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Stephen Derwent Partington
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Abstract
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Underneath the Umbrella of Hope: Syncretism as Solution in the Dialogic Poetry of Mukoma wa Ngugi

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Kenya’s post-election violence of early 2008 led the world to take an interest in the signs of failure that this crisis revealed in what had previously, and naively, been thought to be a stable African State. This essay does not directly address the prolonged conflict that I and other Kenyans lived through in 2008, but it does perform a close reading of a 2006 poem on conflict by the US-based Kenyan writer, Mukoma wa Ngugi, the son of Kenya’s leading novelist, Ngugi wa Thiong’o. Mukoma is a respected young Pan-Africanist, a co-editor of the widely-read and influential online publication, Pambazuka News, a political columnist, and author of literary and political titles dealing with Pan-African and cosmopolitan issues. The cosmopolitan poem under study here, ‘Underneath the Umbrella of War’, reflects upon conflict, specifically the Iraq war and the Kenyan Mau Mau struggle, and, as I will demonstrate, offers the hope of an Africa and a wider world that can justly resolve its conflicts. The poem can be read as anticipating Kenya’s post-election violence of 2008.

The cynical critic’s default interpretation when presented with the writing of Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s son would be to rely entirely upon the mass of secondary literature available on the Father, the precursor poet, ultimately ‘discovering’ in this literary dynasty a neatly literal version of Harold Bloom’s idiosyncratic view of literary history, his famous Anxiety of Influence (Bloom). Yet, firstly, it would be politically offensive and oppressive to read the Ngugi of Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms according to a reactionary theory that views literary history as a unilinear progression of purely Euro-American texts that
together constitute the great Western Canon; the only writing that Bloom, it often seems, considers it worth our while reading. Secondly, such *Vorurteil* (used in Hans-Georg Gadamer’s sense as ‘prejudiced interpretation’ 68) would relegate to the status of mere epigone a talented young Kenyan poet whose debut collection, *Hurling Words at Consciousness* (2006), presents the reader with poems that generally stand on their own feet, albeit, I hope to demonstrate, feet in more than one culture, and in more than one country.

Rather than suggest that Mukoma wa Ngugi is the unproblematic scion of a perhaps chauvinistic novelist whose identification, to many commentators, has always seemed to exclusively adhere, uncompromisingly, to a particular Kenyan ethnic group, the Gikuyu (whom Ngugi refers to as a ‘nation’ [1987 175], a term that will become important later in this essay), I will propose that Mukoma is a cosmopolitan, postcolonial example of what I call the socialistically democratic Janus Poet, who undermines all such chauvinisms. My essay approaches this representative of the New Generation of Kenyan-related writers — who loosely coalesce as a *cénacle* around the talented editor and fiction writer, Binyavanga Wainaina, and the creative journal, *Kwani?* — through analysis of just one poem from his collection, ‘Underneath the Umbrella of War’, which is reprinted after this essay. A study of this forty-line verse reveals the following characteristics of the postcolonial Janus Poem: the syncretising of ostensibly disparate cultures, perhaps much as the Roman god Janus was formed from the fusion of Eastern and Western deities; the simultaneous gaze toward the historical past and the dream of the productive future; the concern with (neo)colonial, imperialist violence and the possibility of genuine peace. A ‘war-and-more’ poem, then, that hybridises the temporal and the spatial, allowing for the hope of culturo-political understanding and reconciliation based upon a generally cross-border socialist appreciation of the causes of that old African chestnut, conflict. All this is enabled by the poet’s exotopic gaze.

Mukoma’s diasporic position is one that has become familiar to students of postcolonial studies: that of the migrant, Salman Rushdie’s ‘translated man’, who bestrides the world of ostensibly disparate cultures like a privileged Colossus, hybridising effortlessly as he traverses the globe (30). Although in this essay I hope to utilise aspects of those theories that view such an exile-and-émigré poet as being in a position that is liberating and that can in turn liberate, it should be remembered that many of those Kenyan and Pan-African subjects-in-place for whom Mukoma in part writes are of course less fortunate. However, Mukoma cannot be condemned as a treacherous Gramscian traditional intellectual, ignorant of his roots, but rather should be viewed as a poet who offers the reader the possibility of escaping her/his condition of restrictive locality, following in the realm of discourse where he treads physically, at home with his movement.

The Janus Poet — in this case, ‘Mukoma’ — is a subject-site, a site that throughout this poem demonstrates how it has been subjected by the discourses
of American nationhood and Kenyan history, for example, but which at the same
time subjects, or writes, the poem. Avoiding the liberal humanist view of the author
as creative genius, the individual who, according to Barthes, pens the monologic
“message” of the Author-God’ (Barthes 144), this postcolonial text cannot be
totally separated from the pen-name; rather, the subject-poet’s subjectivity
permeates ‘Underneath the Umbrella of War’ with Mukoma offering his plural self
as the ‘I’ of this at times confessional poem. What is evident in this poem, then,
is a constructed poststructuralist self, but one that manages to reconstitute itself
in a ‘coherently and subjectively centred way as agent’, something that Rosalind
O’Hanlon believes the critic must enable the postcolonial subject to do, if such
subjects are to be allowed to occupy positions other than victims of pernicious
interpellating discourses such as nationalism, racism, (neo)colonialism in general
(qtd in Loomba 242).

