

Nairobi, the Capital of African Political Exiles in the 1960s.

by

Ntongela Masilela

Autobiography, like history, is the attempt to rethink the thought of others. -
Wilfrid Sellars.

When I arrived in Nairobi in June 1965 at the age of sixteen with my mother and three younger brothers from Los Angeles, having arrived there in early 1962 from Orlando West (Soweto then consisted only of Orlando East, Orlando West, Kliptown, Nancefield, Dube, Meadowlands, Phomolong, Phefeni, Mzimhlope, Dube, Mofolo and Moroka)¹, I could not have anticipated that my four year stay until late 1969, when I returned back to Los Angeles to pursue university studies at UCLA, would leave such a deep imprint on my cultural and political imagination, that when Ngugi introduced me to Keorapetse Kgositsile in Chicago at the conference sponsored by the Gwendolyn Brooks Center in November 1994, he would feel comfortable in telling 'Willie' that just because I was born in South Africa and had a Nguni sounding name, it did not mean that I was really a South African. If anything, Ngugi emphasized to Keorapetse, I was truly a 'Kenyan'. I think what made Ngugi tell Keorapetse that he could not claim me, is that in each of the instances we had had serious discussion over days extending to weeks, in Nairobi in 1979, when I was a colleague with him in the Department of Literatures even though he could no longer teach since his release from detention the previous year, in Bayreuth (Germany) in 1983, where I had arrived from my three-year stay in Poland (Lodz), in West Berlin in 1988 at conference of African writers in which Chinua Achebe participated, Ngugi was always in wonderment and amazement of how could a group of young Africans in High School at Upper Hill School (former Delamere Boys School) become Marxists in the 1960s in arguably one of the most politically reactionary African countries. In other words, in his estimation, noly Kenya could have shaped me into a Marxist I was.

Unbeknowst to both of us, while Ngugi was preoccupied with major political and cultural struggles at the University of Nairobi which culminated in the historic document, "On the Abolition of the English Department", we ourselves were barely three miles from him dreaming the desire of socialism as we read through Mao Tse-Tung, Regis Debray, Jean-Paul Sartre, Herbert Marcuse and many other prominent figures on the intellectual left. Perhaps Ngugi should not have been amazed in wonderment because although the political leadership of Kenya was probably the most reactionary in Africa, terrified of socialism, Nairobi itself in the 1960s was one of the great centers of metropolitanism in the world, creating

counter-vailing forces against the hegemonic bourgeois culture and politics.

If there was one feature characterizing Nairobi in the 1960s, it was its fantastic tableau of political exiles and refugees from many parts of Africa: from South Africa, Rwanda, Ethiopia, Burundi, Ethiopia, Rhodesia (later Zimbabwe), South-West Africa (later Namibia), Mozambique, Malawi, Eritrea, Somalia, Sudan. The political exiles espoused contradictory and non-synchronous ideological perspective(s) ranging from supporters of monarchism (many of the Bugandas from Uganda) through advocates of socialism (invariably they would be many bitter South Africans) to guardians of African nationalism (a large contingent of Namibians). Nairobi was a veritable cauldron of political and ideological contestations. This cauldron created a vibrant exilic political culture of interminable arguments: from morning till evening the same arguments repeating themselves in same way, sometimes extending into decades of unresolvable arguments. Since it was a political understanding of the 1960s that which way Kenya was leaning was in good probability the direction in which Africa was moving, Nairobi became the battle ground of the CIA against the KGB, the PLO against Mossad, Boss against the ANC and other contestatory struggles. Internally in Kenya, 1969 was a decisive year which witnessed the assassination of Tom Mboya, then Minister of Finance, thereby exacerbating ethnic passions, and Oginga Odinga was breaking away from KANU (Kenya African National Union) to form KPU (Kenya Peoples' Union).² Because of these tensions, contestations and struggles, Nairobi was a vibrant place to construct one's intellectual formation: for a South African in the 1960s, this arrogant and lovable city was the best thing on this side of the then recently destroyed Sophiatown.

The extraordinary vibrancy of Nairobi made it certain that while I was in Upper Hill School I would encounter certain intellectual cultures and tendencies: the Marxism of Jean-Paul Sartre (Search for a Method, What is Literature?, Anti-Semite and Jew, "Existentialism is Humanism"); the Guevarism of Regis Debray (Revolution in the Revolution?, "Castroism: The Long March in Latin America"); the revolutionism of Frantz Fanon (The Wretched of the Earth, Toward the African Revolution). Also as part of this cultural formation was the long-extended listening, to John Coltrane's Giant Steps and My Favorite Things, to the Oscar Peterson Trio, and to Miles Davis' Sketches of Spain and the 1950s great Prestige recordings (Cookin', Relaxin', Workin', Steamin') backed by John Coltrane, Paul Chambers, Philly Joe Jones and Red Garland. The discovery which was really a revelation was the encounter with European film masters through the Kenya Film Society founded by Roger Houghton. The following films were extraordinary even on their first viewing at the Society: Miklos Jansco's The Round-Up (1965), Jean Luc Godard's Pierrot Le Fou (1965) and Andrzej Wadja's Kanal (1957). These discoveries were simultaneous with the opening of the panoramic view of African literary masters: the first reading of

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, which was both shattering and exhilarating, the solemn occasion of reading Camara Laye's *Dark Child*, the encounter with the corrosive irony of Ferdinand Oyono's *Houseboy* and *The Old Man and the Medal*, the rendezvous with David Diop's revolutionary poetry, the amazing rhetorical power of "Africa" and "Listen Comrades". My first reading of African American literature was simultaneous with my discovery of South African literature: respectively, James Baldwin and Ezekiel Mphahle. I spent a predominant part of 1968 reading all the novels, essays and plays of Baldwin. *Revolution in the Revolution?* and *The Wretched of the Earth* became fundamental texts for both young Kenyan and South Africa intellectuals.

