

Kunapipi

Volume 34 | Issue 1

Article 8

2012

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Recommended Citation

Musila, Grace A., Writing history's silences: Interview with Parselelo Kantai, *Kunapipi*, 34(1), 2012.
Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol34/iss1/8>

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Writing history's silences: Interview with Parselelo Kantai

Abstract

Parselelo Kantai is a Kenyan investigative journalist, academic and creative writer. A founding member of the East Africa literary magazine, *Kwani?*, Kantai has published several provocative short stories and novellas, among them 'The Reddykulass Generation', 'The Cock Thief', 'The Story of Comrade Lemma and the Jerusalem Boys' Band', and 'You Wreck Her'. The last two were nominated for the prestigious Caine Prize for African writing in 2004 and 2009 respectively. Kantai is currently working on a novel based on the life story of iconic Kenyan trade unionist and politician Tom Joseph Mboya, who was assassinated in 1969 in Nairobi.

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Writing History's Silences: Interview with Parselelo Kantai

Parselelo Kantai is a Kenyan investigative journalist, academic and creative writer. A founding member of the East Africa literary magazine, *Kwani?*, Kantai has published several provocative short stories and novellas, among them 'The Reddykulass Generation', 'The Cock Thief', 'The Story of Comrade Lemma and the Jerusalem Boys' Band', and 'You Wreck Her'. The last two were nominated for the prestigious Caine Prize for African writing in 2004 and 2009 respectively. Kantai is currently working on a novel based on the life story of iconic Kenyan trade unionist and politician Tom Joseph Mboya, who was assassinated in 1969 in Nairobi.



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GAM: *How do you locate your writing in the current Kenyan literary landscape?*

PK: I am a working journalist. But fiction was always the destination since I started as a journalist, about 16 years ago. At the time, there weren't very many outlets in Kenya through which one could pursue fiction, until the advent of *Kwani?* literary magazine. In that sense then, it wouldn't be very far off the mark to say Kenyan fiction was actually re-imported from the Kenyan Diaspora. Many of those who weighed in during those early days of *Kwani?* were people who had just returned to Kenya. And they were returning around 2002; a time of a lot of hope and tremendous optimism for the future. It appeared that 40 years of the ruling party, Kenya African National Union (KANU), and 24 years of President Moi's rule was ending. This emergent writing (primarily published in *Kwani?* magazine) promised a chronicling of the new era as well as an interrogation of 25 years of silence.

GAM: *I'm glad you raise the question of memory and history: most of your stories share a certain concern with elements of Kenyan history. What is your interest in Kenyan history?*

PK: I am interested in Kenyan history and the recovery of a collective memory that seems to have disappeared or is not being discussed. After years of silence around contemporary Kenyan issues, some questions were only being addressed through the limited space of print and other media. Media platforms were not just limited, they were also very transient — you read a newspaper and that is it. For me then, when I started writing, fiction suggested some kind of permanence. And we now had an outlet through journals such as *Kwani?* to begin a ‘new-old’ conversation.

GAM: *What is your assessment of Kwani?’s contribution to the Kenyan literary revival so far?*

PK: As I said, a decade ago there was a lot of optimism and a great sense of possibility. I’m not completely convinced that that possibility has been achieved. I know I’m still very much in the initial stages of a journey that hopefully will be completed. But in terms of this so-called new Kenyan fiction in itself, I think it is yet to fulfil its promise. We still haven’t produced some of the very early things that we had promised. At its inception, the *Kwani?* literary wave seemed to indicate that we were working towards ‘The Great Kenyan Novel’ of our generation. All our conversations and interactions were threatening this. It still has not happened; and one can talk for hours about why it hasn’t happened.

GAM: *What are some of your speculations on why it has not happened?*

PK: Well ... [laughs] ... my views on the subject are rather outlandish.

GAM: [laughs] *Let us hear them.*

PK: For one, I think that *who* was producing the fiction was very critical in addressing *what* was going to be done by that fiction. Unlike an earlier generation of writers who were very closely aligned to the decolonisation, independence and nationalist cause, this generation of writers was in large part middle-class or, if you may, upper-middle class: a comfortable, educated and quite ‘Westernised’ group of people. And much of their fiction tended to do one of two things: either a kind of representative fiction — which chronicled a Kenyan ‘everyman’ experience — or what I would call a ‘me’ fiction, which in many ways was very self-indulgent — largely exploring the contours of the private world without necessarily approaching or confronting the politics that inscribed, informed and circumscribed those (private) worlds. The outcome of this was — at least in my opinion — a fiction that still has not confronted the hard realities of our generation.

