick to tap the textbook market: according to Henry Chakava, a “distinguished Kenyan publisher” (Bgoya and Jay 19), companies such as Longman and Oxford University Press even used their Kenyan offices to “collect good manuscripts and forward them to London for vetting and publishing” (Chakava, qtd. in Bgoya and Jay 19). Bgoya and Jay note that “the multinationals that take the lion’s share of the textbook market in Africa invest little, if any, of those profits within the country in which they are made; and the non-textbook sector is insufficiently developed by indigenous publishers, partly because of their long effective exclusion from the textbook market” (22).

A lack of sufficient financial resources has been identified by George S. Gundu as one of “the main problems of publishing in Kenya” (155): he mentions independent indigenous firms’ struggles to compete with larger, foreign-owned companies, the elevated costs of printing and manufacturing books, and issues related to distribution costs such as warehouse and transport fees (156). But the lack of sufficient funds is not the only obstacle to the development of local publishing houses in Kenya: Gundu also points to the low literacy rates<sup>2</sup>, as well as the challenges brought by what he calls “language barriers” (155). He writes:

The country has more than ten major ethnic groups speaking different languages. English is the official medium of instruction in educational institutions after the first three years of primary school, where the predominant local language is used. Kiswahili is the national language and is spoken by most, if not all, Kenyans. However, many people who speak Kiswahili cannot read or write it. Publishing cannot flourish in such a situation. (155)

The linguistic diversity of the Kenyan readership thus complicates the expansion of a stable publishing industry. Henry Chakava explains that “[t]here are three language categories in which books are published in Kenya: English, Kiswahili and the African languages” (83). The publication of books in African languages is limited because it is hindered by practical issues, such as linguistic variations or the need to create new fonts to represent characters that do not exist in the Latin alphabet (85). Publishing in Swahili is described by Chakava as a “nationalistic” decision more than a “commercial” one (85): he explains this phenomenon by the fact that Swahili, unlike English, is not “the official medium of instruction” and therefore

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<sup>2</sup> According to Gundu, 60% of the 23 million Kenyans were illiterate in 1990 (155).



would lead to fewer sales and profits. Publishing in English then seems to emerge as a somewhat federating solution. Yet most authors who chose to write in English also chose to publish in the United States or the United Kingdom. Indeed, Bgoya and Jay note the various “attractions for authors to publish with companies in the north” (31), most likely because “established foreign publishers (...) can offer more prestige, better financial rewards and a better publicity, marketing and distribution system” (Gundu 155) than local ones. The decision to both write in English and publish with American or British publishers suggests the wish of an author to reach international audiences. It is relevant to note here that publishing abroad is the route Binyavanga Wainaina chose: his memoir *One Day I Will Write About This Place* was first published by Graywolf Press in the United States in 2011, then by Granta in the United Kingdom in 2012, and finally by Kwani Trust in Kenya in 2012.

Ultimately, “[p]ublishing is an economic activity” (Bgoya and Jay 25), and independent indigenous firms’ exclusion from the main book market – that of textbooks – in Kenya, and in sub-Saharan Africa more widely, means that the publishing industry today still struggles to compete with larger, foreign-owned firms. In spite of this, the anglophone population of the continent does not lack “new African literary publishing initiatives” (Wallis 39). Kate Wallis describes “a new inter-connected generation of publishers based on the continent” (45), some of whom persevere in publishing material books, at a time when “digital platforms now offer the potential of reaching more readers in Africa than print” (45).

### **1.1.3 Contemporary publishing landscape: the digital future of literature**

The “internetting of literature” (Adenekan 12) has given a new impetus to the anglophone publishing world on the African continent. According to Bgoya and Jay, “[t]he digital age is empowering African publishers” (30): the digitalisation of literature has made it easier for publishers to “send files by email for upload to ABC<sup>3</sup> digital printers” (30) and “[t]he savings on shipping books from Africa, customs and import clearance charges, and warehousing have been material” (30). Billy Kahora, Kenyan author and former managing editor of *Kwani?*, also noticed this shift in the publishing industry: “Over the last 60 years the print cultures which informed nationalism, literary and cultural production have now shifted to multi-media” (Kahora 11). This move towards the digitalisation of literature seems productive

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<sup>3</sup> The African Books Collective (ABC) is “a group of 17 active publishers in sub-Saharan Africa [who] met in London in 1985 to brainstorm about the hurdles they faced and how they could cooperate together to address them.” (Bgoya and Jay 20).

for authors, who can publish more easily and be read more widely. In an interview with Rob Spillman, Binyavanga Wainaina said about the developing trends of digital literature: “We’ve all got to go digital. There’s no question about it anymore. Print has to die” (Spillman). This radical statement is balanced by the *Kwani?* team’s decision to keep publishing in print. Wainaina suggests that this decision was made out of mere habit (“We’ll continue producing in print because that’s what we have been doing” Spillman), but Kate Wallis sees in this choice an attempt at creating (or maintaining) a physical record of history: “Kwani Trust’s concern with the material book is in part born out of frustration with the partial histories and literature being made material in that national space” (Wallis 45). Printed books and magazines seem to serve as national archives compiled by citizens: “Kahora highlighted that it was widely known violence had also followed the 1992 and 1997 elections, but that this hadn’t been properly recorded, other than as ‘secret histories’ and ‘oral texts that are hard to locate’” (Wallis 41). This particular quote refers to the magazine’s decision, in 2007, to publish texts and artwork relating the violence that followed the presidential elections that had taken place that same year. In his memoir, Wainaina also alludes to this violence (see *One Day*, chapter 32). To some extent, and despite his vehement rejection of the print medium in his interview with Spillman, Wainaina does use writing as a way to maintain a physical record of “partial histories” (Wallis 45), whether these stories are personal and intimate or that of a nation.

The digitalisation of literature has also impacted the discourse regarding the question of language, a central concern for authors of the post-Independence period. In 2019, Billy Kahora radically declared: “Experimentation with language is no longer a national debate. Writers no longer seem to have hangups on the question of language” (Kahora 12). Such an all-encompassing statement may be a bit of an exaggeration, but Shola Adenekan has noted that even though “there are works written in local Kenyan and Nigerian languages such as Yoruba, Swahili, Sheng and Hausa, the bulk of what is being published digitally is in English” (Adenekan 7). For authors belonging to what has been called the “third generation of African literature” (Krishnan), English is no longer a choice (international recognition and financial constraints make it a necessity), but it does not seem to be a source of internal conflict. About his decision to write in English, Binyavanga Wainaina has said:

I write in English. We go to school in English, or French, or Spanish, or Portuguese. In Africa, that’s a colonial situation. And no force big enough has broken that idea. I’m interested in how, as someone local, you speak to your local and you speak to the world, and you use that language as a seduction and

as a weapon so that you're bringing readers to the centre of *your* world, who are out there, in those powerful places, that speak or run the world. (Wiriko 00:14:04, original emphasis)

## 1.2 BINYAVANGA WAINAINA: A DISRUPTIVE FIGURE IN KENYAN ANGLOPHONE LITERATURE

### 1.2.1 Caine Prize: success and criticism

Reflecting on “African literature in the digital age” (Adenekan) in his interview with Rob Spillman, Wainaina stated: “Every break I’ve had somehow came via the Internet” (Spillman). One such break occurred in 2002 when the author won the Caine Prize for African Writing with his short story “Discovering Home”. This break came via the internet because his story, unlike other Caine Prize submissions so far, had been published online. In 2002, Wainaina had just returned to Kenya after ten years in South Africa, when he found out that his short story “Hell is In Bed With Mrs Peprah” would not be published in print in time for the Caine Prize submission deadline (*One Day* 188). He decided to publish another story, non-fiction, on g21.net: “Rod<sup>4</sup> submits it, and gets a snooty e-mail from the Caine Prize people in England, saying they only accept stories published in print. I am furious. I write back, telling them only one anthology has been published in Africa in the past year. Where do they find published stories? I ask. They don’t respond. Fuck them, says Rod. Bloody colonizers. Yes. Yes, I say.” (*One Day* 188). Following Wainaina’s protests, the Caine Prize rules of entry were updated to accept online publications. Lizzy Attree, director of the Caine Prize from 2014 to 2018, indeed stated that “a significant breakthrough occurred when the Caine Prize altered its rules to allow authors to enter stories that had been published online” (Attree 38), thus suggesting that the introduction of online submissions opened the Caine doors to more writers as it took into account the realities of the African publishing landscape. Wainaina’s defiance of the rules paid off, and his disruptive email looking to change the rules allowed authors such as E.C. Osondu and Okwiri Oduor to submit stories published online and subsequently win the Caine Prize, respectively in 2009 and 2014 (Adenekan 8).

Wainaina’s victory of the 2002 Caine Prize was indeed a major “break” in his career, offering him international acclaim and recognition. But this success did not keep Wainaina

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<sup>4</sup> Rod Amis, editor for the g21.net website.

from being critical about the Caine Prize: “I give the Caine Prize its due credit, but it just isn’t our institution” (Nwonwu). He criticised the overreliance of budding writers on foreign awards at the expense of local structures supporting local authors:

“What is happening is you people are allowing the Caine Prize to receive funding and build itself as a brand and make money and people’s career there in London while the vast majority of these institutions<sup>5</sup> are vastly underfunded and vastly *ungrown*, and they are the ones who create the ground that is building these new writers. Why do I have to sit in interviews with Nigerian journalists who want to help Caine Prize get more money in the sixth richest country in the world?” (Nwonwu, original emphasis)

Wainaina’s anger directly echoes what Gundu, Bgoya and Jay have highlighted regarding the lack of financial resources in the African publishing industry. The author laments the fact that the Caine Prize, and by extension other European and American literary prizes, are still considered as prerequisites for gaining legitimacy as an African anglophone writer. Wainaina pleads: “Give due credit but don’t go giving free money and free legitimacy. (...) We need to focus on how we can grow our own ecosystem” (Nwonwu).

### **1.2.2 Setting up *Kwani?*, a literary magazine aiming to push forward young African voices**

Following this very principle, Wainaina used his Caine Prize money to set up *Kwani?*, a literary magazine aiming to support emerging writers. If *Kwani?* was well-received in the United Kingdom and in the United States (Journo, “Brouiller Les Frontières” 82), it was criticised by Kenyan academics and literary critics: Journo references Otieno Amisi’s piece, “Gangsters invade literary scene”, published in 2008 (82), as well as Munene wa Mumbi’s comment comparing the magazine to “a clear case of journalism raping literature” (qtd. in Journo, “Brouiller Les Frontières” 83). *Kwani?* indeed stands at a crossroads between journalism and literature: most of its founding members “are journalists by training” (Journo, “Brouiller Les Frontières” 74) and encouraged the development of creative non-fiction in the journal, but at the same time *Kwani?* has always been “explicitly qualified as ‘literary’ by its founders” (74) and included fictional short stories and poetry (Wallis 40)<sup>6</sup>. Chris Wanjala, professor of Literature at the University of Nairobi, criticised the younger generation of writers

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<sup>5</sup> i.e., local institutions and initiatives such as Saraba, Farafina workshop, Cassava Republic, “thirty thousand Facebook groups that I know off (sic) or don’t know” (Nwonwu).

<sup>6</sup> For more on the ambiguous status of *Kwani?*, see Journo, “Brouiller Les Frontières”.

in an interview given to Emma Dawson-Varughese: he deplored the new writers' lack of "commitment" (Dawson-Varughese 143), of "reverence for ancestral spirits, [of respect for] the elders" (143). Of the *Kwani?* writers specifically, he said they were "poor imitations of Western hip hop culture and, indeed, a poor imitation of Western pulp novels in their raw and alienated forms" (147). The notion of "alienated forms" (147) is reminiscent of Ngugi's arguments against the use of English in African literature, when he stated that "[the English] language and literature were taking us further and further from ourselves to other selves, from our world to other worlds" (Ngugi 12). "Alienated" (Dawson-Varughese 147) here can be taken to mean that Western fiction is foreign to African readers, and therefore its adoption by African authors would necessarily be unsuccessful. One could sense an anxiety of alienation behind Wanjala's attitude to new Kenyan writing, perhaps stemming from a generational difference: what happens when authors adopt foreign literary forms? If contemporary authors reject their country's past (be it pre-colonial traditions and stories or post-colonial narratives of independence), where can Africans exist in literature?

This is exactly the questions *Kwani?* aimed at answering, in part by breaking literary boundaries: Kate Wallis explains, referencing Dina Ligaga's and Doreen Strauhs's work, that

early editions of the *Kwani?* journal were distinctive in drawing on and representing forms from Kenyan popular culture (from email to Sheng to matatu slogans) not previously represented in and as literature. Doreen Strauhs has suggested that, in explicitly incorporating the forms of email, SMS and blogs, *Kwani?* worked towards 'disintegrating the borders between online and offline communication' (126). (Wallis 40)

More precisely, Wallis "suggest[s] instead that *Kwani?* was concerned not to disintegrate, but in fact to draw attention to these borders, and that the journal has been self-conscious of its own role in formalising or validating diverse forms of Kenyan creativity by making them available in print" (40). The borders at stake should not only be understood in terms of media, but also in terms of what can be considered as literary. In other words, *Kwani?* played a part in giving legitimacy to newer forms of writing emerging in Kenya at the time by maintaining the print medium, which, as suggested by Wainaina's difficulties entering into the Caine Prize and Kenyan academics' reticence towards *Kwani?*, still appears to be a prerequisite for one's work to be considered as literature. The magazine's openness to creative forms of writing, in fiction as well as in non-fiction, cements its uncategorizable position, and makes it a disruptive literary object: *Kwani?* does not fit inside one box.

What all of this makes clear is that *Kwani?* was disruptive in more than one way: first, it aimed at encouraging the production and promotion of Kenyan (and even African) literature from the continent; second, it published texts that challenged existing and accepted forms of literature by embracing new media (emails, texts) and evolving means of expression (Sheng). Finally, *Kwani?* cemented its disruptive identity by refusing to be categorised as one thing or another (not exclusively press nor literature, not exclusively fiction nor non-fiction). *Kwani?* was a part of a momentum aiming at galvanising literary and artistic creation in Kenya.

### 1.2.3 “How to Write About Africa”: an overnight international success

If the texts published in *Kwani?* challenged Kenyan literary norms, Binyavanga Wainaina’s essay “How to Write About Africa” came as a bombshell in the wider literary scene. A work of delicious satire, the essay describes the rules authors should abide by in order to produce perfect African fiction. “How to Write About Africa” lists every leitmotif found in literature about the continent and produced by European authors. The essay provides a list of key words to include in the title (“Africa”, “Darkness”, “Safari” *How to* 334), makes important lexical distinctions (“‘People’ means Africans who are not Black, while ‘The People’ means Black Africans” 334), and warns against discussing taboo subjects (“ordinary domestic scenes”, “references to African writers or intellectuals”, “school-going children who are not suffering” 335). The satire is aggressive, and is directed at authors and readers alike (“Always end your book with Nelson Mandela saying something about rainbows or renaissances. Because you care.” 338, “adopt a *sotto* voice, in conspiracy with the reader” 335).

Initially sent as an email to *Granta* editor Ian Jack in response to the 1994 *Africa* issue of the magazine, Wainaina’s essay was “a piss-job, (...) never supposed to see the light of day” (Wainaina, “How to Write About Africa II”). Still, it became, and “to this day, [remains] *Granta*’s most-circulated article ever” (*How to* 345), with governments acknowledging the importance of his work – “I shook hands with, not one, but two European presidents, who read my text and shook their heads: How bad, how very bad” (“How to Write About Africa II”) – and writers sending him their texts and asking him “for permission to write about Africa. They want me to tell them what I think, how they did. Be frank, they say, be candid. Tell it like it is. I have considered investing in a rubber stamp” (“How to Write About Africa II”). To this day, “How to Write about Africa” is one of Wainaina’s most famous pieces and has given its name to the collection of his work edited by Achal Prabhala in 2022. It is also part of various school curriculums in African studies (“Recommended Readings – African Studies”, “Literature &

Language | African Studies Center”). Wainaina was certainly not expecting this text to be shared so widely. But his “venting of steam” (“How to Write About Africa II”), a fundamentally disruptive text both in its criticism of literature about Africa and in its directness in addressing the issue, effectively propelled Wainaina to the forefront of the international literary scene.

### 1.3 LABELLING THE ARTIST

#### 1.3.1 Post-colonial, Pan-African, or Afropolitan?

*“If you asked me if I consider myself a post-colonial writer, I would answer that it's like asking a lion if he considers himself as part of the fauna and flora, the answer is that the question is of no interest to him.” (Journo and Wainaina)*

Labelling writers who hail from the African continent is not an easy task. The label ‘post-colonial’ has been criticised in recent years for its outdated and reductive character, for being “yet another universalizing, Eurocentric, authoritarian approach to the world” (Walder 189), classifying all African writers as authors of “narratives of power and difference” (Dawson-Varughese 13) and nothing more. Several attempts have been made at coming up with a new, more fitting label: Simon Gikandi discussed the adequacy of “Global Anglophone literature” (Gikandi), while independent scholar Emma Dawson-Varughese proposed the term “World Englishes literature” (Dawson-Varughese). In her book exploring this concept, Dawson-Varughese gave a quick history of the postcolonial label, also explaining why, according to her, the term no longer fit the literature being produced on the continent. Initially “a periodizing term” (Lazarus, qtd. in Dawson-Varughese 10) used to designate writing produced after the independence of formerly colonised countries, the ‘post-colonial’ label gradually became synonymous with a certain type of content (“that which critically or subversively scrutinizes the colonial relationship. It is writing that sets out in one way or another to resist colonialist perspectives.” Boehmer, qtd. in Dawson-Varughese 14). But nowadays, writers’ concern with post-colonial topoi “is less evident, and when engaged with, engaged with differently” (Dawson-Varughese 13). Dawson’s observation of a decreasing engagement of contemporary writers with post-colonial themes echoes Chris Wanjala’s concern regarding writers of the *Kwani?* generation in Kenya: recent literary creations are not completely disengaged from political issues; they are concerned with different ones. Today’s writers no longer fervently criticise British imperialism or attempt to reclaim a national history;

they focus on contemporary political issues. The way political issues are dealt with in literature has evolved since the 1960s, and writers no longer share the same ambitions or goals as their predecessors. The literature that is created today in so called post-colonial nations seems to silently advocate for the right to not advocate, to let literature exist for what it is, without authors needing to take a political stance to be taken seriously. That said, this literature is not a-political – as demonstrated by *Kwani?*'s editorial choices following the 2007 post-election violence (Wallis 40).

And indeed, post-colonial is not a term that immediately comes to mind when reading *One Day I Will Write About This Place*. When asked what his memoir was about, Wainaina answered: "It's about travel, it's about understanding yourself, it's about playing with language" (SmartMonkeyTV 00:01:25). Taking readers from his native Kenya to South Africa, where he lived for ten years, and to countries such as Nigeria, Uganda, Ghana, Togo, England, and the United States, Wainaina's memoir is indeed about travel. More than that, it inscribes itself in an Afropolitan framework. Coined by both Taiye Selasi and Achille Mbembe, individually, in 2005, Afropolitanism has been defined by the former as "an urban and upper middleclass way of life of young Africans" who work and live "in cities around the globe, [who] belong to no single geography, but feel at home in many" (Selasi), and as "an identity concept concerned with the way African people relate to (and negotiate with) the world" (Kasanda 381) by the latter. More broadly, Afropolitanism is concerned with Africans' relationship to space, places, and mobility between places all over the world<sup>7</sup>. In this sense, Wainaina's travels make him an Afropolitan, a label he strongly rejects: "for Wainaina, Afropolitanism has become the marker of crude cultural commodification – a phenomenon increasingly 'product driven,' design focused, and 'potentially funded by the West'" (Santana). In his article titled "Is Afropolitanism a Colonial Mentality?", Mba recalls Wainaina's arguments against the concept:

Wainaina's criticisms imply that the new African cosmopolitanism or Afropolitanism carries with it a baggage of irresponsible, colonial mentality, after all. For a colonial mentality is an internalised attitude orchestrated by colonisation about wishing you were like someone else or something else because you feel inferior and unsatisfied about who you are or who you have become. (Mba 84)

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<sup>7</sup> For an explanation of the distinction between space and place, see Adenekan 14.



In other words, there is in Afropolitanism an underlying incentive for people to leave Africa and conform to a Western-standard style of living, which makes it a colonial concept.

In an interview given to the Spanish cultural organisation Wiriko, Wainaina stated: “I am a Pan-Africanist” (00:06:38). Pan-Africanism “may be described as a politico-cultural phenomenon which in its early stages regarded Africa, Africans and persons of African extraction as a unit. It has consistently aimed at the regeneration and uplift of Africa and the promotion of a feeling of unity among Africans in general. It also glories in the African past and inculcates pride in African culture” (Esedebe 127). In other words, Wainaina believed in promoting collaboration between African authors and artists – this is what he did with *Kwani*? – and believed that this could only be done from Africa. In a criticism of the “wrong kind of Pan-Africanism” (Wiriko 00:07:12) (Selasi’s Afropolitanism?<sup>8</sup>), Wainaina points to the “immunity” that comes with this status, that renders these authors “immune, in reality, to the continent” (00:08:01) because they are confined to international, cosmopolitan social circles. This is what pushed him to quit his teaching job at the Chinua Achebe Center for African Writers and Artists: “I’ve been lying to myself in that ‘Afropolitan’ way that you can build an African literary institution out of New York. And that’s a lie. You can’t” (00:09:18).

### **1.3.2 A diaspora writer? Or: who was Wainaina writing for?**

Many questions then arise: if Wainaina felt it was necessary to come back to Kenya to “build an African literary institution” (Wiriko 00:09:18), why did he – one of the creators of the Kenyan publishing house Kwani Trust – get his memoir published by an American firm? This begs the question of the intended audience of his texts: who was Binyavanga Wainaina writing for?

The decision to write in English, according to Walder, gives us some insight as to Wainaina’s intended audience: “In Africa, (...) the writers’ choice of language also depends on whether or not they wish to be read, locally or abroad” (Walder 52-53). Further, Chakava explained that publishing in English “offers instant communication with the world community” (Chakava 85). Wainaina’s explanation of his choice of language indicates that his writing was directed both at local (read: Kenyan, African) audiences as well as global: “I’m interested in how, as someone local, you speak to your local and you speak to the world, and you use that language (...) so that you’re bringing readers to the centre of *your* world, who are out there, in

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<sup>8</sup> For more on Wainaina’s view of Selasi’s Afropolitanism, see Tveit.

those powerful places” (00:14:04, original emphasis). While Wainaina’s world may be more literary than it is geographic, it remains firmly anchored in the countries he grew up in (Kenya), studied in (South Africa) and travelled to (Nigeria, Uganda, Togo, among others). Because he lived outside of his native country for many years, Wainaina can be described as a diaspora writer. But this term, when it comes to African writing, is often exclusively applied to writers who are African-born and moved, either during childhood or young-adulthood, to Europe or North America – think Chimamanda Adichie, NoViolet Bulawayo, Teju Cole, Yaa Gyasi, Helon Habila, Imbolo Mbue, and many more. Wainaina could be added to this list: he taught in the United States from 2009 to 2012 (“Obituary: Binyavanga Wainaina”) and spent almost a year living in England (*How to* 57).