It would seem that Nairobi was one of the best places in the world for an African to be in the 1960s. Jomo Kenyatta's government was one of the most reactionary regimes in Africa, which was a classic exemplification of what Fanon so bitterly denounced in his book. Reading *The Wretched of the Earth*, and seeing that what it denounced was unfolding before our eyes, made us aware that African history was not an abstract category, but a real process in movement happening in the present, the effect of the governmental policies which were unconcerned about the wretched conditions of the dispossessed. The following searing words of Fanon were read as a serious indictment of what was happening in Kenya, a country which practically all South African exiles loved and identified with, yet despised it for its political sycophancy towards United States: "The national bourgeoisie of underdeveloped countries is not engaged in production, nor in invention, nor building, nor labor; it is completely canalized into activities of the intermediary type. . . Yet the national middle class constantly demands the nationalization of the economy and of the trading sectors. This is because, from their point of view, nationalization does not mean placing the whole economy at the service of the nation and deciding to satisfy the needs of the nation. For them, nationalization does not mean governing the state with regard to the new social relations whose growth it has been decided to encourage. To them, nationalization quite simply means the transfer into native hands of those unfair advantages which are a legacy of the colonial period. . . Because it is bereft of ideas, because it lives to itself and cuts itself off from the people, undermined by its hereditary incapacity to think in terms of all the problems of the nation as seen from the point of view of the whole of that nation, the national middle class will have nothing better to do than to take on the role of manager for Western enterprise, and it will in practice set up its country as the brothel of Europe."³ These are profound observations indeed.

Elaborating on Frantz Fanon's thesis, Ngugi wrote the following prophetic judgement in prison on occasion of President Jomo Kenyatta's death, the man who had unjustifiably imprisoned him: "In a class-structured society, a leader is not simply a leader of the whole nation, he is a leader of a class. A leader in

power is a leader of the class in power, that is the class in control of the state. A leader of a struggle is also not simply a leader, but a leader of a class struggling to seize political power, i.e. the state. . . My reception of his death was then one of sadness: here was a black Moses who had been called by history to lead his people to the promised land of no exploitation, no oppression, but who failed to rise to the occasion, who ended up surrounding himself with colonial chiefs, home guards and traitors; who ended up being described by the British bourgeoisie as their best friend in Africa, to the extent of his body being carried to the grave, not on the arms of the Kenyan people, but on a carriage provided by the Queen of England, the symbolic head of the British exploiting classes. Kenyatta was a twentieth-century tragic figure: he could have been a Lenin, a Mao Tse-Tung or a Ho Chi Minh; but he ended being a Chiang Kai-shek, a Park Chung Hee, or a Pinochet. He chose the Lilliputian approval of the Blundells and the Macdonalds of the colonial world, warming himself in the reactionary gratitude of Euro-American exploiters and oppressors rather than in the eternal titanic applause of the Kenyan people, sunning himself in the revolutionary gratitude of all oppressed and exploited. For me, his death, even though he had wrongly jailed me, was not an occasion for rejoicing but one that called for a serious re-evaluation of our history; to see the balance of losses and gains, and work out the options open to us for the future of our children and country."⁴ It was because of the extraordinary quality of such a mind, which was in the process of unfolding its deeper complexities in the late 1960s and 1970s, that one felt privileged to be its engager. Ngugi's practice of cultural politics was a logical extension and application of Fanon's conception of revolutionary history. To have lived in Kenya in the 1960s in close proximity to Ngugi's changing political, cultural and literary imagination, even if one then did not know him, was to have been inside the Fanonian machinery of African history at its most superlative moment.

It was not only in reading Ngugi's articles which appeared now in the Sunday Nation or in the Daily Nation which made one believe that Nairobi was perhaps the intellectual capital of Africa, it was also the availability of books such as Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino* (1966) and Ezekiel Mphahlele's *In Corner B* (1967), both published by East African Publishing House. It is within this context that one could say that Taban Lo Liyong's famous or infamous article in *Transition*, "East Africa, O East Africa, I Lament thy Literary Barrenness", was too harsh given that none of the East African countries had as yet entered the fifth year of political independence.⁵ To have read these books still smelling fresh from the printing press, one by a major African poet from Uganda and the other a major African writer from South Africa, was to be exhilarated at being at the maelstrom of late African modernity. This late African modernity was all apparent when one strolled on River Road, located between the University of Nairobi and Machakos 'Airport' (a big bus and matatu terminal, linking Nairobi

with the various destinations of the countryside). This strolling made one all the more politically and socially conscious that a fascinating 'theatrical' drama between modernity and tradition was in the process of playing itself out. It was River Road, with its many colourful Indian shops and many African street vendors which defined the soul of Nairobi. It was from the street vendors on River Road that I had the pleasure of buying books like *Song of Lawino* and *In Corner B*, as well as journals such as *Transition* and *East African Journal*, and not from the upscale bookstores on Government Road or Kimathi Street. The thousand of strolls I made on this great street looking for the latest copy of the aforementioned magazines made one love Kenya with great passion, while profoundly despairing at the political direction the country was taking. It is with great justice that Meja Mwangi's first novel *Down River Road* takes place on this fantastic street, a novel I read in Polish translation while living in Poland in the early 1980s. River Road with its cheap hotels is a central part of Kenyan national history, whereas Kenyatta Avenue, with the New Stanley Hotel and the Thorn Tree, and expensive tourist shops, forms part of colonial history or the history of occupation.

In reading a book like *Song of Lawino*, my generation was perhaps the first generation not only to voraciously read its own African authors on a massive scale, but it was also the first to be privileged to live simultaneously at the same historical moment with its major writers: one could have seen Okot p'Bitek drinking beer and eating a big dinner on River Road, or as one was passing by, see David Rubadiri (from Malawi but at this time in permanent exile in Kenya) holding forth with American scholars or European intellectuals at the Norfolk Hotel, located just opposite the University, or one could have seen Ngugi entering the University Library, or from the outside one could have seen Rebecca Njau inside a Gallery looking at an art exhibition, or one could also have seen Grace Ogot posting mail at the Nairobi Post Office. As it happened on many Sundays, in the year that their stay in Kenya overlapped, the Masilela family visited the Mphahlele family at their beautiful house by Ngong Road: while my parents conversed with Zik and Rebecca in the dining room, in another part of the house, while listening to American jazz, I would be conversing Tony, their son and my best friend, and Teresa, their only daughter. The Nairobi of the 1960s made possible the acquisition of knowledge and intellectual culture through lived experience, rather than only through intensive reading of books in isolation. But on the other hand, reading R. D. Laing's *The Divided Self* or James Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son* inside the quiet and magnificent architecture of the McMillan Public Library, was a great pleasure. Saturdays were always awaited for with great anticipation, because the mornings would be spent at the McMillan either reading or browsing through English newspapers and magazines, while the afternoons were reserved for movies, either an Indian film with the extraordinarily beautiful Sharmila Tagore at the Globe Cinema, or Peckenpah's

