

Not a Theater but a Bus: Reflections on the Kisii International Poetry Festival
By Karla Brundage

“The function, the very serious function of racism is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining, over and over again, your reason for being. Somebody says you have no language and you spend twenty years proving that you do.” Toni Morrison

When I decided to go to Kenya on my own this year, it was after a lot of work and conversations. The original plan was to take a group of participating poets from Oakland, California to Kisii, Kenya for the 9th annual Kistrech Poetry Festival. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we had started the poetry exchange group on zoom. The festival had been canceled in 2021 due to shelter in place and other travel restrictions. In 2022, it was a go. I had hoped to travel with the members of East Oakland to East Africa Poetry Exchange (EO2EA), but in the end, I was the only one to go. I would deliver the books to the thirteen Kenyan poets who were participants in the exchange that we had been working on for two years, and were subsequently published in the book: Black Rootedness: 54 Poets from Africa to America.

As the date to depart drew near, we had a planning meeting. It was then, that Dr. Okemwa, founder and director of the conference, raised this issue. “Poets,” he said, “are not kind people. Especially those *esteemed international* poets.” Okemwa is an internationally known poet, editor and a Professor of English at University of Kenya in Kisii. He went on to explain how in the eight years he had been hosting this conference, he had encountered consistent unhappiness from the guests he invited from abroad. He said his greatest admonition was for us, the visiting poets, was to be aware that there would be an eight-hour bus drive from Nairobi to Kisii in which there would not be a suitable bathroom. That I must prepare my group for the culture shock.

I was familiar with traveling in rural parts of East and South Africa such as Tanzania and Zimbabwe, but I had never been to Kenya.

One of the Oakland poets asked, “Who would make these complaints, are these white people?” And there you have it. Whiteness enters the room.

As Black people, when we think about returning to the Motherland, the first thing that comes to mind is not really where we will be using the bathroom.

But it always does seem to come down to it. As some would be rulers of the first world cannot say it better.. it’s the shit ...

In a further interrogation of the problematic makeup of the attendees, we arrived at the same problem as always. As when gentrifiers come to Oakland and demand that we stop singing in church, so it goes that when white folks come to a poetry conference in Kenya, they want the conference to change and bend to meet their needs.

By the end of the info session, a decision was made that the EO2EA group would not attend the conference in 2022. The last thing I wanted to do was to take a group from Oakland to Kenya on a Sankofa journey with a bus full of white folks complaining about bathrooms.

But what I did not expect is that there would be complaints about everything. There would be a poetic uprising against the cooks in the hotel kitchen who were “never on time,” the lateness of the bus, the length of the programming and even the electricity for going out. Nor did I expect that the Kenyan organizers would bend and twist and contort to accommodate every wish or demand placed upon them, regardless of the disrespect or ridiculousness of the situation.

I found myself in a theatre of the absurd. It was not a theater but a bus.

I find myself in Kenya, the only Black American in the group of international poets and I am contorting for everyone’s comfort. We (conference attendees) are on a bus for much of the trip. The commissioned bus is also the only bus owned by the University of Kisii; thus this one bus (and bus driver) have the responsibility of all transport for all forty participants to every event.

Let’s go back a bit. When I arrived in Kenya on my first day, I was happy with my room at Comfort Inn in Nairobi; there were nothing wrong with it. When I went downstairs at nine in the morning, I met the other six attendees. They were from several northern European countries and two were from India. I was the only Black (non-Kenyan) in attendance. I was immediately met with a complaint. “We were supposed to be at the museum,” said a sad looking man with a long nose. “But we are here. It looks like this will not happen after all.” Our host, Dr. Okemwa, with whom I had formed a long distance collegial friendship, looked distraught. We were awaiting the arrival of one final poet who had missed their flight. I had only arrived three hours previous after thirty-six hours of travel, so did not know about the impending missed museum opportunity. “It is not far,” said Dr. Okemwa, “if you don’t mind, you could walk there. There is plenty of time.”

“But we were supposed to go,” said the disgruntled man.

Not only was I jetlagged, but I was also confused. I was not sure what the expectation was for the museum visit as it was not on the original itinerary. This was the first five minutes of the trip. In the end, no one went to the museum. But there was a subversive feeling that overtook the group from this unendurable disappointment.

