Binyavanga Wainaina’s Narrative of the IMF-generation as Development Critique

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ABSTRACT

This article looks at Binyavanga Wainaina’s autobiographical and essayistic writing as a site of development theory and criticism. The focus is on his memoir One Day I Will Write About This Place (Granta, 2011). In it, Wainaina used life-writing as a genre to tell what he called the “story of the IMF-generation”, meaning the children of a post-independence African middle class who came massively under pressure due to foreign-imposed structural adjustment in the 1980s and 1990s, and who became a driving force in democratisation movements after 2000. This article elaborates on how Wainaina reflected this African experience of neoliberal globalisation and the related expansion of Western humanitarianism in his writing. This is explored through, firstly, a focus on Wainaina’s engagement with development embedded in his narrative of the IMF-generation, and secondly, through his deconstruction of a humanitarian discourse on Africa anchored in colonising ideologies of the global North and embodied in representatives of the aid industry in Kenya. I read the 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.

KEYWORDS

Kenyan literature; Binyavanga Wainaina; structural adjustment; humanitarian discourse; Kwani?

Introduction

In development discourse, the 1980s are often referred to as “Africa’s lost decade”. In this period, many African economies suffered severe rupture, which brought an end to a time of growth and social improvements after independence. Under the tutelage of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, a series of so-called structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) were implemented, marking the beginning of post-Cold War neoliberal globalisation in Africa (see Shivji 2009, 10–13). People of Africa experienced the conditionalities imposed by the IMF and World Bank as massive, foreign-dictated interventions that led to impoverishment and conflict. In the same period, and more so in the 1990s, Africa saw an enormous expansion of Western non-governmental organisations (NGOs) supposed to “help” and compensate for the dismantling of public
social infrastructure. This marked the beginning of an “age of liberal humanitarianism” (Barnett 2011). It was accompanied by huge charity events in the Western hemisphere such as Band Aid, a project of international pop stars to mobilise aid during the 1983–1985 Ethiopian famine. This and other media events, together with NGOs’ fundraising activities in the North, portrayed “Africans as the subject of pity and whose plight would be relieved through acts of charity” (Manji 2008, 187). They thus significantly contributed to the construction of the whole of Africa as a continent of hunger and catastrophe in the non-African world. In Spaces of Aid Lisa Smirl builds an investigation of the humanitarian field from stating an epistemological problem:

In the context of post-crisis situations, a … disconnect of epistemologies occurs between those “external” humanitarian groups which come to assist, and those people who have experienced the disaster and its aftermath. Any solutions to a given problem, or how the problem is framed and identified, will be shaped by each group’s epistemology. More specifically, in the context of reconstruction, it will be dramatically influenced by how each group thinks about and understands the space of the crisis. (Smirl 2015, 1)

The era of structural adjustment, as I argue in this article, caused a similar disconnect of epistemologies between Africa and the non-African world with effects that continue to the present day. This is elaborated through the following reading of Binyavanga Wainaina’s (2011) memoir One Day I Will Write About This Place. With this text, Wainaina bore witness to this African experience of neoliberal globalisation. A child of the 1970s and as a member of an African middle class establishing itself in Kenya after independence, he experienced the destabilisation through structural adjustment in the 1980s and 1990s as a student, and as a member of what he would call the “IMF-generation”. His writing, as I argue, creates awareness of the epistemological disconnect addressed above as well as ways to overcome it. This will be explored through, firstly, a focus on how his narrative challenges ideas of development in Africa, and secondly, through his deconstruction of a humanitarian discourse on Africa anchored in the colonising ideologies of the global North. It is through the ironic portrayal of white aid workers and volunteers in particular that he puts forward a local perception of this industry. Furthermore, my analysis is interested in the structural absence of dialogue with representatives of Africa’s middle and upper-middle classes evident in humanitarian discourses about Africa dominated by institutions, actors and organisations from the global North. This absence is a theme in Wainaina’s autobiographical and essayistic writing, the topic of this article.

**Memoir as a Form of Situated Knowledge**

Life writing has increasingly become a popular genre in Kenya. A number of writers and literary scholars have contributed to this trend in the past two decades by publishing memoirs, from Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (2011, 2012, 2016), Grace Ogot (2012) and Binyavanga Wainaina (2011) to Rebeka Njau (2019), Wanjiku Kabira (2005) and Ciarunji Chesaina (2018). Autobiographies by politicians, writers and public figures who have shaped national politics and culture after independence have been taken up by historians and literary scholars alike, to explain and explore facets of Kenya’s political and social history. Kenyan autobiographical writings have been read as a simultaneous process of “narrating the self and the nation” (Ndogo 2016), to understand Kenya’s history
through lives representing models of indigenous leadership (Ochieng 2006) and to “understand, through personal narratives, the history and the making of the Kenyan nation” (Muchiri 2014). Wainaina’s memoir stands out here in so far as he was relatively young at 41 when he published his memoir, reflecting from the point of a life and career which was very much in the making. At the time of publication, he was well known for being one of the driving figures in founding the literary magazine *Kwani?* and in the creation of a vibrant, literary space in Nairobi after the end of the Moi regime. In an often-quoted tweet, Wainaina – who in May 2019 sadly passed away – has been remembered as the writer “who democratised Kenya’s literary space” (Warah 2019). Next to the Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, he became a powerful voice in the redefinition of African literature in the age of digital media and the democratisation movements around the millennium. With his public coming out as gay, he became a prominent supporter of the LGBTQI-movement in Kenya and beyond. Even though with *One Day I Will Write About This Place* he had published only one major book, Wainaina left a rich and challenging intellectual and literary heritage, scattered across newspapers and literary magazines.