Major Dundee (1965) at the Kenya Cinema, or Brooks' *The Professionals* (1966) at the Twentieth-Century Cinema. If one did not wish to go to the McMillan Library, one could always have gone to the American Library or the British Council Library: both now and then displayed movies that best represented their national cultures. Sunday afternoons and evenings were reserved for films not movies, as one watched programs organized by the Kenya Film Society, on high European film modernists like Luchino Visconti, Ingmar Bergman, Jean Renoir, Carl Dreyer and other great non-European film artists like Akira Kurosawa, Kenji Mizoguchi or John Ford. Nairobi in the vibrant 1960s gave one many options for the utilization of one's leisure time, but the most predominant was either entrance to high European modern culture(s) through films, or investigation of the then exponentially developing modern African literary culture.

The extraordinary impact of *Song of Lawino* on me and on my High School friends resided in the fact that it opened the limitless horizons of modern African literary practice by establishing what we perceived to be the third front of African poetic form, between or adjacent to the minimalism of Christopher Okigbo and the rhetoricism of David Diop. Although Okigbo's attempt to wed Ibo mythic patterns and the modernism of Pound and Eliot, as well as the music of Debussy and Ravel was exhilarating and fascinating, it was not experienced as a sufficient challenge or break with Europeanism which our British expatriate teachers were rumming down our throats in the form of the poetry of Yeats, Auden and others. Since Okigbo had self-consciously proclaimed, with a certain amount of flourishness, at the famous Makerere Conference of 1963 that he was a poets' poet, and since we considered ourselves students and followers of Fanon and Guevera, i. e. revolutionaries, intoxicated with Fidel Castro's statement that 'the duty of a revolutionary is to make revolution', we never made extraordinary efforts to understand the dense allusiveness of his poetry. Its profound musicality was sufficient for our ears. The following lines from *Heavensgate* (1961):

Before you, mother Idoto,
naked I stand,
before the watery presence,
a prodigal,

leaning on an oilbean,
lost in your legend. . . .6

and those from *Limits* (1962):

Suddenly becoming talkative
like weavebird
Summoned at offside of
dream remembered

Between sleep and waking,

I hang up my egg-shells
 To you of plam grove,
 Upon whose bamboo towers hang
 Dripping with yesterupwine⁷

resonated deeply in our ears without necessarily informing our minds. What made us hold Okigbo at arm's length was his wish to locate African Poetry under the sign-post of African Mythologies. This we could not accept since we believed that Africa was suffering and in agony because of the absence of rationalism, purposefully held at abeyance by colonialism and imperialism. We believed that it would be merely a matter of time before the enlightenment of Marxism gave Africa her true poetic voice and historical mission.

Since we were attracted to the revolutionary rhetoric and anger of his poetry, as well as his placing of Africa poetry under guidance of African History, we saw David Diop as a conter-foil to Christopher Okigbo. Perhaps more importantly, Diop's historicized Negritude was read to be antagonistic to Senghor's romanticized Negritude, in effect a duel between revolutionarism and romanticism. One had to be able to recite "Listen Comrades" in order to enter our circle of friendship which we defined ourselves as serious students of Fanon. The Wretched of the Earth became our bible, hence the whole book had to be committed to memory. Diop and Fanon were understood to have been engaged in the same historical project concerning Africa: the liberation of the African people. There was not much difference between the poetic voice of Diop when it hailed in bitterness and anger, perhaps even in lamentation:

The cry of a hundred people smashing their cells
 And my blood long held in exile
 The blood they hoped to snare in a circle of words
 Rediscovered the fervour that scatters the mists
 Listen comrades of the struggling centuries
 To the keen clamour of the Negro from Africa to the Americas
 It is the sign of the dawn

The sign of brotherhood which comes to nourish the dreams of men.⁸ and the political voice of Fanon when in fortitude and determination it pronounced: "Come, then, comrades; it would be as well to decide at once to change our ways. We must shake off the heavy darkness in which we were plunged, and leave it behind. The new day which is already at hand must find us firm, prudent, and resolute. . . Leave this Europe where they are never done talking of Man, yet murder men everywhere they find them, at the corner of every one of their own streets, in all the corners of the globe."⁹ Both Fanon and Diop were voices of revolutionary modernity. Beyond the reticence of the Nigerian and the rhetorics of the Senegalese, both these voices where expressing themselves under the poetics of European modernism.

The startling and dramatic intervention of Okot p'Bitek through Song of Lawino was to make clear that to be a modern African poet it was not necessary to belabor under the poetics of European modernism. The poetics of African languages were just as capable, if not more so, of capturing and rendering the crisis of African modernity, as the poetics of Western modernism. Originally written in Acoli, Song of Lawino, was a singular exemplification of the fact that the African languages were just as capable as the Europeans languages in rendering the complexities of African modernities: the eternal struggle and conflict between modernity and tradition. Perhaps this is one of the things that enamored Okot p'Bitek to Ngugi wa Thiong'o, the Ugandan's commitment to African languages when the Kenyan was still obeying the edicts of cultural imperialism. In a memorial homage Ngugi writes: "Although Lawino, the heroine of the poem is lamenting the passage of the African world, in a more real sense she is only saying what is fundamentally true---that is, the African tradition and the African world are valid in themselves and did not have to be criticized or praised in relationship to other cultures. In other words, the African world is as valid to the African people in the same way as the Western world or the Western culture is valid to Western people."¹⁰ Unquestionably, the poem did validate the African world, as we could the Ocols walking on Kenyatta Avenue, but never on River Road, or driving the Merdes-Benzenes ("WaBenzi") on Koinange Street.