‘Underneath the Umbrella of War’ begins with the poet-persona, who may
be read as the subject, ‘Mukoma wa Ngugi’, driving across sections of the
United States, ‘from small town/ to obscure town’. This obscurity, or state of
being unknown, is a psychological displacement, a projection of the anonymity
of the poet who, travelling alone as a Kenyan through the blank rural spaces of a
foreign land, experiences how the immigrant can, in Julia Kristeva’s formulation,
be ‘ignored’ in her/his country of adoption, even when that adoption may have
been lifelong (189). This obscurity of place and self seems at this point to chime
with that sense of painful psychic dislocation, even schizophrenia, that Fanonian
postcolonial theorists often suggest is the defining characteristic of ([neo]colonial)
cultural confrontations — Fanon’s ‘Manichaeism delirium’ (Fanon 112). This
initial impression of an African lost in the American heartland of modern day
capitalistic imperialism permeates the first one and a half stanzas, with the subject-
site blindly and alone searching for interpretative clues as to what the ‘population
counts pasted on signs’ might really mean during this time of threatening (Iraq)
war in a threatening landscape. Ultimately, his uncertainty leads him to clutch
at alternative similes, a figure that is always more tentative than the assertive
metaphor, and that here suggests a scrambling for interpretation, for identity-and-
location-through-comparison.

Certainly, the ‘signs’ on the roadside have revealed themselves through
language as what they are: signifiers that float and here confuse, referring to
nothing but the next linguistic phenomenon that the poet, in his disorientation, can
associate them with. This offering of multiple readings of the road signs draws
clear attention to the slipperiness of language and the multi-accentual character
of poetry itself. This pair of comparisons to ‘numbers of lives lost in a plague’ or
‘casualties of just living’ seems to be offered as an introduction to the theme of
conflict and death, but as just two of an infinite possibility of references that the
poet might have discovered; there is a silent punctuation, the three dots of ellipsis,
after the word ‘living’ in line four. The reader is reminded that the repository of
imagery is as infinite as sentences in a language. This is not just Empsonian and New Critical poetic ambiguity, where the reader focuses on the words on the page, but a figurative instant during which the reader may be as interested in what is not written as what is written: at other times (perhaps of peace) and to other people, what alternative associations might these road sign statistics have had? However, there is no chance for pretty similes at this time, for the extra-textual context forbids it, subjecting the poet to the necessity of grave images. This is a time of impending and actual wars, notably the Iraq War, and the media was full of them at the time ‘Underneath the Umbrella of War’ was written.

Yet, this postcolonial poet is not entirely subjected, passively, by the pernicious discourse of war. That is, the discourse of war is not all-encompassing, but reveals its ambivalence and rupture in the poet’s recognition of what the road signs are conventionally supposed to represent: ‘population counts’ — and ‘population’ as a signifier proliferates with associations of birth and life, much as the ‘smallness’ of these anonymous rural settlements implies peace. The discourse of war and its correlatives of aggression and death cannot, even at this early stage in the poem, have total sway in the Manichean fashion of Abdul JanMohammed’s colonial discourse, but rather the discourse contains the seed of its others, peace and life, and therefore perhaps also the seeds of dissidence (JanMohammed 75). As this poem processes, the poet can be observed chipping away more confidently at the vileness of new imperialist aggression, but even here in this first stanza some assuredness in the poet’s formulation of the simile can be read, opting as he does not for the common ‘as…as’ or ‘like’, but rather for ‘as if’, which may be read forcefully, with all the scornfulness of an American slang repudiation: ‘As if!’ The subject poet has caught a glimpse, which we as readers may share, of war discourse’s Achilles’ Heel, counter-identifying with that which he is ‘underneath’, that which would subject him from above; for a moment here, the poet seems to peep outside discourse. This first-stanza counter-identification (or straightforward rejection) is a precursor to the more productively resistant ‘third modality’ of the theorist Michel Pecheux, which the poet slips into later in the poem, when he dis-identifies with the putative inevitability of war that he is offered by his environment (Pecheux 98). At this later stage, the reader might observe a subject being born into some agency.

Stanza two introduces the reader to the ubiquitous postcolonial issue of nationalism: ‘For every town,/ there are flags of salutation’. The pluri-signation of ‘salutation’ is telling, again hinting at the unstable ambivalence of the powerful discourse that hangs over the poem, for a salutation may of course be a friendly and peaceful greeting and/or a military salute, pointing to war. These flags are of ‘God, Race and Country’, three traditionally powerful aspects of identity, and are undoubtedly, predominantly, the American flag, which, as the postcolonial critic Robert Young laments,
flies everywhere across the country, planted in every conceivable, possible, and even impossible place: front lawns, car windows, the sides of buildings, corporate websites. Its ideology is materialised through the common lifestyle that keeps the US coherent as a nation, the proliferation of monopoly capitalism that makes most American cities very similar to all others… You always know where you are when you are on the road in the US. (61)