As the title *One Day I Will Write About This Place* indicates, what Wainaina’s use of the genre of life writing aimed at was not primarily a narration of the self, but of a place. The title leaves it open whether this “place” is Wainaina’s hometown Nakuru, his country Kenya, South Africa where he lived for almost a decade, the continent Africa, or all of them. Krishnan, in reading the memoir as representative for a renewed national commitment of the so-called third generation of African authors, aptly described how this writing of a “place” makes room for plurality and multiple affiliations:

> Reflecting the ambiguity of its title, the narrative problematizes the idea of the nation as a singular and all encompassing site, intertwining imagined spaces and physical landscapes ranging from Rwanda to Uganda to South Africa to the United States, ultimately creating a portrait of post-independence Kenya that highlights plurality and dislocates the totalizing mythologies of the nation-state. (Krishnan 2013, 79)

The local, the national, the pluri- and transnational, the pan-African and the global are in continuous flux in Wainaina’s narration, negotiated in and through people’s lives, as well as through references to popular culture and literary worlds, in which Kenyan and African epistemologies of this “place” and of people’s existence in it are at work. In the reflection of this “place”, expressions, echoes and effects of the humanitarian discourse play a role, as do encounters with their concrete representatives on the ground.

Wainaina’s life narrative covers a time span from 1978 to 2009/10 and can be roughly organised in three major periods. The first one deals with Wainaina’s childhood and coming-of-age in his hometown Nakuru and diverse boarding schools, and covers a period from the late 1970s to the early 1990s. It ends with Wainaina leaving Kenya after graduating from high school and higher education at Kenyatta University, to study finance and marketing in South Africa. The second period covers the 1990s and Wainaina’s time in South Africa, from the beginning of his studies at the University of Transkei to being a published writer in Cape Town. The third period covers the 1990s and Wainaina’s time in South Africa, from the beginning of his studies at the University of Transkei to being a published writer in Cape Town. It is a rare account of how a young African foreigner experienced South Africa in the transition to post-apartheid. The account of this life period includes the narration of a longer stay in Kenya, published earlier as short story under the title “Discovering Home”, which won Wainaina the Caine Prize for
African Writing in 2002. The third major period covers the years after 2000, from Wainaina’s breakthrough as a writer in Nairobi and the founding of *Kwani?* to the national trauma of post-election violence in late 2007 and early 2008. This section includes several chapters in the style of creative travel writing, recounting the author’s travels to West Kenya, South Sudan, Nigeria, Ghana, Togo, Lamu Island off the coast of Kenya, and his time in the United States, where he taught creative writing at Union College near New York in 2006.

What characterises the literary and philosophical quality of the text is its “explicit engagement with representation and hindsight” (Wenske 2021, 68). Unlike most autobiographical writing, in *One Day I Will Write About This Place*, events are predominantly focalised through the narrated self. The movement between what he knew and felt then, and what he recognises from a later perspective, is seamlessly integrated. This allows the reader to experience the ever shifting and expanding place of the narration at particular historical moments through the senses of the child and student, while at the same time being made aware of their larger connections.

Problematising the continued presence of English as the dominant language of writing and higher education in Kenya, Wainaina explained that what moved him when writing his memoir in English was “how you, as someone who is on the ground, speaks to the local and the world” to try to “bring readers into the center of your world who are out there in these powerful places” (Wiriko 2014). Bringing readers from outside, from the powerful places in the world to the centre of your own world means getting them to shift their perspective and look at the world from that centre. Locating knowledge within relations of power has been one of the most significant contributions of critical theory in feminist, postcolonial and decolonial thought since the 1990s. Wainaina’s literary project connects to these. By inviting readers to “the centre of his world” and at the same time inviting them to view neoliberal globalisation and the concomitant rise of humanitarianism from this centre, the memoir makes us aware of our involvement with and locatedness in these processes. Furthermore, it builds a bridge to audiences and movements all over the world who would identify with what Jan Nederveen Pieterse described as “critical globalism”, meaning a “critical engagement with globalisation processes that neither blocks nor celebrates them” (2010, 49) and understood both as a disengagement from development ideologies entrenched in a binary thinking of “developed” versus “developing” world, and a response to dogmatic anti-globalisation ideologies. Adopting a stance of critical globalism is flawed, however, when we do not consider how our knowledge and experience of neoliberal globalisation is situated in and bound to localities and limited subjectivities. Wainaina’s memoir offers this sense of locatedness to the Kenyan and pan-African reader and to readers from outside. Contrary to what Wainaina suggests in the interview, I propose that the text constructs its diverse audiences not as “local” versus “global” readers; but as readers who are all involved in the interplay of local and global dynamics, albeit differently located and unequally aware of their locatedness.