Fanon had already taught us how to recognize the Ocols, whom he had denounced in these passionate words: "As we see it, the bankruptcy of the bourgeoisie is not apparent in the economic field only. They have come to power in the name of a narrow nationalism and representing a race; they will prove themselves incapable of triumphantly putting into practice a program with even a minimum humanist content, in spite of fine-sounding declarations which are devoid of meaning since the speakers bands about in irresponsible fashion phrases that come straight out of European treatises on morals and political philosophy." Like Ocol, the irresponsible husband of Lawino, the African national bourgeoisie is characterized by imitativenees, lack of originality, and suffering from a profound inferiority complex:

My husband treats me roughly.
 The insults!
 Words cut more painfully than sticks!
 He says my mother is a witch,
 That my clansmen are fools
 Because they eat rats,
 He says we are all Kaffirs.
 We do not know the ways of God,
 We sit in deep darkness
 And do not know the Gospel,
 He says my mother hides her charms

In her necklace
And that we are all sorcerers.11

Since we were already interested in the socialist 'man' as constructed by the Cuban Revolution, the fumbblings and mediocrity of an African national bourgeoisie could hardly demoralize us. We wanted to know about the movement of history: the Cuban Revolution was its greatest exemplification.

In a real sense it was Frantz Fanon who indicated to us both the importance of the Cuban Revolution and the necessity of African intellectuals to engage themselves with Latin American history, in order for us to understand the tragedy unfolding there that had to be avoided at all cost: "Latin America, made up of new independent countries which sit at the United Nations and raise the wind there, ought to be an object lesson for Africa. These former colonies since their liberation have suffered the brazenfaced rule of Western capitalism in terror and destitution. . . Castro took over power in Cuba, and gave it to the people. This heresy is felt to be a national scourge by the Yankees, and the United States is organizes counterrevolutionary brigades. . ."12 Reading Fanon's defense of the Cuban Revolution as well Jean-Paul Sartre's, and seeing the transformations being undertaken in relation to Cubans of African descent, it was impossible for us to accept Carlos Moore's attack of the Cuban Revolution from an 'Africanist' perspective because of its alleged racism and oppression of Afro-Cubans.

In the 1960s the lessons that Frantz Fanon afforded onr were simply inexhaustible. In his condemnation of American imperialist intervention at the Bay of Pigs, and his expression of solidarity with the Cuban Revolution, Fanon in *Wretched of the Earth* was in effect declaring Cuba to be the first liberated zone in the Americas. Fanon also stated that it was imperative for Africans to have a deep knowledge of Latin America in order to avoid what had befallen the continent of Simon Bolivar. This edict had a profound effect on me personally in that today I possess a greater knowledge of Latin Amnerican literature(s) and history than that of African literature(s) and history. Some members of my generation were more likely to be more familiar with Cesar Vallejo than with W. B. Yeats, more familiar with Eduardo Galeano than with Alain Robbe-Grillet, more familiar with Angel Rama than with Herbert Read, more familiar with Alejo Carpentier than with Lampedusa: Fanon had in effect replaced the position of Europe with that of Latin America in our historical imagination. I can still remember nearly twenty five years ago the moment when I first discovered Cesar Vallejo in the shelves of the Los Angeles Public Library, about about four years after reading Fanon profound statement in Nairobi. I picked the book *Poemas Humanos/Human Poems* without knowing what it was about and who the author. The discovery of Cesar Vallejo was one of my greatest experiences, easily rivalling that of my stumbling onto Fanon. Reading the following lines, I was totally convinced that Marxism had found its greatest poetic voice, whose

revolutionary spirituality paradoxically also embraced Catholicism:

There are people so wretched they don't even
have a body; quantitative the hair
lowers inch by inch, the genial grief;
the mode, above;
don't look for me, the molar of oblivion,
they seem to come out of the air, to add sighs mentally, to

hear

bright whips in their palates!¹³

Such deep poetic imagination from Spain, *Take This Cup from Me* (an anthology of poetry about the Spanish Civil War which sought to rival Whitman's outpourings of a century earlier about the American Civil War) was very compelling:

Proletarian who dies of universe, in what frantic harmony
your grandeur will end, your extreme poverty, your impelling
whirlpool,
your methodical violence, your theoretical & practical chaos,
your Dantesque

wish, so very Spanish, to love, even treacherously, your enemy!¹⁴

Reading such astonishing lines one could not avoid worshipping and idolizing the great Peruvian poet, estimating him to be the greatest poetic voice since Dante.

The edict of Fanon also had the effect of intellectual liberation: Latin America was to be our point of orientation and not Europe. Although we were aware of the large presence of Africans in Cuba, it was Carpentier's *The Kingdom of this World* (1949) that announced to us that Latin America was as much African as it was 'Latin'. This great novella, inspired me to 'search' for the African intellectual presence in Latin America: one encountered Jean-Price Mars in Haiti, Manuel Zapata Olivella in Columbia, Joao Cruz e Sousa and Abdias do Nascimento in Brazil and so on. It was also his other book, *Explosion in the Cathedral* (1962), that made us recognize the inseparability of the French Revolution and the Haitian Revolution, a thesis, although unknown to us then, had been formulated earlier by C. L. R. James in *The Black Jacobins* (1938). If we were obsessed with revolutionary questions and issues in the Nairobi of the 1960s, it was because the African Revolution was then in a state of fermentation, a process that came to full fruition in the Ethiopian Revolution in 1974 and in the Angola Revolution in 1975.

Our awareness of the enormity of the Cuban Revolution coincided with the death of Che Guevara in October 1967 in Bolivia: at Upper Hill School, we spent the whole of 1968 mourning the CIA directed execution of this great revolutionary. Our obsessive preoccupation with the crisis of Guevarism made us believe that

the 1968 French May Events were historic events of a very limited nature: they were more important to our perceived interests in Africa in revealing to us that Jean-Paul Sartre had shifted from Existentialism to Marxism in a definitive way. Consequently Sartre's Preface to *The Wretched of the Earth* had to be read within a Marxist problematic. What made us hold Sartre in high esteem was not only his Preface to the writings of Patrice Lumumba, but his defence of the Cuban Revolution. The French May Events were important in our eyes in having made Sartre conceptualize a new type of intellectual: the critical intellectual whose fundamental responsibility was the struggle for freedom and justice. An intellectual who seemed to embody this commitment to new conceptualization was Régis Debray, whose book, *Revolution in the Revolution?*, embodied both the triumph of the Cuban Revolution and the impending tragic defeat of Guevarism. In his opening remarkable first paragraph to the book, Debray theorized a new understanding of history which seemed to confirm to us what Fanon had observed in *Studies in a Dying Colonialism*: that history as it moves forward seems simultaneously to be moving backward. Debray's observations made us aware of the multiplicity of planes in which history moves: "We are never completely contemporaneous with our present, History advances in disguise; it appears on stage wearing the mask of the preceding scene, and we tend to lose the meaning of the play. Each time the curtain rises, continuity has to be re-established. The blame, of course is not history's, but lies in our vision, encumbered with memory and images learned in the past. We see the past superimposed on the present, even when the present is a revolution."¹⁵ This statement of the dialectic between the real and appearance, substance and form, which Marx in the *Grundrisse* saw as necessitating the construction of sciences, was a source of deep fascination to us as well as making us aware that history must be approached from a scientific perspective, and since we were convinced that Marxism was the only rational and scientific approach to history: we intellectually became Marxists. Witnessing the ravages of imperialism in the form of neocolonialism in Africa, we also became Marxists morally. Marxism became the central part of our moral vision.