Certainly, the small and anonymous settlements that the poet meets ‘on the road’ in ‘Underneath the Umbrella of War’ seem ‘very similar to all others’, despite the fact that they are not necessarily neighbours on the map of North America, a similarity that is in great part achieved by the omnipresence of the national flag. The poem next refers to the Star-spangled Banner as an ‘emblem’, the simplest of visual images, which, as Francis Bacon wrote in 1605, ‘reduceth conceits intellectual to images sensible’. The defining characteristic of the emblem as a basic symbol since the European Early Modern period, is its crass simplification of complex and weighty concepts, as can be seen here: the poet is aware, although presumably the flag-waving patriots of America are not, that the emblematic flag of the United States in the modern world conflates in its three bold colours some tremendously contentious histories, of American religion, of American racism, and of belligerent nationalism. As Ruth Hsu, amongst others, reminds us, flag-waving ‘nation[alism] … has legitimised and sanctified the destruction and subjugation of peoples and cultures around the world’ (154), and it might be said that today it is predominantly the hand of US nationalism that has the power and the inclination to reach, grasp and shake imperiously over the entire globe. Imperialism is nationalism that does not know when to stay in its play pen.

The poet wonders, still in this second stanza only tentatively, questioningly,

What shape
does the winter’s cold wind fluttering across
these emblems take? Is it the same wind
that whispers through funeral shrouds?

These lines are cautious, inquisitive, yet powerfully challenging. The two questions here may seem simply rhetorical, but in fact they are the first clear instance in the poem of a forthright democratic act, that of explicitly involving the reader in the active creation of meaning by inviting an imaginative response, by inviting the reader to create her or his own associations. It is here that the poem reveals itself as a fully scriptible text, open and centrifugal, contrary to the charges often levelled at poetry by Bakhtinians, of closure, of centripetality. If the poet provided a sample pair of similes in the first stanza, he is now acting as the psychologist who holds up the ink blots, in effect asking us, ‘What can you see in this flag? Can you see this, or maybe this, or…?’, so abdicating his function as an Author-God and instead birthing the reader, enabling her/him to reflect, actively, avoiding the passivity that the simple emblem of the flag might seduce readers into, perhaps an acceptance of war as inevitable or, as the George W. Bush administration might insist, noble and just. What shape does the wind
take? That of a ‘cold’ corpse under a funeral shroud? An American flag draped over a soldier’s coffin as it is warehoused — beyond the media’s glare — ready for a glorious, rifle-saluted funeral? Or perhaps — an image that this reader finds inescapable — those flags of other nations or denied-nations, draped over biers in Palestine, in Iraq, in Somalia, in the Lebanon, the victims of conflicts that at times reek of American imperialism? In the landscape of the poem, the US flag becomes an emblem symbolising many deaths, symbolising Death, and the reader is invited to consider: which deaths can you, reader, see in this flag, emanating from this nationalism, stemming from this country where not only the administration is implicated, but also to some extent the unreflective flag-wavers of rural America, the ‘patriots’, the fundamentalist Christians, the anti-Arab racists, the Islamophobes, the voters who ridiculously cry ‘Obama Osama’…?

Again, the poet employs a silent ellipsis: he waits for the reader to imaginatively re-complicate the simplified emblem of the flag of the most powerful nation on Earth, and in so doing contemplate the many ideological causes and the many victims of that international wrong, imperialistic warfare.

As the poet accompanies us as readers in these complex interpretations of the causes and victims of war — a set of interpretations that can have no single final arbiter, but rather a network of readers who may variously contemplate the plethora of causes and victims that nevertheless network under the umbrella of contemporary imperialism — he experiences ‘a fear I cannot name’, a fear so intense that it is, to reduce Mukoma to cliché, beyond words. Once more, then, the reader must imaginatively create that fear, and as the poet is now imaginatively transported to different conflict zones, different places, different times, so too must we accompany him and perhaps even take ourselves to other conflicts that might be more familiar, perhaps Palestine, perhaps Yugoslavia, perhaps the Democratic Republic of Congo, perhaps… The reader is encouraged to accompany the poet on a journey beyond sympathy, beyond superficial empathy, and into experience: the distressing experience of the Tutsi, borne down upon by the poem’s ‘Hutu’ and his ‘machete’; the fear of the ‘Baghdad’ resident, pulverised by ‘American bombs’.

Prompted into this positionality, this identification with various victims of global war, the reader is forced to do more than simply objectify the victim as the other, viewing suffering as someone else’s problem, but rather is perversely privileged to share the experiences of the ultimate underprivileged, the postcolonial victims of war. After the outsider’s analysis of war and its causes and consequences that the reader was prompted into in stanza two, that same reader is now jolted into constructing, as best he or she can, an insider’s view — and, as Terry Eagleton has written, ‘Only those who know how calamitous things actually are can be sufficiently free of illusion or vested interests to change them’ (136). We are as readers, through our own imaginative agency, shown the path to a productive solidarity with the oppressed, with the subaltern, and inspired through disgust and shared ‘fear’ to perhaps seek that Marxian ‘change’ mentioned by Eagleton. The
poem, then, places the reader in two perspective-positions, that of the insider and the outsider, in this way giving us the insider privilege required by Eagleton while at the same time avoiding the isolationism that many cultural theorists such as Peter McLaren argue is the result of believing that only insiders can understand, and may study, insiders:

Either a person’s physical proximity to the oppressed or their own location as an oppressed person is supposed to offer a special authority from which to speak... Here the political is often reduced only to the personal where theory is dismissed in favour of one’s own personal and cultural identity — abstracted from the ideological and discursive complexity of their formation. (McClaren 125)

Mukoma forces us in stanza three to personalise victims only after in stanza two having obliged us to consider the ‘discursive complexity’ of war. The human emotion and experience of this section of the poem are contextualised by reference to the nationalist ideology, mentioned earlier, that can extrapolate into war. There is a powerful responsibility here.