**IMF-generation and Multi-disciplinary Critique of Structural Adjustment**

In an interview which Wainaina gave to the Spanish organisation Wiriko – Artes y culturas Africanas (2014) he was asked what his book could provide to a Spanish-speaking audience. He answered that this was the story of what he called the “IMF generation”. With
this term, he identified the offspring of a post-independence African middle class, who came massively under pressure as a result of the debt crisis and structural adjustment in the 1980s and 1990s, and who became involved in democratisation movements on the continent from the turn of the millennium onwards. In Wainaina’s words:

That is what this book is about. That is what I call them. ‘Cause we are the generation that saw the middle class fall apart in the nineties – late eighties and nineties – with the IMF conditions that said, no subsidies for education. And so people left the country or people fell – fell, fell and fell, and then fell again. (Wiriko 2014)

His memoir, as he continued in the interview, intended to capture the story of this generation, of the destabilisation it had to undergo and how it returned in democracy movements across the continent. With the concept of the IMF-generation, Wainaina places his life narrative in the context of a larger narrative carried by intellectuals and activists across the continent, recalling the deliberate impoverishment of millions in the wake of neoliberal structural adjustment in the name of “development” in the 1980s and 1990s. Next to being a period of severe hardship and crisis, it mobilised people across the continent into resistance, what the Tanzanian scholar Issa Shivji in Accumulation in an African Periphery: A Theoretical Framework (2009) remembers as follows: “There have been struggles against SAPs and globalisation in the streets and lecture halls of Africa. African scholars have severely critiqued structural adjustment programmes and indicated alternatives”. At their core, these alternative frameworks – Shivji points to the Lagos Plan of Action (1980) and the African Charter for Popular Participation and Development (1990) – advocated human-centred and people-driven development and underlined the need for a holistic approach (Shivji 2009, 15). The IMF programmes, on the other hand, installed an “extreme form of monetarism” (Emeagwali 2011, 3), forcing African governments into rigid austerity to finance public debt incurred during a period of cheap borrowing. The measures hit African economies precisely where the independence governments had tangibly laid foundations for upward social mobility and economic growth, what Firoze Manji (2008, 177) describes as “one of [their] most remarkable, and yet least acknowledged, achievements … that within the space of but a few years, access to health services and to education was to become effectively universal”. It was the poorer and middle classes across the continent who bore the burden of the reforms and the prioritisation of debt payment over public spending on education, health and social services (Emeagwali 1995, 2011). Furthermore, critics and analysts have shown how the programmes de-democratised governance in Africa and triggered political abuse and conflicts with disastrous consequences (see Emeagwali 2011, 9–10 on Somalia and Nigeria; Manji 2008, 183–184 on Rwanda; Murunga 2007 on Kenya).

One consequence of structural adjustment was a new rise of humanitarianism, termed the “neoliberal age of humanitarianism” by Barnett (2011), with the dramatic expansion of Northern NGOs in Africa who increasingly took over development agendas (Barnett 2011, 165–170; Manji 2008, 184–188). Wangari Maathai (2009, 93) succinctly pointed out the interdependence between debt, structural adjustment, impoverishment, and humanitarian aid in an essay on indebtedness and unfair trade. In it, she wrote as follows:

These illegitimate debts … dilute the impact of philanthropists and donors who care about Africa and its peoples. As much as Africans are being assisted in practical ways by their efforts,
some of the philanthropists’ and donors’ governments, as well as international lenders, are draining Africa’s resources.²

It is into this larger narrative seeking to untangle the interrelatedness of neoliberal globalization, wilful impoverishment, the rise of humanitarianism and the construction of Africa as a continent of catastrophe and crisis, that Wainaina, through declaring his memoir as the “story of the IMF-generation” sets in. While the knowledge of this African experience of neoliberal globalisation is anchored in critical scholarship and social activism, it is harder to find popular versions circulating in literature, film and popular culture. One such instance was the feature film *Bamako* (2006) by Mauritanian-French director Abderrahmane Sissako, in which African citizens in a backyard in Mali’s capital Bamako put up a fictional trial against the IMF and the World Bank. Wainaina’s memoir does something similar, creating a personal testimony and reflection, which enables readers to understand how these processes were experienced from a Kenyan middle-class perspective. This is highlighted in the following section, which juxtaposes the text’s engagement with "development" as discourse and as experience.