The position of Wainaina in the African anglophone writing sphere is difficult to establish. He is both decidedly Kenyan – his work explores the concepts of nation(-building), relationships between individuals and the collective locally in Kenya; and undeniably Pan-African – he studied, lived, travelled, and worked all over the continent. His mobility around the continent and the world makes him part of the diaspora of African writers, which to some can be synonymous with Afropolitans (as outlined by Selasi). But there are some concerns regarding the literature produced by Afropolitan writers: “if we accept the plurality and multi-local character of the African, how do we define authenticity in the future?” (Morales 229). Morales warns of the risks of disconnected (or “immune”, to use Wainaina’s term) Afropolitans writing about an Africa they do not live in (Morales 229, 232) and Dabiri points to the danger of the “single story” (Dabiri 105)<sup>9</sup>: “While Afropolitanism may go some way in redressing the balance concerning Africans speaking for themselves, the problem lies in the fact that we still do not hear the narratives of Africans who are not privileged” (105). However, as stated earlier, Wainaina rejected the Afropolitan label. As a matter of fact, he rejected all labels: “as an author I reject being put inside a box, you could call this the dismissal of the box approach” (Journo and Wainaina).

Moving away from polarising terms such as that of Afropolitanism, Madhu Krishnan has adopted the descriptive phrase “third generation African literature”. The texts produced by authors of that generation, to which she argues Wainaina belongs, “include an emphasis on diasporic identity, migration, transnationality, globalisation, and a diminished concern with the

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<sup>9</sup> For more on the idea of the single story, see Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. “The Danger of a Single Story.” *TED*, 7 Oct. 2009, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9Ihs24Izeg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9Ihs24Izeg).

colonial past” (73-74). This broad categorisation allows the emergence of a double designation: Wainaina is both writing for “[his] local” and for “the world” (Wiriko 00:14:04), not just the one or the other. His position as a writer reflects a compromise, which he embraces: discussing notions of global citizenship versus entrenched nativism, the author concluded “I think all of our identities are precisely in between those two extremes” (Journo and Wainaina).

### 1.3.3 An activist?

Binyavanga Wainaina’s role as a writer and overall literary figure has been well-established. He has often been described as an activist; more specifically as a gay rights activist following the publication of his memoir’s so-called “lost chapter”, “I am a Homosexual, Mum” in 2014. In an article commemorating the author’s life, *Granta* editor Sigrid Rausing said of Wainaina: “He could have become a poster boy for liberal literary Africa, a ‘cultural personality’, but he resisted turning himself into anything other than what he was: a writer, and an editor” (Flood). But if Wainaina did not see himself as an activist, Rausing noted his “profound influence, through *Kwani?*, his literary magazine, through his refusal to accept the othering of Africa and Africans, through coming out in a homophobic society and through advocating for feminist principles, for the idea of ‘upright Africans’” (Flood). Wainaina was also involved in politics. Not as a politician, but as a satirist and sometimes politically vocal writer. His memoir’s primary focus is not politics, or at least this aspect is not foregrounded – which, as Wainaina remarked, is a political act in itself (KwaniTrust 00:07:03); but as the years went by, Wainaina published various essays concerned with his country’s government (Wainaina, “Kenya Elected a President”, and “A Letter to All Kenyans”).

Wainaina “also had a reputation as something of a bully” (Baraka, “The Many Faces”) – Sigrid Rausing cited his “stubborn spirit” (Flood), and social media gave him an easily accessible platform to express his opinions openly. He often took part in online discussions or debates: among other things, Wainaina took a public stance in support of Tony Mochama, a Kenyan writer who was accused of sexual harassment (Ondieki, Patel “To think about”). Wainaina was also reportedly accused of sexual misconduct (Baraka “Binyavanga Wainaina” and “The Many Faces”, Enjani, Patel). About the (almost) inevitable controversy that prominent public figures such as Wainaina will most likely face during their career, Carey Baraka wrote:

“How then do we think about Binyavanga now? Do we cancel him post-demise?  
Do we talk about the writers he championed and whose careers he made

possible? Do we talk about how he drove *Kwani*? dangerously close to ruin because of his financial irresponsibility? Do we talk about the fact that there was a *Kwani*? to begin with, driven heavily by his energy? Do we talk about his powerful critiques of colonial images of Africa? Do we talk about the way he pandered to ethnic stereotypes in his writing? About the presence of an excellent memoir? About the absence of the Mwangi-esque novel? In the reductive Binyavanga scale, where does he fall? Bad? Good?" (Baraka, "The Many Faces")

## Chapter 2. The Author's Toolbox: What Makes Meaning?

### 2.1 BINYAVANGA WAINAINA'S ENGLISH(ES)

#### 2.1.1 English/english: a theoretical distinction

As mentioned in the introduction of this paper, the question of language is always central for literature written in formerly colonised countries. In many instances, language constituted a tool of oppression and has been considered “an essential aspect of colonial violence” (Ravishankar 1). Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong’o has advocated for the use of African languages over English in literature produced in Africa, stating that “[the English] language and literature were taking us further and further from ourselves to other selves, from our world to other worlds” (Ngugi 12). Ngugi is a world-renowned author, who stopped writing in English in the early 1980s. His fiction is now published in Gikuyu, and translated into English afterward. However, in order to reach a position in which his works were recognised enough for them to be translated into English, Ngugi had to begin his career by writing in English. Indeed, in accordance with the points of Gundu, Bgoya and Jay discussed in 1.1.2, writing in the language of the coloniser is a necessary step to achieve international recognition. This introduces a notion of choiceless choice regarding the production of literature in English: it may look as though writers are free to pick the language they feel most at home in, but there are other factors – economic, political – to consider before putting pen to paper. One way to deal with this inevitable contradiction is to make the language one’s own.

In their seminal book on post-colonial theory, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin introduced the distinction between English and english. They described the former as “the ‘standard’ British English inherited from the empire” (Ashcroft et al. 8) and the latter as “the english which the language has become in post-colonial countries” (8). So English becomes english when it has been or is being appropriated by the inhabitants of formerly colonised countries, when it is used by authors writing from this specific standpoint. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin do not understand English and english as a dichotomy, but rather as the two extremities of a “continuum”, which “exists between the various linguistic practices which constitute english usage in the modern world” (8). The articulation of this continuum is a way to differentiate between English as an instrument of colonial domination and english as an instrument of resistance against colonists, and to recognise the efforts of appropriation of the language that have been made by speakers and writers.

The appropriation of English into english has similarly been expressed by the Nigerian author Chinua Achebe. In his essay on “The African Writer and the English Language”, he dubbed English a “world language” (Achebe 57) and stressed the importance for African writers who choose this medium to transform it into “a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings” (62). There seems to be a consensus between authors and critics that the colonial language used to write literature should be, and is, different from the one spoken and written in the colonial centre. It is worth noting that Ashcroft et al.’s understanding of the English/english distinction as a continuum, from imperial to reappropriated, also suggests that they do not recognise any spatial distinctions. That is, english is not determined by locality or history, it cannot be limited to a place, it can only be put on an international continuum of englishes.

In *Beyond the Post-Colonial*, an inquiry challenging the adequacy of the ‘post-colonial’ label for “post-millennial writing in English from some countries which have known a British (post) colonial legacy” (Dawson-Varughese 2), Emma Dawson-Varughese introduced a national component to the appropriation of English. Her monograph defends the idea that the term ‘post-colonial’ is outdated, and its definition no longer fits the content of the literature that is being produced in formerly colonised countries. She instead proposes the term “World Englishes literature”, which she defines as follows:

Most (but not all) World Englishes literature explores the culture(s) of the country and people from which it is written (...); usually the literature employs *the English of that place* (to a lesser or greater degree); and, moreover, the writer chooses to write in that English over other languages in which she could alternatively write. (20, emphasis added)

In light of Ashcroft et al.’s theoretical distinction, the italicised ‘English’ in this definition could be spelled with a lowercase *e*. Indeed, Dawson-Varughese’s notion of “World Englishes” effectively refers to uses of English that have emerged in former colonies as appropriations of the colonial language – that is, englishes. To the conceptual distinction of *The Empire Writes Back*’s authors, Dawson-Varughese adds a spatial dimension: an english is what it is because of the place where it evolved. Rather than a continuum, from profoundly English to radically english, Dawson-Varughese proposes a geographical distinction between the englishes of various places, of various now-independent nations. So to her, an english can only be that of a place: a given form of english is necessarily tied to a nation-state, and all anglophone authors of that nation-state write in “the English of that place” (or: english of that place).

### 2.1.2 The construction of Binyavanga Wainaina's english

Following this line of thought, then, Binyavanga Wainaina's texts would be written in a Kenyan E/english. In her monograph, Dawson-Varughese does not provide clear definition criteria for what constitutes a country's English. In the case of Kenya, some defining elements could be the use of Sheng within anglophone texts<sup>10</sup>, or more widely of "language innovation and creativity" (Dawson-Varughese 129). Language innovation and creativity certainly is one way to describe Wainaina's relationship to writing. Indeed, his texts are rich in vivid imagery, original turns of phrases, and musical interludes. In light of this, I would argue that rather than writing in a Kenyan E/english, Binyavanga Wainaina set out to craft his own english: this individual language inscribes itself in the theoretical framework of both Ashcroft et al.'s english and Dawson-Varughese's concern for the geographical specificity of the E/english. Taking Achebe's suggestion literally, Wainaina chose to "aim to use English in a way that brings out his message best without altering the language to the extent that its value as a medium of international exchange will be lost" (Achebe 61).

And indeed, as pointed out by Savannah Lucas, "it is clear that English cannot fully communicate the nuances, memories, emotions, and diversity of Wainaina's life" (Lucas 309). To be able to communicate as much of himself and his world as possible while still using English as a medium, Wainaina implemented various strategies to craft a language of his own. Fittingly, his first published text, a short story titled "Binguni!", begins with a definition: "Allotropy: (ə-'lä-trə-pē) n. The property of certain elements to exist in two or more distinct forms" (*How to 3*). Figuratively, Wainaina's english is allotropic: it is an element – a language – that exists in two or more distinct forms. Indeed, his language is made up of an assortment of sounds, rhetorical devices, genre-defying forms, and embodied forms of meaning, all of which can be considered as sub-systems of meaning. A visual representation of this system could be that of an open umbrella, standing for Wainaina's english, and under which hang various strings, labelled 'sounds', 'rhetorical devices', and 'embodiment'. The following pages will provide more information as to what lies behind each of these labels, and make clear the ways in which each one of them works as part of a wider system of meaning crafted by the author: his english.

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<sup>10</sup> Fiction is being produced in Sheng in Kenya (see Journo, Aurélie. "Jambazi Fulani: Hip Hop Literature and the Redefining of Literary Spaces in Kenya"), but Wainaina does not write in that language.

What is being argued here is not that sounds, rhetorical devices, and embodiment are languages. Rather, they constitute a set of communication tools that work together as Wainaina's english, carrying meaning in the specific context of his writing. These sub-systems of meaning only work as partial languages: they can connote but cannot denote. For instance, if one wanted to ask their neighbours to be quieter in English, one would either explicitly say so (denote) or use a euphemistic formula (for instance asking the neighbours if they, too, have noticed how thin the walls are in the building) to suggest, or connote, the meaning of the request. The abovementioned sub-systems of meaning are connotative in essence, and cannot denote meaning because they have no semantic definitions. They nevertheless permeate the whole of Wainaina's texts, creating a profound feeling of disruption: nothing, whether in a fictional or non-fictional piece of writing, is ever just what it is. This is arguably the case of every good piece of literature, but what is striking about Wainaina's prose is that these linguistic disruptions are almost always visible. Each sub-system of meaning exists on the page through the medium of the English language, but appeals to readers' imagination and senses, inviting them to somehow see, hear, and feel the text outside of the pages of the book, too. Wainaina's relationship to E/english is thus profoundly disruptive, and sets the tone for the rest of his body of work. The following sections will dive into each sub-system of meaning, explaining how they are at once disruptive in themselves, and how they constitute a tool of disruption.

## **2.2 DISRUPTIVE FORMS FOR A DISRUPTIVE CONTENT**

One of the first noticeable aspects of Binyavanga Wainaina's english is his use of literary forms. This includes challenging and pushing the limits of various literary genres, sometimes blending them together, as well as resorting to stylistic devices and syntactic irregularities. Before studying the content of the texts, we will see how the form already shows signs of disruption.

### **2.2.1 Categorising Binyavanga Wainaina's work: beyond genres**

When discussing the decision to arrange Wainaina's texts by theme in the 2022 posthumous collection he edited, Achal Prabhala explained that he "instinctively recoiled at" the idea of "split[ting] his [Wainaina's] work into genre" (Obi-Young). He went on to explain: "(...) it wasn't who he was, or how he went about his creative life. His non-fiction was often as vivid as fiction; his fiction, on the other hand, was often as documentary as non-fiction"



(Obi-Young). It is true that Wainaina's writings are difficult to categorise, always standing on the edge of one genre while borrowing elements from another.

"Food Slut", one of the essays included in *How to Write About Africa* in the category Away in South Africa and England, is a good example of the author's defiance of genre boundaries. The essay sits at a crossroads between journalism, travel writing, food writing, personal essay, and cookbook. "Food Slut" qualifies as a journalistic piece because in it, Wainaina investigates various African recipes, and the reasons behind their exclusion from typical tourist attractions. It also makes sense as a piece of travel writing because the essay recounts the author's culinary travels throughout the continent; and the personal essay label fits the paragraphs describing his own attitude towards certain dishes, or food in general. But as suggested by its title, "Food Slut" is most of all a text about food. Not only does Wainaina discuss traditional African foods, he also shares ten recipes with his readers. The most notable aspect of this text is that the recipes are not collected at the end, in an appendix: they are included within the body of the text, between paragraphs lamenting the "lack of information" (*How To* 25) about African cuisine or explaining why kale is "a dictatorial vegetable" (51). The incorporation of recipes within the text rather than at the end gives them a particular status and opens up questions about literature. What is worthy of being considered literature? At first, readers may be intrigued by this choice: is there a surprise literary passage within the recipes? A beautifully poetic line slipped among mundane cooking instructions? This pushes readers to read them thoroughly rather than merely skim them. Because they are not relegated to the end of the text, the recipes appear in context, after stories that explain what makes them so special to the author-narrator. As such, they are part of the narrative, part of the story. Thorough readers will see their patience rewarded by two jokes slipped inside recipes six (39) and eight (44), but there is no additional narration or argumentative point being made. The recipes are the story, the story is the recipes – in part, at least. All in all, "Food Slut" is a combination of various uses of literature (argumentative, informative, personal) and by extension various genres (essay, journalism, personal essay, cookbook). This variety of forms and genres echoes *Kwani?*'s wide approach to literature (see 1.2.2) and suggests that pushing literary boundaries is part of contemporary anglophone African authors' efforts to redefine what can be thought of as literature. This could be seen as a way to reject essentialist and reductionist depictions of Africa and Africans that have been made in literature in the past through content *and* form. However, it should be noted that there is nothing radical or revolutionary in Wainaina's pushing of boundaries: it should be taken into account because it is there, it is something that he does,

but it is certainly not the main aspect of his writing. Wainaina's attempts at representing the plurality of lives and individuals that make up the African continent through his texts are visible in the content of his stories, but they are also one of the reasons behind the experimental character of his writing. The author aims at crafting a literary form that can contain, within itself, the plurality that he perceives.

Wainaina also pushes genre boundaries in *Beyond the River Yei: Life in the Land Where Sleeping is a Disease*, a book he published in 2004. This book, which is also included as a chapter in *How to Write About Africa*, was initially commissioned by a European humanitarian NGO. Binyavanga Wainaina and Sven Torfinn, a Dutch photographer, were received in Southern Sudan by Malteser Germany, a relief organisation, and asked to produce a book about "what life is like in South Sudan – and how it has been affected by Sleeping Sickness" (Wainaina and Torfinn 5). After spending two weeks there, Wainaina returned to Kenya and wrote. In his memoir, he recounted the European organisation's rejection of the text he produced:

The EU is very jittery about the book. They say that EU policy says there is only one Sudan, but my story says South Sudan! They are also concerned about language ... some ... improper ... unseemly ... language. Many things are not in line with EU policy. They have a proposition. Scrap the book. Keep the money. What they can do is fund an awareness-raising photo exhibition. And for the exhibition, I can write a few paragraphs—within the parameters of EU policy on Sudan, of course. You keep your full fat fee, of course. I tell them to fuck off in seemly language. I raise the money elsewhere, and *Kwani?* publishes the book. (*One Day* 190-191)

And *Kwani?* did publish the book: described by Dr Adolf Diefenhardt, regional co-ordinator Malteser Germany in the foreword as "a kind of diary that constantly moves between fact and fiction" (Wainaina and Torfinn 7), *Beyond the River Yei* "uses poetry, photographs, reportage and fiction in an unsettling and tender homage to South Sudan" (Kalondo). The first part of the book is the text Wainaina produced upon returning from Sudan. In it, the author centres the story around a fictionalised doctor the narrator accompanies, Ajo Diktor, whom he also turns into a poet. This character and his poems punctuate descriptive passages that aim at showing the ravages of sleeping sickness in the country. Torfinn's photo essay constitutes the second part of the book, a visual journey among the locals' day-to-day life. The third and final part is a documentary section, concerned with factual information about the nature, history and evolution of sleeping sickness. In only ninety-seven pages, *Beyond the River Yei* manages to

be everything at once: an informative booklet about a disease raging in Sudan, a photo-reportage, a literary account of a personal experience, and a collection of poems (Ajo Diktor's poetry is the first Wainaina ever wrote (*One Day* 190)).

Wainaina does not limit his writing to strict formal definitions, and on the contrary enjoys pushing the boundaries of various genres, often by mixing them. "Food Slut" and *Beyond the River Yei* are the two examples that seem the most flagrant in the author's defiance of rules and boundaries, but his tendency to disrupt literary conventions transpires throughout his whole oeuvre. This is another way, beside the content of his texts, to disrupt readers' expectations. As suggested by Wainaina in "According to Mwangi" (*How to* 192), a global audience would most likely expect a so-called postcolonial writer to break literary boundaries. In a way, this is what Wainaina does. But again, his challenging of form and genre is neither radical nor groundbreaking: it is disruptive, but not more so than European or American authors' questioning of these boundaries. In this sense, playing with genres is one of the areas of writing in which Wainaina somewhat conforms to certain expectations, as he is in line with authors who in the past have tried to sidestep their predecessors' heritage by crafting new forms in the name of literary innovation. So, paradoxically, Wainaina's efforts at moving away from strict genre constraints make him conform both to what is expected of an author writing from the "periphery" as well as an author writing from the "centre" (see Casanova for notions of literary centre and periphery). This does not mean, however, that Wainaina caters to all expectations: the author manages to make his writing appear conventional at first glance, luring readers into his texts, thinking that they will find what they expect. But

In ['Discovering Home'], (...) Wainaina successfully and imaginatively inverts the more anthropological approach of Western travel writers who write about Africa in all the clichéd ways he so hilariously critiques in 'How to Write about Africa.' Instead of discovering the exotic, dark continent on his journey, he discovers the most intimate personal spaces, those of his mother's family and his own very middle class identity. (Attree 42)

Though Wainaina's choice to not depict Africa as an "exotic, dark continent" seems an obvious one, Attree, who worked as a Caine Prize administrator, brings up an enlightening point: it seems that both Attree and the EU organisation (who declined to publish *Beyond the River Yei*) were taken aback by the subjective character of Wainaina's words. Contrary to their expectations, the author did not paint the picture of a far-away land full of suffering, but rather showed a variety of people in their intimacies and contradictions. And this is precisely where

disruption comes in: what makes Wainaina's relationship to genre boundaries disruptive is that he does not challenge them to create new technical, literary forms, but instead chooses to redefine them by systematically introducing a more human, subjective point of view to these stories. In "Food Slut", he does so by introducing a pause (the recipes themselves, and the personal ties he feels to them) in the political commentaries he makes in the essay. In *Beyond the River Yei*, Wainaina's noncompliance with the "EU policy on Sudan" (*One Day* 191) and ensuing refusal of both their alternative project ("an awareness-raising photo exhibition" 191) and their offer to "keep [his] full fat fee" (191) are guided by his wish to publish the book as he wrote it. That is, as a text that is not led by a political agenda (the author shall not be bought), but rather by an attempt at an authentic depiction of the stories of the people he encountered in (South) Sudan. If complying to the expectations of the genre, which in this case are also the expectations of the EU, comes at the cost (quite literally) of losing out on the subjective and intimate character of his stories, Wainaina will simply not deliver. Formal and genre disruption are then a tool used by the author to counter expectations that readers may project onto his work, and to some extent, the use of disruption as a challenge to expectations is continued through Wainaina's use of language, namely through his use of satire.

### **2.2.2 The use of satire: disruptive uses of literature**

Because of the success of "How to Write about Africa", Binyavanga Wainaina is internationally known as a satirist. This aspect of his writing is most evident in his satirical essays, gathered in the last part of the 2022 collection of his work (*How to* 321-338) under the title A Continent of Satire, which contains four pieces: "How to be a Dictator", "How to be an African", "The Senegal of the Mind", and the celebrated "How to Write About Africa". In the first one, each of the sixteen rules references actions taken by one or more rulers from sub-Saharan Africa, sometimes regarding internal policy and other times focusing on their country's relationship with former colonial states. The second essay mocks "Pan-African Seekers and Thinkers" 's (327) attempts at finding African origins for themselves, anchoring unrelated things into a mythologised, glorious African past. "The Senegal of the Mind" is a satirical comment on Zap Mama's lead singer Marie Daulne and her ambition to "embark on a Pan-African search for some quality me-time" (332); and "How to Write About Africa" parodies the simplified and essentialised portrayals of Africa in European literature. The satire in these four essays is political: it is overtly so in "How to be a Dictator", as the subject of the text is governments' behaviour and actions; and less overtly so in the remaining three. In them, the central issues are that of the image of Africa in the Western world, that is, mostly in Western

Europe and in the United States. The question of the representation of Africa is a political one because of the history of colonisation in many African countries. The image of the continent (which is most often considered as a whole; there is little regard for countries individually) has historically been plastered onto it, rather than has emerged from it. Africans' condemnation of Western representations of Africa is a political act because it also implies reclaiming the right to produce such representations from within the continent's nations. It is a claim to cultural self-determination.