Although we had carefully read Roberto Fernandez Retamar's lucid and succinct Introduction to the Spanish edition of *Revolution in the Revolution?* (carried over into the English edition), and were impressed by its exposition of Debray's relation to the Cuban Revolution, it was to be a few years for us to be aware of Retamar's own position within the Cuban Revolution. His monumental project of bringing political and cultural enlightenment through his great journal *Casa de las Americas* (actually the voice of the Cuban Revolution in cultural matters) to the whole of Latin America was still not apparent to us: in other words, it was not immediately apparent to us in Africa, that the Cuban Revolution had made possible the emergence of, the New Latin American Novel, the New Latin American Song, the New Latin American Film. For my part, by now a doctoral

student at UCLA in 1974, it was upon reading Retamar's "Caliban: Notes Toward a Discussion of Culture in Our America" in *Massachusetts Review* that the remarkable intellectual profile of Retamar emerged (it was a great honor later to meet with him in Houston in 1977 and in West Berlin in 1988). In 1967 or in 1968 when we read Retamar in our youthful days in Nairobi, characterized by a tinge of revolutionary romanticism, his mentioning of Louis Althusser as 'a great Marxist thinker' did not register that much, to us then, there could only be one French Marxist thinker, and that was Jean-Paul Sartre. This insistence merely expressed our time lag.

Since it was obvious to us that *Revolution in the Revolution?* was an intellectual presentation of the ideas of Ernesto 'Che' Guevara on guerilla struggle, or that Debray was a student of Guevara on revolutionary theory, beside the fact then that Debray was in imprisonment in Bolivia, having been arrested while clandestinely visiting Guevara's revolutionary foco, the nature of Guevarism became our constant preoccupation. We were startled to learn that Guevara had actually fought in the Congo in 1965, in an attempt to overthrow the CIA sponsored fascist dictatorship of Mobutu. This had a profound effect on us. We read everything by him that we could possibly lay hold of in the libraries and bookstores in Nairobi. Our reading Josie Fanon's interview with Guevara, the widow of Fanon, was one of the electrifying experiences we had at this time, for it indicated a direct connection between Fanonism and Guevarism: in effect, between the African Revolution and the Cuban Revolution. In response to a question posed by Josie Fanon to him about the position of the Cuban Revolution concerning the situation in Africa in 1964, Guevara responded with stirring words that still resonate in one's being, approximately thirty years after one's reading of them: "Africa represents one of the most important fields of struggle against all forms of exploitation existing in the world---against imperialism, colonialism, and neocolonialism. There exist great possibilities for success in Africa, but there are also many dangers. The positive side includes the youth of the African people's modern states, the hate which colonialism has left in the minds of the people, the very clear and profound differences between an African and a colonialist. . . We believe that the principal danger faced by Africa is the continually rising possibility of division among the African peoples. On one side we can find the lackeys of imperialism, on the other the people trying to free themselves along the roads best suited to them. We have valid reasons for fearing this danger. . . In short, it can be said that at present there are great possibilities in Africa due to the unrest existing in this region of the world, but there are also real dangers which we have to keep in mind. There are important economic problems to be remembered. Unequal relations in international exchanges lead to an impasse where it becomes very easy to give in to imperialism and to oppress the people whom, for awhile, they [national bourgeoisie] seem to serve."16 Such words stirred us into internationalism in our beliefs, perspectives and

commitments: our generation had no historical reasons for believing in or subscribing to African nationalism, black nationalism or African socialism, however much we held Julius Nyerere in high esteem: the fundamental struggle in our time was perceived to be between capitalism and socialism. The lesson of internationalism imparted by Guevara is what we also found compelling in *The Wretched of the Earth*.

All the central books which were shaping our political imagination, *Revolution in the Revolution ?*, *The Wretched of the Earth*, *Che Speaks*, all published by Grove Press in New York, had been purchased in open-kioks (which consisted of a bown cardboard layed out on a pavement with books alphabetically lined) on River Road. River Road was much more important in our intellectual formation than the African elite High Schools we attended, the former 'Whites Only' Schools. Not only "foreign ideologies" were obtainable on River Road, but also nationally and regionally brewed ideologies, respectively in the form of brilliant magazines such as *Transition* and *East African Journal*. Beside the high intellectual calibre of the essays which appeared in both journals, one could also read articles, speeches or policy statements by President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, President Milton Obote of Uganda or by Tom Mboya, the Minister of Finance in Kenya. Reading in one of these reviews the Arusha Declaration of 1967 by Julius Nyerere in which Tanzania opted for a socialist form of development, was an exhilarating experience since it confirmed to us that the African Revolution was moving forward, after its disastrous defeat by United States imperialism in the Congo Crisis of 1960. The death of Patrice Lumumba and its aftershock defined some of the somber African moments of the 1960s.

Our historical sensibility and imagination was intellectually shaped not only by books, especially not only those by European left avant-garde intellectuals like Herbert Marcuse (notwithstanding that he had by then been living in United States for decades) or Raymond Williams or others, but also through our own home produced intellectual vehicles such *Transition*. It was in 1967 and in 1968 that this great review shaped our generation in Kenya, for that matter in the whole of Africa, by encouraging and inspiring us to develop a passion for the written word: the culture of the written word. Recently (March 1996) browsing through the old copies of the review for the first time since initially reading them approximately thirty years ago one Sunday afternoon at California State University in Los Angeles, I can still remember palpably the excitement of that initial encounter. I recall the profound sadness that descended on us when we read in *Transition* no.33 (October/November 1967) an anonymous obituary announcing the death of Christopher Okigbo or *Transition* no.34 (December/January 1968) Lewis Nkosi's obituary about Can Themba. In the same issue as Nkosi's note, we were entranced to read Ezekiel Mphahlele's long letter written from the University of Denver explaining his unawareness that the events he had

sponsored or the institutions he had created as Director of the African Programme of the Congress for Cultural Freedom, the Kampala Congress of 1962, the Conferences in Dakar and Freetown in 1963, the Mbari centers and the Publishing House in Nigeria, and the Chemchemi Center in Nairobi, had been secretly financed by the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). It was fascinating reading in different African and overseas publications about the big controversy that subsequently ensued.