**Development as Discourse and as Experience in One Day I Will Write About This Place**

Although the text in many ways observes and reflects on processes of social, economic and political change in Kenya, South Africa and West Africa, it does not use the term “development” for these. “I don’t really do development writing”, is what the author has his narrated self respond to the request from a European Union humanitarian programme to travel to South Sudan to write a piece on sleeping sickness (*OD*, ³ 190).⁴ Where he explicitly speaks of development, he does so to present and expose a discourse that is determined and controlled by foreign interests and perceptions. These moments also always have something ironic.

The author introduces the discourse of “development” into his life narrative with the demonstration of a bio-gas plant by a Swedish organisation in his school, which has the pupils and staff assembled in the schoolyard follow the presentation of what Wainaina describes as a “cow-shit machine” that powers a lightbulb. The narration stages this event as the first encounter of the then twelve-year-old student with an understanding and practice of “development” that collectively incapacitates African citizens. The irony of this scene is how the narration – hidden from the eyes of the Swedes – makes the students’ sense of self and their place in the world collide with the sense of self and the worldview of the Swedish development workers. To get a full sense of this ironic clash of self- and foreign perception, I draw attention to the place that is evoked through the narration up to this encounter. Wainaina’s family home lay on a hillside in an until recently exclusively white neighbourhood, overlooking a fast-growing town.⁵ In this particular place at the particular historical moment, African citizens like his parents – “Anglo-Kenyans” as he calls them in the last chapter – took ownership of the built environment and the institutions of colonial rule. This is what his writing retrospectively seeks to understand, to celebrate and to assess critically. Everything Wainaina portrayed in the memoir up to the encounter with the Swedes in the Nakuru schoolyard was social and economic development in practice, driven and enacted by African citizens, workers, students – men and women. His family played a key role as his father, who was managing director of the
Pyrethrum Board of Kenya, was one of the agents of agricultural development in the region (on Wainaina’s father’s career see his sister’s Rebeka Njau’s memoir 2019, 42–45). From the family home, the boy viewed daily the agro-industrial building and workplace of his father, where the latter managed the marketing of one of Kenya’s main export products (on the marketing of pyrethrum in post-independence Kenya see Winter-Nelson 1992). His mother ran an independent business, the family invested in the children’s education and supported other members of the extended family. The Lena Moi Primary School that the children attended is an expression, product, vehicle and symbol of the social advancement of African citizens in a post-independence, profoundly transforming Kenya. It had previously been a private school for whites only, and, at the time Wainaina attended it, had been transformed into a public school where the vast majority of students were black (OD, 32). The school is portrayed as a socially inclusive space, where children from different social backgrounds were given a chance: “The school is run by the town. Some parents are poor, some are rich, the fee is low” (OD, 55, on Wainaina’s engagement with education in Kenya, see Wenske 2021). The students live with the conviction that they belong to the future elite of the country, as is expressed in these lines: “Our school is for future doctors, lawyers, engineers, and scientists is what we are told by all our parents; this is what we believe” (OD, 55).

What the narration conveyed so far was a sense of development, how it is – as Shigali (2016, 46) explains – commonly understood in contemporary discourse in Africa, namely as “the process of material production and creation of commensurate ideas, policies, structures and institutions, with the ultimate aim of solving practical problems of poverty, ignorance and disease”. Into this environment of experienced development, Wainaina’s narration makes the Swedish organisation intrude with a colonising discourse on development, as is made evident in the author’s ironic reconstruction of the event:

This is biogas, the Swedes tell us. … It looks like shit – it is shit – but it has given up its gas for you. With this new fuel you can light your bulbs and cook your food. You will become balance-dieted; if you are industrious perhaps you can run a small biogas-powered food mill and engage in income-generating activities. This way, they say kindly, eyes as blue as Jesus’s, … you can avoid malnutrition. This is called development, they said, and we are here to raise your awareness. (OD, 55, emphasis in the original)

Wainaina makes full use of the interplay of hindsight and representation here to deconstruct the Swedes’ perception of the Kenyan environment. In their eyes, the students are not future engineers, doctors and lawyers; but children in need of help, possibly suffering from hunger and malnutrition and potential customers of a technology the Swedes are unlikely to use in their own households. The students are perceived as such before any kind of interaction has taken place. The narration thus exposes the “development gaze” inherent to the encounter, understood as an authoritative epistemological position, “which constructs problems and their solution by reference to a priori criteria” (Grillo 1997, 19). Furthermore, it shows how – through shifts in the global order that took place in the 1980s – a generation in whom parents, teachers and an educational system invested became collectively redefined as aid recipients. The narration makes clear through how the author introduces the scene that this redefinition took place elsewhere: “Something has shifted. In the world. The Swedes made the first announcement that things are no longer the same” (OD, 55). The particular irony of this encounter
with international development in the Nakuru schoolyard is that the Swedes think they know and have to explain what development is, while they are not capable of seeing and reading the development right before their eyes.