Satire is not solely confined to the essays gathered in the last part of the collection; it permeates most of Wainaina's texts but is more apparent in some than in others. A concentration of satirical texts appears in the section titled *The Continental Dispatch*, a selection of columns Wainaina wrote for the *Mail & Guardian* (235), a South African periodical. Of particular interest among these columns are "Brand the Beloved Continent", reminiscent of Swift's "Modest Proposal", "Goodwill Hunting with Monsieur Sarkozy", a reaction to the French president's controversial 2007 speech in Dakar, and "Oxfamming the Whole Black World", which focuses on the paternalistic and infantilising attitude of the West towards Africa.

Wainaina's use of satire is most evident in his nonfiction, but it is not confined to this genre: in the short story "All Things Remaining Equal" (*How to* 145), satire is used to ridicule Gordon, Milka's step-father and "Maverick American Missionary" (149), and the television crew that follows him, "who always say things like, 'He didn't understand that I needed some Me-time', 'People are dying', 'You'd think they care', or 'It's such an empowering book'" (151). In another short story, "According to Mwangi" (*How to* 192), satire serves the purpose of highlighting the treatment of African anglophone literature, transforming literary works into patronising symbols of decolonisation. Mwangi's book is not considered for what it is – a good piece of literature – but for the symbol it quickly becomes. There is a process of quasi-sacralisation of his work, but barely anyone has read the actual novel: the highly hypocritical dimension of literary centres' patronising and paternalistic relationship to anglophone post-colonial writers transpires through this short story. Mwangi's book is only good and worthy of recognition as distinctly Kenyan ("a Kenyan voice at last!" 197) because it fits the stereotypical image of what post-colonial fiction should be: "a beautiful thing, like stained glass, shining with prose so stark it seemed naked; some characters were gritty, some were magical but real; some deconstructed; some stood in existentialist angst; others spoke in decolonized English" (196-197). Irony often accompanies satire to reach essentially the same purpose: sneering

remarks and comments about European authors such as Karen Blixen or Ryszard Kapuściński are sprinkled throughout Wainaina's texts ("The kitten that adopted me is waiting at the door. I call her Karen Blixen, and frequently wish she would get out of Africa" 187), as well as parodies of white tourists' vision of Kenya ("Stomach plummets: fear, thrill. Trippy. So *real*. Smell of old oil, sweat and spices. So exotic" 205, original emphasis).

When writing about representations of Africa that come from outside the continent, Wainaina's stance is necessarily political: his is a criticism of the reductive and essentialist vision of Africa by Western authors and media, created to support and justify the violence of colonisation during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and which continue to exist through literature and in the collective imagination. Wainaina's use of satire is disruptive in that it challenges widely accepted and established views of Africa by revered European authors such as Karen Blixen, Joseph Conrad, or Ryszard Kapuściński. But it is also disruptive in that it is ubiquitous: it permeates Wainaina's writing, giving a sense of constant underlying anger and dissatisfaction with the way things are. There is, in this exuberant satirical voice, a kind of performance. Performance in the theatrical sense, first: it sometimes reads as though the author were on a stage, dramatically reciting his argument against clichéd depictions of life on the African continent. Performative also in the sense that his satirical essays, because they were published, perform a task: they are effective in contributing to change the narrative about Africa in literature, and more broadly in people's imaginations, because they, too, are a piece of literature about Africa. By criticising and denouncing the misrepresentation of the continent, Wainaina opens space for a more accurate representation, and to some extent contributes to this representation himself both through his fiction and his non-fiction. It is worth noting that there is an inherent paradox to this process: to denounce and subvert essentialising clichés, Wainaina must use them. Indeed, I would argue that in order to gain access to an international audience (which, once reached, allowed the author to create the representation of Kenya and of Africa that he wished to push forward), Wainaina was to some extent obligated to acknowledge those clichés. To attain literary recognition, authors must first conform to the expectations of authorities such as the Caine Prize: Wainaina's "Discovering Home" won this award, but that was apparently not enough to make him an internationally renowned writer. It took the success of "How to Write about Africa", an essay that specifically deals with those essentialising clichés, to propel him to the forefront of the literary scene. The text, that was never meant to be published, details his own take on outdated stereotypes. This, paradoxically, is what allowed him to move past needing to constantly acknowledge them. Ironically, his fervent rejection of

these clichés is what gave him access to an international audience, which in turn made it possible for him to overturn them through his writing.

The necessity of conforming before being able to resist against those clichés, whether through satire or through the almost obligatory seeking of recognition from international prizes (such as the Caine Prize) may explain the underlying anger that fills Wainaina's texts, and which is particularly palpable in "Who Invented Truth" (*How to* 127). The essay ends abruptly, with a sense of frustration and helplessness: "Do I know what I am saying? No? Okay" (132).

### 2.2.3 Traces of disruption within the text: syntax and stylistics

Diving further into the texts, readers will observe that Wainaina plays with form on both a larger, generic scale and a smaller, stylistic scale. Disruption does not stop at genres; it weaves its way into the construction of the text as the author ingrains it within his words and sentences. These disruptions can be visual, when capital letters coat the page to reflect the loudness of the speaker's excitement or emotion: "GOOOOOOAAAAL!" (*How to* 195), "THERE! THERE!" (227). Visual, too, is the way words spread on the page to look like how they sound in the world ("anywaaay" *How to* 168, "shaking iiiit" 168) or to mirror the semantics they carry ("Kenya streeetches" 51). All these practices converge in "Binguni!" (*How to* 3), Wainaina's first story, when a character promises "EEETERNALL DAMNATIONNN!" (4): the letter case conveys the volume of the utterance, while the multiplication of vowels and consonants echoes both the particular way the Red Devil pronounces these words and their semantic implication – the words themselves strive for eternity, stretching their letters on the page. The concordance between words and sounds is also evident in the author's frequent use of onomatopoeic words ("giggle giggle" 4, "clang" 117, "a-hemed" *One Day* 132) and vivid imagery describing shapes and sounds ("laughing like tinkling glasses in a film" 175, "my laugh is stones rattling on a corrugated-iron roof" 186).

In addition to figurative language, Wainaina frequently makes use of wordplay, using sounds and spelling to create puns. The former can be exemplified by the author's use of paronomasia: first in "Discovering Home" (*How to* 68) when, discussing Uganda, the author-narrator states that "This country gives [him] hope that this continent is not, finally, incontinent" (94); or in "Goodwill Hunting with Monsieur Sarkozy" (*How to* 265), when "the African peasant" becomes "a new species of birds, the African pheasants" (265). Spelling also serves as a tool to create wordplay, as for instance the name of Shanks's tour firm, "WylDe AFreaKa tours" (204), or when the author-narrator compares Kampala to "Nairobi" (95), a

portmanteau of Nairobi and robbery. In “The Senegal of the Mind” (*How to* 331), the author explains the origin of Zap Mama’s name: the Belgian singer of Congolese origin “was named »«*l*l*l*l, which means ‘the Queen with colliding arrows and upside-down question marks’. (In French, this translates as Marie Untoilette.)”<sup>11</sup> (331). There is a strong irony in this last passage, as well as a playfulness with language: this is what makes Wainaina’s writing what it is, as irony comes to form part of his english.

Wainaina also makes frequent use of figures of speech throughout his texts. Some are quite common, such as analogies (“If crystal were water solidified, her voice would be the last splash of water before it sets” *How to* 73), personifications (“my tongue has rediscovered its French” 79), or anaphoras (“When I left, white people ruled South Africa. When I left, Kenya was a one-party dictatorship. When I left, I was relieved that I had escaped the burdens and guilts of being in Kenya, of facing my roots, and repudiating them.” 75). Some figures of speech run through several of his texts: the metonymy of Kenya as a “dollar-a-day” country first appears in “The Power of Love”, a column published in the Mail & Guardian between 2006 and 2009 (*How to* 236) and is briefly referenced again in the penultimate chapter of Wainaina’s memoir (“Paraffin and matches cost less than a dollar a day” *One Day* 245). However, some of the figures of speech mobilised by the author are less common and tend to affect the syntax of a sentence. This is the case of the zeugma that described his newfound appreciation for Nairobi: “I slipped and slid and fell in love with this city” (*How to* 133). The use of this stylistic device is a way to make the reader feel the same surprise the narrator found himself confronted to: just as the latter did not expect to appreciate the capital city so much after his return from South Africa, to find his way back so easily, the former is surprised by the unexpected link between two syntactic elements of different kinds brought together in the zeugma. Similarly, by beginning with an adjective, the anastrophe “Tired of truth, I am” (*How to* 127) in “Who Invented Truth?” (127) places the emphasis on the author’s lassitude with “truth”; that is, with “literature about the strong brown woman who empowered herself without human quirks” (132), with “metanarratives and more truth and post-colonies. An intellectual world in which each paper rewrites its own perceptual framework” (127). Additionally, the syntactic construction of the sentence following an Object-Subject-Verb structure rather than the prototypical Subject-Verb-Object pattern of English helps to transmit the feeling of a linguistic fatigue: grammar no longer matters, and words are expired in a tired breath.

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<sup>11</sup> The singer’s real name is Marie Daulne.



The syntactic construction of sentences is indeed often disturbed in Wainaina’s texts. While some lack a verb (“Writing, a vain pursuit” 127), others are only made of verbs: “Impound. Stamp. Impede. Sta-mpede. (...) Imp. Imprison. Implode. Implant. Impede. (...) Improve. Impress. (...) Impede. Imperil. Improve” (*One Day* 45). These words are scattered on the page, among other sentences and paragraphs, thrown in almost as interjections. And indeed, to some extent, they do work as onomatopoeic words: because of the alliteration in /p/, a plosive consonant that connotes a certain violence, the sounds of the words “Impound. Stamp. Impede. Sta-mpede” (45) do resonate with “[a]rmy and police bands [being] called to order” (45), just as “Impede. Imperil. Improve” is evocative of the colonial reality suggested by the preceding sentence (“The old dances were banned by the missionaries, and now many dances happen in rows and columns” 45). The words that constitute the alliteration throughout this page are linked by phonetic similarities as well as by their reminiscence of the sounds of military power – be it that of colonial times or of contemporary regimes. It could then be argued that the combination of the phonemes /m/, and /p/, in that order, becomes an alternative signifier for abusive uses of political power. This becomes clear when considering the following passages: “[Baden-Powell] founded the Boy Scouts and could skin a rabbit with his fingernails. He was buried in Kenya. Mpr.” (44), “before the arrival of colonial missionary mpr” (46), “Standing trumpets bracket the song with controlled rhythm beats, the loudest part of the song. Mprahh.” (51), “surrounded by military mpr” (52). It is worth noting that “mpr”, sounds relatively close to the word “emperor” /ˈɛmpərər/ (“Emperor”): when vowel sounds are removed, the consonants are identical (/mpr/). This similarity reinforces the association between “Mp and mpr words” (44) and the mechanisms of colonisation and military rule.

## 2.3 “THE SOUNDS OF ONETHINGS AND THE SOUNDS OF MANYTHINGS”, OR HOW SOUNDS BECOME WORDS

### 2.3.1 Sounds, transcribed: integrating sounds into the text

Let us now move on to sounds and the way they permeate the written text. *One Day I Will Write About This Place* is an exceptionally loud memoir, the first chapter introducing the author playing with his siblings, “random sounds fall[ing] into [his] ears” (*One Day* 3), and the last chapter a comment on a documentary about benga music. Between these two extremities, sounds are not simply described in expressive terms (“Frying sausages sound like rain on a tin roof, which sounds like a crowd” 17, “laughing like tinkling glasses in a film” 175) and named

in abundance, they are also regularly transcribed. A quick skimming of the memoir will reveal plenty of miscellaneous noises and onomatopoeias: “Mpah!” (10), “Tingtingtingting” (14), “*Shhhhhh* is made up of many many tinny tiny ting ting tings” (17), “Whoosh” (53), “kssss, kssss, kssss... Rolexxx... xss... xxxsss...” (94), “Boing!” (120), “Aiii!” (231). The author-narrator’s extreme awareness of non-linguistic sounds may stem from his similarly acute awareness of linguistic sounds, that is, of the different sounds of all the languages that surround him. For most of his life, the perception of a large quantity of sounds has been a source of anxiety, encapsulated in what he calls *kimay*. *Kimay* is “any language that I cannot speak, but I hear every day in Nakuru” (25), it is “people talking without words, exact languages, the guitar sounds of all of Kenya speaking Kenya’s languages” (253). Wainaina describes the anxiety that accompanies *kimay* as follows:

“*Kimay* is a long, flapping lower jaw, which gives me anxiety. (...) *Kimay* is a very specific feeling that is hard to re-create: the feeling of disorder in the stomach that comes when a swing wobbles and stops flying up and down and instead begins shaking from side to side. It is the feeling in the stomach in a dream in which I am falling.” (*How to* 141, original emphasis)

The abundant incorporation of sounds within the text could be a way to recreate, for the reader, this feeling of anxiety induced by the unsettlingly loud environment the author-narrator grew up in. Making sounds a sub-system of meaning in his English, using them as a form of language, echoes his intention to bring readers to the centre of his world when writing in English (Wiriko 00:14:04). His world here is not a geographical place, but his individual constructed world of perceptions, the way the world exists through his eyes (and ears). And for this world to be accurately represented by words, the author must not only transcribe the noises produced by objects and things, but also the sounds of languages.

In this sense then, Wainaina’s technique matches Jaji’s definition of transcription. In a chapter dedicated to the study of “what writing music itself – as score and as textual referent – meant for a generation of self-styled modernist South Africans who saw their own aspirations as inseparably linked to international pan-Africanism” (Jaji 24), she defined transcription as “an analog (sic) to translation, mediating between the different sensory grammars of hearing and sight” and “an alternative to translation, conveying music as a sonic sign unbounded by linguistic specificity” (24). Though initially written about the transcription of music, Jaji’s words are enlightening regarding the incorporation of all kinds of sounds within Wainaina’s texts, and are particularly relevant in the case of the transcription of accents: it is “an analog

(sic) to translation” in that it translates ungraspable sounds into symbols that can be read and interpreted by the reader, letters on the page working as musical notes on a sheet music, and it is “an alternative to translation” in that the sounds of language are transmitted via unrestrained linguistic forms. Wainaina allows for a linguistic plasticity that makes the transcription of sounds on a page full of silent words possible; pronunciation is not forced to surrender to spelling. Some examples of the transcription of characters’ accents can be found both in Wainaina’s fiction and non-fiction. In the latter, one may occasionally hear an Englishman loudly supporting “Arsenaaaaaaawl” (*How to* 53) or mechanics discussing the “sokasoba” of “old pinjots” (*One Day* 76), while in the former one can listen to Mrs Peprah calling Milka “sweet gel” (*How to* 172), or to someone talking about American actor “Eddy Maafi” (211).

Such words create a disruption in the text as they make one’s accent *visible* on the page, and disrupt the reading experience as they break the rhythm of the language: readers cannot properly anticipate the word they are reading because it is not spelled in the way it usually is, and therefore may have to read it more slowly or a second time to understand. There is an intrusion of sound in the text, drawing particular attention to the words which are phonetically transcribed. I would however argue that the point of these transcriptions is not to focus readers’ gaze on the words themselves, but rather on the fact that they were transcribed phonetically in the first place. The emphasis is not on the word that is transcribed in a way that mimics its pronunciation by the speaker, it is on the inclusion of this accent within the text. In other words, what matters is not simply what is said but how it is said. This process is a way for the author-narrator to include local speech patterns and variations in his prose, even while writing in English. Visible accents become part of his English, which itself is the tool he crafted to better “carry his peculiar experience” (Achebe 61). By transcribing characters’ accents, Wainaina effectively forces readers to mimic the speakers’ pronunciation of certain words. There is an imposition of rules at play here: the writer does not explain or describe the way a word is pronounced, he writes it in a way that the word cannot exist otherwise. “Sokasoba” is “sokasoba”, it is not ‘shock absorbers in a Luo accent’. A speaker’s accent is only visible in the text because it is audible in the world, and is transcribed this way for accuracy purposes – this is a perfect example of transcription as “an analog (sic) to translation” as theorised by Jaji.

### **2.3.2 Speaking through the page: accents and power relations**

It is worth noting that the transcription of accents is not always neutral. In “According to Mwangi” (*How to* 192), the eponymous protagonist holds a PhD in “litera-chuwa” (196) and

becomes a world-renowned author upon the publication of his first novel. The apparent discrepancy introduced between the high social and educational status brought by his level of education and what is both a misspelling of the word “literature” and a transcription of a non-standard pronunciation of that same word (that is, one that does not conform to British Received Pronunciation standards) is highly ironical. By referring to the supposedly noble field of literature this way, the narrator mocks the protagonist’s high regard for the prestige brought by his title and pre-emptively diminishes the grandeur of Mwangi’s success.

The use of accents as a tool of mockery is recurrent in Wainaina’s prose. Throughout their childhood, the author-narrator and his siblings imitate Americans while playing: “‘Sophiaaanh,’ I say, Americanly. ‘Sow-phiaaanh.’” (*One Day* 9), “‘Haaangi. Wreng wreng,’ I say Americanly, whinnying through my nose, and make a little bubble of gum pop out of my mouth. My high heels are about to fall off. ‘I arrived fram Ohi-o-w. Laas Angelis. Airrrrrrt. Baarston. Wreng wreng...’” (9). If the tone of this accent imitation remains playful in childhood, it grows sarcastic in adulthood: “Lurve gifts donated so the People of Sath Soo-Dan can get to have a prrrsonal relationship with Gaad” (*How to* 281). In this passage from “Beyond the River Yei”, a piece about Wainaina’s trip to South Sudan that stands between fiction and non-fiction (see 2.2.1), the narrator denounces the performative activism of US-based Christian NGOs. The transcription of the speaker’s accent makes it more noticeable, because it is visible on the page. This exaggeration contributes to ridiculing the content of what is said, diminishing its importance and sincerity. The transcription of this accent and not that of other characters effectively creates a gap between the form and the content of the utterance. By putting the emphasis on the form, the content is relegated to a minor position, and this causes the NGO representative’s discourse to seem shallow. The transcription of accents to undermine the content of one’s speech is a tool that appears in Wainaina’s memoir too, as exemplified by this rendering of the dominant political discourse heard on the radio in 1984:

“Moi and his cronies are on the radio daily. It is in the papers every day. These are dark days, we are told. There are dissidents everywhere. We have to all unite and silence the dissidents. From the radio, we know that foreign influenzenes are invecting us, secret foreign influenzenes are infringing us, invincing us, perfering our gildren, preaking our gultural moralities, our ancient filosofies, the dissidents are bushing and bulling, pringing segret Kurly Marxes, and Michael Jagsons, making us backliding robots, and our land is becoming moonar handscapes. They took the rain away, the Maxists, the Ugandans, wearing Western mini sgurts, and makeup, they are importing them, inserting them

inside invected people, these dissidents, like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, and that man called Raila Oginga Odinga. (*One Day* 84)

Here, again, the political discourse is undermined by the transcription of an “accented English” (Popescu 31). This transcription is somewhat different from the other examples discussed earlier as it is not part of direct speech but is free indirect speech. The seriousness of the discourse is undermined by the distance between form and content introduced by the presence of the speaker’s accent. Words are dissociated from their semantic meaning and become mere phonemes, a collection of funny (“Kurly Marxes” 84) or distracting sounds. The content participates to the ridiculing aspect of this reported speech too, as it is exaggerated and modified by the narrator: “the Maxists [and] the Ugandans” certainly did not “[take] away the rain” (84) by wearing short clothes. Form matches content, and both are disruptive. It then becomes obvious how sounds become a language of their own: the transcription of sounds adds a whole other layer of meaning to what is being said.

Additionally, one could argue that the transcription of accents into the written text opens a new playing field in which relationships of power emerge. Transcription necessarily implies a process of transformation: a sound goes from being produced by vibrations (of vocal cords or of objects), to being decomposed into written syllables on the page, before finally being re-interpreted as sounds within the readers’ heads. This transformation of sounds and noises amounts to tying them down, freezing them, reducing them into something that is somehow less than what they were. A sound, written on the page, takes up less space; it cannot be as overwhelming or all-encompassing as it was before being broken down into onomatopoeias and phonemes. The narrator becomes all-powerful in the way he represents the characters’ speech, which is the only direct link between character and implied reader. What I mean by this is that direct speech can be seen as a window open onto the fictional world (or the world as it is recreated by the author, in the case of nonfiction), through which the true sounds and ideas of a character, or politician, come to the ears of the implied reader. By manipulating the way they sound, using their accents against them, the narrator takes away the power of their words and takes full control of the narrative.

### **2.3.3 “Music as an alternative language for a fragmented identity” (Lucas 309)**

Just like the sounds of languages, the sounds of music work as a kind of language, or sub-system of meaning, in Wainaina’s texts. According to Lucas, “the use of music counteracts the limits English creates in communicating an accurate portrayal of his life and surroundings”

(Lucas 309). In *One Day I Will Write About This Place* in particular, music accompanies the author-narrator throughout his life, from his childhood home to his experience of the world as an adult.

About music, the author-narrator declares: “Music makes whole worlds, out of unwhole lives. (...) [It] promises to carry all of you, even the parts of you that cannot work together” (*One Day* 52). This sentence suggests that there is hope and strength to be found in music, which stands as a reassuring, almost-personified figure that promises to accept one completely. Music in that sense becomes a language of articulation of the self, of a personal identity that can only be fully formed in music. Another way of putting this would be to say that music has the ability to make sense out of something that does not make sense. It then becomes a language which creates before it communicates: it produces meaning that did not previously exist, and then allows for it to be transmitted from person to person. What may be disordered or chaotic in the world becomes a melody in music, able to somehow make sense of the chaos and transmit this new meaning.

The ability of music to create “whole worlds” applies on an individual scale, with regards to the creation or acceptance of a fuller version of oneself, but also applies to the wider scale of family. In “Discovering Home” (*How to* 68), Wainaina’s Caine-prize winning personal essay, the author-narrator writes about his family: “In French, Swahili, English, Gikuyu, Kinyarwanda, Kiganda, and Ndebele, we sing one song, a multitude of passports in our luggage” (102). Here, music serves as an international and borderless language that allows family members who live on different parts of the globe to communicate together. Music is both an entity that goes beyond languages, as it makes people who speak different tongues able to understand each other, and is a way for Wainaina to “communicate (...) how an array of languages, nationalities, and identities can exist simultaneously in a single moment of his life” (Lucas 309).