GAM: *What are some of these realities that remain unexplored in your view?*

PK: Well, let's take a hypothetical example: you are an emerging Kenyan writer from some place in Southern Kiambu, but you have grown up in Nairobi, you have gone to all the good national schools around, gone to university abroad, been exposed to the possibility of fiction there; and you return to Kenya, to try and throw in your two bits into the collective pot. Now, there are some very uncomfortable truths that you may need to face up to if you are to really get some thorough-going material out there. A lot of it might even mean a confrontation with your family and its past. The landmark political events of independent Kenya may have involved your father, an uncle or some relative; or even people in the same family on either side of the political divide. So, what I sensed in a lot of the writing (and some people may even accuse me of the same thing), was a very subtle retreat from those confrontations. The outcome of which is a fiction that reads very well, but I wonder how much it begins to do some of the alarming, threatening and dissident work of some of the writers of an earlier generation. We have very good writing, but have we yet produced good fiction? I am not sure.

GAM: *What you are saying brings to mind your critique of the Kenyan middle-class and broadly the Kenyan nation project — or what you term 'Project Kenya' — in your story, 'The Reddykulass Generation'.*

PK: Very much so. I felt keenly about this during the Mwai Kibaki presidency in Kenya [2002–2007]. I began to see a replay of my own parents' and relatives' accounts of being young, ambitious and optimistic in Kenya in the late 1960s and early 1970s; and how those dreams began to unravel. I experienced a replay of these things in my own life, and saw them played out in my friends' lives and that whole Reddykulass Generation¹ as it were. There was a sense in which these forms of Project Kenya were themselves reproducing the pathologies of their parents' generation

GAM: *I don't know if this is something you are willing to go into, but I found it striking that 'The Reddykulass Generation' is both a critique of the Kenyan nation project and a personal obituary of your friend, Bee. Did it start as a comment on the nation project, or was it primarily an attempt to understand your friend's tragic suicide?*

PK: It was both. I was trying to say something about what was happening during the Kibaki era. One of the hardest things that happened for me was my friend's suicide. In the early years of the Kibaki regime [2003–2004], there was widespread triumphalism. The notion that things were booming was advertised everywhere, from the media to ordinary conversations. And yet when I looked around me — my own personal space, my relations, my friends and so on — I didn't see any sign of it. I

remember wondering: where is all this happening and who is it happening to, and why? And so when my friend starts going through what she goes through², it very much mirrored what was happening to many private and public institutions. All the key beneficiaries were closely affiliated with the president. And you have these people who held on to this idea of being Kenyan. These were people who went to national schools, and who had gone to the University of Nairobi, and other local universities. And they were now standing there, having decided not to cave in to all that was happening around them. They found themselves in this rapidly shrinking island; everybody else was caving in. This was the tragedy of my friend. I didn't try to embellish her in 'The Reddykulass Generation'. She was almost 'stupid' under the circumstances. And yet, it is only when you step back that you begin to understand the logic of what was going on. A lot of people have criticised me and said, 'how dare you try and explain someone's suicide as a kind of symbol of the failure of the country'; and I say, well, that is just my opinion and I'll try and convince you that the two sit very much together. You may not have known her, but to me, she embodied what we had been told about what it means to be Kenyan. And yet she found herself on the outside of things.

GAM: *For me, one of the things the story enables is a contextualising of what was going on in personal lives, by drawing connections to the broader socio-political landscape. At the same time, 'The Reddykulass Generation' laments the failure of the post-independence middle-class to imagine and produce new realities. What is your view of the contemporary Kenyan middle class, five years on [after the publication of 'The Reddykulass Generation']?*

PK: I think the critical moment of our generation and of our time will one way or another be 30th December 2007 and its aftermath.³ And whatever reading of that one has, pretty much informs how you view both the future and the past and where you place yourself in it. So, our failure to actually say something substantial about Kenya and the 2007 post-election violence, was very instructive and very much a part of this ongoing failure of myself and my writing colleagues. Hopefully this is a temporary situation. Hopefully there are writers, known and unknown, who are struggling and determined to produce something of that kind, because I think it is very important. But we can see how once again history replays itself. Just like 1969 and the assassination of Tom Mboya⁴ — which for me is a pivotal event in contemporary Kenyan history — there was an almost total silence after the event. Similarly, in 2007, you are surrounded by a literary silence.

