Preface

This special issue of *Matatu* was inspired by an address given by Yvonne Owuor called “Reading our Ruins: A Rough Sketch.” The address was the first keynote delivered at the the 17th Triennial Conference of the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies (ACLALS), delivered on 11 July 2016 at Stellenbosch University, South Africa.

Two aspects of Owuor’s presentation I found both arresting and moving. Firstly, she addressed a vital question that had begun to preoccupy many of us in South Africa and indeed many of us from elsewhere in the world in the lead up to and during 2016. Sharing her ambivalence about what the concept “postcolonial” means here and now, she asks a broader yet more pertinent question: “What distinguishes *colonialities* when the existential violence visited on entire peoples and nations remain unexorcised, unquestioned, unnamed?” (p. 15). Owuor invites us here to consider our current state of being as far more rooted in an inherited history of colonial relations perpetuated by systems of violence than our postcolonial assertions often tend to acknowledge. This was the very question the university student movement in South Africa, arising in 2015 and unabated at the time of the ACLALS gathering, forced us to consider almost a quarter century into so-called post-apartheid democracy.¹ We thought, the students were asking, we had made progress to a non-racial democracy but what about the widespread, overt as well as covert racism still entrenched in every institution and everyday life? Why the continuing and in fact growing impoverishment of the majority of black people in the country?

More globally, this was and still is a time of acute strain within and between nation states, when the dire social consequences of the 2008 capitalist financial crisis were becoming acutely manifest. In so many countries around the world,

¹ The student movement was sparked by a black University of Cape Town student Chumani Maxwele throwing human faeces at the statue of colonial figure Cecil John Rhodes which has a prominent place on that campus. Country-wide protests followed on and off university campuses demanding both free access to university education as well as a “decolonisation” of all aspects of university life. These protests lasted over two years and succeeded in getting the state to allow students from poorer homes no-fee university education. The question of decolonisation of universities, however, seems to be a much more protracted debate and process.

national political and corporate elites were looting state coffers for personal gain, and the poor were turning to desperate protest action, enforced migration or to supporting populist and nationalistic politics. With this climate and our deep history of colonialism and postcolonial betrayal in mind, Owuor asks: when we contemplate our physical and figurative ruins and the ruinous forces in our starkly divided world, what does it mean to be human, to act humanely?

Secondly, Owuor addresses these questions through the form of what she calls “a *causerie*.” By this she means to signal a departure from the more formal academic keynote, which addresses a topic by developing a sustained position strongly grounded in theory of one form or another and explored in a formal and conventional register that is often impersonal. Instead, Owuor gives us a response which combines the formal with the chatty, the sustained with the anecdotal or the glimmer, the objective with the personal, the strident with self-doubt, and declamation with stories. In addition to its informality, a *causerie* is, as the Latin root “*causari*” suggests, also a way of reasoning, of disputing. This hybrid, dynamic form manages to shift the listener’s/reader’s intellectual perspective and keeps us suspended between dispassionate attentiveness on the one hand and affective upwelling on the other—we are moved intellectually and emotionally by her questions, claims, stories and perspectives. Owuor points to Canadian scholar Linda Hutcheon’s “historiographic metafictional” as a method that

informs this presentation, at the heart of which is a contemplation of figurative ruins by this story-seeker haunted by a riddle that exercises many: *what does it really mean to be human*. I will use glimmers of story from many places, including inner spaces, to reflect on ‘post-colonial’ beingness, with a focus on the Africa bits, strongly favouring Kenya examples (*italics in original*).

p. 14

Following a key dimension of historical metafiction, the paper/address is both deeply self-reflexive as well as concerned with larger historical and current questions through the prism of literal and figurative “ruins,” where ruins are regarded as sites of dialogue between past and present.

Taking our cue from Owuor’s paper, we asked authors to experiment with such hybrid form or submit “creative/critical” papers, as Michael Green describes his piece called “Ghosting Through Our Ruins”—a meditation on place, memory and self, or postcolonial “spectrality.” In addition to Owuor’s, the piece by Michael Green and my own contemplative autobiographic paper “Ruins and Restoration: District Six in My Time of Failed Freedom,” on memories of Dis-

trict Six under apartheid and on recent developments in the memorialisation of the area now being resettled, explore such play with hybrid form. We have grouped these three at the start of the volume. This is then followed by the paper by Fernando Ribeiro “From the Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific: Creolisation, Magic, and Mimesis in Oceanic Networks” and the one by Marie Kruger, “Witnessing the Ruins of Apartheid: The Women’s Jail (Johannesburg) as a Site of Encounter.” Both incorporate elements of the more personal in the academic articulation of their ideas but in less sustained fashion. Ribeiro’s wide-ranging exploration of the entangled dimensions of creolisation, mimesis and magic in writing accounts of the “other” begins with him pointing to certain similarities between his own subject position and that of the eighteenth century explorer he analyses, Le Vaillant. Kruger in turn reflects on the nature of the memorialisation of life under apartheid in the women’s prison in Johannesburg and calls for “responsible forms of spectatorship” (p. 62). Her piece more than any other in the volume draws directly on Owour’s address and the focus on vulnerable bodies Owuor invites.

In the third grouping we have the rest of the articles more conventionally written which have an African focus broadly speaking. In this section, for example, the piece by Michael Wessels, “Separating the Magical from the Real: The Representation of the Barwa in Zakes Mda’s *She Plays with the Darkness*,” appears. Wessels explores the way Mda’s novel presents the world of dance, music and art of the Barwa (or Bushmen/San) way of life, and the “symbolic resonance they possess for the present” (p. 188). What is significant here is the way Wessels is interested in both indigenous culture as literature and in literature, and what this could mean for us today.

Finally, I want pay tribute to Michael Wessels, my co-editor of this volume in its initial stages. Michael took over the chairmanship of ACLAS at the St Lucia conference in 2013 and I agreed to be conference convenor of the 17th ACLALS conference. We shared a deep reluctance to play these leadership roles but felt duty bound to do so and were intent on making the 2016 triennial a really good conference. After the event, we were approached by Geoffrey Davis to edit a special edition of *Matatu* and welcomed the opportunity to capture something of the wonderful spirit of the gathering. I also welcomed another opportunity to work with Michael. His sustained work on indigenous culture and literature was fascinating, and he gave our field of literary studies in South Africa a long view of its genesis reaching back to the oral and the pictorial, to the very dawn of humankind. It was his ideas that gave the conference its theme of “Stories from afar,” drawing on the tales of the Xam storyteller and visionary //Kabbo.

Michael was a kind, generous, gentle person whose intellectual acumen in part came from his deep interest in indigeneity, literature and nature, making

working with him easy, rewarding and always stimulating. A more fulsome tribute to Michael by his colleague at the University of the Western Cape, Hermann Wittenberg, follows this preface.

We dedicate this publication to the memory of Michael Wessels.

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