Indeed, music seems to become a sort of national language, in which the many voices of Kenya can coexist successfully. About the traditional instruments used in benga music, which “[e]verybody is now saying it is the true music of Kenya” (*One Day* 251), Wainaina writes: “The *nyatiti* and *orutu* do not create their own sounds. Their job is to follow the words, the intonation, the language and melody of the song, to maintain the integrity of the story. So, if you take the singer away, what they sound like is what the singer was saying. They mimic the singer” (253, original emphasis). What is described here is a symbiosis between the

instruments and the voice, between music and language; the two become one. The author-narrator adds: “Any good *benga* guitarist can mimic the architecture and musical rhythms and verbal sounds of any Kenyan language” (253, original emphasis). What this passage makes clear is that music is not only considered as a language in its own right, it is also perceived as a kind of national language: within music, all of Kenya’s languages gather and become one entity. This wholeness is perceived by the narrator, who identifies this symbiosis between the music of the instruments and the lyrics of the song as “the source of all *kimay*” (253, original emphasis). Only now, *Kimay* is no longer causing anxiety (“No *kimay*. I am not thrilled” 252, original emphasis). Interestingly, this feeling is caused by the melodies played by the instruments and not by the lyrics sung by the singer: this brings us back to the idea that the sub-systems of meaning of Wainaina’s english connote rather than denote. Here, it is not the semantic meaning brought by the song’s lyrics that create a feeling of national belonging, it is the meaning – fully open to interpretation – connoted by the sounds of the instruments. In this sense, music appears to be somewhat more reliable than language, in that it is all-encompassing. As “a literary form” (252), music becomes a metaphorical language, a part of Wainaina’s denotative english, that allows a more direct communication of ideas, especially in terms of national unity. This is made possible by the alliance, the imbrication, and even the symbiosis between music and language: music on its own does not mean as much, and neither does language. This is what the author-narrator refers to when he speaks of music’s ability “to maintain the integrity of the story” (253), in every sense of the term. Integrity as a synonym of “wholeness, completeness, entirety” (“Integrity, N., Sense 1.a.”), first: the *nyatiti* and the *orutu*, when they accompany the voice, provide an imitation of both the linguistic plurality of the whole of Kenya and of “the architecture (...) of any Kenyan language” (253). Integrity in a moral sense, second: if “for the government, Kenya is something essential, immutable, and written in a single narrative of triumph” (Krishnan 81-82), *benga* music stands in opposition to this essentialist and simplified representation of the national story. *Benga* music instead ensures the protection of the “myriad discourse, voices, and code that constitute [the nation] as multiply-articulated and contingent” (81).

Beyond the creation of a national community through music, this tool used as a sub-system of meaning also permits a more effective communication between “[Wainaina’s] local and the world” (Wiriko 00:14:04), whom the author aimed at addressing through his writing. Indeed, Lucas argues that “Wainaina uses the universal nature of music to communicate a diverse life to a global audience. Music brings the sense of a shared experience between

Wainaina and the reader who can imagine the sounds and the feelings they evoke” (Lucas 311). While such a blanket statement about the “universal nature of music” can easily be qualified, what Lucas points to is that the sounds of music, unlike that of languages, need not be translated to be felt. Not every musical piece can be understood straight away by anyone, as it is structured according to codes which vary from one place to another, from one period to another, but the simple act of listening to music and getting something from it is not hindered by a lack of comprehension, in the same way that listening to a language one does not speak or understand would. One could argue that English, described by Achebe as a “world language” (Achebe 57), is a good enough tool of international communication. But as suggested by the previous paragraphs, music has the capacity to go beyond languages by creating and transmitting meaning(s) that exists beyond words and their semantic definitions.

In many regards, music serves as a bridging sub-language: it allows a form of ontological reconciliation, serves as a binding agent for a multilingual family reunion, offers a space in which a form of national language can take shape, and provides an international tool of communication. Music is not disruptive in itself, but in its uses. In short, “[t]he use of music counteracts the limits English creates in communicating an accurate portrayal of his life and surroundings” (Lucas 309), and effectively becomes a part of Wainaina’s english.

## **2.4 FROM MEANING TO INTENT: THE ROLE OF THE BODY IN / AS LANGUAGE**

### **2.4.1 Body language and embodied language**

After understanding how music is an example of symbiosis between the material and the immaterial, that is, between the sounds produced by the vibrations of the instruments and the words of the lyrics, it becomes easier to grasp the author’s relationship to a form of embodied language, or embodied forms of meaning.

The authors of *Linguistic Bodies* have argued that meaning is “a result of acting in the world as a body” (Di Paolo et al. 21): this can be understood in several ways. First, as a synonym for body language, in the common sense of the phrase: one moves their body, even slightly, in a way that conveys an emotion or a reaction. In such cases, body language is used to connote meaning. This can be observed in the author-narrator’s rendering of the increasingly



tense climate in Kenya around the time of Kibaki's election<sup>12</sup>: "Wink wink. Nod nod. It is our season. Kibaki season" (*One Day* 211). The sense connotated by these winks and nods is one of community, a visual suggestion that two people belong to the same tribal group. These physical cues become signifiers for a notion of shared identity, of having something in common with one's interlocutor. A similar phenomenon takes place when Suzannah, the family landlord's sister-in-law, "responds by lowering her head and looking away" (150). On occasion, Wainaina also uses body language as a means to seemingly denote meaning rather than merely connote: "Her eyes narrow at the salesman and ask, 'How much?'" (*How to* 317), "Go-Gerrit, his body says" (*One Day* 168). In these two examples, it is the body that speaks. It is as though the speaker's body gained some kind of autonomy, or at least that the meaning produced by body language was autonomous, standing on its own rather than merely accompanying verbal language for emphasis.

And indeed, it seems that in Wainaina's writing, body language can turn into an additional language. While on a flight to Lamu island, the author-narrator's seatmate initiates a conversation with him, in "perfect" (*One Day* 237) Swahili. The author-narrator has no interest in this conversation, but the other man's language "demands that I be more attentive than I want to be—inattention is impossible when somebody speaks in formal Kiswahili" (238). To signify his disinterest, Wainaina uses facial expressions: "Eyebrows up and eyes wide in mock interest" (238). In this instance, it is not so much meaning that is transmitted, but an intention. The exaggerated eye opening and eyebrow movement mark a gap between the enthusiastic verbal exchange ("Ndio, ahaa, eh? Yes. Ohh!" 238) and the speaker's attitude towards this exchange, suggested by his ironic facial expressions. In this case, body language serves as an additional language, able to support the idea that is being communicated in spoken language. In some instances, the use of body language goes further and, rather than an additional language, it becomes an alternative language. This is the case when Wainaina and his class make a stop while returning from Durban and start singing:

One day, it seems like an age ago, on a campus trip to Durban, we stopped the bus in the middle of the road to piss in the wilderness past Kokstad. The sky was huge; the air was cool and dry and smelled of tarmac fumes and daytime heat. The bus stereo system was on, and we were all drunk and somebody started to sing, and soon all drunk sixty of us were arranged in lines by the side of the road, doing the Bus Stop, laughing and singing, not one note out of place. The

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<sup>12</sup> Kenyan President Mwai Kibaki, elected in 2002, was Gikuyu; as was Wainaina.

sky was huge—we were only a few miles from the border, and beyond the road were giant white farms—and we all knew there were guns there and threats, *but in this moment we were all one woven mat of bodies singing struggle songs. I found I knew the words, but not the meaning; I knew the intent.* Cars honked rudely, and we boarded the bus and sang all the way back to Umtata. (*One Day* 113, emphasis added)

What is particularly interesting in this passage is the direct link drawn by the author-narrator between singing and bodies. The unity felt in this shared singing of songs materialises through the bodies of the singers, which become “one woven mat of bodies”, a singular entity made up of many individuals.

This leads us to the inextricable link between language and body which is present throughout Wainaina’s life, from childhood to adulthood. In the first chapters of his memoir, the instruments of language are materialised, embodied, have a tangible existence in the world: not only are words “concrete things” (*One Day* 5), some have “length, breadth, and height, a firm texture, (...) like hands and toes and balls and doors” (6-7). Eventually, words begin to “trip and fall” (7), sounds and words jump (4, 120), language “stumbles” (28). As language gradually acquires a capacity of movement in the world, a kind of autonomy, sounds “get tangled up, like my hair if I comb it dry” (43, see also 92) and begin climbing: “I close my eyes. Gikuyu letter m breaks free of his place in the stadium and runs around manically, looking for the Gikuyu b. They stand together and hug, bonded by fear into a new single letter, a tribe. Mbi. Sometimes you try, but your tongue can’t wrap right around the rules. A, mbi, ci” (48). The materialisation of language in Wainaina’s writing suggests that the only way language can effectively do something in the world is if, or when, it is embodied. There is a form of inevitability of body/language interactions, a necessary relationship. This brings us back to the passage quoted above: in it, the body/language symbiosis becomes visible when singing as a group results in an embodied communion. About the song, the author-narrator states: “I found I knew the words, but not the meaning; I knew the intent” (*One Day* 113). Meaning and intent here can be construed as two different levels of understanding. First, meaning: it is communicated by words, which serve as linguistic signs. Because the narrator has learned the song, he knows the words and is able to sing them. A barrier emerges when he attempts to reach their meaning: whether this refers to their semantic meaning (if the song is in a language he does not speak) or their interpretation in the context of the song, there is still something lacking, a missing piece of information. Meaning is the result of an explanation, an answer to a question that emerges because of a lack of information. Intent, on the other hand, is a sort of

pre-existing knowledge, one that does not create the need for an explanation. In this example, the intent of the song is felt by the author-narrator when the students gather into a single group of bodies. The sense of community created by the song is not the result of the meaning of its lyrics, which probably articulates the necessity of working as a group to survive in the face of oppression or abusive power (as suggested by the term “struggle songs”), but stems from a pre-linguistic, embodied form of knowledge: intent.

#### **2.4.2 Dance as an alternative system of meaning: intent**

There indeed seems to be something important at play that emerges through dance. Later in his memoir, Wainaina writes about his struggle to master the dombolo, a Congolese dance: “My body finds a rhythmic map quickly, and I build my movements to fluency before letting my limbs improvise. Everybody is doing this, a solo thing—yet we are bound, like one creature, in one rhythm” (*One Day* 140). It is interesting to note that the use of the term “fluency” in this context hints at the links between body and language: as with language, it is necessary to understand the correct choreography in dance (grammatical rules in the case of language) before being able to improvise. The symbiosis of the group found in dance emerges from each person “doing this, a solo thing”, and not from the group moving in a cohesive manner. This is surprising, as one may expect cohesion to emerge from a strictly choreographed dance, especially as the importance of order in dance is stressed by Wainaina’s school choir conductor:

Sometimes we practice traditional songs for the interschool music festival. We try to make sure we do not shake our bodies too much so that we step out of the lines and lose our place. *It is important that we move our limbs together*, and keep in tune, and follow the conductor. At practice, the conductor, our music teacher Mr. Dondo, keeps us in do-re-mi-fa key with his mouth organ before we start. Don’t move like a villager, he likes to say. We often do not know the meaning of the traditional song we are singing, but we learn the words well. (*One Day* 34-35, emphasis added)

In this passage, it is almost as if Mr. Dondo’s voice transpired through Wainaina’s: the sentences are affirmative and to-the-point, as if there were no questioning the strict regulation of these children’s bodies. The conductor (who conducts their bodies as well as their voices, movements becoming melodies) is not opposed to dancing altogether – students may “move [their] limbs” – but is very much in favour of order. Children are instructed to “not shake [their] bodies” and not “move like a villager”: these two expressions are equally degrading, and imply

that the body's natural response to traditional music would be disordered and, as such, unwanted. The consequence of this ban on dancing (the word itself is never said) is the creation of a discrepancy between sound and body: the children can sing, but cannot move freely to the sounds they hear. A similar disconnection happens with language: they sing, but the absence of meaning produces a rupture between words and sounds, signifiers and signifieds – which is also what happens later, when Wainaina and his classmates sing together on their way back from Durban. However, intent cannot yet be reached for the children in choir, for their understanding of what they are singing remains superficial: the restriction of their movements keeps them from finding their own meaning in the song – the intent. No sense of community emerges for these children because their definition of (national) community stems from government-approved songs and lyrics, and this knowledge is not the result of intent, the alternative and pre-linguistic form of knowledge found in dance. It is important to note that the pre-linguistic form of knowledge I am talking about here is not synonymous with any kind of innate knowledge, something that the children would somehow already have within themselves and that would be unlocked by dance. Rather, I would argue that intent is, like language, a learnt behaviour. The choirmaster's efforts to keep the children's bodies from moving is an attempt at keeping them from creating their own form of embodied meaning (intent) through dance.

This highlights a tendency of the various governments' policies to control the population's bodies. This is also hinted at during the Madaraka Day parade chapter of the author's memoir: pride of place is given to "order" (44, 45, 48); and this includes language as an embodied entity, too. The passage quoted above, which describes language's capacity for movement in the world as an embodied entity ("I close my eyes. Gikuyu letter m breaks free of his place in the stadium and runs around manically, looking for the Gikuyu b. They stand together and hug, bonded by fear into a new single letter, a tribe. Mbi. Sometimes you try, but your tongue can't wrap right around the rules. A, mbi, ci" *One Days* 48) is also relevant here. The last sentence of this segment echoes the opening of the following paragraph, in which two Kalenjin men join President Moi on stage to receive medals: "Policemen circle them; the president pauses" (48). The striking syntactic parallel between the tongue's inability to "wrap right around the rules" and police circling the two men points to the agency the body holds over language: it will not bend under its phonetic constraints. Not only that, what this passage highlights is also the rejection of independent bodily movements, which are immediately handled by the police. All this tends to suggest that there is an agenda behind the control of

children's bodies and movements, which serves as a preventative measure: if their bodies need to be controlled, it is because there is a risk in letting them move (dance) freely. The risk is that of an autonomisation of movements and bodies, of people starting to move according to their own patterns and rhythms instead of following those imposed by the government. And by letting individuals move freely, the power in place loses the control it has over them. Forbidding children from moving during choir is a way of instilling self-control of their bodies early on in their lives, to ensure their compliance with the rules and wishes of the power in place<sup>13</sup>. The risk is that the body may become "an instrument expressing resistance to the power established by borders of all kinds" (De Lame 21, my translation)<sup>14</sup>. And it is in the hopes of limiting this resistance and ensuring submission to their rules and policies that government officials choose to impose a restriction on dance, for children as well as for adults.

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<sup>13</sup> There may be an interesting parallel to draw between Foucault's concept of docile bodies and Wainaina's depiction of the control of bodies in his texts.

<sup>14</sup> "Le corps devient instrument d'expression d'une résistance au pouvoir qu'instaurent les frontières en tous genres" (De Lame 21).

# Chapter 3. Patterns Of Disruption: Revealing Fragilities And Ambiguities

## 3.1 DISRUPTION AS A PATTERN

Having identified the various mechanisms of disruption at work in Binyavanga Wainaina's texts, it becomes easier to see how certain patterns appear. If disruption is first noticeable in the way the text is constructed, as traces of disruption in the formal aspects of the text, it then becomes perceptible on the narrative level, in the way the stories are crafted. These almost-omnipresent traces of disruption eventually emerge as patterns, which this chapter seeks to explore and analyse. Most of the patterns that will be studied are linked to sounds: that of languages, first, whose plurality is cause for ontological impermanence on both an individual and a collective level. The constant presence of sounds means that their absence, in turn, becomes disruptive. What is striking about the absence of sounds in Wainaina's texts is that it is almost always tied to the nation: we will see that silence is rejected for fear that it will reveal cracks within the community. And indeed, the role of sounds in community or nation formation can be perceived at all levels: it is a key element for the population, which makes sure to be surrounded by sounds at all times, and for the government, which uses music as a nation-building tool through the influence of school choirs.

As will become apparent through the examples studied in this chapter, the narrated moments of disruption which reveal the underlying patterns often involve the relationship between the individual and the collective. The collective can be understood on different levels (a character's family, group of friends, classmates), but is in most cases synonymous with the country's population as a whole, or with a small group of the population taken as representative. This brings forth a constant sense of tension between the individual and the collective, which plays out in terms of identity. As characters find their own sense of self unsettled by the linguistic plurality that not only surrounds them but is part of them and sometimes determines the way they speak or behave, their relationships to others also come into question. What does the group hold in common that contributes to its continued existence as one entity? We will see that throughout his works, the author makes several attempts at resolving these tensions. However, even if progress is made in understanding the way these relationships work, most tensions are never resolved. Readers eventually come to understand that this ontological limbo is the resolution that Wainaina offers.

This chapter aims to explore the reasons behind this constant state of disruption, and argues that these patterns serve to reveal, through literature, the precarious equilibrium of social relationships as perceived by Wainaina. But there is a paradox in this mechanism: disruption in action – meaning moments of disruption, or disruptive phenomena faced by the author’s characters or protagonists – serves to hide fragilities and instabilities; but patterns of disruption in literature serve to reveal them, highlighting where things get tangled.

## **3.2 “HE WAS SOMEBODY ELSE, SOMEWHERE ELSE, IN ANOTHER LANGUAGE”: LINGUISTIC PLURALITY AND ONTOLOGICAL MULTIPLICITY**

*We move from one language to another, from one identity to another, navigating different worlds, some of which never meet.” (How to 134)*

In the previous chapter, I have attempted to show how language takes various shapes within Wainaina’s texts. But if his own English is shapeshifting and can communicate meaning on various levels, it is also the case for the other languages (such as Swahili, Kalenjin, or Gikuyu) that appear throughout his texts. In Wainaina’s writing, relationships between people or characters are often defined in terms of what language(s) the protagonists hold in common and can use to communicate. The multiplicity of languages available to the people that populate his texts – and his life, as this concerns his nonfiction too – quickly emerges as a pattern of disruption within his prose. This multiplicity can be the source of unsettled or unstable identities, and can introduce a loss of equilibrium in interpersonal relationships.

### **3.2.1 Different selves in different languages**

*“So many times, you hear about somebody who was living another life in another language, and when he died, whole families came crawling out of the woodwork.” (One Day 125)*

If Wainaina’s characters and protagonists exist in English on the page, their daily life is different: the official languages of Kenya are Swahili and English, and sixty-one languages coexist on the territory (“Kenya”). This multiplicity of languages is not disruptive in itself as, unlike in most Western countries, speaking more than one language daily is the norm. However, what is disruptive is the impact that this plurality seems to have on the characters’ construction of their own identity. This disruption is fundamental and all-encompassing. Fundamental, first, because it influences the way a person holds themselves while speaking a certain language: “The man’s body language, his expressions, his character even, change from

language to language – he is a brash town guy, a Gikuyu matatu guy, in Gikuyu, and even in Kiswahili. When he speaks Kalenjin, his face is gentler, more humorous, ironic rather than sarcastic, conservative, shy eyes” (*One Day* 193). This implies a multiplicity of identities, wherein the man morphs into a different version of himself when speaking a different language. There seems to be a clear separation between the identities he sports, each one associated to a specific language: he appears to be a different person when speaking Gikuyu or Kalenjin. The transformation from the one to the other is first described as a change in body language: the man’s body communicates in a different way, the body adapting to the shift in character undergone by the speaker. This indicates a link between body, whether body language (which implies communication) or expressions (one’s emotions leaking onto the body, from the inside to the outside), and language. In other words, language influences the way the body behaves, suggesting there is something corporeal about language: the way the body exists in the world adjusts to the tongue spoken, as if a language was not only spoken but also experienced physically. The change in body language materialises the shift in personality. Language can thus be seen as a costume one can put on, worn on different occasions: the author-narrator is surrounded by the “sounds of people in the many costumes of Kenya” (25). In his interview with Emma Dawson-Varughese, Professor Chris Wanjala describes Sheng, a Nairobi vernacular mixing English and Swahili, as “a sign of a new society without boundaries”, explaining that “[p]eople who speak Sheng have a dress code to give them an identity. They enjoy similar speech patterns, demeanour and etiquettes, attitudes and literary taste” (Dawson-Varughese 147). This interpretation furthers the idea that language can be worn as a costume (“dress code”, “demeanour”, “attitudes”), a sort of visual aid for the process of becoming other when speaking a different language.

As suggested by Wanjala also, the language a person speaks influences the way the costume looks, or, in other words, the personality adopted by the speaker: there is an apparent cohesion to be found between speakers of the same language. This is reflected in Wainaina’s texts, as languages do seem to hold some common characteristics. Kalenjin, for instance, is associated with a child-like softness, as exemplified just above (“When he speaks Kalenjin, his face is gentler” *One Day* 193) or in Wainaina’s diary of his “Travels Through Kalenjinland” (*How to* 111): he hears people speak “in Kalenjin, which [he does] not understand, but which [he loves] to listen to, the soft t’s and baby-softness of it” (115), describing what he hears as “a soft mist of Kalenjin babble” (111). Gikuyu, on the other hand, is often depicted as a harsher, louder language: it “can be a harsh and blunt language. Often somebody speaking Kikuyu



seems to be sneering at you” (107). Gikuyu women do not speak, they “ululat[e]” (*One Day* 25) and “yode[l]” (25); and the language overall is “bawdy” (53, 193) “rustic” (193). As for Swahili, it is often “broken” (28, 228) or “rude” (53, 238), and can be “slangy” (49) and “ungrammatical” (41). This tends to suggest that each version of a person will reflect, to a certain extent, the language that this person is speaking. The personality displayed by a speaker in each of the languages they speak tends to match the rhythms and inflections of the narrator’s perception of each language. This would suggest that the ontological disruption that stems from speaking different languages is not simply the result of someone constructing several versions of themselves to match an identity that they want to experience or play with in another tongue, but is also strongly influenced by the language spoken. In other words, this suggests that there is a form of ontological determinism in the languages that one speaks. The author-narrator’s depiction of characters switching from one language to another is reminiscent of the concept of Cultural Frame Switching. Quoting from psychology professor Ramírez-Esparza (et al.)’s article, entitled “Do Bilinguals Have Two Personalities? A Special Case of Cultural Frame Switching”, Unk explains:

One of the most pertinent psychological paradigms used to explain the cognitive and behavioural changes that occur in a person when switching from one language to another is the Cultural Frame Switching that explains the often noticed phenomenon of the bilinguals manifesting double personalities, as an expression of their biculturality, which prompts them to change their attitudes and representations when facing stimuli belonging to a different culture. In other words, when they speak a different language that acts as a priming mechanism for a different culture, bilinguals manifest a different personality (Ramírez-Esparza 2006, 100). (Unk 180)

The existence of a plurality of identities, each linked to the languages spoken by characters, is therefore not (just) a creation of Wainaina’s imaginative mind. In her research, Ramírez-Esparza goes as far as to suggest that the different personalities of each individual do match “the personality displayed in each culture”<sup>15</sup> (Ramírez-Esparza, et al. 115). Wainaina’s rendering of cultural frame switching, however, may be nuanced: some critics have accused him of basing his portraits on stereotypical traits associated with each tribe (see Baraka<sup>16</sup>),

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<sup>15</sup> “We found that bilinguals were more extraverted, agreeable, and conscientious in English than in Spanish and these differences were consistent with the personality displayed in each culture.” (Ramírez-Esparza, et al. 115)

<sup>16</sup> More specifically: “Still, the essays. One of the unfortunate things about Binyavanga the writer is that he could be a bit narrow-minded about tribe. He was no Kapuściński of course, and is very far from him, but as he observes people from different communities, he was a bit too eager to reduce them to their tribal identities. Some of the

therefore suggesting an essentialising character behind his depictions. I would maintain that if it is true in some instance, it is not the case for the characters he builds in his short stories.