The juxtaposition of ineffective development rhetoric imposed from outside and above with African agents on the ground – entrepreneurs, business people, artisans and traders – who are actually doing development, without naming it as such – recurs in the adult Wainaina’s visit to the West African capitals Accra and Lomé in 2006, narrated as an encounter with two very different African metropoles. The one is portrayed as thriving, vibrant and friendly, its representation reflecting a common perception across Africa of Ghana as a model of democracy, political stability and successfully manoeuvred economic growth after the millennium: “What a happy, happy city. People are laughing and greeting and laughing and greeting. Working, selling, building” (OD, 213). The other bears the stamp of forty years of dictatorship and a heavily oppressive state that gives itself the appearance of modernity with the support of international donors:

In the centre of the city, buildings are imposing, unfriendly, and impractical. [...] There are International Bureaus of Many Incredibly Important Things and International Centers of Even More Important Things. I count fourteen buildings that have the word développement on their walls. In Accra, signs are warm, quirky, and humorous: Happy Day Shop, Do Life Yourself, Diplomatic Haircut. (OD, 218–219)

In the portrayal of Lomé again there is irony in how the author creates an opposition between the “developed” city centre and the places where people on the ground are doing what he calls “sensible commerce: somebody providing a useful product or service to individuals who need it”. It is only when he reaches the market of Lomé after one hour’s drive that, as he writes, “we find ourselves in a functional and vibrant city” (OD, 220).

Throughout the memoir, we find a fascination with what Wale Adebanwi has aptly called the “political economy of everyday life in Africa” (2017), which shines through the portrayals of people who populate informal and formal economies. The reader from outside, whom the memoir brings to the centre of Wainaina’s world, is guided by the narration to see what works in seemingly malfunctioning political economies and how people make things work even in unlikely and harsh conditions. These portrayals bring forward the creative, unique and resistant in the everyday struggles of people who navigate with more or less economic success through the contradictions of African political and cultural economies and who develop their own paths. Through them, the text creates a literary and narrative version of “human-centered and people-driven development” (Shivji 2009, 15) which was, as addressed above, at the core of African scholars’ responses to structural adjustment.

These individual stories of economic aspiration are counterbalanced not only by a politicised development rhetoric but also by the manifestations of an African-driven neoliberal capitalism in post-apartheid South Africa, as well as in Kenya after the democratic transition of 2002. While Wainaina’s narrative is clear in its sympathy for “people-driven development” and in its rejection of colonisation through “development”, whether through the policies of international donors, through an authoritarian state, or through an aid industry populated by foreign “mercenary, missionaries and misfits”, it betrays a certain ambiguity toward the business careers and the upward class mobility
of people of his generation, first in South Africa, and a decade later in Kenya. Thus, the memoir reflects the student’s vain attempts to connect to a business study programme and his preference for reading novels in the seclusion of his private room, against the backdrop of rapid change in South Africa and the materialist values of a politics of “Black empowerment” which quickly fills the space opened by South Africa’s liberation struggle:

There are now new black people in suits and ties, on television, on the streets. There are black people with American accents, with white South African accents, soft breasts, six-pack abs and regular features and good straight teeth, all over the radio, on television, in magazines showing off their new homes in white suburbs, their 2.3 children gleaming with happiness and swimming pool health. … It is about money, and money has decided to become like a rainbow. (OD, 112–113)

Ironically, this representation of displayed material wealth mirrors how Wainaina’s family home in the formerly white suburb of Nakuru must have appeared to less affluent fellow Kenyans two decades earlier. There is an ambiguity in this representation and others (see for instance OD, 166–177 and 231–233) of new economic African elites oscillating between fascination, irony and a critique reminiscent of, but far less explicit than, bell hooks’ (2000) analysis of the de-solidarisation and new classism among African-Americans that followed the political success of the civil rights movement.7

**Deconstructing Humanitarian Discourse**

Wainaina deconstructed through his writing the mechanisms within international development relations that have produced the exclusion of the Kenyan intellectual and a highly educated middle class as “experts” and potential agents of change from the “field” of development and humanitarian discourse and practice. The critique of the development industry and the ideological and economic framework within which it operates and which it continues to reproduce is a frequent theme in Wainaina’s writing. Next to his famous satirical essay “How to Write About Africa” (2005) and its sequel “How Not to Write About Africa in 2012 – a Beginner’s Guide” (2012), he engaged with it as a columnist for the *Mail & Guardian* in South Africa between 2006 and 2009. Starting from his early essay “How to Write About Africa” (2005) Wainaina’s deconstruction of what in critical theory has been described as “white saviourism” has brought to the fore a pattern of how foreigners populating the development industry actively do not see and do not enter in dialogue with their middle-class peers, with equally qualified or higher skilled professionals on the ground.