The poem enables our imaginative transport by means of the breakdown of the standard punctuation that has preceded this third stanza. The syntax becomes disordered through the segmentation effected by the employment of the dash. As the linguist Roger Fowler writes, echoing Winifred Nowottny, ‘syntax exercises a continuous and inexorable control over our apprehension of literary meaning and structure’ (242), ordering space-time for the reader according to a set of conventions. In stanza three, however, space-time is disrupted by the many dashes, and syntax and sense consequently fragment and float as concrete images — ‘Hutus’ and ‘machetes’, for example — stare out as isolated lexemes. At this point in the text, the reader is disorientated by the poem’s structure, or the constructed lack of it, into a sort of nightmarish dream-sequence, a quick-fire of action that vulgarly flashes out across time and space from the Rwandan genocide of 1994 to present-day Iraq with the glint of a blade or the notorious ‘Fourth of July’ firework analogy used by American journalists when describing early bombing raids over Baghdad. When reading ‘Underneath the Umbrella of War’, the poet offers an alternative positionality, that of the foreigner: we are all Rwandans, we are all Iraqis, we are all the Gazan or other who suffers in whatever war we care to imagine in stanza three; we all become those (postcolonial — I am writing from my home in Kenya) poststructuralist reading subjects who, as Catherine Belsey reminds us, may ‘differ...even from ourselves’ (52).

The poet, also, clearly differs from himself here. Earlier in this essay, I referred to Mukoma as an example of the ‘translated man’, and then proceeded to suggest that in stanza one this ‘man’ seems disorientated by his current locale, America. If earlier on in this poem, the reader was able to read the poet-persona as a little boy lost in an overwhelmingly different USA, it is here in stanza three that such a reading will be corrected and revealed to be overly dependent upon the idea that colonial-period subjects always experience Fanonian angst. Instead, the reader
can now see Mukoma as the cosmopolitan postcolonial poet, the confident ‘I’, asserting himself, an assertiveness enabled by his fluent knowledge of the US, gained after long periods spent living and studying there. He is a prime example of the diasporic writer who, as Stuart Hall hopefully insists, ‘provides the prospect of a fluidity of identity, a constantly changing subject position, both geographically and ontologically’ (qtd in Ashcroft et al. 218). This poet ranges effortlessly over the globe, over time, over alternative interpretations — of road signs, of flags, for example — and the uncertain ‘I’ of earlier stanzas now becomes self-assured, becomes an individual with some agency, some ability to change the world in Eagletonian fashion, rather than just a passive subject. So, when he becomes a victim ‘without/ a face’ in stanza three, he is no longer back in the position of the anonymous Kenyan immigrant who I said was possibly ignored in stanza one, but is instead imagining himself as one of the faceless others in Rwanda and Baghdad, an imagination made all the more believable and genuinely empathetic because he, Mukoma, has himself earlier experienced this facelessness. Partially rooted in America, Mukoma’s learning and experience nevertheless knows few borders; his mention here of facelessness even transports the poem and the reader to his Kenya, intertextually referring as it does to one of Mukoma’s journalistic articles from the South African youth culture journal, Chimurenga. Again, this polemical article visits the topics of violence (terroristic and imperialistic), US insensitivity toward foreigners, and victimhood:

On August 7th, 1998, truck bombs exploded simultaneously in Nairobi and Daresalaam. 10 Tanzanians were killed and 75 injured, but Kenya bore the brunt of the attacks with 245 Kenyans and 12 Americans killed. Or, as the American press would have it, 12 named Americans with faces and 245 unnamed faceless Kenyans were killed.

(Mukoma, Chimurenga online)