In some instances, the fundamental aspect of the ontological instability created by language(s) then takes another form, wherein one becomes the languages that one speaks: “Wambui *is* broken English, slangy Kiswahili, Gikuyu inflections” (*One Day* 49, emphasis added). What happens here is striking: it is not that Wambui’s personality or attitude changes when she switches languages; it is not that the language(s) she speaks merely influences her behaviour or inflections; it is that she fully becomes the language that she speaks. The person that she is disappears behind and is determined by the words that come out of her mouth. Her identity is obliterated by language, as she becomes an incarnate form of each of the respective languages she speaks. This phenomenon is what makes the disruption of one’s identity all-encompassing: not only does one become a language, fully surrendering to it, but this process is all the more visible when coupled with the physical changes that accompany this shift (as with the matatu driver discussed above). The author-narrator describes a friend’s children switching from one language to another in a similar way: “[The children] tumble out of the car and walk, now slouching and chatting loudly, their bodies different, *English-speaking bodies*” (*One Day* 118, emphasis added). In this passage, the language is embodied by the children. They no longer have English as a language, as a tool of expression and communication, they are English, in their external attitudes as in their most profound selves.

### **3.2.2 “Everybody has to translate themselves”: translation of the self as a necessary compromise**

This becoming other languages, or other in different languages, calls for a translation of oneself. Indeed, when moving from one environment to the next, protagonists find themselves needing to morph into someone else, or some other version of themselves, and this process is described by the narrator in terms of translation. In “Ships in High Transit” (*How to* 202), the narrator describes Matano’s attitude towards languages and accents: “Then there is the accent business. Speaking with the white people with so many people watching, he always feels self-conscious about the way he adjusts his syllables, whistles words through his nose and speaks in steady, modulated stills” (208). Matano, who works as a guide for WylDe AFreaKa tours in Mombasa, finds himself adapting his speech to the environment he is in. While on the

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characters were easily identified as The Maasai, The Luo, The Somali, The Meru, et al, and at certain moments he would reduce them to the myths they had been stereotyped into.” (Baraka, “The Many Faces”)

job, working with white tourists, Matano “adjusts his syllables” (208) to sound whiter (“his fake mzungu<sup>17</sup> accent” 208). This change could be seen as an attempt by the guide to create a sense of kinship with his clients, encouraging them to tip him well. Alternatively, Matano’s efforts could be guided by racial prejudice. One would hope that the tourists who visit Mombasa do not do so with a (neo)colonial attitude, looking to discover how the “noble savage[s]” (204) live, and yet the visitors need constant reassurance: ““Is it safe, do you think?”” (205), “The tourists’ eyes are transfixed: somewhere between horror and excitement” (206). As such, Matano’s accent change could be interpreted as his way to counter their prejudice, their efforts to “separate and break him apart – to move away the ordinary things that make him human” (213) and instead display how “ordinary” he is: he speaks with the same accent as they do, so surely, he is like them. And indeed, catering to the expectations of (white) tourists, Matano’s clients, is part of his job: the accent is a literal “business” (208), an indispensable part of what makes him an appreciated and successful guide, which in turn ensures “that dollars [find] their way into his pockets” (212). The financial consequence to this accent switch may lead one to think that it is a choice on the part of the protagonist, guided by his desire to make more money. However, the narrator does suggest a fatality to Matano’s translation of himself: “This is what he does most of the time, in public places, where everybody has to translate themselves into an agenda that is set far away, with rules that favour the fluent” (209). The use of the verbal form HAVE TO in this sentence, rather than the modal MUST, suggests an objective necessity coming from the outside. There is an inevitability to this process and Matano, like everyone else, has no choice but to comply: he cannot exist in only one version of himself.

The mention of an “agenda that is set far away, with rules that favour the fluent” (209) echoes Wainaina’s condition as a writer, and more specifically as a Kenyan writer, whose entry into the “world literary space”<sup>18</sup> (Casanova 127) has been made more difficult by his country’s colonisation by the British. The latter are the fluent ones in this case, in charge of creating the “rules” (209) – from imposing agricultural and economic practices (Moindi), religion (Kurgat and Jerop), and language (Ravishankar) on the people of Kenya in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to knowledge production and dissemination today (see Ndlovu-Gatsheni). Even if, as discussed at length earlier in this paper, Wainaina’s relationship to English as the language

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<sup>17</sup> “Mzungus: white people” (*How to* 348).

<sup>18</sup> “L’espace littéraire mondial” (Casanova 127), my translation.

with which to write is not as problematic as his predecessors', it is not a completely straightforward one either. In this sense then, for him as for other authors writing from formerly colonised countries, writing in English is a kind of compromise.

In the same way, characters and protagonists in Wainaina's texts are forced to exist between (at least) two languages. When relating a conversation he shared with Suzannah, the family landlord's sister-in-law, the author-narrator writes: "I am sensing this is her compromise – to live two lives fluently" (*How to* 92). The two lives she leads are dictated by the languages she speaks and their accompanying customs, and "her compromise" (92) is to not question the contradictions between the expectations linked to each of her languages. In this case, the term compromise is to be understood as "reach[ing] an agreement" ("Compromise, V., Sense I.1."), coming up with a somewhat satisfying solution to a problem. But the notion is twofold: to compromise also means "to expose (oneself, one's own or another's reputation, credit, or interests) to risk or danger, to imperil; to involve in a hazardous course, to commit (oneself)" ("Compromise, V., Sense II.8."). And indeed for some characters, the compromise that is self-translation also jeopardises their individual sense of self: "The barman is staring at me. I realize my accent has changed: it mirrors hers, down to the intonation. This unconscious betrayal irritates me, but I can't seem to find entry to my usual accent" (*How to* 185). Here, the character of Geoff Mwangi, a Gikuyu man, finds his accent mirroring that of his adoptive half-sister, Jemima, visiting him from her native England. His accent changing to match Jemima's is out of his control: just like Matano, he is forced to exist differently in another accent. It seems that this change is motivated by the environment these characters find themselves in; or more precisely by the people around them and their relationships.

### **3.2.3 Facing the collective: the influence of languages on relationships**

In Geoff Mwangi's case, it is the confrontation to the other's gaze that makes him become "[c]onscious of the ambiguous place [he is] in without [his] usual accent" (*How to* 186): "[t]he barman is staring" (185) at him, and Jemima, his interlocutor, "is in charge now. She can afford to display herself without fear" (186). Context then serves as an impetus for self-translation, and the speaker is forced to adapt his language, or in this case his accent, to the situation. Similarly, Matano's relationships with people vary depending on the accent he is using. If in the town, "his tour-guide uniform is power" (208) – and I would argue here that his accent, one of his many costumes, is part of his uniform – the same is not true in his home village of Bamburi. There, "[h]e is awkward and clumsy in his ways, his fluency falters" (209).

There is no place in which he can be his full self, unencumbered by the necessity of the compromise that is self-translation. In a way, his constant costume changes cause a sense of never-ending displacement: this is the key to the character's true self. In Wainaina's stories, each individual is defined by the multitude that they contain, and can never be stripped down to only one version of themselves. So for Matano, as for other characters, there is no one version of him that is more authentic than another; Matano is not more himself in his home village than he is in the city.

Indeed, partially fitting in and only being able to share part of one's identity is a recurrent trope in Wainaina's writing. During the author-narrator's conversation with Suzannah, in which he realises her "compromise" is "to live two lives fluently" (92), he also witnesses how different she is in each of her languages: "I switch to Kiswahili, and she pours herself into another person, talkative, aggressive. A person who must have a Tupac t-shirt stashed away somewhere" (91). Note, here again, how visible the transition is from one language to another: the use of the verb "pour" here suggests an urgency behind this transition, the necessity to physically become an other self. The mention of "a Tupac t-shirt stashed away somewhere" (91) confirms Wanjala's point on how languages are costumes that one puts on: as she switches from one language to another, Suzannah's many costumes reveal themselves. Because her personality also changes with the language of the conversation, she and the author-narrator are able to broach a variety of topics. Initiated in English, the exchange takes a different turn in Sheng: "I am stunned. How bold and animated she is, speaking Sheng, a very hip street language that mixes Kiswahili and English and other languages" (92). But as the conversation progresses and moves from general topics ("So where do you go to school?" 91) to more intimate questions ("Won't it be difficult to do this if you are not circumcised?" 92), it eventually comes to a standstill when Suzannah states that if she had refused circumcision, her life in Maasailand would have been "finished" (92). The author-narrator does not reply: "In Sheng, there is no way for me to bring it up that would be diplomatic; in Sheng she can only present this with a hard-edged bravado, because it is humiliating. I do not know of any way we can discuss this successfully in English" (92). He then states:

If there is a courtesy every Kenyan practices, it is that we don't question each other's contradictions; we all have them, and destroying someone's face is sacrilege. (...) we spend a lot of time pretending our contradictions do not exist. (...) There is nothing wrong with being what you are not in Kenya; just be it successfully. Almost all Kenyan jokes are about people who thought they had

mastered a new persona and ended up ridiculous. Suzannah knows her faces well. (92)

The physicality of an individual's plurality of identities is here again reinforced by the metaphor of Suzannah's "faces": her various selves are not merely costumes she wears; they are her "faces", body parts that are inherently part of her and that she cannot live without. Not all of them are visible at once, though: each face is appropriate in certain contexts only, and Suzannah clearly knows when to display them. The hiding mechanism that emerges here is something that children seem to be aware of from a young age. In the first chapters of his memoir, Wainaina writes: "If I visit you in your home and your mother starts to speak to you in your language while I am there, you will roll your eyes at me, and reply to her in English or in Kiswahili, because we have agreed that parents are ridiculous that way" (*One Day* 34). This narrative address to an unidentified "you" is an exception in the memoir, a disruption that emphasises that this phenomenon is a shared experience among Kenyan children. There is another instance of a narrative address to "you" in the essay "Who Invented Truth?" (*How to* 127): "My peers have friends they have known all their lives. But only in English. When somebody dies in one's family, your friends do not come. *They do not know, or want to know, you in your mother-tongue*; that vast part of you that cannot present itself in a Nairobi bar remains yours and your family's" (131-132, emphasis added). This passage emphasises the rigid separation between an individual's plurality of identities, the manifestation of which is determined by the situation (place, relationships) one is in at a given moment.

The paradox of the patterns of disruptions explored by Wainaina is evident here: the plurality of identities that accompany the plurality of languages are disruptive because they create a sense of ontological instability. This plurality tends to be hidden by characters, who pretend it does not exist – this is the "courtesy every Kenyan practices" (92) described by the author. However, this courtesy of not acknowledging "each other's contradictions" (92) is instantly acknowledged by the author-narrator. In other words, the shared compromise to not enquire about other individuals' identities (or: costumes, faces), which helps maintain balance in interpersonal relationships, is highlighted in the text's narrative passages, and this paradoxically contributes to revealing what protagonists endeavour to conceal.

### 3.3 DISRUPTIVE SILENCES: CONSTANT SOUND AS A GUARANTEE OF EQUILIBRIUM

The maintaining of every individual's "faces" (*How to* 92) is, as Wainaina highlights, a collective effort. By not "question[ing] each other's contradictions" (92), everyone protects the stability of the other's self. Similarly, a common drive seeks to maintain a form of interpersonal equilibrium vis-à-vis the linguistic plurality of the country. The abundance of sounds in Wainaina's texts becomes synonymous with the plurality of languages in Kenya, and the sudden stop of these sounds produces a disruptive effect, even more so than their abundance in the first place. In *One Day I Will Write About This Place* and *How to Write About Africa*, silence is rare but meaningful. The following paragraphs will examine how silence works in these books, and explain how the absence of sounds can become synonymous with a loss of equilibrium.

#### 3.3.1 Types of silence: auditive and semantic

If language, and in particular the sounds of languages, carry meaning, it would then be logical to assume that silence is devoid of any sense. But auditive silence, or the absence of sounds, is not always synonymous with semantic silence. Indeed, as Nancy (44) writes, silence may be a means of "resonance" rather than "deprivation"<sup>19</sup>: whether it allows the prevalence of body language as a means of communication, or simply creates space for the unsaid to be heard, the absence of sounds leaves room for other forms of meaning to emerge and be recognised. Here again, Wainaina's first published story provides an illuminating example. When entering the afterlife, moments after his death, the main character is gripped by the "[u]tter nothingness" (*How to* 6) that surrounds him: "Stasis. Silence so absolute, it screamed louder than anything he had ever experienced" (6). The alliteration in *s* is reminiscent on the one hand of a shushing sound, provoking this ubiquitous silence and breaking it simultaneously, and on the other of a snake-like hissing sound of reproach or warning. This, paired with the notion that this silence loudly "screamed", makes for a paradoxical link between silence and sound. If the silence is indeed "absolute", the loudness of the scream could therefore be understood in terms of meaning rather than in terms of volume. Comparing this silence to a scream rather than any other type of loud sound is significant: the silence could have echoed like a gong, creaked like an old house, roared like a lion. But instead it screamed; and a scream

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<sup>19</sup> "Le 'silence' en effet doit ici s'entendre non pas comme une privation mais comme une disposition de résonance" (Nancy 44).

is “usually expressive of pain, alarm, or other sudden emotion” (“Scream, N., Sense a.”). This definition highlights the emotional dimension of the sound, which in turn makes clear how the silence of the afterlife, perceived as a loud scream, can carry meaning. Auditive silence is therefore not synonymous with semantic silence: it is likened to a scream, and while a scream does not carry semantic meaning per se (it does not denote one specific thing, and is instead open to interpretation), it is not completely devoid of sense either.

Additionally, it is interesting to note that a physical dimension is attributed to silence, as the first word used to introduce this state of “nothingness” is “Stasis” (*How to* 6). The association of these words by the narrator suggests that the absence of movement accompanies the absence of sounds. This would, after all, seem logical: if nothing moves, no vibrations are produced, and therefore no sound can be heard. Though this is quickly challenged by the character (the passage is filled with antitheses and oxymorons: “Utter nothingness surrounded him”, “an excruciating numbness” 6), it could in turn suggest that the opposite may be true, too: the presence of sounds is synonymous with the presence of movement. This idea is exploited in “Discovering Home” (*How to* 68), when the author-narrator describes fresh produce sellers “chattering away constantly” (71) in Nairobi. A couple of paragraphs down, he writes about the perpetual sense of motion that permeates the city. He concludes: “Maybe motion is necessary even when it produces nothing” (71). I would argue that in this context, motion extends to that of the lips, of the mouth, which are continuously engaged – the “old women in kangas” (71) chat, as do “[a] man wearing a Yale University sweatshirt” (71) and his friend, who then begin “laughing as if they had no care in the world” (71). There is, throughout Wainaina’s prose, a constant state of movement that accompanies the very full soundscape of his stories. In fact, the absence of movement is rejected outright. For children, it is synonymous with death: “(...) we saw, spread out on the dust, two long bodies in ragged shorts and nothing else. (...) They were motionless, and my brother turned to me and said, ‘They are dead’” (114). The narrator in particular “did not want to see if their tongues were hanging out, because that was, in our childhood language, the utter confirmation of death” (114). While this preconception may stem from the caricatural representation of death in cartoons or comics, hence its influence on the children’s minds, the association between the motionless tongue and death reinforces links weaved by Wainaina throughout his body of work between sounds and life, between the necessity to speak and the ability to exist.

Motion of the body thus becomes necessary as a guarantee of life, “even if it produces nothing” (71). This is a case of semantic silence: no meaning is being produced by the sounds



exiting a person or character's mouth. However, the existence of this sound is nonetheless indispensable. I would argue that to understand this phenomenon, we need to rely on a distinction made earlier between meaning and intent, in which meaning was understood to be the semantic sense denoted by a word or series of words whereas intent was considered to be a pre-existing knowledge or understanding which does not create the need for an (articulated) explanation (see 2.4.1). Sounds can therefore exist in the world without carrying meaning, the mere fact of their production instead carrying intent. In other words, the constant movement of the mouth may at times produce no meaning, but it is not senseless: it communicates an intent. The following paragraphs will attempt to show that meaningless sounds, or semantically silent speech, are nothing more than a choreography of the lips, producing a shared, pre-linguistic form of understanding – intent – that renders possible a relative collective stability.

### **3.3.2 Illusions of a safe and secure collective**

Indeed, every group situation is filled with noises and sounds of all sorts. This applies to various contexts, as for instance when “[a] group of women rush in” (*One Day* 14) to the author-narrator's mother's salon: “They are dressed for a wedding. They are hysterical. (...) The bride is crying. ‘Gennlemen, we can rebuild him. We have the tek-nalagee.’ Mum issues instructions. Sharp voices explode: clunking and whooshing and foaming like hands shaking up cutlery in the sink” (14). This passage highlights the variety of sounds that fill the room: a group hubbub (“They are hysterical”), two sentences in direct speech, individual voices surfacing (“Mum”, “sharp voices”), hairstyling tools clanging like utensils. The salon in “Hell is in Bed with Mrs Peprah” (*How to* 165) is also rich in collective greetings and daily “domestic editorials”, performed over “music from the record shop next door” (166). Chatting and singing often go hand in hand, as is the case in “Ships in High Transit” (*How to* 202): “None of the women singing know a word of what they are singing. Not three hours ago, they were chattering away in Kiswahili, while cooking supper. After dark, they don beads and kangas and practise in the servant's courtyard, heaving and gurgling and making all kinds of pretend Maa sounds” (226). When describing a church service he had attended with his mother, the author-narrator recounts: “some are moaning, others whisper, music softer, honeyed panting, tongues lolling, and the pastor's hands are spread out and he is swaying, and the tambourine is soft, and soon we spill out, and people are talking to each other and shaking hands solemnly, and we go to swim and lick Cadbury's chocolate off our fingers” (117). In the same essay, Wainaina describes in an interaction he experienced during a matatu trip in the Rift Valley:

(...) the driver turned to the young man sitting next to the door in the back seat of the fifteen-seater Nissan and addressed him in Kalenjin, and he replied in the same language. I was so startled I turned back and his eyes caught mine and he laughed, then broke into Kalenjin for the benefit of the passengers, swinging his chin to point at me, laughing softly, his smile now open and friendly, teasing, rather than mocking. (*How to* 118)

This passage, like the ones quoted above, helps us grasp the extent of the ubiquity of sounds in every social interaction. Another point of interest in this exchange is each individual's attention to the others' reactions. Even when the narrator physically expresses his surprise ("I was startled and turned back"), there is no silence in this interaction. This is because of the man's quick reaction ("laughing", "teasing"). The immediate transformation of a potentially tense moment into a shared and light-hearted experience defused any tension that may have been brewing: earlier in the essay, Wainaina described existing tensions between Kalenjins and Gikuyus. The young man's quick thinking rejected the installation of silence and left no space for the pressure to rise, thus maintaining peace and calm.

The old ladies selling produce in Nairobi are no exception to the permanent production of sounds: "They hang out in groups, chattering away constantly, as if they want no quiet where the fragility of their community will reveal itself in this alien place" (71). Only this time, silence is mentioned. In this quote, the emphasis is placed on the "community", which is perceived as an indivisible entity. The individuals that form the group only exist through it; their presence confirmed by the incessant production of sounds. Without the chatter, the "alien" character of the place comes to the fore: the physical space in which these ladies find themselves is not what unites them. Note that the risk brought by silence is the revelation of "the fragility of their community" in a place that is already "alien", unknown. Constant noise is a way to look beyond the foreignness of the "place", of the arbitrary space that this community is sharing. The "fragility of their community" lies in the fact that these "old women in kangas" (71) do not have much in common: their co-existence turned "community" is imagined and exists first and foremost through language. Constant movement, including that of the lips, is what cements a secure collective existence:

If you ask me now, I'll tell you this is everything that matters. So this is why we move like this. We affirm a common purpose; any doubts about others' motives must fade if we are all pieces of one movement. We forget, don't we, that there is another time, apart from the hour and the minute? A human measurement, ticking away in our bodies, behind our façades. (*How to* 82)

In *Imagined Communities*, Anderson describes the “apprehension of time” (Anderson 22) as a key element in the conceptualisation of the “imagined community of the nation” (24), arguing that a shift from “the mediaeval conception of simultaneity-along-time” (24) to “an idea of ‘homogeneous, empty time,’ in which simultaneity is, as it were, transverse, cross-time, marked (...) by temporal coincidence, and measured by clock and calendar” (24). To further exemplify his argument that simultaneity is at the heart of the imagining of the “community of the nation” (24), he writes: “An American will never meet, or even know the names of more than a handful of his 240,000,000-odd fellow Americans. He has no idea of what they are up to at any one time. But he has *complete confidence in their steady, anonymous, simultaneous activity*” (26, emphasis added). I would argue that in Wainaina’s texts, constant sound and movement work as the confirmation of the nation’s “steady, anonymous, simultaneous activity” (26). They are the source of the “complete confidence” (26) in the existence of a nation that is unified and stable, on which every individual can rely.

Silence is then disruptive in that it breaks the illusion of a stable national unity. It reveals the mechanisms at work behind the imagined community that citizens try to sustain. The rare occasions in which silence manages to settle in Wainaina’s texts confirm this. One instance, which could be seen as an exception, takes place during the author-narrator’s Christmas family reunion in Uganda. The whole family gathers and enjoys each other’s company, basking in sounds of chatter, laughter, and music. But when Aunt Christine, who lives in New York and is the one who “urged us all years ago to gather for this occasion [his grandparents’ sixtieth wedding anniversary] at any cost” finally arrives, silence fills the room: “Nothing is said; the service motors on. Everybody stands up to sing. Somebody whispers to my Aunt Rosaria. She turns and gasps soundlessly. Others turn. We all sit down. Aunt Rosaria and Aunt Christine start to cry. Aunt Rosaria’s mouth opens and closes in disbelief. My mother joins them, and soon everybody is crying” (*How to* 102). It seems as though in this moment, the busy scene turns silent. Silence here is not revelatory of instability because there is no instability to be revealed: the family is perfectly balanced, and their links are clear. There is no doubt that they know why they are gathered, and therefore have no issue with an absence of sounds. Within the circle of family, silence is intimate, and it is safe.