In doing so, he was neither the first nor the only East African writer to explore and critique these patterns from an Africa-centred perspective. Instead, he engages with a narrative brought forward by several *Kwani?* writers and activists after the democratic turn in 2002, which tells of the ambiguous relationship of the Kenyan middle class to the structures of international development and humanitarian aid. Criticism of the international community and its local manifestations makes part of, for instance, Yvonne Owuor’s Caine Prize-winning short story “Weight of Whispers” (2003) in the portrait of the UNHCR in Nairobi, where officials use their position to force the asylum-seeking protagonists into sexual services. A critique of developmentalism in its material and ideological dimensions is a major theme in the work of the journalist and writer Rasna Warah. In
her introduction to the anthology *Missionaries, Mercenaries and Misfits*, she records how, while working for the UN in Afghanistan, she as the only woman of colour in the UN-guesthouse was met with ignorance: “The international development set thought I was a local, so they ignored me” (2008, 18). Muthoni Garland (2003, 276) introduced “Odour of Fate”, an unsettling short story of a Western diplomat, whose sexual adventure with a black sex worker turns into a murderous obsession, with the observation:

> White executives working on contract in black countries don’t go to black places, and they certainly don’t go anywhere low class. They write proposals for poverty eradication and recommendations for development projects from the comfort of leafy, suburban neighbourhoods. Only the odd one, perhaps, consults with an upper class black person.

What Garland polemically states here about white executives is to a certain degree also valid for whites employed in international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), as noted by Stirrat (2008), and for the humanitarian field, as analysed by Smirl (2015). Smirl’s study of the spatial order of the humanitarian field is particularly revealing here, shedding light on the complex relationships between aid organisations and the local population on the one hand, and between the “field” of crisis interventions and the “headquarters” of international organisations on the other hand, the latter of which in most cases are located far from the areas of intervention. In this network of relationships, as Smirl’s study shows, the aid workers on the ground have a decisive, mediating function. They are the ones who describe the facts on the ground, commission investigations and report back to the decision-makers at the level of international organisations. In the creation of a humanitarian imaginary, understood as a set of “idealized assumptions regarding organization and community” (Smirl 2015, 2), they act as local experts or, more precisely, experts for a locality that is considered “foreign” in the perception of donor states. However, they move in a secluded world – in hotels, gated communities, vehicles – from which locals are largely and literally excluded and their access is controlled. Smirl conceptualised the space foreign aid workers move in as a “liminal space”, which affects the knowledge it produces. This spatial difference and the different epistemologies it produces have been reinforced in recent years, as Smirl notes, by the increasing securitisation of humanitarian interventions. Her analysis shows

> a dynamic which sees the space of the field becoming more and more distant from the places in need of assistance … The representation of the field that is reported back to headquarters, and upon which policy and programmes are based, is therefore not based on society at large, on the nation as it really is, but upon the bounded and increasingly securitized spaces of aid workers. (2015, 5)

A lack of knowledge about “society at large, on the nation as it really is” is also at the heart of much of East African intellectuals’ critique of developmentalism brought together in the anthology *Missionaries, Mercenaries and Misfits* edited by Rasna Warah. Wainaina contributed to the anthology with an essay titled “The Power of Love”. In this short, satirical text Wainaina portrays the love of the philanthropic “West” for Africa as driven by selfish interests and blind towards its negative impacts on local economies. Their foreign-financed salaries and budgets literally ruin the labour and rental market for young, highly educated Kenyans who cannot compete and must watch how their Western peers use their volunteer jobs as a springboard for careers with international organisations. The text forms a parenthesis between the Ethiopia Campaign 1984 – with which
the text begins – and the Campaign for Hunger Relief in Kenya 2005, with which the text ends. Wainaina places individual encounters with NGO employees and volunteers from the West in the context of a critique of the power structures that produce and nourish this aid industry. The seemingly arbitrary narration of encounters, which at first glance do not have much to do with each other, creates a dense picture of the distortions that the developmentalist take on African economies has produced. In the narrative, Wainaina picks up pieces from the discourse of humanitarianism – such as “raise awareness”, “care for people”, “educate the girl child” – and juxtaposes these with concrete effects of and local experiences with the aid industry. What becomes visible through these ironic juxtapositions is how “unaware” the international aid industry is of the struggles of highly qualified Kenyans to own their present and their future:

What you can be sure about in all these love projects is that it is easier for a thirty-something Scarlett O’Hara – or a Boomtown Rat – than it is for a PhD-wielding Maasai speaking, Maasai person, to decide who the Maasai will be to the world. (Wainaina 2008, 91)

With One Day I Will Write About This Place, Wainaina built on earlier critical essays like this one. Moreover, the memoir elaborated on how closely these imbalances were linked to the political and economic crisis of the Kenyan middle class, to the exodus and political immobilisation of a young, highly educated generation in the wake of foreign-imposed structural adjustment and the consequent de-democratisation of the Kenyan state.

**On Similitude**

At this point, I want to return to the Swedes whom Wainaina used to represent a paternalistic concept of development in the Nakuru schoolyard, and to ask the question: Why did they not see in the children the future developers of technologies? Why did they not recognise in them a carefully nurtured generation and the dream of social and economic transformation that they embodied?