While on the one hand Transition sustained our intellectual inquisitiveness and development, it unintentionally made us cultivate a deep hostility, and thirty years have not abated the intensity of the animosity, toward Ali Mazrui because of the nature of the essays he wrote in the review. One of the most famous or infamous, depending on one's scholarly and ideological point of view, was "Nkrumah: the Leninist Czar", in which Mazrui argued that because of his personality cult, Nkrumah had failed in his quest to be a Lenin of Africa, pathetically ended up being a Czarist.¹⁷ Mazrui concluded his argument by stating that although Nkrumah had been a great Gold Coast, he had failed miserably as a great Ghanaian. This provocative essay appeared barely within six months after the overthrow of Nkrumah. The unanimous negative response to it by African intellectuals, most of whom were progressive and on the left, was because it was read as an apologia for imperialism, colonialism and neo-colonialist forces in Africa. Many of us High School concurred with this reading of Mazrui. It was clear to my school friends that Nkrumah's overthrow had been the work of the CIA and the British MI6, undertaken a few months in early 1966, after Nkrumah had expressed his vociferous opposition at the Commonwealth Meeting of December 1965 to Ian Smith's Unilateral Declaration of Independence in November of that year in Rhodesia, since 1980 Zimbabwe. In fact, at the time of the coup d'état against him, Nkrumah was in the process of organizing an All African Army to overthrow Ian Smith. It was within this context that Mazrui's essay had such a chilling effect, which three decades have not lessened its traumatic impact. It is interesting to note that while most African intellectuals from Ngugi to David Rubadiri reacted with violent anger against Mazrui, Nkrumah himself in exile in Conakry reacted with a certain admiration for him, as can be gleaned from a letter by his Secretary stating why the recently deposed President of Ghana had refused the offer of Rajat Neogy, editor of Transition, for Osagyefo himself to respond to Mazrui's critical comments.¹⁸

In his next major piece in Transition, Ali Mazrui went on the intellectual offensive against Julius Nyerere's Ujamaa socialist experiment in Tanzania. Specifically, he lambasted foreign expatriates, especially European and American, who were enamored with Nyerere's attempt to construct a form of African socialism.¹⁹ Although it was clear to us then at Upper Hill School then that the University of Dar-es-Salaam was the center of European and African

Marxists, while Kampala or Makerere University was largely a camp of intellectual ideologues for capitalism, we were not fully aware that Mazrui intellectual attack was part of the war between the two intellectual centers in East Africa, and we were also not fully cognisant that perhaps the real nemesis of Mazrui was not really Nyerere, but Walter Rodney, the brilliant Guyanese Marxist who was then in Dar-es-Salaam. Grant Kamenju's riposte on this and other matters in Transition to Ali Mazrui made us excited about the intellectual fermentation which was then happening in East Africa.²⁰ While we were enthralled with Kamenju, Rodney, Giovanni Arrighi, John Saul, Mahmood Mamdani and others as members of a 'School' in Dar-es-Salaam, and with Kampala as the intellectual and cultural center of Transition, we were not aware that the recently returned Ngugi from University of Leeds had launched a literary and linguistic revolution at the University of Nairobi on matters concerning literature and representation of history. All of these happenings made many of us High School students hold in high esteem all three of the East African universities. To us, given the intellectual excitement generated in Dar, Kampala and Nairobi, the breaking up of the East African Community (Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda had been in a form of federalist alliance from pre-independence days) was not experienced as a major tragedy it was, because we saw it as breaking of the hegemonic power of capitalist Kenya over socialist Tanzania and social-democratic Uganda. We naively believed that as long as intellectual culture was vibrant at the three centers, politics will inevitably be pulled into enlightenment. We were certain that within a short time Fanonian political principles would hold supreme in Africa in the process of its unification.

As we were trying to make historical sense of the importance of Fanon for Africa, Ali Mazrui published a book which in effect questioned the relevance of Fanon. In this collection of essays, Violence and Thought, Mazrui rejected Fanon for his supposed adulation of violence. Mazrui did not seem to think that Fanon's critique of the African national bourgeoisie, of neo-colonialism, of spontaneity, of imperialism, of personality cult of African leaders, and his support of the Cuban Revolution and suggestion of the choice of the socialist path of development for Third World countries, were of serious importance to merit serious and considered reflection.²¹ Like many of his counterparts- West liberal scholars- Mazrui was obsessed with the concept of violence without taking note of Fanon's careful calibration of its historical differentiations. We interpreted Mazrui fixation on violence in Fanon's epistemology and philosophy of history as an unconscious fear of socialism and the African Revolution. This hatred of the African Revolution was the driving force of Mazrui subtle hostility to Frantz Fanon, Kwame Nkrumah and Julius Nyerere, the great exponents of its movement.²² We ridiculed Mazrui hostility to these great sons of Africa as a not so subtle advertising of his intellectual services to American imperialism.