The grand opening of the conference was to be that night at Machakos University, some two hours out of Nairobi. Well since we did not get to go to the museum, we want to go to Machakos University early, came the demand. And thus it started. Half of the group got a taxi to the University early, where they sadly discovered “deplorable bathrooms and no food.” It was also at this time that it was determined that our hotel was not satisfactory and better

accommodations “should have been made.” This would become a refrain of the trip despite the affordability (\$55 a night) and the short duration of our stay there... two nights.

I did not go early to the University that first morning. Instead I walked to the museum. It seemed unclear to me why, when the conference program said that the first event would take place at 2:00 pm, a group who did not want to walk three blocks to a museum, would then get their own taxi and venture two hours out of the city to get to the University early. It felt like a bold move. Racism had come to the conference.

Racism is an anthropomorphic shapeshifter. Sometimes in the modern world, with all the niceties of polite society, comes this idea that poets are people who purport to have some kind of vision into concepts such as the human condition and empathy and cannot be racist. But I could feel it in the room and in the judgmental looks, exchanged glances between the European poets, who seemed to already know each other from other international poetry festivals. This kind of credential dropping began immediately. Well at least this is not as bad as Egypt remember.. or god the hotel in Mongolia with more exchanges of looks. Suddenly, I began also to feel lesser. I had come to this conference with so much excitement about the book, about meeting the poets I had been working with for two years and here I was listening to people talk about how bad this was compared to other bad places they had been. Mind you, all expenses were paid for including those of their spouses by their respective Embassies. I had paid my way and come alone. After arriving to the university two hours earlier than expected, hunger began to ravage those unhappy poets. The opening was astonishing, but long. There were student performances and book launches celebrating the flourishing of Kenya’s emerging writers and publishing houses. Most moving were Bonface Nyamweya and Ruth Koech. Each featured poet read a selection, but as I was last to read, I noticed most of the international poets had already left. Abandoning the table set up for the esteemed guests. They left the conference early to get food. I sat alone at a table set for ten. What my international counterparts did not remember what that we were still all on the same bus. Once the event came to an end, there would be no more taxis. Moreover, the Kenyans would not abandon them, as they had abandoned us. Under the full moon, the conference attendees boarded the bus. I assumed we would meet the other poets back at the hotel, but instead, we drove into the small down on that bus and waited for forty minutes while those disgruntled finished their dinner. It was nearly 10:00 pm when we returned to Nairobi. I silently joined Dr. Okemwa for a late dinner.

To explore racism on most of the continent of Africa, necessitates an examination also of Colonialism and the colonial mindset. And I think that is what made this weight almost unbearable for me. As a person of African descent my mindset is as such. But as an American, my passport and the strength of the US dollar carry forward a message that only those who do not have this privilege can understand. Growing up in Hawaii, where the colonial mind still grips our population like a shark’s jaw, I can recognize imperialism even in my own mind. But what of the European colonial mind, which uses time as a hammer, wielded like a weapon, decreeing if you are not on time, then you are nothing.

I am always reminded by the amount of knowledge Africans, and in this case, Kenyans, hold on the politics and current events of the U.S.A. Most of the students of Kisii University were up to date on our latest elections and expressed concern about recent mass shootings and the proliferation of guns as well as political unrest after the murder of George Floyd. However one area where the subtleties of race become complicated is in relationship to class. I have come to understand that while in America my Blackness is measured in skin color historically reinforced by the “one drop rule”, in Kenya, class and education are more significant measure of social stratification. The blue passport and U.S. dollars give create a divide in which, to many, Black Americans are seen more as “American” than “Black”. This is the opposite of our experience here in America. I say this because, in the poetry I chose to read on this trip, I decided to tackle this issue. The poem, “White Women in Africa.” I prefaced this poem by saying that in America I am Black but here, I can be seen as a foreigner which can be translated abstractly into “white.” I also read a poem called “Race Trader” in which I discuss my mixed race identity. The students enjoyed very much learning about Black American history. Specifically I also share about the Black Panthers.

As we began our six hour bus journey into the heart of darkness (can I say irony intended) I worried about what would come out of the hearts of my fellow travelers. There was only one bus that would take us to all our destinations, and on this bus we were both trapped and joined. Myself, the other eight poets and forty or so students from Kisii University. This would be the bus that would take us from Nairobi and back, to safari, to Lake Victoria, to the village, school visits and to all the other poetry readings and cultural activities on the conference itinerary.