As I indicated above, One Day I Will Write About This Place displays a certain mastery in recreating a sensual experience of narrated worlds. Knighton (2014, 34) has described the author’s use of the sensory as a method to combine the personal, the aesthetic and the political in his writing about the self. As she writes, “Wainaina’s portrayal of the political moment in contemporary Kenya is filtered through an exposition of the sensory, which in turn is used to convey his consciousness as a child and his sensibility as a writer”. This is particularly true for the childhood and coming-of-age part of the memoir. In these first chapters, Wainaina leads us into the world he experienced as a child – playing football with his siblings, watching TV, jumping on the sofa with his sister, hiding in his mother’s hairdresser salon, following the conversations of adults, trying to make sense of them – conversations about politics, about business. The child watches American TV shows, he reads whatever he gets his hands on. As an adult, he remembers himself as a child who loves daydreaming and living in his imagination. It is scenes like these that are radically different from how African childhoods are anchored in mentalities outside Africa, those mentalities that produce and nourish humanitarian ideologies towards Africa. Even if we have to bear in mind that it was an extremely privileged childhood within Kenya, whose ideological anchoring in an “Anglo-Kenyan” universe Wainaina himself critically examines in the concluding chapter of his memoir, they nevertheless
lead us to realise that the worlds of middle-class households in the 1970s and 1980s, for all their different locations in global power asymmetries, were perhaps experienced more similarly, especially by adolescent children, than is often assumed.

When I first read One Day I Will Write About This Place, I was struck by how much it reminded me of my own coming-of-age in the late 1970s and early 1980s in a provincial setting in Austria. This was, in particular, the case in how Wainaina captured the spirit of the late 1970s and early 1980s, how America’s glamour entered teenage imaginations through the radio and the TV: Boney M., Dallas, SciFi TV shows. As children, we had watched some of the same TV shows, some of the games we played were populated by the same heroes who had come into our world via TV. What also stunned me in this first encounter with One Day I Will Write About This Place was that as a literary scholar at a European university who had been reading and teaching African literatures for years, I had not previously encountered an African child of the 1970s in literature, who liked to watch Dallas, drink lemonade, cross-dressed in his mother’s clothes and was alive with an imagination that took the globe as his world. This made me realise a simple truth which I may have known intellectually before, but have not felt. In the social universe where I came of age at about the same time as narrated in the memoir, the idea of an African teenager who listens to Afropop, loves books, chews gum and tries to make sense of the world, simply did not exist. In the social and cultural imaginary of a white, middle-European, Christian and provincial childhood of the time, African children were different. Either they were poor, suffered from hunger; or they were joyful, grateful and obedient children of the Christian God, or, most of the time, they were a combination of both. Certainly, they would not watch Dallas and dance to Boney M.’s Rivers of Babylon. There was literally no cultural text I could have come across, in which African teenagers had fun, existed as persons and engaged with the contemporary world. While the text opens up unexpected similarities in the worlding of middle-class teenagers of the 1970s and 1980s, it equally creates a sense of what separated middle class cultures across the “development divide”. The narrative of the IMF-generation that Wainaina develops in his memoir does not begin with the economic and political crisis of the 1980s. It begins with the dreams, fantasies and plays of Kenyan children and youths nourished through the spirit of departure in a Kenya that was opening up and through American and African-American popular culture of the 1970s and 1980s. There is a suggestive power in this point of departure and a starting point to fundamentally challenge imaginaries of Africa which characterise the humanitarian field.

Frictions in Wainaina’s Development Critique

When writing about Wainaina’s critique of discourses and practices of development and humanitarian aid, we cannot avoid acknowledging there is friction between text and context. The literary magazine Kwani? that Wainaina co-founded, and for which he served as editor for the first three issues, was funded by the Ford Foundation which donated more than US$ 1.5 million from its inception until 2015 (see Amuke 2020). The US-based foundation with its focus on social justice and human rights had started a funding programme in the field of “Media, Arts and Culture” in Nairobi, Lagos, and Cairo in 1999 to support innovative cultural projects (see Oluooh-Olunya 2012). Doreen Strauhs (2013) offered the concept of LINGO, short for Literary
Non-Governmental Organization, to capture the specific location of initiatives such as Kwani Trust and Jalada in Kenya, Femrite and Writivism in Uganda, or Farafina Trust in Nigeria – to name some of the most visible – that have increasingly transformed and shaped the literary landscape on the continent since the turn of the millennium and attracted a significant amount of scholarship (Bush and Krishnan 2016; Kiguru 2016; Strauhs 2013, 2012; Wallis 2019). As non-profit organisations, Strauhs writes, LINGOs “operate in a sector between public, i.e. governmental, institutions and for-profit business enterprises”, are “largely dependent on external funding, yet in their actions usually financially independent from their local governments”. They differ, however, from NGOs in the sector of Theatre for Development, since “the literature produced and promoted by LINGOs and their associated authors is at least not openly content-tailored as to suit specific donor interests in development policy” (2012, 96).