Mukoma’s poem adds features — his own and ours — to the hitherto ‘faceless’ foreign victims of violence. How are these victims referred to in the poem? As ‘strange fruit’, an allusion, particularly charged for the African and the American reader, to the Blues song about lynched African Americans hanging from trees during the period of legalised Segregation in the southern states of the US. Not only does the implication seem to be that suffering and death is suffering and death wherever it may be, but also, in alluding to victims of racism within America in this way, the poet seems to suggest that the US still does abroad what it used to do at home, exporting racist violence across the globe. This is not a pretty allusion, nor a light accusation — there is an angry disgust in this metaphor of ‘strange fruit’. No longer do we have the tentativeness of simile, but now the assertiveness — echoing Mukoma’s own increased assertiveness — of the more certain figure, metaphor: the modern victims of imperialist war really are the same as the victims of far-right racist lynch mobs! If this imagery of exported violence might seem like the merely fictional rantings of a disgruntled left-winger, Mukoma backs the figurativeness up with a literal export: ‘American
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bombs’. Europe’s neo-colonial endeavours do not go unchallenged either: it was ‘French and Belgian guns’ that in part armed the fury of the Rwandan genocide and that, like US military equipment, training and interference continues to threaten peace and people in ‘independent’ Africa and the wider world via such military organisations as AFRICOM (United States Africa Command), which became operational in 2008. Indeed, this reference to one of the most lucrative of European and US exports cannot help but suggest the depravity of modern global capitalist economics, something that too many postcolonial writers and critics, to my mind, forget in their obsession with vulgar culturalism — the modern-day intellectual’s inversion of vulgar Marxism. Here, in stanza three, the poet enables us to see that neo-colonial violence does not stem from discourse alone, from culture alone, from signifying practices and other textual instances of postmodern jouissance and ludism (how can we apply such terms to conflict?), but equally from economics, which today sees nuclear technology proliferated to India and tanks allegedly smuggled to Southern Sudan, and which can still assert itself as foundational even in these days of theoretical equivocation.

Following his nightmarish dream-sequence, the poet-persona then refocuses on his journey through an American winter’s night. Statements such as ‘Night-time is here’ display a sense of foreboding, the threat of another US-led conflict, the coming full war in Iraq that, up to now, remains violent, and that has since proven to be far more complex an undertaking than the initial flag-waving hubris of the Bush administration suggested would be the case. Not only is there a symbolic night, but ‘The sun has turned/ his back’ on the world. Readers from the so-called Western tradition might catch an allusion in the poet’s prosopopoecic reference to the sun, a personification that has always been biblical, denoting the Son, Jesus. The ‘sun’, with all its religious and biological associations of life and Life and love and peace has seemingly abandoned the world, leaving it in the grip of the new, overarching discourse of War, which now stands threateningly, apocalyptically, at all four corners of the Earth. The recurrent imagery of snow and the ‘bare’ landscape, again in the Western tradition symbolising death, reinforces a certain morbidity here, and almost brings with it a fleeting sense of helplessness after previously assertive stanzas.

Yet, even here there is hope for the reader, for despite the continuingly violent imagery of his seemingly ‘dismembered’ head here in stanza five, the poet can see, ‘Peering/ through my car window, my face…half inside/ and half outside’. He is back to his present self, deictically located as me, here in the car, and in the now of the poem. What he sees at this moment, through the mirror imagery of the reflective window at night, is his own face(s) — no longer that of once faceless victims — positioned both as insider and outsider. Now explicitly drawing attention to his privileged, transculturally plural subjectivity as — amongst other things — a Kenyan in the US, the poet through his act of self-awareness can be read as a self-sacrifice, offering himself as a microcosmic example of ‘cross-
culturality’, which, as Ashcroft et al state, is ‘the potential termination point of an apparently endless human history of conquest and annihilation justified by the myth of group “purity”. [It is] the basis on which the post-colonial world can be creatively stabilised’ (35). Glimpsing and then articulating to the reader his own internationalism and his own interculturalism — that is, his status as ‘translated man’, the Janus Poet — Mukoma not only counter-identifies with the nationalisms explored earlier in the poem, railing at the US, but begins to offer that ‘third modality’ hinted at above, a dis-identification or an alternative subject position. Neither just the US lackey — a member of Anthony Kwame Appiah’s ‘comprador intelligentsia’ (346) — nor the simplistic, knee-jerk foreign loather of the US, Mukoma-as-Janus-Poet offers a third, syncretic position.

I would suggest that this corresponds to Homi Bhabha’s ‘Third Space of enunciation’, the zone where different cultures (here, the US and the Kenyan, among others) meet and at points hybridise as our poet effects a series of linkages and fusions between the times and places of these different cultures (Bhabha 8). Our Janus Poem, then, is what I will call a Third Space Artefact, a textual site where cultures intersect, a site that reveals to the reader how cultures can change and optimistically hybridise, leading us to embrace and correct the wrongs of the ‘inter-national culture’ that the poet presents us with (Bhabha 8). It becomes ‘third’, rather than on the one hand the sort of conservative (say, ‘Colonial’) text that allows for no alternative to the status quo of oppression or, on the other hand, the impossible purity and authenticity-promoting poem that still frequently comes from East Africa, typified by the nativist 1970s Songs of Uganda’s late Okot p’Bitek. At the very least, ‘Underneath the Umbrella of War’ offers the reader the hope of socialist change while at the same time practically countering, by virtue of its own hybridity as Janus Poem, the vain reaction of yearning for a mythical, exclusively pre-colonial Eden — the Janus Poet is no nativist. In passing, Bhabha has referred to the Third Space as ‘alien territory’, and from East Africa it really is: spatially, temporally, culturally, politically, aesthetically. Mukoma’s poem is part of a new and youthful phenomenon in the region.