However, silence is not always an indicator of safety. A few years earlier, during his childhood, the author-narrator and his siblings are at home, watching the Madaraka Day parade on television under the supervision of their nanny, Wambui. The parade is a military one, a demonstration of the president’s power: it is loud and full of movement, with choirs singing

and soldiers marching at a choreographed pace, “ankle bells rattling and clanking, enormous drums” (*One Day* 44). The author-narrator’s experience of the parade is starkly different from what he sees on the television screen: “[Wambui] turns down the volume, and we watch the parade in silence” (47). But this contrasting silence only lasts for a few moments: instead of listening to the beats imposed by the government, which she deems “boring” (47), Wambui “puts on the giant Sanyo radio behind the sofas. It stands on four legs, and it is covered in brown vinyl. Wambui’s favorite radio show is on. DJ Fred Obachi Machoka is the Blackest Man in Black Africa” (47-48). There are two contradicting movements at work in this passage: firstly, the sound is turned off on the nation’s celebration of its independence from British rule, an event that one would assume is celebrated by everyone in the country. Silencing government officials in this way is, to some extent, an act of transgression which amounts to stripping them of their costumes. It is as if, in silence, the ceremony was nothing more than an empty-shelled *mise-en-scène*, a parody of itself. Secondly, Wambui offers an alternative soundtrack to this celebration by turning on the radio, listening to songs curated by a former General Service Unit<sup>20</sup> officer (Robi) turned media personality. All of these elements introduce a discrepancy between the two simultaneous scenes: the presidential parade carries on in all its grandeur (“The president stands on the now silent TV screen, behind him a row of provincial commissioners in khaki and pith helmets; in front of him are rows and columns of human order” *One Day* 48), but the children and their nanny are not taking part in this national moment of communion as the television remains silent. Instead, they are sharing a moment of community among themselves, listening and dancing to the songs they hear on the radio. This raises the question of national cohesion: can it be imposed by the government? Or must it come from the people, who claim the right to choose what community they do or do not belong to? And with this specific passage in mind: what is the role of music in nation-building?

### **3.4 MUSIC AS A NATION-BUILDING TOOL**

#### **3.4.1 Music as a political tool to build a nation: top-down movement**

Music indeed seems to be associated to political power for Wainaina, who in his memoir rhetorically wonders: “I don’t like Moi – but if those people<sup>21</sup> take over the government, what

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<sup>20</sup> “a paramilitary force” (Wanyeki 94).

<sup>21</sup> “those people” are people like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, who “is a communist and says that to decolonize we have to write our literature in our languages” (*One Day* 88).

music will we listen to? Nyatiti?” (*One Day* 88). Here, Wainaina draws a link between the government and the music listened to by the population, suggesting that the former influences the latter. This assumption could stem from his childhood days, during which he learned to sing in the school choir. In a passage studied earlier (see 2.4.2), we saw how the school choir conductor emphasised the necessity for children to stay still while singing, to restrain from “shak[ing] [their] bodies too much” (*One Day* 34) and rather focus on not stepping “out of the lines and lose [their] place” (34). The school choir is a place for children to learn order and discipline – a preparation for them to join the ranks of the military parade on Madaraka Day? The national holiday is indeed presented in continuity with the children’s training, as “[s]choolchildren” and “teachers’ choirs” (44) accompany “the navy [and] the army” (44) in the crowd “marching to the stadium in Nakuru, to sing for the president” (44). In school, the children learn traditional music, even though they often “do not know the meaning of the traditional song [they] are singing” (35). The songs the children learn are chosen by their conductors, who, like young Wainaina’s choirmaster Mr Dondo, are rewarded by the government if their choices fit the presidential agenda. The author-narrator states that “President Moi likes primary school choirs and gives choirmasters big promotions” (32), and soon after informs the reader that “Mr Dondo has been promoted. He is now the deputy headmaster” (32). This is not an isolated occurrence: “The music teachers of several schools compose the praise songs, and the best ones get to become headmasters or even go to work at the Presidential Music Commission near State House in Nairobi” (33). Music is seen by presidents as a way to impose a political agenda on children, and use the incentive of promotions to encourage teachers to use music as a tool of nation-building for children.

The use of choir music in particular is interesting, as highlighted by Lucas: “Choral music in Kenya has a long history of being used by postcolonial regimes to document the official version of Kenya’s history” (Lucas 310). Documenting the official version of the country’s history implies negating other parts, proposing only a smoothed-out version of events, and erasing parts of it. Lucas continues: “The production and distribution of choral music were used in the aftermath of independence, as a medium to urge people to forget past injustices so that Kenya could move forward” (310). This highlights a top-down mechanism of using music as a way to impose a national narrative, namely one in which the rulers of Kenya negate the complicated and divided past of the nation, in hopes of building a united country. Choral music is thus a tool used by governments to impose an identity onto Kenyans, who are taught in the songs they learn at school that their country is a united one. In addition, a choir is

symbolically made up of many voices coming together to produce one sound, mimicking the ideal of a united national community that presidents strive for. This explains why other types of music are frowned upon:

The only problem is National Service radio, all those songs in so many languages that suggest some other pungent reality, songs complicated enough to suggest mess and history. This music does not want to conveniently fit the shape of thrusting forward and shaping yourself like the next opportunity; it throbs with undefined past sounds, and shapes and ideas, and it is inconvenient, if only because the Anglo-Kenyan garden does not look like that music sounds. (*One Day* 247-248)

The acknowledgment of a plurality of identities (“so many languages”) through music is equated to choosing to keep alive an uncomfortable past at the expense of building a shared future. The latter is spoken of in terms of “opportunit[ies]”, of unlimited possibilities to become somehow more by becoming other (“fit the shape”, “shaping yourself”). The former, on the other hand, “throbs” like a painful headache and stands “undefined” and “inconvenient”, a period of time that is perhaps easier to forget than to deal with. What is most striking about this passage is that the music of the future, that which “thrust[s] forward”, is above all a performance: one must alter themselves to fit into the mould of the “next opportunity”; and the music broadcast on National Service radio is unacceptable because it does not sound like “the Anglo-Kenyan garden<sup>22</sup>” looks. It is all a game of appearances, a way to perform the nation in a way that matches what the people in power want it to be.

There indeed seems to be a performative use of music on the part of the presidents, who hope to convince children that what they are taught is the truth: if children are raised hearing (quite literally) that Kenya is a united country, they will surely grow up to build a united Kenya. This performative use of music is directed both inwards and outwards. Internal displays of national unity through music take place on Madaraka Day, during the parade – a literal performance – celebrating the country’s independence. External displays may be aimed at visiting presidents from neighbouring countries: “Presidents are also in trouble from generals. Like Uganda, and Sudan to the north. Everybody is in trouble from communists. Like Mengistu Haile Mariam [President of Ethiopia, 1977-1991], whose hand I shook when he visited Baba’s factory with President Moi and our school choir sang for him” (*One Day* 29-30). In this

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<sup>22</sup> The “Anglo-Kenyan garden” is an allegory Wainaina uses in the last chapter of his memoir to refer to the Kenyan middle-classes and above, those who benefit from the country’s relationship with the West.

passage, the author-narrator suggests that Moi's decision to have a school choir perform for Haile Mariam is a way to hide that he is "in trouble", instead emphasising the united and peaceful character of his country.

This example also emphasises the direct link between children and political leaders, who see the former as the ideal audience on which to impose their vision of the national community. Krishan describes this process as a "top-down form of nationalism" (81). She writes: "the voracious nationalism of the government imposed upon him [Wainaina] operates in staccato, estranged from the pulsations of the nation" (81), before quoting a passage in which the young author-narrator introduces his country in brief sentences that sound like a memorised speech: "Kenyatta is the father of our nation. I wonder whether Kenya was named after Kenyatta, or Kenyatta was named after Kenya. Television people say Keenya. We say Ke-nya. Kenya is fifteen years old. It is even older than Jimmy [his brother]. Kenya is not Uganda" (*One Day* 14). Krishnan thus introduces the idea of two different rhythms, that of the government on the one hand and that of the nation on the other. The government's rhythm can be felt in passages of learnt discourse, like the one mentioned just above, or in the following lines: "Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o is Kenya's most famous writer, and was arrested by Moi in the early 1980s and imprisoned. He is in exile now, and he is trying to bring down the government. His books are banned in Kenya. He is a communist and says that to decolonize we have to write our literature in our languages" (88). In these examples, the sentences are short and to-the-point; information is stated as unquestionable fact. This is the staccato rhythm Krishnan (81) described, and it is the same rhythm that guides the military displays of the Madaraka Day parade: "Standing trumpets bracket the song with controlled rhythm beats, the loudest part of the song. Mprrahh. No drums. No traditional drums. This is national music, taken from folk songs, and brought into rows and columns" (51, emphasis added). The author-narrator goes as far as to suggest that Kenya is "held together by the military trumpets and cash crop exports, the future, only the future, laboring bodies, a railway, a mpresident" (51); that is, Kenya is held together by the strict and controlled rhythms dictated by its government.

### **3.4.2 Music as a tool of resistance: finding community in resistance, a bottom-up movement**

The rhythms imposed by government officials do not go unchallenged by the population: an example of this would be Wambui choosing to turn down the volume of the

government's Madaraka Day celebration and instead listen to music playing on the radio. Similarly, Lucas notes that

Wainaina interlaces descriptions of President Moi's dictatorship getting stronger and what is known in Kenya as the 'dark days' (2012, 84) with descriptions of 'music thumping from illegal radio cassette players' (85) and the increasing trend in breakdancing. These descriptions reveal music as a counterculture and form of resistance to the official powers. (Lucas 314-315)

The chapter Lucas is quoting from is identified by the author-narrator as taking place during the 1980s (*One Day* 81, 87), a turbulent period in Kenya marked by massacres, a severe drought, and a failed coup<sup>23</sup>. In this tense political context, she argues that characters and protagonists in Wainaina's texts use music as a tool of "resistance" (Lucas 315) against "the official powers" (315) or, more specifically, against the national narrative imposed by the latter. In other words, the government's attempts at speaking (or singing) into existence a unified and pacified Kenyan nation is disrupted by the population's uses of music. While discussing the links between music and memory, Lucas recalls a point made by Paul Gilroy in his book *The Black Atlantic*, who "point[ed] out the dangers of ethnic absolutism that is produced in many texts about Africa" (Lucas 309). The government's use of music in Wainaina's texts can be assimilated to a text produced about Africa, or in this case Kenya, by its leaders. The notion of ethnic absolutism, though, can be challenged in this specific context: even though a number of Kenyan presidents have had a propensity to favour the advancement and well-being of fellow citizens who belong to the same tribe<sup>24</sup>, this is not reflected in their use of music as a political tool, at least in the way Wainaina depicts it. The author has instead emphasised the presidents' tendency to smooth out the national narrative and favour the construction of a seemingly united and peaceful national community.

Interestingly, the music produced and listened to by characters and protagonists of Wainaina's texts connotes the refusal of a single, set identity. Indeed, Lucas argues that in the

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<sup>23</sup> The decade began with the "mass killings [of Kenyan Somalis] by security forces in November 1980" in Garissa, "after some upcountry officials were murdered" (Hornsby 369). "In February 1982, Kenya entered a period of crisis that began with a Cabinet reshuffle and ended with an attempted coup" (372) against Moi. The following year, a severe drought which lasted until 1984 caused food insecurity (Shisanya 137-138, Hornsby 433). The year 1984 was also marked by the Wagalla massacre, during which "military based in Wajir rounded up 5,000 Degodia men and proceeded to shoot, beat and torture them for several days on the Wajir airstrip, in punishment for anti-government activities and insecurity in the area. Meanwhile, other troops raped women and robbed properties. Up to 2,000 people died in the massacre" (Hornsby 413).

<sup>24</sup> This is discussed in *One Day I Will Write About This Place* on several occasions; see in particular Chapter 6 ("They all became Gikuyu after Independence, for the president was Gikuyu, and so the river of independence gold spoke Gikuyu and wore pith helmets on podiums" 49) and Chapter 29.



author's memoir, "[m]usic contains the potential to negotiate a range of identities simultaneously, but because music is made up of individual elements that change through space and time, it resists an essentialist representation" (309). Music, then, is the perfect way to reconcile the plurality of identities that make up Kenya, without amalgamating them into an undistinguishable mass. This works on two levels: on an individual scale, first, as the "range of identities" carried by music can refer to a person's various identities, or *faces* (see 3.2.3), as suggested by the author-narrator ("[Music] promises to carry all of you, even the parts of you that cannot work together" *One Day* 52; see 2.3.3). On a collective scale, benga<sup>25</sup> music seems to represent, for the author-narrator, the coming together of all of Kenya's languages: according to him, "[a]ny good benga guitarist can mimic the architecture and musical rhythms and verbal sounds of any Kenyan language" (253). It is perhaps this perceived proximity between benga music and the variety of languages that fill the young author-narrator's soundscape that leads him to identify benga as "the source of all kimay" (253). As explained earlier, kimay is a word created by the author-narrator to deal with the many languages that he hears but does not understand. This, which Krishnan refers to as "the larger dissonance of the Kenyan community" (Krishnan 80), is a source of anxiety and discomfort for him. This is where the links between benga and kimay become clearer: in the last chapter of *One Day I Will Write About This Place*, the author-narrator writes that he has bought a benga CD, accompanied by a documentary about the music genre. He states: "I am afraid to watch it and find I still hate benga music. Everybody now is saying it is the true music of Kenya" (*One Day* 251). The reason he has identified benga as "the source of all kimay" (253) is because of its ability to bind instruments and languages into a single, combined entity. Kimay, then, is the linguistic equivalent of benga music: both are an assortment of sounds that pieces together the fragments of a variety of languages for the former, and a variety of instruments for the latter.

His eventual fascination with benga music in the final pages of his memoir reveals that the anxiety kimay caused him was not linked to a fear of the plurality of languages that surround him, but rather a manifestation of his inability to grasp that "such a feat was possible" (253). The adult he has become now sees benga as the musical equivalent of kimay, a way to successfully represent the many identities, costumes and faces that make up the Kenyan national community. Kimay no longer symbolises a dissonant representation of linguistic,

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<sup>25</sup> "For many the word *benga* references traditional culture of the Luo people in the area surrounding Lake Victoria. *Benga* is also a term used loosely by many Kenyans to refer to a variety of popular music forms in addition to the particular style of music that emerged in the 1960s among the Luo." (Barz 108)

cultural, and social fragmentation. The many sounds and rhythms of benga music – and of kimay – thus constitute the “pulsations of the nation” described by Krishnan (81). And to her, this “trust in difference, contradiction, the unknown and the unknowable (...) becomes the heart of national commitment” (Krishnan 85). This is what the last paragraphs of the memoir tell us, too:

If kimay brought me uncertainty, it was because I simply lacked the imagination to think that such a feat was possible. For kimay was part of a project to make people like us certain of our place in the world, to make us unable to see the past and our place in it. To make us a sort of Anglo-Kenyan. Right at the beginning, in our first popular Independence music, before the flag was up, Kenyans had already found a coherent platform to carry our diversity and complexity in sound.

We fail to trust that we knew ourselves to be possible from the beginning.  
(*One Day* 253)

The final words of the memoir emphasise the author-narrator’s shift in perspective: if kimay was initially a reminder of the country’s apparent fragmentation, it eventually turned into the symbol of a composite national community and of the population’s ability to create “a Kenya that is coherent in its incoherence, in its lack of a single story” (Krishnan 85).

Popular music such as benga can thus be seen as a means to create or reinforce a sense of national community that differs from the one defined and imposed by politicians. Music is not only a tool of resistance, it is a tool which can create or reinforce links between people, in shared moments of merriness for instance – think of the author-narrator and his family singing songs together during their Christmas reunion in “Discovering Home” (*How to* 68), or of the students singing together during their campus trip to Durban (*One Day* 113). It can also bring people together by the mere fact of reflecting the plurality and variety of sounds and identities that make up the nation. Music is a space in which plurality and multiplicity are welcome, and where a variety of identities can coexist.

# Chapter 4. (Re-)Articulating Disruptions: Formulating A “Common Body”

## 4.1 A MATERIAL “COMMON BODY”

### 4.1.1 Cementing the nation

Music then seems to offer a successful platform for the rearticulation of the disruptions perceived by the author in the world that surrounds him. There, the collective ontology of the nation can play out, ensuring at once the representation of many individualities as well as the reflection of a shared sense of Kenyan-ness. But this is not sufficient for Wainaina: if music can hold the community together through sounds, can it ensure its sustained material existence? Just as dance emerges as an inevitable supplement to music, the embodiment of the national community seems to come as a necessity for the author. This chapter thus aims at examining Wainaina’s use of the material body – common, individual, and ultimately literary – as the place where the national community can be constructed and sustained. The author’s striving towards an embodied sense of identity aims at bridging the gap between an exclusively sensorial experience of national community (through the sounds of music) and a lived reality. As has been shown in the second chapter of this paper, embodiment and physical materiality are a key aspect of Wainaina’s system of meaning. His english is attentive to the material reality of sounds, letters and words, and to the way they act in the world. Language is understood by Wainaina as being inherently performative – what is said creates a physical, tangible reality – but in certain situations, performativity is taken to a new level with the introduction of an active, material body.

It is in this context that Wainaina developed the concept of the “common body”, a tool that serves to create and maintain some form of national unity. He writes: “If there is no law, no order, what keeps us together? Faith in the future? Not really. But we have built a common body of a sort. We have to be alert and extra considerate to each other. That thread is what we hang on to” (*One Day* 196). What is striking in this passage is the precarity of the “common body” as a solution to political instability. It is only a “thread”, and seems to have come into existence out of sheer necessity, in the absence of “law” and “order”. Additionally, the alertness alluded to by the author-narrator conveys a persistent sense of threat, or danger, in the face of which the only possible solution is a bottom-up approach to national community (“We have to

be (...) extra considerate *to each other*” 196, emphasis added). This constant state of awareness linked to the common body can be felt in different ways. Most often, the common body works as “small graces, (...) interpersonal relationships, (...) trusting body language” (195). Readers are given a glimpse of such “small graces” when laughter is used to pre-emptively keep a situation from escalating into tribal clashes (see *How to* 112):

We had just passed the police post at an industrial area when the driver turned to the young man (...) and addressed him in Kalenjin, and he replied in the same language. I was so startled I turned back, and his eyes caught mine and he laughed, then broke into Kalenjin for the benefit of the passengers, swinging his chin to point at me, laughing softly, his smile now open and friendly, teasing, rather than mocking. It is an excellent way to defuse our present political tensions—he is telling us all is fine. (*One Day* 193)

This passage is particularly interesting as it demonstrates the ubiquity of sounds in social situations (see 3.3.2) and reveals this to be a sign of the “consideration” that is extended by each individual to the rest of the group. The driver’s quick reaction to the author-narrator’s surprise at hearing the former speak Kalenjin is indeed an example of the care each person brings into their interactions. The driver’s laughter serves to instantly defuse the situation, not only for his and the author-narrator’s benefit, but for every passenger’s. Attentiveness to every perception is a sign of the common body.

Throughout the memoir, signs and traces of the common body quietly appear in the relationships between characters and protagonists. After the author-narrator’s return from South Africa to Kenya, though, the common body takes a more prominent place and is analysed and exemplified in greater detail. This moment of Wainaina’s life is described in what will hereafter be referred to as the matatu episode. This passage, which provides a definition of the common body as well as an example of its manifestation, appears twice in Wainaina’s texts: once in the twenty-seventh chapter of *One Day I Will Write About This Place* (pages 228-230 specifically) and once in the essay “Travels Through Kalenjinland” (*How to Write About Africa*, pages 118-121 specifically). The two renditions of this episode of the author-narrator’s life are almost identical but nonetheless contain some differences, whose analysis will prove fruitful.

#### **4.1.2 Introducing the common body**

Upon his return to Kenya after spending ten years in South Africa, the author-narrator embarked on a few trips around the country and ended up spending a considerable amount of

time in matatus<sup>26</sup>. On one such occasion, a woman got into the matatu headed to Kabartonjo (in the West of Kenya), sighing: “her neck swings, her shoulders move up the[n] droop quickly, as she says, Oh, that man! He really offended me, her slack shoulders say” (*How to* 119). Her indignation is shared by the passengers, who listen to her: “she trusts our common reaction enough to know we would not put up a wall of pride at offence, or begin an escalation of conflict” (119). This last line, which somewhat foreshadows the (imaginary) event that will unfold soon after, also highlights the term *common* as a key word in the following pages. First, it is the “reaction” that is shared; then “For a moment we become a common personality” (119). This suggests a gradual movement towards a shared identity. I have argued earlier that in Wainaina’s texts, every individual bears a different personality in each of their languages: perhaps the “common personality” is one of these, triggered not so much by language as by a specific social situation, one in which an individual is looking for community, and possibly support. The “common personality” is more than a reaction taking place at one point in time, it appears to be one of the many costumes of Wainaina’s protagonists and characters, which can be called on when needed. The narrator indeed talks about “[his] common person” (119): is this a version of himself that comes to the fore when his interlocutor, or someone in the room, is looking for communal comfort and safety? Or is his person “common” because it is inherently shared, because a part of him is somehow always controlled by the group, whose energy he has to surrender to? In this “common person”, who, then, is in charge? Is it the individual, who chooses to devote themselves to the group; or the group, which assumes the right to mobilise the individual’s resources to maintain its stability? Whichever it is, the “common person” is something that manifests in the form of an embodied reality: the sighing woman’s movements are, in a way, her “common person”, communicating to the rest of the passengers her feelings towards the situation she is in, and therefore the attitude they should adopt in return. The narrator writes: “it occurs to me, just now, that all the movements she presented are (...) a national capital: a small tool that can be used to elicit an act of grace, in any part of this country, where neither our anthem, nor our tax base, nor our language, nor our view of the world is in any way universal” (119). In a context where people appear to have very little in common, there is one common language, and that is body language.

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<sup>26</sup> Privately-owned minibuses. For a study of their significance in Kenya, and in Nairobi in particular, see Mutongi, Kenda. *Matatu: A History of Popular Transportation in Nairobi*. The University of Chicago Press, 2017.