Perhaps the reason the East African Journal was not as compelling to our imagination as Transition is that it was not so much preoccupied with political and intellectual matters of the African Revolution as with the pedagogics of African Culture. The 1960s were the historical time of the African Revolution. Even though now and then the East African Journal published the speeches of Milton Obote, the president of Uganda, and those of Julius Nyerere, it was mainly concerned with giving forum to outstanding writers such as Ezekiel Mphahlele, Okello Oculi, David Rubadiri, Okot 'Bitek, Grace Ogot and others. When Ali Mazrui appeared on its pages, he was more intellectually sounder than ideologically hectoring as was invariably the case when he appeared in Transition: even though he could be illuminating and lucid on African intellectuals and on the African Revolution, there is always something skewed in his discourse as when he posits that the writings of Lenin and Marx contradict each other: Mazrui has absolutely no understanding of dialectics, even though at this time he was fond of name-dropping Hegel's name at totally unexpected moments.²³ The East African Journal did succeed in establishing the intellectual foundations of modern literary culture in East Africa as can be seen in publication of the first three copies of East Africa Journal Literary Issue edited respectively by Ezekiel Mphahlele, David Rubadiri and Lennard Okola: all published within a year of each other in 1967.²⁴ Reading these special literary supplements convinced one that Nairobi was at the center of the essential things happening in Africa, despite the reactionary regime in power. The role of Mphahlele in contributing to the establishing of these literary foundations by founding the Chemchemi Cultural Centre cannot be overestimated.²⁵ Coupled with the extraordinary essay by Bernard Magubane on the shortcomings of Sociology in Africa, one was also convinced that Johannesburg or Cairo or Lagos were not on intellectual par with Nairobi, whether this was true or not, it did not really matter.²⁶ Such direct contributions as that of Mphahlele and Magubane, among others, to African intellectual culture of the 1960s, is one of the things that made our South African exile experience historically meaningful, however much it was now and then characterized by bitterness, bickering, anger, although never ruled by hopelessness. Beside these two brilliant reviews, there emerged in June 1967 another outstanding journal: Mawazo. Since it was edited by three European expatriates in Kampala, at least initially, and seems to have come into being as an afterthought or as a challenge to Transition, it does not seem to have possessed the urgency, immediacy and zest of the other two journals, even though its debut copy had impressive contributions by Ali Mazrui and Kenneth Kaunda, then president of Zambia.

Political and intellectual matters may have preoccupied a large part of our week-day schedule while I was with my Kenyan High School friends, the week-ends were invariably spent with my South African compatriots, who were just a few years than older than myself. On Saturday evenings we were usually to be found

at the Starlight Nightclub, up Kenyatta Avenue and opposite the Pan-African Hotel boggying to the Congolese music of 'Dr.' Franco and Nico, and to the Rhythm and Blues music of Otis Redding, Aretha Franklin, Sam Cook, Wilson Pickett, James Brown and others. Starlight Nightclub was where many political exiles and refugees from many African countries were to be found. But here too were to be found the children of the emergent Kenyan national bourgeoisie. In many ways Starlight was a force field of acculturation to black modernities in the twentieth-century within the context of Kenya: whether the Africans were from the Americas or South Africa or Zaire or Sudan or Ethiopia, they were commingling, hybridizing and synthesizing with each other. To a large extent, Rhythm and Blues music dominated the radio stations that were popular with the young urban crowd. Jazz was practically non-existent in Kenya. It was South African political exiles who brought jazz to Kenya, whether American jazz or South African jazz. If one wanted to listen to jazz in Nairobi, one had to go in the direction of Westlands, where even here jazz was presented very infrequently: invariably it was a South African political exile artist playing jazz in a struggling Nightclub, just on the outer perimeters of the center of Nairobi. The South African musical group, Lo Six with Thoko, also in exile, was one of the mainstays of serious music in Nairobi. After spending nearly two decades in Nairobi, Lo Six spend the last decade in Mombasa before returning to South Africa in the early 1990s. Even though I was not aware of it at the time, Lo Six was the fundamental connection for us South African political exiles in Kenya to the Sophiatown Renaissance cultural tradition of the 1950s. It was when I started doing research on the 1950s, that thirty years later in Los Angeles after having encountered the Lo Six in Nairobi in the 1960s, that I recognized their true historic importance. In a very interesting way, Lo Six made us constantly aware that we were South Africans, and that our stay in Nairobi was part of an uncompleted journey.

As I mentioned earlier, for many of us young South African political exiles and refugees in Kenya, jazz and African American literary culture were much more closer to our immediacy than our own music and literary culture. One central explanation for this was the question of availability: the American Library on Government Road, that is centrally located at the center of Nairobi, had the latest copies of the trendiest magazines and the latest books published by African American writers and cultural critics. Practically all of my compatriots hardly ever visited the British Council Library which was located by the Kenya National Theater, and the University of Nairobi. In contrast, one usually ran into a few of my compatriots at the American Library. Our favorite writers were James Baldwin, Richard Wright and Langston Hughes. Down Beat, the American jazz magazine, was very popular amongst us. Every copy was read religiously. There would always be serious discussions about the musical directions Jimmy Smith, John Coltrane and Oscar Peterson were taking. There would be interminable

passionate discussions about John Coltrane. The one book one had to have read to be taken seriously in our small community of jazz aficionados was Leroi Jones' *Blues People*. There was a time when it seemed that every young South African in Nairobi was carrying a copy of Amiri Baraka's book under their arms. His poetry also was very popular with some of us. Ironically, none of us were aware, that at the time we were reading *Blues People* avidly and under the spell of its author, that at the same time in Harlem Amiri Baraka was leading the Black Arts Movement, the most important African American cultural and literary movement of the 1960s. Another book, which I recall as having also been read religiously at this time was Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son*. Eldridge Cleaver's savage attack on Baldwin in *Soul on Ice* caused consternation among us. But Cleaver had his defenders, especially among those who were fanatical partisans of the Black Panther Party. The American Library made sure that little information was obtainable about the Black Panther Party; but there was all kind of information about the NAACP.

Jazz music was probably the one thing that cemented the relatively young exile community together while South African politics invariably lead to denunciatory and acrimonious discussions. So one painfully and gradually learned with whom to discuss exile politics: ANC members with ANC members, and PAC members with PAC members. Jazz brought all of us together. Listening to jazz on a Sunday afternoons with fellow exiles Eric Bates, George Menoe, Mhlangabezi Vundla, among many others, in Eastleigh is one of my fondest memories of exile in Kenya.²⁷ Jazz playing went on for hours, sometimes continuously for ten hours. Now and then our discussion would turn to the question of whether would we be around to see a democratic South Africa come into being! In the 1960s, when the opposition at home had been completely suppressed, it was very difficult to be optimistic. But none of us ever lost hope. The struggle of African Americans, with Martin Luther King at its helm, held much hope for us. But it was the struggle of the Vietnamese people in resistance to American imperialism that had a lasting impact on us. It is remarkable to recall, nearly thirty years later, that jazz gave us a sense of hope and purpose, at those very trying times. Since while listening to Miles Davis or Clifford Brown or Lee Morgan we would be discussing or arguing about Lenin or Trotsky or Bukharin or General Giap or Regis Debray or Mao, Marxism and jazz were inseparable in my intellectual formation. Kenya gave me a passion for Marxism and jazz.