This Third Space of postcolonial, diasporic syncretism can be further reflected upon if the reader considers the ‘dialogic’ characteristics of ‘Underneath the Umbrella of War’. Earlier, I noted in passing how Mikhail Bakhtin, perhaps for reasons rooted in the dogmatism of the Stalinist regime he worked under and the lyric poetry he had to hand, dismissed poetry as centripetal, as always moving toward closure, forcing readers into a sort of conformity dictated by the author. I have already indicated how the reader of this poem might, on the contrary, be liberated and activated, but I would go somewhat further and suggest that the poem has characteristics of dialogism, something that Bakhtin believed could only be fully realised in literature in the novel. Here is the Bakhtinian concept of the dialogic as articulated and reinterpreted through the prism of Jan Mukarovsky by the Kenyan critic, Kimani Njogu, who is as concerned as I am in his 2004
study, *Reading Poetry as Dialogue*, to counter the second-class status that poetry as a genre has been relegated to in literary studies in general since the demise of New Criticism, and in East Africa in particular:

the speaker can be both a subject and object of discourse in so far as he or she is capable of distancing the inner-self from the outer-self. The inner-self in that case becomes another. What we witness in such situations is an objectification of the self in order to establish a dialogic relation with the self. This tendency would explain why the soliloquy may be dialogic although on the surface it gives the impression of being monologic. (10)

In short, the self can talk to itself, a revelation that gains even more currency when the poststructuralist claim by Belsey is recalled, that ‘Subjects can differ — even from themselves’. Our Janus Poet’s fluid and composite subjectivity allows that face inside the window to converse with the face outside. There is a relationship of Self and Other throughout much of this poem, where the Self and the Other are selfsame, both being components of the subject-site poet; a non-absolute alterity in which the Other is comprehensible on its and the Self’s own terms. This is Bakhtin’s ‘exotopy’, but not in the conventional novelistic sense of conjunction-disjunction between author and character, but rather a distancing-and-identification between ‘selves’ within the same subject-site, leading to a dialoguing balance of objectivism and subjective experience that has been seen to be a key to cross-cultural understanding. No fixed, authentic or chauvinistically ‘pure’ identity is necessarily found in this poem, for as Derrida suggests, ‘An identity is never…attained, only the…process of identification endures’ (qtd in Harrison 132); and yet this pursuit, this ability by the Janus Poet to quest, and for her/him to similarly engage us in that quest, enables the readers to go beyond themselves seeking connections and solidarities in an otherwise atomised world. There is great hope in this poem, even in these fourth and fifth stanzas where the imagery of despair threatens total disillusion. Where the despair in what have become called the early *disillusionment novels* of Ngugi wa Thiong’o — for example, *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) and *Petals of Blood* (1977) — and his first generation colleagues in Kenyan literature seems to be straightforward and monologically unrelenting, depressing the reader as it depresses the writer, Mukoma’s New Generation poetry offers hope and a window onto agency.

That syncretism, that sense of this postcolonial poet’s easy confidence in various situations, continues now throughout the poem, and we learn that ‘In…/Ohio, I could be home’. These lines are left deliberately ambiguous: either he is home in Ohio, or Ohio reminds him of ‘home’, perhaps Kenya. Either way, there is a comfort in place, a sense of recognition rather than dislocation — America is no longer ineluctably alien and other. Inviting the reader to do otherwise, as the poem itself does, I will read this line to mean: ‘Ohio is homely enough to remind me of my Kenyan home’. Partly this reading is prompted by the fact that, immediately after his survey of Ohio, the poem shifts to Kenya. My interpretation forces me to
continue reading to discover what it is about Ohio that causes it to resonate with the poet’s Kenya. In stanza seven, it would seem to be the following that conjure these associations: ‘scarred hands’, ‘black lungs’, ‘soil’ and ‘black diamonds’. Skirting over the obvious and perhaps Négritudist imagery of blackness, it might be noted that many of these items, and indeed much of stanza seven, evoke labour, the working person, the proletariat, the American equivalent of the earth-working peasants from Kenya. This sense of suffering labour is highlighted in the alliteration, with the harsh, bilabial ‘b’ sound spreading throughout the stanza, conceivably echoing the pick-blows of mining or the coughs of the workers. Here, the poem presents the equality of suffering between workers across borders, and it becomes a sort of literary Comintern. If belligerent, simplistic, flag-waving US nationalism intimidated and alienated the poet earlier, leading the reader to condemn the hubris of a martial Republican administration, the material suffering of American workers seems to position them, instead, as victims of the capitalism previously criticised, not just economically, but also mortally — there is certainly a slow death in their ‘black lungs’. The US is not indiscriminately condemned in this poem, then, for the suffering of the impoverished workers exonerates them from war-blame. The Janus Poet’s multidirectional gaze enables him/her to connect the dots between cultures, sensitively tracing networks of blame and suffering across the dimensions of space and time. Far from luxuriating in his own privileged position, relaxing into an irresponsible postcolonialism that Arif Dirlik infamously characterises as ‘the condition of the intelligentsia of global capitalism’ (524), the poet retains a profoundly responsible socialism. He is not here writing from a tenured chair in a US university, but instead this poem comes to us from the cold winter soils of backwater America, where calloused hands work the earth.