This marked the end of the matatu lady's interaction with the author-narrator. But the latter decided to push the story further, leaning into his imagination:

Let us imagine that as Prisca [the woman who got on the matatu] begins to speak to the whole now-open vehicle, a Bavarian tourist in the car says something poisonous, like, 'Please shut up, madam. Can't you see I am reading?' The moment this happens, this man senses the small shifts and stiffness inside the vehicle, the sudden silence of fifteen chattering people. His confidence in his body evaporates. His fingers do not know what to do as they fidget, and his throat clears, gurgling defenses. He knows exactly what he has destroyed, but not at all what she said or did, or what that meant. (*One Day* 195)

Striking in this passage is the "sudden silence of fifteen chattering people", which comes as an immediate reaction to the man's remarks, and serves as an indicator that the cohesion of the group is in danger. The physicality of the scene, then, comes to the fore: the Bavarian's reaction is felt "in his body", which is also the vehicle through which the other passengers both communicate their, and feel his, anxiety. In the "Travels Through Kalenjinland" version of this passage (*How to* 111), the interlinkage of the bodies is somewhat more explicit. In that version, there is an extra paragraph between the narrator's description of his "common person" and the Bavarian's eruption, whose first sentences read: "They say, those scientists who know these things, that our smartest nerves are mirror neurons. They fire when we watch sports or watch somebody dancing" (119). And the description of the moment that precedes the Bavarian's comment is described by the narrator in terms of mirror neurons failing to fire: "(...) we are sitting together, in this vehicle, and somebody's mirror neurons fail to fire (maybe there is a Bavarian sitting with us)" (120). And these mirror neurons guide the bodies – the man's and the passengers' – in their reaction.

The author-narrator goes on to list the various ways the tourist could have reacted – *could have* because all of this is, after all, nothing more than a "fantasy" (*One Day* 195):

He could go quiet and look fiercely into his book, face red, and soon he will be lost inside it, and the open chatter will rise again and seal him off. Or he may choose to be brave and stretch out an arm, which we are all so suddenly acutely aware of—it stands outside our common experience. If this wiggling thing cannot read the common body, its actions are unpredictable. (195)

The "wiggling thing" 's inability to "read the common body" is here again a consequence of the mirror neurons' failure. The man's unawareness of his position in the group, or even of the existence of the group itself, causes his immediate exclusion from it. Not only is he no longer

one of the passengers (“this foreign object reaches forward” 195), he is also no longer human: his arm “becomes an immediate animal threat, an inhuman object” (195). The Bavarian is excluded from the (imagined) community of the matatu passengers. This imaginary episode becomes a pretext for the author-narrator to make a more general comment about the Kenyan national community. He writes:

It is so easy for people to turn on you. Here in Kenya, where only our interactions keep us together. Now that the state is failing, we are held together by small grace, by interpersonal relationships, by trusting body language. (...) We avert conflict every day with the smallest of things. If there is no law, no order, what keeps us together? Faith in the future? Not really. But we have built a common body language of a sort. We have to be alert and extra considerate to each other. That thread is what we hang on to. (*One Day* 195-196)

To the author-narrator, this “common body language of a sort”, made possible by functioning mirror neurons and a constant awareness of others, is what makes the Kenyan national community hold. Krishnan, in her study of “Affiliation, Disavowal, and National Commitment in Third Generation African Literature”, points to Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* to highlight the key role of language in community-building. She refers to his argument that “the most important thing about language is its capacity for generating imagined communities, building in effect *particular solidarities*” (Anderson 133, original emphasis). In the matatu episode, the way the bodies communicate (and commune) with each other is a kind of language, which generates an imagined community. The common body emerges as a sort of last resort, capable of holding the group – which seemingly nothing else keeps together – and therefore protecting the equilibrium of the national community.

#### **4.1.3 Performing the common body: the role of the conductor**

And indeed the common body is an effective tool to protect the equilibrium of the nation. This tool is mobilised by the matatu passengers in the face of the Bavarian’s eruption, which in itself is also the cause of a disruption within the common body: what is disturbed is also what serves to redress the situation. The matatu episode in its entirety, though it is imaginary (because it is imaginary?), is a performance. It reads as a choreography of bodies simultaneously improvising a dance together and performing a ritual. On this stage, the “conductor” (196) takes pride of place: aptly named, the matatu driver directs the crowd of passengers towards a calmer state. The use of the term “conductor” indeed connotes the necessity for a person to organise, shape even, the bodies around him: “his job is to speak all

our languages, move his body to arrange us, persuade us, collect from us” (*One Day* 196). The driver

takes charge and sends us all into a new series of patterns by saying, “Hallo mzungu,” and jerking about in a deliberately simple-patterned<sup>27</sup> way, a parody, close to our idea of a television Bavarian clumsiness, and we all burst out laughing at this joke with no punch line, constructed only out of movements that are incongruous (...), based entirely on patterns and conductors<sup>28</sup>. (*One Day* 196)

As conductor, the matatu driver takes the de-escalation of the rising tensions into his own hands. Aware of the need to regulate the reaction of the common body, he launches into a parody of Bavarians as they stereotypically appear on television. It is interesting to note that in *One Day I Will Write About This Place*, he is “moving to be irreverently German” (197), but in “Travels Through Kalenjinland”, the adverb used by the narrator is “righteously” (*How to* 121). Though essentially antonyms, the two words do fit with what is happening: the conductor, through his parody, aims at disrespecting (“irreverently” 197) the Bavarian in the same way that the latter has disrespected Prisca, the lady who was speaking. But his parody is also right, “in accordance with justice or goodness” (“Righteously, Adv., Sense 1.a.”): it seems to be the only way to defuse the situation, to keep things from escalating. The conductor is purposefully disrespecting the Bavarian man, because in this context, it is (paradoxically) the right thing to do. In spite of appearances, there is order among this chaos: the conductor’s movements are “incongruous” yet “constructed” (*One Day* 196), the passengers have nothing in common yet share a “common reaction” (194). With his “joke (...) constructed only out of movements” (196), the matatu driver guides the passengers away from conflict by rearranging their bodies, their patterns, and drawing attention to his own body, which takes the shape of a stereotypically Bavarian one. This is perhaps also a way to remind the passengers that the Bavarian’s “common body”, the interpersonal norms and rules he plays by in his home country, are not the same as theirs.

The figure of the conductor reappears in a short story by Wainaina – another work of fiction – entitled “An Affair to Disremember” (*How to* 176). In it, Jemima suggests that her lover Geoff (who is also her adopted half-brother) should “put on a play at the festival, you, a

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<sup>27</sup> Or “unpatterned” in “Travels Through Kalenjinland” (*How to* 121).

<sup>28</sup> Or “based entirely on patterns and mirror neurons, and capital places like Ogilgei, and capital people, and conductors” in “Travels Through Kalenjinland” (*How to* 121).



conductor, playing your symphony to an audience of headless goats” (189). The term conductor, director of sounds, also suggests that sounds need to be kept in check, as they can be the source of disruptions – this has been argued extensively in the second chapter of this paper. The absence of a director (conductor of bodies) may suggest that bodies need not be controlled, that they instinctively know what to do; that is, how to form an effective common body. And indeed, the conductor does not at any point take on the role of a director. He is not directing the passengers so much as channelling their energy: his joke is visual; no words need to be spoken. By removing all sounds from this interaction, the conductor retains control over them, and therefore allows the passengers’ bodies to act almost instinctively, abiding by the rules of the common body, no longer disturbed by the instability brought by sounds.

Another essential aspect of passages involving the common body is that they always appear in fiction: both the matatu conductor’s reaction and the Bavarian’s eruption are a product of the author-narrator’s imagination, and Jemima’s suggestion is made by a fictional character in a short story. This would suggest that the common body, in need of a conductor but never of a director, can only exist in fiction: the performance is performative; it is productive in terms of meaning, of intent, but cannot exist tangibly, materially. In reality, the common body as described by Wainaina never seems to materialise. When children sing together in the school choir, their singing remains disembodied as the conductor forbids them from moving (*One Day* 34-35). Once the author-narrator is free to move as a college student, dance remains “a solo thing” (140). And even if this solo thing does bind the students together and create the ability for some form of meaning to be communicated, it all remains rather theoretical and tentative.

## **4.2 PROTECTION VERSUS DEFENCE: FROM COMMON TO INDIVIDUAL BODY**

### **4.2.1 Dissolution of the common body in the face of reality**

The fictionality of the common body is revealed through a series of ‘cracks’, so to speak, in its existence. One of the first cracks takes place in an airport, when the author-narrator is travelling: an airhostess asks him “What tribe are you?” (*One Day* 208). Surprised by her question, he writes: “I was startled. Something was wrong with this pattern” (208). In a context where “neither our anthem nor our tax base nor our language nor our view of the world is in any way universal” (195), and in which “question[ning] each other’s contradictions” is

“sacrilege” (151), the hostess’s questioning of the author-narrator’s identity amounts to the deliberate creation of a hostile environment. Another interesting aspect of the author-narrator’s reaction is his mention of patterns. A recurring motif in Wainaina’s memoir, patterns are a way for the author to refer to a set of behaviours, attitudes, or more broadly of ways of being in the world. From an early age, the author-narrator perceives and analyses what he calls the “patterns of other people” (134, 152) that he detects around him. As early as in the first chapter, he observes that he is able to copy the way his siblings Ciru and Jimmy move about the world: “I know how to move with her patterns, and to move with Jimmy’s patterns” (4). As he grows up, the author-narrator writes about his struggles with his own patterns, which “are always tripping on each other in public. They are only safe when I am alone, or when I am daydreaming” (4). Soon after his return from South Africa, while he is settling back in Kenya, he writes: “What a wonderful thing, I think, if it was possible to spend my life inhabiting the shapes and sounds and patterns of other people” (134). Other people’s patterns serve as a sort of guide for him, a user manual showing him how to (re)act in any situation. It is worth noting how inherently tied to the body patterns are: the author-narrator describes “the patterns of the body” (53), in which he can “soak” (152) or can “tea[r] away [from], like Velcro” (8). With this in mind, it is difficult not to draw a link between patterns and the various identities, or personalities, donned by the characters and protagonists of Wainaina’s texts. The term *pattern* is also used in linguistics to refer to “a discernible order or arrangement in some branch of language, esp[ecially] phonology” (“Pattern, N., Sense II.11.d.”). When one speaks a language or another, one will use different patterns: each language has its own grammar, and its own patterns (be they syntactic or phonetic ones). Similarly, individuals will adopt different attitudes or behaviours: their ways of being adapt to the language they are speaking. This is not to suggest that individuals’ various personalities are the consequence of different linguistic patterns in the languages that they speak. Rather, I would argue that this makes the author’s choice of the term *patterns* all the more significant: just like linguistic patterns work as a common set of rules that speakers of the same language use to successfully understand each other, Wainaina’s embodied “patterns” serve as a grammar for social relationships.

As such, patterns also play a part in the sustainability of the common body: the conductor’s efforts at defusing the situation hinges on him “send[ing] us all into a new series of patterns” (196), acting out “a joke with no punch line (...) based entirely on patterns and conductors” (196). A disruption in group patterns – the hostess’s comment is an example of such a disruption (“Something was wrong with this pattern” 208), suggests an instability in

interpersonal relationships (the Bavarian tourist's comment was another disruption in patterns, which caused a major moment of instability on the matatu). The hostess's questioning of the narrator's tribal belonging amounts to verbal violence: it is as though she were willingly breaking the convention of the common body by choosing to adopt the wrong pattern. This is striking because up to this point, the role of the common body has been to provide a form of protection, both collective and individual. Collective because it guarantees the existence of a national (imagined) community; it is the proof that there is something to connect Kenyans together, despite their lack of common language, tribal belonging, or ideas about the world. It is the one common feature the author manages to find which, to him at least, gives a sense of coherence and cohesion to the nation. Individual protection also, because during the imaginary matatu episode involving a chatty Kenyan lady and an annoyed Bavarian man, the "common reaction" (119) of the passengers is an attempt at protecting the woman, at keeping her from being offended again, by someone who does not understand the rules. Similarly, I would argue that the common body is a tool of (individual) protection for the author: believing in the existence of the common body is reassuring to him. These imagined and fictional moments allow him to trust that there does exist an accessible, solve-all solution to the permanent instability that he perceives around him. The air hostess's questioning of Wainaina's tribal belonging constitutes a small rupture in the common body that foreshadows an escalation into physical violence. This escalation takes place in the last three chapters of Wainaina's memoir, when he writes about the lead up to the 2007 post-election violence.

Other cracks in the common body, also related to displays of tribal affiliation, begin to appear throughout these last chapters. They are materialised by the growing presence of meaningful winks: talking about the resurgence of tribalism in the early two thousands, a time of elections and constitutional referendum in Kenya, the author-narrator writes "Wink Wink. Nod nod. It is our season. Kibaki season" (211). Kibaki was the president at the time, and he, like Wainaina, was Gikuyu. A few years later, during the 2007 elections, Wainaina flies to Lamu island to be "as far away from the poisonous election as I can get and still be in Kenya" (237). Before boarding his flight back to mainland Kenya (the final results of the election not yet announced), an "airline steward passes me today's paper, and winks" (244). His tribe is not mentioned in the text, and the author-narrator did not share his with him. What is the case though is that the steward assumed that he and the author-narrator belonged to the same tribe, and winked at him in order to communicate a sense of camaraderie, or brotherhood. A few pages down, the author-narrator related another similar airport incident: "Last time, an

immigration official at the airport started to speak to me in Gikuyu the moment she saw my surname. Wink wink. No hiding now. We are in conspiracy with one another. Let's help each other, her eyes said" (250). These winks serve to emphasise a common tribal identity (often a Gikuyu one) over a shared Kenyan one, and as such can be considered symptoms of a growing instability in the common body. This is particularly evident in the penultimate chapter of Wainaina's memoir, which takes place in 2007, during the presidential elections. In it, the author describes the tense political climate linked to the upcoming presidential elections: "Next year promises drama. We do not know if our democracy is strong enough for the incumbent, President Kibaki—Gikuyu—to be peacefully removed from power by a strong candidate, Raila Odinga—Luo" (227). The concerns raised by the author-narrator turned out to be justified: "With the announcement of the PNU's [Party of National Unity, Kibaki's party] victory and the widespread belief that they had rigged the result, violence erupted across the country" (Hornsby 764).

It is interesting to note how in Wainaina's text, this election is shrouded in silence: "(...) he announces that President Kibaki is the winner. The whole room is quiet; the whole of Kenya is quiet" (*One Day* 244). As the constant chatter and music that usually fill the narrator's soundscape suddenly come to a stop, the common body menaces to collapse. There is nothing holding the group together anymore. However, this silence does not last and is quickly replaced by "the screams of people as they rushed down hills and valleys to kill, and all the mobile phones of Kenya were jammed up with text messages full of rumors and threats" (244-245). The immediate aftermath of the election was a time of great inter-ethnic violence: "These next few weeks, it does not matter that you have known her all your life and she was the first girl you loved in primary school. Your wife of another tribe. Your blade will cut through her stomach, tear through the Tupac T-shirt, and you will clean that blade and move to another room to look for her baby" (245). The choice of pronouns in this passage is quite significant: the use of *you* instead of a more generic plural (or: *one*) brings a more personal and specific dimension to the violence; it is not disembodied, and on the contrary is performed by a very real person. Somewhat conversely, the perpetrator stabs not his wife but "the Tupac T-shirt": this makes it seem as though the man were perforating a mere object rather than murdering his wife, a living person. And even though she is no longer considered as a human being, the baby they share is only hers ("her baby"), and no longer his. The pronouns used in this passage therefore reflect verbally the physical violence that took place in the aftermath of the 2007

election, and emphasise the absence of any sort of unity, both in body (individual bodies prevail as tools of violence) and in language (there is no *we*).

#### 4.2.2 Emergence of the individual body as a tool of defence

It then appears that the individual body is also used as a tool; but unlike the common body, its role is not to provide protection. In the way Wainaina describes it, the common body is a tool of protection because it serves as a safeguard against potential violent outbursts. It comes into action before any harm is actually done, and is always active, in the background. The individual body, however, seems to only come into play when a threat is perceived to be closer: then, the body becomes a tool of defence, ready to fight a designated enemy. In the example that closed the previous paragraph, the husband's body was acting to defend itself against its wife and child, whose belonging to another tribe was perceived as a threat in the wake of the results of the presidential election. That is not to say that the man murdered his wife because he thought she was going to murder him. Rather, his reaction in the face of tribal instability was guided by the need to ensure the survival of the members of his own tribe over that of others, which he felt meant murdering his wife. Her death did not amount to the elimination of an actual threat so much as it ensured the husband's (and his tribe's) superiority: as Wainaina wrote in a later piece, "to kill is to insist to matter" (Wainaina, "Since Everything").

In this context, there is no solidarity to be found in the common body: "Your body, your tongue must respond quickly to an environment that sometimes shifts every few minutes. You must constantly invent new strategies to thrive the next day. These strategies need to be drilled into the body, so they are used subtly and suddenly when they are required" (*One Day* 229). The semantic fields of physical violence and of combat are sprinkled throughout this passage, which functions as a lax analogy between soccer and politics, a comment on the workings of corrupt governments: the author-narrator talks about "strategies" (229) that are "drilled" (229) into a body that needs to "practice" (229) in order to survive. As with soccer, the author-narrator suggests that some players are more apt at understanding how to get ahead in the game – by relying solely on themselves. And to him, "[t]his intelligence is not harboured in the mind. Repeated practice transfers the ideas of the mind into the instinct of the body. No gun to the head can make this body perform" (229). What this passage tells us is that language, though it is not a sufficient tool for defence, remains an essential base in the construction of the body's ability to defend itself. It is the transfer of "the ideas of the mind into the instinct of the body"

(229) which ensures an effective defence; but to achieve this, the ideas must first brew within the mind. The notion that “[n]o gun to the head can make this body perform” (229) is an interesting one: it implies that performance is the opposite of self-preservation. This is a surprising turn of events, as the previous instances involving bodies in Wainaina’s texts have often been closely linked to performance. This contradiction, however, is understandable when the performance is that of the Madaraka Day military parade: replete with soldiers, this day is an excellent example of a situation in which guns could “make [the] body perform” (229). The key to understanding the newfound contradiction between performance and defence, then, is the *individual* factor. Indeed, the common body provides protection, but it is above all a performance – in its practical implementation, but primarily because it only exists in fiction. The individual body, on the other hand, is very much anchored in reality, where performance is insufficient. The body cannot protect itself in this context, it can only rely on defence.

And for the author-narrator, defence cannot be achieved through language. In order to defeat “the structure of the opposition” (228), or in other words “[t]o be a successful sovereign citizen of urban Togo (or Brazil, or Nigeria, or Kenya)” (229), one “needs to make his body and mind flexible” (228). Adaptability and shapeshifting are the keys to success, and this can be obtained through the use of the individual body: every individual “needs to have an eye that does not just understand the structure of the opposition but also can seduce, fake, deceive, con, charm” (228). But the eyes are not the only part of the body that should be able to demonstrate some kind of adaptability: “[y]our tongue, the flexibility of your limbs, your sexiness, the timbre of your voice; your understanding of the structure of power you face – these are your only tools” (229). It seems as though every aspect of the self must constantly remain “flexible”, adaptable – and effectively adapting – to a constantly evolving social and political context. Through it all, and despite the author-narrator’s suggestions, language continues to be a key element: it is implied in the “understanding of the structure of power you face” (229) and is explicit in the reference to “[y]our tongue” (229). This highlights once again the inseparability of language and the body: the body can only be an effective tool of defence if it remains tied to language. This becomes even more evident when the individual body starts to fail and is no longer able to ensure an effective defence.

#### **4.2.3 Eventual failure of the individual body**

The notion of a failing individual body is a much rarer occurrence throughout Wainaina’s texts, but it is an image that does appear. If the individual body eventually comes

to be prepared to face an attack originating from the outside, it is not so well-prepared when the attacker strikes from the inside. In *One Day I Will Write About This Place*, the author-narrator hints at this when he recalls his time living in upstate New York, where he had been teaching “creative writing and literature at Union College” (*One Day* 226) for a few months. Not long after moving into his new American abode, his health started to decline: “All my life, my body has been a soft and comfortable beanbag, nicely worn into the right shape for my mind to wiggle around, to lean back, sigh and dream. No longer. Something happened. This winter my body has been causing havoc” (226). Again, the connection between body and language: the body is construed as a space for the author’s “mind to wiggle around” (226), his ability to use language tied to his ability to move about the world. But in the United States, the diabetes that runs in his family catches up with him: “I have lost a lot of weight and I wake up several times a night to the sight of a million dripping icicles of confectionary outside my window. I am so hungry I am faint. (...) My throat went and got all imperialist on me. It wants to drink the whole Hudson River. It is sure it can drink it all” (226), “I am sure I have diabetes. I have all the symptoms” (231).

Some years later, Wainaina’s health has continued to decline, and he suffered “up to twelve small strokes” (Wainaina, “Since Everything”) in the span of a few days. This experience is related in the essay “Since Everything Was Suddening Into A Hurricane”, published by Wainaina in 2017. In it, he narrates the sudden deterioration of his health, followed by his return to Africa where he took a holiday in Ghana and visited his father in Kenya. The exact chronology of the piece is relatively hazy, his thoughts hindered by the newfound fragility of his body. In a widely experimental prose, the author attempts to depict the way the world feels to him after his strokes. The syntax of the text mimics the workings of his brain, at once describing with eloquent images the way events seem to unfold before the narrator’s eyes, and his simultaneous inability to fully grasp or process them. To represent the mental anguish that accompanies this state, Wainaina relies on an unravelling and unstable syntax – the title is a good example of this. In the text, adverbs become adjectives (“I am feeling so almost”), new verbs are formed (“Jimmy was hurricaning”, “I am taxi-cabbing”), sentences remain unfinished (“(...) still refusing to. be. agreeing. to. any. such.”). The rhythm seems to intensify upon the author’s return from his Ghanaian trip, when his father’s health drastically declines, and he is taken to hospital. At this point, syntax grows loose, alternating between child-like sentences (“Already Baba is dead in his head on Tuesday at midday”) and disordered sentences such as: “In a nanosecond I tell her [Clem, his father’s girlfriend] to be, screaming,

quiet, to turn around and go to emergency in War Memorial Hospital”). The oxymoron (“screaming, quiet”) is not really an oxymoron: the author-narrator is not giving Clem contradictory instructions, but instead is “screaming” at her to be “quiet” and “turn around”.