Our hotel in Kisii was a western style hotel with a pool and bar and several floors. In this hotel which had white granite interior, lots of glass, but very few furnishings, I felt like I was in a cavern. I was constantly cold as air condition was unbearable. The white walls and the glass made it feel icy. I cannot describe the first night in that hotel but there was a loud fight over the itinerary and all the changes. Nothing made sense. I could not understand why the conference attendees were demanding for the itinerary to change. Crying, I found the one spot where WiFi worked. I called my lover back in Oakland. “I miss you,” I said.

“Are you crying?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

I cannot speak. Here I am in Kenya and I have lost my voice again..

“I know,” he said, “... tell me about it.”

We arrive at Mosando Primary School to teach a class. The classrooms resemble those I had taught in when I lived in Zimbabwe in 2001. Overjoyed to see us, we are greeted with songs and dance. In turn, three students per class presented *mashairi*, Swahili Poetry, and read a translation.

Although the classrooms lack decorated billboards or even chalk, the students are eager and pleasant and speak their best English to us, as we depart the bus, the students prostrate themselves before us. It is a practice, says, Dr. Okemwa, from the colonial days, it is a sign of respect.

“Look at my feathered hat the children made me.” The people I am with do not notice the lines of student bowing down before them.

On our final day, we go to the village of Bogiakumu of the Abagusii. The morning is filled with anticipation, but the bus is late. I suppose the biggest complaint of the entire trip has been the lateness of the bus. Finally I have had it! The night before the village visit, dinner is almost unbearable.

“We know the bus will be late. Maybe we should just sleep in.”

“9:00 means 10:00”

“Let’s all sleep until 10:00 maybe the bus will be there at 11:00.”

At 9:30 the next morning we get a text. It our bus. It is stuck in the mud. The students in their best clothing are pushing the bus out of the mud.

This is the thing, I finally say, finally I have found my voice. I say, do you realize that we are all on the same bus. Like we are all going to the same village. If the bus is late, it does not matter. Since we are all going to the same place the party starts when we arrive. Not only that, but the bus is not late. Can’t you see. The bus driver got up this morning at 4:00am. Picked up all the students from the villages, drove to pick up the tent and chairs, went to the village to set up. It rained, people were stuck in the mud, they pushed the bus out of the mud. Now they are coming here to get us. It is not that hard to see. Also the young woman you saw sleeping on the kitchen floor. She is not dirty. She is sleeping there because her village is far away, there is no taxi, she is here so she can make your breakfast tomorrow morning at 6:00 am.

The bus arrives at 9:50. We wearily board the bus. My body hurts from holding my breath for a week. One of the Kisii University students greets me with a smile. I wrote this poem for you, he says. And I open the poem. For each of us visitors he has composed an original ode, calling me by name he says, “Our ancestors...are thanking you... Karla.. For your openness to remind us of the suffering of the Black people abroad.” He gives one poem to each poet on the bus. Suddenly the bus is full of sobbing.

In America we have a saying castigating white people for their tears. But here, on this bus in Kenya, it is a welcome sound of shared humanity. I tried to avoid this kumbaya moment, but it happened in real life. Bonface, a young Kenyan poet, overlooked all the insults that had been heaped upon his people and country and found enough grace and beauty in his heart to create a tectonic shift in the hearts of others.

The villagers greet us with ululations. We spend the day eating boiled bananas and visiting homes where we are welcome. The festival ends with traditional dancing and cultural creative dances such as Riogembo, Riamakora, Masongo, Nyamokenye, Ekerubo, Bogiakumu, Mwanyagetinge, Ekerore, and Kisii National Polytechnic.

It is here that I read my signature poem, “Lips.” This poem embraces African features not traditionally valued by white beauty standards. It is a sexy poem about kissing. I was honored as it was translated live into Swahili. What was even more fun was how the women of the village, especially the elders, laughed knowingly and their eyes sparkled with laughter. We were treated by a performance also in Swahili and translated into English by local poets who sang their oral pieces.

As the rain clouds gathered, signaling it was time to go I looked over the village. Dr. Okemwa approached as we boarded the bus for the final time. “Karla, I think you left your Lips here in the village.” All the women are still repeating your words. If you come back next year, it may be a song.”