The poem says ‘home’, and the poet then invites us to his ancestral home, Kenya. But home is not just place, it is kin, and it is history. Mukoma invokes his grandmother, a powerful woman of a generation that supported the independence struggle of the Kenya Land and Freedom Army. This was a revolutionary movement composed predominantly — but not exclusively — of members of the Gikuyu, Meru and Embu ethnic groups; a movement that has come to be known internationally by its British colonial name, Mau Mau. Although to suggest as Ngugi wa Thiong’o often seems to, and as many Western-located, hagiographical Ngugian critics too easily accept, that Mau Mau was the only force for independence in colonial period Kenya — an approach that condemns, as the historian Bethwell Ogot reminds us, all other Kenyan revolutionaries to ‘a second death’ — would be somewhat revisionist, there seems little point denying that Mau Mau as a name symbolises independence revolution in Kenya, even though the movement was not Kenyan-nationalist in any countrywide sense (9). There is, similarly, no reason to suggest that it was, in the main, and especially at the outset and in its motivations, anything other than a peasants’ revolt, to use
the term applied by the socialist independence leader, Jaramogi Oginga Odinga, even if those peasants did not necessarily spring equally from a variety of Kenya’s many ethnic groups (Odinga qtd in Atieno Odhiambo 42). The Janus Poet’s vision of American ‘peasants’ conjures, then, an imaginative solidarity with Kenyan peasants as he continues writing from Bhabha’s Third Space, finding ‘those words with which we can speak of Ourselves and Others’, linking the disenfranchised of distant continents (Bhabha 8).

But what of the grandmother’s struggle? She ‘died/ broken by struggles without fruit’. The word ‘fruit’ is of course an anaphoric reference to the ‘strange fruit’ of the syntactically broken stanza three, and so a reminder of the links of victimisation that exist between the Kenyan peasant and the African American of the Segregation era, but the word as used in the phrase quoted here has an additional poignancy to the Kenyan reader, and the wider African reader. *Matunda ya Uhuru* (‘fruits of independence’) is a Kiswahili phrase that was used frequently in the years following 1963’s nominal independence, and it was roughly a synonym for another well-known phrase, ‘the national cake’. Indeed, the phrase forms the main title of one of the most impressive Kenyan essays on the symbolic meanings that exist between the Kenyan peasant and the African American of the Segregation era, but the word as used in the phrase quoted here has an additional poignancy to the Kenyan reader, and the wider African reader. *Matunda ya Uhuru* (‘fruits of independence’) is a Kiswahili phrase that was used frequently in the years following 1963’s nominal independence, and it was roughly a synonym for another well-known phrase, ‘the national cake’. Indeed, the phrase forms the main title of one of the most impressive Kenyan essays on the symbolic meanings of Mau Mau, the historian E.S. Atieno Odhiambo’s ‘Matundu ya Uhuru (Fruits of Independence): Seven Theses on Nationalism in Kenya’. As might be expected, the freedom fighters, amongst other subaltern groups, hoped that their sacrifices might result in ‘fruits’, in material and social benefits. The immediate post-independence history of Kenya echoes that of many new African nations — in short, and as Frantz Fanon points out, a neo-colonial elite took the reins of power and with it reaped the rewards of what was often others’ struggles. This process has been well argued and lamented by Ngugi wa Thiong’o and countless others, and can be summed up in this uncharacteristically blunt statement by Mukoma: ‘African governments, with few exceptions, are useless’ (Mukoma, Chimurenga Online). If that word ‘fruit’ acts as an allusion for the Kenyan reader, so too does the use of the word ‘flag’ in the same stanza, for Kenya has the politically-charged and still radical phrase, *Uhuru wa Bandera*, or ‘flag freedom’, referring to the commonly-held belief among socialists especially that in 1963 colonialism merely became its cousin, neo-colonialism, with few benefits to the mass of the population. From a superficially different American cultural context there is the Broadway allusion to Lorraine Hansberry’s 1959 play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, about an African American family’s struggle to make sense of their lives under circumstances of profound inequality. Informed readers will also notice that Mukoma’s rhetorical question, ‘What of her raisins in the sun?’, is an allusion further back to Langston Hughes’ 1951 jazz poem, ‘Harlem’ (sometimes known as ‘Dream Deferred’), in which activists’ postponed or failed dreams of social justice wither. Again, this is Mukoma making an effortless cross-cultural reference from American segregation back to his own Kenyan grandmother, whose struggle was similar to that of those African Americans who have through
the ages struggled for justice. This stanza details how the grandmother’s cause, although just, was fruitless, and she died knowing only a flag freedom.

The proliferation of Kenyan independence-era allusions in these historically dense couple of lines makes us aware of the Janus Poet’s acknowledgement of the importance of history. Achille Mbembe is perhaps correct when he states that ‘the younger generation of Africans have no direct or immediate experience [of colonisation]’, a claim for this continent that Eagleton agrees with in another context when he writes that there is a whole young generation in the Western world that can remember little or nothing ‘of world-shaking importance’ (Mbembe qtd in Dirlik 510). However, it is the poet’s conception of an imagined rootedness in the history of Kenyan struggle that enables him to envisage a way forward into a future that differs from the present; this is a positive, messianic vision that has been lacking in much Afro-pessimist East African literature for decades.