Another passion which Kenya made it possible for me to discover was the brilliance of the Eastern European film culture, specifically the Hungarian cinema and the Polish cinema. Both Jansco's *The Round-Up* (1965) and Wajda's *Kanal* (1957) opened to me unimaginable ways into the intellectual landscape of history. It was these films that convinced me that film is just as capable of interrogating history as Marxism. Probably I found Miklos Jansco, who is still

one of my favourite film artist, more appealing than Wajda, whom I still hold in high esteem, because in him I encountered a remarkable synthesis of film form and Marxism in the investigation of the domain of history. Jansco's later films like *The Red and the White* (1967), *Silence and Cry* (1968), *Confrontation* (1968) and others, most which I saw when I was a student at UCLA in the early 1970s, convinced me that Jansco was one the great historians of our time. His *Red Psalm* (1971) which I arranged for it to be shown in our Third World Film Club on one of our Thursday screenings at Melnitz Hall (UCLA) had a indelible impact on many members of the Los Angeles School (Haile Gerima, Julie Dash, Charles Burnett, Alile Sharon Larkin, etc.). Jansco's choreographing of world history and Hungarian history on the Hungarian puszta plane through his continuous ten to fifteen minute sequences are the greatest revelations I have encountered.²⁸ Not only Miklos Jansco revealed to me the concept and structure of history, he made understandable the nature of film form, as his construction of film form was affiliatively related to the film projects of Antonioni and Andrei Tarkovsky, all three of whom are prefigured in the early films of Jean Vigo and Carl Dreyer and Luchino Visconti.

Andrzej Wajda theorized history largely from the perspective of Polish Romanticism of the nineteenth century: in which anarchism, futility, individualism, hopelessness are given predominance over order, rigour, collective consciousness, obedience. The Kenya Film Society enabled me to see other films by him: *Ashes and Diamonds* (1958) and *A Generation* (1955). Together with *Kanal* (1957), these two films formed a trilogy: and what a trilogy! When I saw *Kanal* at the age of eighteen in 1967 I made a vow to myself that one day I would visit and know the country that history had made to suffer so profoundly. It was really gratifying that fifteen years later in September 1980, three months after the founding of the Solidarity Movement, that I was able to fly from Nairobi to Lodz via Moscow to study at the Polish Academy of Film Art. Meanwhile in 1970s in Los Angeles I was able to see more of Wajda's films: *Wesele* ('Wedding', 1972) and *Landscape after Battle* (1970). After seeing these two films I could not be convinced but that Wajda was a master historian. In Poland I was able to see the complete context of Wajda's work as a member of the Polish School (1956-1962): the other members were Andrzej Munk, Jerzy Kawalerowicz, Wojciech Has. From the distance of approximately thirty years, I think what I gained from Wajda and Jansco in Nairobi was the essential nature of history as movement, its dialectics as well as its narrative forms. This lesson became invaluable when I encountered at UCLA the New Latin American Cinema: Tomas Gutierrez Alea's *Memories of Underdevelopment* (1967), Glauber Rocha's *Antonio das Mortes* (1968), Humberto Solas's *Lucia* (1966), just to name a few. The Cuban Revolution made it possible for Latin American intellectuals to investigate and interrogate their history.

I think what facilitated my gaining so much in the Nairobi of the 1960s was my tutoring in the afternoons by the most important political exile in Kenya at this time: Ras Makonnen. Makonnen who was born in Guyana at the turn of the century had been Kwame Nkrumah's confidante and adviser while Osagyefo was in power. When Nkrumah was overthrown in 1966, he was put in prison. Jomo Kenyatta obtained his release in 1967. To the credit of Jomo Kenyatta, he remembered that it was Makonnen who had assisted many African students like himself in London in the 1930s, including Nkrumah, Banda, Azikiwe and many others. It was Makonnen also who organized the financial side of the Pan African Congress of 1946 in London. It was also he who maintained the African Bureau in London, which he had founded with C. L. R. James and George Padmore in the late 1930s. In other words, Ras Makonnen was one of the great pillars of Pan-Africanism in the twentieth century. I considered myself very fortunate that at eighteen, for two years on every afternoon of the week day I would hold a political and intellectual discussions with this great man of approximately sixty seven years. Even though he was a staunch enemy of Communism, for he subscribed to the Pan Africanism similar to that of George Padmore, he never once criticized my Marxism: when we came to a point of serious disagreement, he always just shook his head and continued with his exposition. Together we read Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, whom he had met in Accra at All Africa Peoples Conference of 1958; together again we examined Hollis R. Lynch's biography of Edward Blyden (*Edward Wilmot Blyden: Pan-African Patriot 1832-1912* [1967]). We talked about many essays and articles which appeared in *Transition* and *East African Journal*. The only time I saw Ras Makonnen get very angry was when he read Ali Mazrui's critique of Kwame Nkrumah: he was so sad he hardly spoke for a whole week. But when he recovered he continued being the great teacher that he was. The only other point of disagreement with my great teacher was his deep sympathies for the PAC and deep skepticism towards the ANC. My love for the ANC and Marxism were considered as heresies that time he felt would eradicate. The intellectual stimulation I received from him was immeasurable. To me Ras Makonnen represented and reflected what the experience of political exile should impart as formulated by Bertolt Brecht: "Emigration is the best school of dialectics. Refugees are the keenest dialecticians. They are refugees as a result of changes and their sole object of study is change. They are able to deduce the greatest events from the smallest hints - that is, if they have intelligence. When their opponents are winning, they have the sharpest eyes for contradictions. Long live dialecticians." Makonnen was an African dialectician. He died in 1983 while I was in Poland. He lies today at Langata cemetery in Nairobi facing the interminable African sky, a grave just a few steps from my father's.

When I returned back to Los Angeles to commence my undergraduate studies at UCLA in October of 1969, Nairobi had for four years more than prepared me to

engage United States and Europe on the terms of Africa, the Africa of Frantz Fanon, H. I. E. Dhlomo, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Sembene Ousmane, Haile Gerima: a Africa that synthesizes politics and culture.