GAM: *But what about the short-stories and novellas by Kenyan writers, most notably the Kwanini? Series about the 2007 post-election violence?*

- PK:** Granted, there were all kinds of attempts not so much to explain the situation, but to deconstruct it especially for Westerners so that we would not be confused with Rwanda, so that we would not be stereotyped under categories of atavism and savagery. This was through the contribution of the writing community especially the urban and the diaspora ones. But beyond that, has there been any serious interrogation of what had happened? How are we talking about it as writers? Are we really talking about it in a challenging way? No. We have shied away from it. We have retreated if not into those ethnic Bantustans⁵; then into other kinds of closets and shut doors. We are preoccupied in an enterprise at the moment, of on-going failure. And that really is the challenge for us as Kenyan writers right now.
- GAM:** *Do you see that failure to be linked to the fact that, as you noted earlier, our contemporary writers are part of the same middle class which is implicated in the drama? Or is it because of what you describe as historical the fragility of the Kenyan nation — or Project Kenya — as you describe it in ‘The Reddykulass Generation’?*
- PK:** I think it is both. First and foremost, the Kenyan middle class as it exists today is very little more than two generations old. The other side of my family comes from Uganda, and on that side you find that they have a longer memory of being modern; of being educated; of driving cars; of going to school; of going abroad etc. Secondly, Project Kenya unravelled in many ways pre-2007. Some people may say there is an attempt to reconstruct it and so on at the moment. I don't want to talk about it. But the literary heritage that people of my generation were bequeathed was in itself in various stages of unravelling. How has the writer addressed these issues? I think in that sense, much of the kind of diaspora writing you now see is very much a reflection of these changing realities and at the same time it signals a retreat from the collective project. A retreat to the personal, one could argue, it is in itself also a retreat from one narrative of Project Kenya or even a retreat from the idea that there is a collective project that we are all invested in.
- GAM:** *What you are saying about this retreat to the personal is interesting, especially because while at the same time we are under the impression that we are getting somewhere. It is a little schizophrenic in that way. I'd like to move on to your story: ‘The Story of Comrade Lemma and the Black Jerusalem Boys’ Band’. It seems to have strong allusions to the General Mathenge fiasco.⁶ Is that the inspiration to the story?*
- PK:** I suppose in a very broad sense. The story was going into the territory of deliberate collective amnesia which then produces all these farcical

dramas. Kenya has always been a country with a national credo of ‘forward ever, backward never’. There is a very marked embarrassment and discomfort with the past primarily for political reasons. The Kenyatta government wanted the past shut out because it would create too many contradictions with the choices his regime made; and the Moi government continued to put a lid on that past. So when it is being reopened all those years later, whatever lies in that dark closet or in that dark well, is in many ways unrecognisable. I wrote that story in 2003 following the General Mathenge fiasco. The General Mathenge fiasco struck me as being so emblematic of the erosion of the past. I think that, more than anything else, the sudden ‘return’ of General Mathenge — a Mau Mau fighter who disappeared in the 1950s — showed the true nature of the amnesia, because when this man, Lemma Ayanu, is taken to meet his supposedly long-lost wife, she confirms that he is General Mathenge; and the way she confirmed this was by saying ‘I know him because of his teeth’. It turned out that it wasn’t him at all. I was trying to look at how this happened and why through that story.

GAM: *In a way ‘The Story of Comrade Lemma and the Jerusalem Boys’ Band’ zooms in on what can be termed ‘perception management’ which is a familiar element in Kenyan public life. I wonder whether you see this as a Kenyan peculiarity: do you see similar patterns across the region or even on the continent; or is it a uniquely Kenyan approach?*

PK: Quite the contrary. Go across the border to Uganda. Uganda is a country with the youngest population in the world. Uganda is a country that has had a very traumatic history. In many ways with 1986 and the coming of President Yoweri Museveni to power, you expect Uganda to be a country that denies its past for all sorts of political reasons. Instead, Uganda is a country that is locked inside its past and has a lot of difficulty trying to resolve some very ancient arguments around issues of identity, belonging, ethnicity, federation and the restitution of the kingdom among other concerns. To step into Uganda is to step into an ongoing conversation about history. On the other hand, given its settler colonial history one would have assumed Kenya would be a country that would be at pains to recover much of the past that had been shut out and rubbed out from its people. But this is barely the case.