Following his detour into history and cultural roots, the poet returns to the present, as suggested by the reintroduction of the snow imagery. He has reached his physical destination, the home of his lover, but his statement that ‘Every life/ has a destination’ of course takes us beyond this literal interpretation. It is as if his ‘destination’ — his destiny — mentioned as it is immediately after his musings on his grandmother’s sacrifice, is to fulfil the aspirations of his revolutionary history, seeking to put an end to modern-day imperial warfare in the same way that his grandmother in years past struggled to end the violent oppression of an illegitimate British colonialism; but where, again, is the hope, if his grandmother’s legacy is one of ostensible failure? Might his own endeavours not be doomed to the repetitive cycle of history?

Hope springs from his literal destination in the poem, which refracts again into symbolism. He is in bed with his — for want of a better term — other-colour lover, ‘Sukena’. The pair ‘delight in contrasts…/skin against skin’. This image of contrast, of cultural, racial, sexual and perhaps national difference united in ‘delight’ — the first use in the poem of an unambiguously positive word — is the hope of unity and solidarity hinted at throughout the poem, and is the text’s messianic moment, of bodily-material pleasure and love thriving beneath the umbrella of war. This epiphany is the culmination, the climax toward which the poet and reader have been journeying. ‘[O]utside the flags keep fluttering’ as that extrapolated nationalism, imperialism, persists in the present, but the lovers’ passion for unity cannot be dampened.

Finally, the reader encounters that powerful image, of the lovers’ embrace being ‘the tight clutch of history’. Throughout this poem, the poet has urged his reader to be alert to myriad histories of struggle and suffering, but what of this final line? Again, the poem resists closure, this time by offering, at its very end, a most difficult line. Compression of this enigmatic type creates an inevitable complexity and ambiguity in poetry, or a certain indeterminacy. I would suggest that there is hope here, with the lovers occupying a position...
that potentially subverts the discourse of war, their productive love and unity revealing the ambivalence of the discourse of nationalistic war and the racist and other hatreds outlined earlier in the poem; an ambivalence that has existed in this poem from those early, ambiguous road signs to this, the ambiguous final line. Through their love, the couple have revealed martial imperialism’s fault line, its insuppressible concomitants, Peace, Unity and Liberty — a hopeful slogan from Kenya’s independence era. If there is a ‘clutch’ in the final line of this poem, it is a potentially successful grasp at hope for the future, a future in which cross-cultural syncretism, effected after great reflection and action on the part of working class and other readers, replaces nationalist conflict; that ‘clutch’ represents the end of a pernicious and protracted phase of world history. To quote Ashcroft et al again, the goal is that ‘termination point of an apparently endless human history of conquest and annihilation justified by the myth of group “purity”. [It is] the basis on which the post-colonial world can be creatively stabilised’, a goal of ultimate reconciliation that the avowed Pan-Africanist, Mukoma, proclaims in an article on the linked issues of Somalia, Ethiopia, the Lebanon, Iraq, Iran, Syria, Nazi Germany, Liberia, Nigeria, Israel and Palestine. In this article, he states his concluding hope that ‘people from vehemently opposed sides can someday talk to live with each other’ (BBC Focus 9).

But is this poem, this audacious hope, just that, just ‘talk’? Certainly Mukoma has been accused before of being a polemicist whose ‘argument is stronger on passion than pragmatism’ (New Internationalist, online). The answer to my question is unclear, and this is the poem’s final indeterminacy, its worldly aporia. It is not a textual indeterminacy, but a social one that can be expressed in the form of this further question to readers: are you willing, following your reflective reading, to act?

‘Underneath the Umbrella of War’, Mukoma wa Ngugi
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Tunneling through I-51, I advance from small town to obscure town, population counts pasted on signs as if numbers of lives lost in a plague or casualties of just living. Winona, 27,609, Stockton, 632, Utica, 250 and at Drover post, 439. For every town, there are flags in salutation, more flags than I have ever seen of God, Race and Country. What shape does the winter’s cold wind fluttering across these emblems take? Is it the same wind that whispers through funeral shrouds? And then a fear I cannot name — here or there I am without a face — Hutus — machetes — French and Belgian guns — American bombs that rainbow the skyline over Baghdad — How many strange fruits shall we bury underneath these emblems? And I think how starvation
is hunger turned inward, when the body craves its own flesh until it reveals white bones carelessly covered by old skin. Night-time is here. The sun has turned its back on this empty landscape of bare farm after farm tied together by last night’s snowfall. Peering through my car window, my face, half lit, half inside and half outside keeps getting dismembered by oncoming car headlights. There are rows and rows of snow covered earth turned inward, dull-lit houses that beckon like a pirate’s lighthouse. So I recall an Appalachian School outpost where under the moonshine confessions came easy: ‘I no longer dream. I can no longer dream their dreams or mine’, the teacher says. ‘My nights are like death. I sleep like I am dying’. In Appalachia Ohio, I could be home. In this land of scarred hands of black lungs, of soil turned to the earth’s bone for black diamonds — I could be home. My grandmother died broken by struggles without fruit. Bones like hers — flag poles. What of her raisins in the sun? Every life has a destination, and lying in bed covered only by a moonlight magnified twice by felled snow, me and Sukena delight in contrasts, scars against scars, skin against skin — but outside the flags keep fluttering — and as I burrow deeper into her skin, this can no longer be a lover’s embrace but the tight clutch of history

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