As a LINGO, Kwani Trust and its flagship publication Kwani? operated on a threshold between cultural and developmental space until the magazine had to cease. Critical voices have accused the management that, in the process of establishing Kwani? as a literary magazine and widening its activities, it created another elitist space incompatible with the democratic and transformative ethics of its beginnings. Nuanced accounts have recently been provided through the investigative work of Amuke (2020) and in particular Baraka (2020), who in a thoroughly researched and sensitive enquiry into the “unspoken demise of Kwani?” honours what had been achieved as well as naming mismanagement and untangling Wainaina’s role in the project. The article gives voice to founding members, who started the magazine as a communal project and have watched the way it continued to be run with unease. Interestingly, Baraka’s account also reveals that it was predominantly women, such as the human rights activist Muthoni Wayeki and the writer and cultural activist Yvonne Owuor, who in the beginning did the often unappreciated and unprestigious behind-the-scenes work of raising funds and building a viable administration, while the prestigious positions were held by men.8 It is one of the contradictory aspects of Wainaina’s work that, while he deconstructed and challenged the structures and imbalances of foreign-controlled development in his writing and wanted to keep his writing free from donor interests, as a driving force of Kwani? and in a national context where public funding for culture and the arts practically does not exist, he benefited from developmental relations and his work was to a certain degree enabled through them.

**Conclusion**

The narrative of the “IMF-generation” brought forward in Wainaina’s memoir, as this article shows, helps readers understand how a generation meant to be Kenya’s “future doctors, lawyers and engineers” has been disenfranchised by the disintegration of free public education in the wake of SAPs, by political repression within Kenya, and by the construction of Africans as collectively in need of help and suffering from poverty and hunger in humanitarian discourse in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Wainaina develops these themes: the narrative of Kenya’s 1970s middle-class generation’s disrupted dreams of a different Kenya and the narrative of the white “humanitarian”, who from the 1990s onwards filled a space s/he perceived as void of indigenous dreams, knowledge and analysis about social transformation with a humanitarian ideology built around the
idea of “caring for Africa”. Through them, he creates a sense of the different epistemologies these different subjectivities inhabit, but are not aware of to the same extent. They turn up, as Wainaina’s autobiographical and essayistic writing illuminates, between citizens from the global North working in African countries in the field of development cooperation and humanitarian aid, and African citizens working on a daily basis to improve their lives and the lives of their communities, who are agents of change in their countries, without necessarily calling this “development”. I referred to Smirl’s suggestion of an epistemological disconnect that characterises the humanitarian field in post-crisis situations and results in different perceptions of the “space of crisis”. In applying this to my reading of Wainaina, I clearly did not propose reading Africa as a space of crisis. Rather, the “place” in Wainaina’s writing carries the knowledge of being pinned down to a single “space of crisis” in the very processes of neoliberal globalisation, to which his narrative bears witness, while emerging from entirely different registers of knowledge.

I understand the memoir as inviting dialogue by how it contrasts a one-sided humanitarian discourse about Africa with perceptions of locally lived and experienced political economy. This sets in motion a process of learning, which takes the autobiographical and the literary as its means.

Notes

1. In Kenya, the number of international NGOs increased almost three-fold to 134 from 1978 to 1988 (Manji 2008, 185).
2. According to Jubilee USA, a coalition for debt relief, Africa received over half a trillion dollars in loans from the World Bank, the IMF, and individual wealthy nations from 1970 to 2002, and paid back roughly the same amount. However, because of the interest on the debt, by 2002 $300 billion was still outstanding. (In Maathai 2009, 89)
3. In the following quotations, One Day I Will Write About This Place will be referred to as OD.
4. The trip ultimately resulted in the publication of the booklet Beyond the River Yei: Life in the Land Where Sleeping is a Disease (2004).
5. In fact, Nakuru has grown from a population of 47,000 around the time of Wainaina’s birth to Kenya’s fourth largest urban centre and a centre of agriculture, manufacturing and tourism with a population of roughly half a million people, with highest growth rates in the 1980s (Owuor and Foeken 2006, 24).
6. A current, ironic (self-)characterisation of development workers within the development industry (for a revealing analysis of these stereotypes and their material embodiments see Stirrat 2008).
7. A critique of African capitalism is not the focus of this paper, but it would be worth exploring Wainaina’s representation of post-apartheid South Africa further to this aim, both in context of critical scholarship on economic growth and the African (upper) middle classes (see Melber 2016); and in context of the debate on the political role of the middle-class in Kenya that runs through the writing of many Kwani? authors and accompanying literary scholarship. I want to highlight here Musila’s digging into “the complex cultural politics of the African middle class” (2010, 294) in her works (2013a, 2010) on Kwani? writers’ engagement with “project Kenya”. A more class-critical version of the IMF-generation is provided by Parselelo Kantai’s (2007) proposed “reddykulass generation” in his essay (see also Musila 2013a, 2010).
8. That Wainaina, despite his openly queer identity, also conveyed gender-conservative values is a topic that has remained little explored to date. In a rare feminist reading of Wainaina’s autobiographical writing, Musila (2013b) took issue with instances of objectification of the female body in his memoir, as well as his romanticisation of a domesticated womanhood modelled on Western gender ideologies through the portrayal of his mother.
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