GAM: *Given your assessment of the Kenyan writers’ struggles with their uncomfortable truths as you described them earlier, who could possibly lead this process of engaging with our troubled histories?*

PK: The irony is that, more than ever, today the writers have the opportunity to do things previous writers could not imagine. We now have other outlets

and collaborations that have been made possible by technology — film, TV, etc. And yet at the same time, you have the writer grappling with questions of audience and market. Unlike the high noon of the African Writers Series, where a writer like, let us say Dambudzo Marechera, was assured of an audience that spanned the continent; today the writer is preoccupied with seeking Western markets in order for his craft to be viable. Now, that comes with its own sets of problems and dilemmas. The Western market wants truths and realities translated. So, you as a writer are almost reduced to some kind of a literary tour guide who must take his little English lady of a certain age into his world and start by saying: ‘first and foremost please understand that we are human, that when ITV shows you an infant with flies in its face, when it shows you dead and starving people and bombed out villages, you must understand that that is only part of the story; that normal life is also happening here’. So, that ends up becoming a project in itself. Even before you get to bare-knuckle issues, you already are so invested in someone else’s project, that it takes a whole other enterprise to begin to talk a different language.

GAM: *Ok, so, moving on to your story, ‘The Cock Thief’. What inspired it?*

PK: ‘The Cock Thief’ is actually inspired by a true story. During President Moi’s last years, when he was a lame duck president, people started stealing from him. At one point someone stole this jogoo⁷ from his home in Kabarak. There was also another story about lots of election money — hundreds of millions of shillings, KANU⁸ campaign money that was being distributed from State house — was stolen by a driver. So I was interested in chronicling these issues. One of the things I hope I can accomplish with my fiction is writing these stories that run in and out of real political events. How one does that without naming names and getting libel charges I don’t know; but I was fascinated about that and this story was an attempt at that.

GAM: *I’m interested in rumour, because in both the Moi and Kibaki regimes, the Kenyan grapevine has always been a rich source of all sorts of truth. So I was struck by how this story weaves in lots of grapevine stories of the Moi regime, and I wondered what you were doing with that.*

PK: As you know, dictators make fascinating subjects; the whole subject of personal rule makes for fascinating stories. One of my favourite books is Garcia Marquez’s *The Autumn of the Patriarch* which chronicles the endless life-long rule of this dictator and is told in this stream of consciousness language that both sympathises and parodies this guy and his rule. And for me, you know ... [laughs] for want of a better word, I am very much a Nyayo child; I went to primary school during the Nyayo

years; I drank school milk; those mass choirs were very much a part of us; the Muungano national choir and all its music was very much a part of our growing up. There's lots of material there. How does one begin to use it? With 'The Cock Thief' I don't think I achieved all that I was trying to do, but one of the main things I was trying to do was to show how things become devalued at the end. How things that are so central to the autocrat and his fierceness and power mean nothing once you step out of the autocrat's shadow. So that when you are going to exchange what you understand as something valuable, smuggled out of that regime, people look at you and don't know what you are talking about; because it is as ordinary as can be. This is some of what I was trying to communicate in that story.

GAM: *The story also reminded me of those Jini stories⁹ that can be seen as an East African variation of the West African Mami Water figure. OK, could we talk a bit about the Mboya project? I understand you are working on a novel on Tom Mboya. First of all, why Mboya?*

PK: I just have this sense that the assassination of Mboya was the assassination of this project called Kenya. I feel that Mboya personally — or at least in his background — contained all the seeds that would allow a modern person in Kenya to transcend all the restrictions — Mboya was a modern guy. One could debate his politics, but Mboya the person, how he managed to move and accomplish so much in such a short time is fascinating to me. From the time he entered politics to his assassination, it was a span of 20 years. And during that time, he was in many senses the architect of modern Kenya.

But there are other interesting things as well, much more personal reasons as well. This is the book of my father's generation. This is the book that tries to explain who these people were. I find them the most remarkable people that have ever graced the continent in the last 100 years. These are guys who had just come from the village and in a few years they were out there quoting Shakespeare and then rejecting him and so on. They lived remarkable lives. And I've always been fascinated by them as individuals and some of the things they did and some of the choices they made. I am hoping that this book will be a vehicle to showcase their lives.