If this instability of language can be explained in part by the emotional dismay caused by the loss of his father, the author-narrator’s language nonetheless appears unsettled throughout the whole text. I would argue that this is a consequence of his own health deteriorating, of his body slowly slipping away from his control. Unable to hold itself together, then, the body inevitably becomes unable to sustain its capacity for language – it is no longer “the right shape for [Wainaina’s] mind to wiggle around” (*One Day* 226). In this sense, the unravelling of language in “Since Everything Was Suddenening Into A Hurricane” is intrinsically tied to the unravelling of the body. Along with the progressive failure of the author-narrator’s individual body, language becomes out of reach. But in spite of this, a text is produced: the author’s capacity for language and expression is not hindered to the point of silence. And this text, although it is a personal one, centred on the author’s strokes and his father’s death, still speaks to and about the wider Kenyan community. A full paragraph is dedicated to the portrayal of the Africa the author-narrator encounters upon his return to the continent:

Everywhere in Africa it is oil and copper and gas oozing everywhere (...). Apartments, apartments, and new apartment blocks. The city garbage dump doubling in size every year, imported wine and good cheese in every new mall over the city, an epidemic of breast cancer, our soldiers all in Somalia, and the forgotten people of forgotten places of Kenya attacking police and their neighbours, to kill is to insist to matter, or else. (“Since Everything”)

In contrast to most of his texts, this passage keeps the focus away from bodies altogether. Apart from the very end, the emphasis is on the material changes that have taken place on the continent. This text, one of his last publications, shifts away from depicting the body, whether common or individual, in its relation to the creation or preservation of a(n imagined) national community. However, the author remains consistent in his interlinking of the body and of language: as he gradually loses his ability to control his body, and that of others (he tries to intervene in the process of his father’s death, but remains helpless), his syntax and grammar come undone. In the midst of this chaos, however, the production of a text significant: it is as though the text itself were becoming the instrument of combat, the tool of defence and of protection. When the body goes, the text remains and is able to supplement both the common and the individual body. It acts as the common body in that it welcomes the creation of a safe



national space, in which all sounds, accents, and movements – patterns – can cohabit; and it serves as an individual body in that it is the way the author-narrator found to defend himself in the face of uncertainty: even when words began to escape him, he attempted to regain control through the creation of a written narrative. In the face of death, ultimate failure of the body, the writer’s “instinct” (*One Day* 229) is to write. The text, then, is effective: “words on the page, words in the reader’s imagination, sounds of words, sounds and smells in the reading room, and so on, and so on—all these bodies co-acting are what do the job” (Bennett 234).

### 4.3 LITERATURE AS THE COMMON BODY

#### 4.3.1 Performing the nation: the role of literature

If literature can serve as a common body, in the way that Wainaina outlined in the *matatu* episode, this implies that it is also tied to the nation and its construction. In an essay entitled “Who Invented Truth?” (*How to* 127), the author-narrator indeed declares that “[a] young nation is a bad novel” (129). Is it so because it is “contrived, trying to push an agenda that cannot persuade readers, trying to impose a tight structure that excludes all reality” (129). Just as “[f]iction is about creating worlds” (128), literature is a way for the powers in place to construct the nation they wish to govern, writing it into existence. Literature as a nation-building tool has arguably been used by several Kenyan politicians. Indeed, twenty-six years before his presidency, Jomo Kenyatta wrote *Facing Mount Kenya*, an anthropological study in which he related the origins of the Gikuyu people. About this book, Wainaina writes:

Jomo Kenyatta took the game further when he invented a certain Kikuyu. Before he wrote *Facing Mount Kenya* in England, those of us now known as Kikuyus could not agree on our origins, on how many clans there were. Some said we were descended from the same, some that Gikuyu and his wife Mumbi were the first Kikuyus, and that their nine daughters formed the nine clans. Some insisted the clans were thirteen, some said five. His version of Kikuyu-ness, a mix of missionary education and the experiences of his own village life, became the *idée fixe*. Now we look to his book to find out how to perform wedding ceremonies, to settle debates. (*How to* 128, original emphasis)

To Wainaina, the publication of Kenyatta’s book equated to the creation of a Kenyan mythology and contributed to the development of “raving” (128) nationalism among the Gikuyu tribe. Despite the former president’s book being published two decades before he was elected, Wainaina sees behind its existence an attempt at using literature as a nation-building

tool. He writes: “And how do you create a nation out of forty or so tribes? You spend time, as frenziedly as possible over forty years, building a weave of mythology strong enough to bond the pieces together” (129). One may infer that the forty years the author refers to are the first decades of Kenya as an independent country, from 1964 when Kenyatta became president to around 2004, during Kibaki’s term. Indeed, Kenyatta is not the only politician who has written about his tribe: “Odinga [Kenya’s first vice president] wrote *Not Yet Uhuru* (1967), a memoir that also included history about the Luo community” (Muchiri 256). The second Kenyan president, Daniel arap Moi, later wrote a book entitled *Kenya African Nationalism: Nyayo Philosophy and Principles*. In this book, Moi detailed his politics of Nyayosim, a “manufactured ideology” (Hornsby 399) which “gradually changed meaning from Moi’s following in Jomo Kenyatta’s footsteps<sup>29</sup>, to that of everyone following in Moi’s” (399). Though not about his tribe, Moi’s book did aim at creating a “mythology” (*How to* 129) about the greatness of Kenyan politics.

Wainaina’s perception of these narratives as “a weave of mythology” (129) may provide an explanation as to why his comments about the Kenyan nation – its construction, its existence, its shapes and patterns – appear almost exclusively in his non-fiction. This might be a way for the author to paint what he considers to be a non-fictional picture of Kenya, in opposition to the mythologies of politicians. In spite of his tiredness of “truth (...) [a]nd metanarratives and more truth and postcolonies. [of] An intellectual world in which each paper rewrites its own perceptual framework” (127), the author produced relatively little fiction throughout his literary career. Wainaina found himself in the position of a non-fiction writer, who aimed at expanding the literary discourse produced in Kenya about Kenya, so that it did not only originate from the words of politicians and presidents; his role as a writer being “to document, to simply document” (132). This does not however mean that Wainaina acts as a mouthpiece for the people of Kenya; he is not a representative for voiceless citizens. Firstly, and simply, because one individual cannot possibly represent or speak for the whole of a country; and secondly because of his belonging to a relatively well-off, middle-class family, his father the former “managing director of the Pyrethrum Board of Kenya” (Kopf 330-331). Nonetheless, his voice does contribute to the “myriad discourses” Krishnan talks about: “the nation emerges from the myriad discourses, voices, and codes that constitute it as multiply-

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<sup>29</sup> The term *nyayo* means *footsteps* in Swahili, and was used to refer to Moi as well as to his politics: upon his election, he promised to follow in Kenyatta’s footsteps.

articulated and contingent” (Krishnan 81), in opposition to the governmental discourse according to which “Kenya is something essential” (81). This clearly echoes the notion of literature being a tool used to counter the limitation of partial histories discussed in the first chapter of this paper, about *Kwani?*’s role in the wake of the 2007 post-electoral violence (see 1.1.3). As a piece of non-fiction, then, Wainaina’s memoir participates in the creation of a platform for a plurality of discourses to emerge and exist, all of which contribute to the construction of the Kenyan nation. And though anchored in the author’s real life, a memoir remains a piece of literature in which, as in fiction, “everybody is represented, nobody is real” (*How to* 127).

#### **4.3.2 How literature matters: representing plurality**

The question of the accuracy of the representation(s) of Africa and Africans in literature has long been – and to some extent continues to be – a subject of contention. Wainaina’s readers are well aware of his aversion to European authors’ depictions of the continent: in many of his texts, both fiction and non-fiction, he details his grievances against the likes of Blixen, Conrad, or Kapuściński. The source of his exasperation towards such writers is the essentialising quality of their prose; how in their books, Africans are all one and the same, iterations of a type rather than an assortment of singular individualities. As an author himself, Wainaina effectively turns things around by creating characters that never fit into clichéd representations. That is, at the exception of white (European or American) characters. First comes Gordon, the “‘Maverick American Missionary’, [and] hero to ‘The Forgotten Peoples of Africa’” (*How to* 149), his friend Linda, as well as “the CNN woman” and “the TV people” in “All Things Remaining Equal” (145): “There is Linda, another friend of Gordon, another type, who sits with the two CNN people in the car, and who always says things like, ‘He didn’t understand that I needed some Me-time’, ‘People are dying’, ‘You’d think they care’, or ‘It’s such an empowering book’” (151). Then, there is the well-meaning Mrs Green, in “An Affair to Disremember” (176), an Englishwoman who removed a young boy from his “soil and smoke and sweat” (179) -smelling family to offer him an education, because she saw great potential in him. But Geoff, now an adult, eventually understands her true intentions: “I was simply the lever on her pedestal: *Missionary Adopts Destitute Prodigy!*” (185, original emphasis). These two instances are examples of what has been dubbed ‘writing back’ to the West, Wainaina putting into practice what he advised in “How to Write About Africa” (*How to* 334) by challenging Eurocentric and limited visions of the African continent and its population.

Through his own practice, Wainaina aspires to move away from essentialising representations of the people around him, or of characters in his fiction. To do so, he draws his inspiration from artists such as Joga, a painter from Mathare Valley, a large informal settlement just outside Nairobi. While spending a few days there with a photographer friend of his, Wainaina is struck by “*the art*” (105, original emphasis), “most of the better paintings hav[ing] been done by the same person: Joga” (105). He describes what he sees in Joga’s creations:

He refuses to accept that there could possibly be an objective picture of somebody. Surely people are exactly how he chooses to see them? He therefore refuses to see the difference between his cartoon images, which distinctly reflect the character of the people he portrays, and photographs taken from the perspective of the photographer. It amazes me that he is able to discern this truth with such simplicity – it is one I grapple with often. Joga is able to draw attention to what people see in other people, even laughing at the silliness of the stereotypes he portrays, but so subtly that his clients never notice. (106)

What he admires in particular in Joga’s work is his rejection of totalities, of single representations. In a way, this is what Wainaina strives to achieve within his own texts: “I envy him” (106).

In the short story “According to Mwangi” (*How to* 192), which could be considered the fictional equivalent to the essay “Who Invented Truth?” (127) in that it serves as a platform for the author to formulate his thoughts about literature, Wainaina once again praises the value of plural representations. In this story, the two main characters, both creators of stories, are constructed as literary antagonists. In a rather black-and-white vision, the narrator describes the creation, reception, and impact of both artists on their local community as well as on the international literary stage. Mwangi, the story’s eponymous character, is a published author whose novel is “a beautiful thing, like stained glass, shining with prose so stark it seemed naked” (196). His “literary career” began when he started “listening to Mwananchi’s stories” (196), whose words he “burned with passion for” (196). After getting a “PhD in litera-chuwa somewhere really prestigious in the UK” (196), he published his novel and quickly gained worldwide recognition. Through this character, Wainaina deplores a form of hypocrisy behind the adulation of a single literary figure admired for his revolutionary use of English, while Mwananchi, a truly valuable storyteller who “matters” (201), “had left no memory of himself” (199). This is reflected in the title of the story, which indicates that the only voice that will ultimately be heard is Mwangi’s: the story is told “*according to*” (192, emphasis added) him,

as his literary success makes him the only viable representative of Kenyan (if not African) imaginaries and ways of life. Mwananchi, who is arguably the true subject of the short story – the first half of the text is dedicated to him – will quietly fall into oblivion, being remembered only locally by those whose lives he impacted.

According to the narrator, what made Mwananchi's "stories special is how they managed to capture the place the kids lived in" (192). Because if Mwananchi's success was not international, his legacy carried on locally: Maillu, a child who grew up listening to Mwananchi's stories, "became the Director of School Sports in his province. Travelling to sports events around the country, he started to hear this song all the schoolkids sang while cheering their team: 'Mama Milka'. It would always leave him in tears, and he remembered how Mwananchi came up with that song one day, and how people would add rhyming couplets to it" (199). What makes Mwananchi's stories matter is that he "was democratic – he didn't slag off one group of people to entertain the rest" (193). His creations were told "sometimes in Sheng, the version of Kiswahili that all the cool people spoke, or sometimes in that hip Nairobi English teachers laughed at" (192), and his song had "a bit of everything, a bit of every language the kids spoke, a bit of what films they watched, what comics they read, what new football slang had arrived from the suburb of Eastlands" (199). In doing so, he managed to create a space in which the children could see themselves, feel understood in a way they may not have felt from their parents (see *How to* 192). Ultimately, what Mwananchi managed was to create a space in which the children as a group could exist fully, reuniting the various aspects of their fragmented individual selves. The coming together of all of the children's individualities within this one song by Mwananchi made it possible for them to "trust that [they] knew [themselves] to be possible from the beginning" (*One Day* 253).

In "The Many Faces of Binyavanga Wainaina", Baraka wonders if it was "Binyavanga's dream to write a novel like [Mwangi's]" (Baraka, "The Many Faces"), if the author's contempt was real or if he might have been "[h]iding his ambitions behind mockery" (Baraka, "The Many Faces"). While there may be some truth behind that, I would argue that writing a "Mwangi-esque" (Baraka, "The Many Faces") novel was never Wainaina's ambition. At the heart of his craft stood the wish to first understand, and second render possible, the existence of plural identities. More specifically, I would say that Wainaina used literature to create a space in which the national community as he saw it as a child – fragmented, often divided, with no common denominator – could be transformed into a community defined by

its plurality and impossibility to boil down to essential traits. About the representation of national commitment in the author's memoir, Krishnan wrote:

In the narrative, it is the trust in difference, contradiction, the unknown, and the unknowable that becomes the heart of national commitment. A simultaneous sense of affiliation to the land, the people, and that which is lived plays off of that which is uncertain and only available to the imagination, creating a Kenya that is coherent in its incoherence, in its lack of a single story. (Krishnan 85)

Here, it is precisely the "lack of a single story", taken very literally, that is the source of the children's enjoyment of Mwananchi's song. Not only do they see themselves in it, they also see their peers. Contrary to what they might learn at school or from their parents, the plurality of identities that surrounds them does not endanger the *harambee*<sup>30</sup> ambitions of the nation: in spite of their apparent differences, they can "all pull together" (Musau) successfully – Mwananchi's song being their first experience of this.

#### **4.3.3 Shaping patterns: literature as a space for the exploration of the national community**

In Mwananchi's song, then, fragmentation (or plurality) makes sense because it is embraced. It has, so to speak, taken shape: the messiness of the multiplication of individualities in the world comes to create a single song, which all the children sing together. Literary creation – music is, after all, "a literary form" (*One Day* 252) – emerges as the favoured space in which the national community can be explored. For Wainaina, this exploration is linked to what he calls the "patterns of other people" (152), on which he relied as a child to direct his actions and behaviours. These ways of being, of existing, served as a map guiding him along the construction of his own sense of self, as he "soak[ed] in the safe patterns of other people, and live[d his] life borrowing from them" (152) to navigate the world around him. Most of the time, though, this appropriation was done through writing: "on the written page" (152), patterns "can be shaped" (152), or built "into a defensible shape" (194). This is what happens in the matatu episode: the patterns of the common body take shape on the written page, the imaginary moment allowing the author to formulate (and extrapolate) the behaviours and attitudes he has observed in his daily life. Writing, then, is a way to counter "the young Binyavanga's sense of permanent unsettlement and perpetual displacement" (Krishnan 79): the "narrator's lack of comprehension of the whys and hows of existence is only overcome through his closeness with

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<sup>30</sup> "Harambee" is the motto of Kenya, a Swahili word meaning "all pull together" (Musau).

his brother and sister” (80), that is, through his ability to “move with [their] patterns” (*One Day* 4). For the young author-narrator, the patterns of other people serve as “a code through which to navigate his outer experience” (Krishnan 80). This shaping of patterns is something he has done throughout his whole life, even before he began writing:

All this time, without writing one word, I have been reading novels, and watching people, and writing what I see in my head, finding shapes for reality by making them into a book. This is all I have done, forever, done it so much, so satisfyingly. I have never used a pen—I have done it for my own sensual comfort. If I am to grow up, I must do some such thing for others. (*One Day* 142-143)

As I have tried to demonstrate throughout this paper, Wainaina’s version of shaping patterns amounts to articulating, through the written medium, the patterns of disruption that he encounters in his daily life. The patterns he shapes on the written page are not merely his own: they are that of each individual protagonist and character that populate his stories, and more broadly the patterns of the Kenyan national community as a whole. Gradually, patterns become not so much the guidelines for one individual’s way of being, but rather an outline of the rules by which the community must live if it is to cohabit in peace and negotiate conflict. The creation of a literature of patterns then becomes informed by the realities of the author-narrator’s everyday life and of his interactions with people, rather than a fabricated narrative imposed by an authoritative authorial voice dictating behaviours and beliefs to its audience.

In his article on migration in *The Affect Theory Reader 2*, Kasmani references Samia Khatun’s *Australianama*, in which the latter “weaves together stories of various peoples colonised by the British Empire to chart a history of South Asian diaspora” (“Australianama | Hurst Publishers”). Though the context is quite different, her words resonate: “(...) what they do have in common is that they no longer have narratives to inhabit: no tales that can hold together their experiences of the world, carrying them smoothly from yesterday to today to tomorrow” (Khatun, qtd. in Kasmani 216). This directly echoes a sense of temporal rupture that is present throughout Wainaina’s texts, and which is primarily linked to the generational gap between his parents’ generation and his own, born shortly after the independence of Kenya. Among his parents’ generation, who grew up under colonial rule, some “inherited, nearly exactly, the British idea about who does what” (*One Day* 210-211). This generational gap is summed up by the divide between those who appreciate Mwananchi’s stories and those who do not, in “According to Mwangi”:

Their parents, still with one foot in their home villages, still with colonial hangovers, busy building the nation, had no real idea how their children's world worked. This was the first generation of kids in independent Kenya, the first generation to be born in a city. There were no books about them, films about them. They didn't even see themselves on television. (*How to* 192)

Writing then emerges, for Wainaina, as a way to give form to fragmented patterns and ways of being. His compulsion to write and “fin[d] shapes for reality by making them into a book” (143) felt to him like “an unbearable privilege” (195). Summarising his relationship to writing in an oxymoron feels very fitting for Wainaina, whose prose thrives in the exploration of various tensions and oppositions, balancing disruptions and re-articulations. Wainaina's language, his english, embraces the complexity of the composite aspect of his environment in a tribute to the potential and potency of the written word, an exploration rather than a resolution. What Wainaina weaves throughout his oeuvre is a series of “tales that can hold together” (Khatun, qtd. in Kasmani 216) various experiences of Kenya. But these stories, patterns of the world shaped on the written page, remain very much anchored in Wainaina's subjectivity. As such, they cannot offer a resolution, a definite rearticulation of the disruptions of the world. In “Who Invented Truth?” (*How to* 127), the author wondered if “the main problem with the educated classes of our continent [was] simply this: we want our continent resolved in our own lifetimes. And our continent is not interested” (132). In response, he suggested that writers should aim “to document, to simply document our times (...), document in the flawed way that seems true to us in our individual hearts” (132). Throughout his oeuvre, Wainaina endeavoured to set to the page his own vision of the individuals and collectives that surrounded him, always reinventing and reshaping his own english to better convey his perceptions: “I am always standing and watching people acting boldly to the call of words. I can only follow them” (*One Day* 6-7).



## Conclusion

Binyavanga Wainaina was a singular figure. His literature, strongly anchored in a Kenyan and African political landscape, yet ferociously subjective and intimate, has deservedly attained global acclaim. Despite his career being cut short by his untimely passing in 2019, the collection of his work edited by Achal Prabhala in 2022 has contributed to securing Wainaina's legacy. The author's relationship to literature was guided by a necessity to write, and even rewrite, his life. In the introduction to *How to Write About Africa*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie recalls a time when Wainaina felt he was an "unworthy practitioner" (*How to ix*) of literature, thinking: "I haven't found the language yet" (*ix*). The future tense in the title of his memoir says just as much, betraying the author's refusal to fully commit to articulating the present. This paper aimed at understanding and explaining some of the central questionings in Wainaina's body of work, namely his never-ending exploration of individual and collective ontologies.

A panorama of the main problematics linked to the Kenyan publishing industry has helped us to assess the consequences of British colonisation on literary production in Kenya. If missionaries were the ones who initially imported the presses and began printing during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the colonial involvement in the industry eventually hindered its indigenous and autonomous development, therefore creating a dependence on foreign(-owned) publishers. In addition to constraining authors to write in English, this pushed them to seek publication abroad. Following his early literary successes, Wainaina founded *Kwani?* and the Kwani Trust, a magazine and publishing house aimed at mitigating the obstacles linked to the structure of the Kenyan publishing industry. The *Kwani?* enterprise supported writers locally, but it also encouraged them to challenge literary boundaries, mostly through experiments with form. But Wainaina did not limit himself to being a disruptive figure in the literary world: he introduced disruption as a key component of his writing, making it both the essence of his language and a recurring pattern within his stories.

With a playful irreverence for the English language, Wainaina set out to craft his own system of meaning to describe his individual, situated experiences and perceptions. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin's, as well as Dawson-Varughese's studies have provided a theoretical framework in which to anchor Wainaina's language: the former's description of the English-to-english continuum and the latter's introduction of a geographical component to the way

english is spoken have highlighted the various processes at work behind the appropriation of the colonial language. Strongly tied to the sensory, Wainaina's english is made up of sounds and movements: language is understood as a dynamic entity, a process even, that moves between the tangible and the intangible by creating disruptions in the text. Wainaina's english is a system of meaning that is inherently disruptive because it is ubiquitous. It permeates every aspect of his texts, from the general form and genre of a story ("Food Slut", *Beyond the River Yei*) to unsettled and unsettling syntactic constructions and stylistic devices. The use of sounds and embodied forms of meaning as part of his english also contributes to cement disruption as a dynamic process in his work. This maintains language very much anchored in the tangible world, and keeps it from becoming an abstract entity.

Throughout Wainaina's body of work, the various traces of disruptions introduced by his english develop into patterns of disruption. The texts are structured by such patterns, both as a topic and as an active, operational principle: traces of disruption become moments in which equilibrium is challenged, and these moments come to reveal, through literature, the precarious equilibrium of social relationships as perceived by Wainaina. This is paradoxical, as disruption in action (that is, moments of disruption) aims at hiding the fragilities of the national community, while the patterns of disruption that emerge in Wainaina's texts are designed to reveal them. The uninterrupted presence of sounds in Wainaina's soundscape is the source of the "complete confidence" (Anderson 26) in the nation's unified and stable existence, which the irruption of silence periodically threatens. Music, which stands between constant sounds and controlled silences, comes to serve as a nation-building tool: in two conflicting motions, music is used by the government to impose its national ambitions, and it is seized by the population in an attempt to reclaim its right to self-determination.

But for Wainaina, music seems to offer an insufficient platform for the creation of a national community. The author attempts to compensate the lack of stability he has perceived all around him since his childhood by creating what he calls the common body, which he outlines as a tangible solution to the instability and fragility of the national community. But as time passed, and in the wake of the 2007 post-electoral violence, the common body, a creation of the author's imagination, swiftly evaporated and was replaced by the individual body, which became the only tool capable of defending the integrity of the self. However, it quickly became apparent that the individual body was not infallible, either: when the body became unable to carry the self, the text took over and offered the ideal space for the rearticulation of the multiplicity and plurality of the nation. In this sense, literature is for Wainaina a space in which

to explore the complexities of ontology, both on the level of the national imagined community, and in terms of his own situated self. Wainaina's body of work provides a space which guarantees individuals' and communities' right to "inhabit the story" (*One Day* 252), "in defiance of chaos" (111).

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