GAM: *When do you expect the Mboya novel to be out?*

PK: I wish I could say. I have been on this project for a very long time. I need six months to finish off the research, then at most a year to finish the book. It wouldn't be prudent to say now, but hopefully by the end of next year, there will be a manuscript.

GAM: *What you are saying about that revisiting of our fathers' generation takes me back to the Kwani? project. My sense of the Kwani? project is that at some point there seems to have been an Oedipal anxiety about the generation of the fathers. To a certain extent it looked like it could only legitimise itself by almost undermining or even being dismissive of the generation of the fathers.*

PK: Look, in Kenyan literary circles, you have people who have been heads of departments at the university for 30 years or longer. You have people who have refused to do anything new; and the only way the *Kwani?* project could exist was by trying to take them on and to stand outside its shadow. So, in that sense, yes maybe you are right about that Oedipal anxiety. So there might be a kind of challenging of decaying institutions; but there's very much a sense that many of these writers are interested in saying something about where they are coming from; and where they are coming from is little more than 40 years.

GAM: *What would you like to see African writing doing in the immediate future?*

PK: I'm hoping that as writers, one of the humps that we will move over is the difficulty of telling our own truths. We talk a lot about telling our own stories — this has become something of the African writers' refrain — that this is the time to tell our own stories. But we also need to recognise that behind the stories are truths that we need to confront which may become very uncomfortable — family truths, national truths, personal truths.

GAM: *Thank you so much you for your time, and for sharing your thoughts on your writing, and broadly, the state of Eastern/African writing.*

NOTES

¹ *Redykyulass* — a playful parodying of the word 'ridiculous'— is the stage name for a trio of Kenyan comedians: Tony Njuguna, John Kiarie and Walter Mongare. 'Redykyulass Generation' was first coined by the Kenyan writer and founder of *Kwani?* literary magazine, Binyavanga Wainaina in 2003, in celebration of what he saw as an unprecedented burst of creativity among Kenyan youths, which he envisioned *Kwani?* embodying and providing a platform for exploring. Kantai's story uses the term in the same way, as a tribute to a contemporary generation of politically engaged youths who have successfully used various genres of popular cultural productions and media platforms to engage with Kenyan social imaginaries.

² In 'The Reddykulass Generation' Kantai describes the experiences of his good friend — playwright and business woman — Bee, who sank into depression and eventually ended her life in 2005.

³ Kantai is referring here to the 30th December 2007 presidential elections in Kenya, whose results were violently contested, resulting in at least 2500 deaths, and over 500000 Kenyans internally displaced. The post-election violence was both a result and a cause of deep inter-ethnic tensions across the country.

- ⁴ Tom Joseph Mboya was a prominent Kenyan politician and Minister of Economic Development and Planning in the Jomo Kenyatta government. Mboya was shot dead on 5th July 1969 on Moi Avenue in Nairobi. Although the gunman, Nahashon Njenga Njoroge was convicted for the murder and hanged, it is believed that the assassination was ordered by a powerful Kenyan political figure.
- ⁵ Ethnic enclaves. Kantai borrows the South African term ‘bantustan’, which refers to territories designated by the white apartheid government as ethnically homogeneous homelands for black South Africans.
- ⁶ General Stanley Mathenge was a key figure in the Mau Mau Land and Freedom Army in the 1950s, who is believed to have escaped to neighbouring Ethiopia in the late 1950s. In 2003, the Kenyan press carried the news that he had been found living in a village in Ethiopia. Soon after, the state undertook to invite the man believed to be General Mathenge, who was given a hero’s welcome in Nairobi. This was to turn into an embarrassing situation, when it emerged that the person taken to be the Mau Mau veteran was in fact an Ethiopian farmer, Lemma Ayanu.
- ⁷ Swahili for ‘rooster’, the symbol of the political party, Kenya African National Union (KANU), which was the ruling party in Kenya for the period 1963–2002. The party apparently had a solid gold rooster, which was on display at the presidential residence in Kabarak, Nakuru. In ‘The Cock Thief’, Kantai creates an alternative rendition of the alleged theft of the gold rooster — the icon of the then ruling Party, Kenya African National Union (KANU) — from President Moi’s official residence during his last days in office.
- ⁸ Kenya African National Union.
- ⁹ The ‘*Jini*’ or ‘*djinn*’ are supernatural creatures which feature prominently in Swahili folklore in Eastern Africa; but might be originally drawn from Arab folklore and Islamic mythology.

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