



(UN)FINISHED BUSINESS
JOYCE NYAIRO

Dr Joyce Nyairo is an independent researcher who works on cultural memory projects under Santuri Media Limited. She enjoys being a ghostwriter of biographies when she is not on Twitter trying to unpack the roots and routes of Kenyan cultural trends. For twenty years, she taught at Moi University, Eldoret, in the Department of Literature, Theatre and Film Studies. She spent five years as a Program Officer with the Ford Foundation Office for Eastern Africa, where she bridged theory and practice by initiating and managing cultural memory projects in the fields of Civil Society, Media, Arts, and Culture. Joyce has published numerous opinion pieces and features in Kenya's daily press, as well as a host of academic papers on East Africa's literary trends and popular culture in international peer-reviewed journals such as *African Affairs*, *Social Identities*, and the *Journal of African Cultural Studies*. Her recent publications include *Ten Cities: Clubbing in Nairobi, Cairo, Kyiv, Johannesburg, Berlin, Naples, Luanda, Lagos, Bristol, Lisbon, 1960–March 2020*, which she edited with Johannes Hossfeld and Florian Sievers (2020), and a celebration of urban culture titled *Kenya@50: Trends, Identities and the Politics of Belonging* (2015). – Address: Santuri Media Ltd., P.O. Box 1051, 30100 Eldoret, Kenya.
E-mail: jnyairo@gmail.com.

I left Wiko on the morning of July 15, 2023. I had with me the same three suitcases I had landed with 11 months earlier, which made my year abroad look like a neat and compact narrative. But even with the three suitcases that my husband Alfred was pushing along at Berlin Brandenburg Airport, I knew that our time at Wiko surpassed everything we had come with, everything we had come hoping for, everything we were taking home with us.

I had arrived in Berlin on Friday, August 26, 2022, those three suitcases in hand and three goals in mind. First, complete the first draft of the 14 chapters of my book project on “Death and Funerary Practices in Modern Kenya.” Second, learn German. Third, travel to an ATP or WTA lawn tennis tournament in Europe – Basel, Monaco, or Stuttgart. I could choose from these and several others, perhaps I could even catch a Grand Slam – Roland Garros or Wimbledon. Arriving at the splendour that is Grunewald, bags set down, eyes firmly glued to the amazing sunny view from my pretty apartment at Villa Walther, my dreams for my time at Wiko grew wings. It looked and felt like a place where every success was possible.

And then it started raining. I shrugged off the excess baggage I had been hauling in my mind from the moment I left Nairobi. Let’s call it unfinished business. There was the political uncertainty and noise of an ongoing presidential petition following the General Election of August 9, 2022. There was the forthcoming wedding of our son, Ronald, in March, which was to be preceded by six improvised traditional ceremonies; two of them had been held just days before my departure. There was *The General and I*, a memoir I had ghostwritten. It was in the final stages of production, and I had to be available for nearly all the online meetings with the designers and with my team at Santuri Media as they planned the launch.

I was momentarily distracted by the death of Queen Elizabeth and forced to find a moment to reflect on her legacy in Kenya.¹ Her exit was an opportune moment to unpack the culture of our democracy, so I found time to gel those thoughts for one of Kenya’s progressive journals.²

As the days in Berlin grew colder, shorter, and darker, my third bit of unfinished business came to a happy ending. The designers produced a beautiful and thematically cogent cover design and layout; Wiko’s head of Public Relations, Katharina Wiedemann, helped me locate a brilliant printing press in Hanover, and Alfred and our daughter Wanda, the cover designer, arrived back in Nairobi on the morning of the December 8th book launch, which the team planned and executed to perfection.

As our other daughter Stephanie and I scoured Berlin’s Christmas markets in readiness for our trip back to Nairobi for the third of Ronald’s marriage ceremonies, I took stock of

1 <https://nation.africa/kenya/blogs-opinion/blogs/let-s-keep-our-mourning-of-the-queen-brutally-honest-3944512>.

2 <https://www.theelephant.info/culture/2023/02/17/the-boon-and-the-bane-three-markers-of-democratic-culture-in-kenya/>.

my first four months at Wiko and the three goals I had arrived with. I had devised a simple formula to guarantee progress with my project. I would write a chapter every time I was invited to give a talk. That strategy extended to my Wiko colloquium on the last Tuesday of November, for which I would present Chapter One. Someone remarked at lunch that this is not the purpose of the Tuesday Colloquium. I smiled, suspicious as always of the idea of authentic traditions and far more interested in traditions as ways that are always in the making, constantly open to reinterpretation and infusion from many elsewhere.

Surabhi and NoViolet, fellow postcolonials, would understand my need to escape straitjackets, to do the work of adding perspectives without degenerating into native informant or diluting ways of becoming by making them legible for others. Halfway through the deluge of questions after my presentation titled “Dying in the City” – as a condition of (post)colonial spaces and as a bodily transition that generates clear cultural practices and attitudes – I had to summon my inner tennis. Breathe, one more ball, go where they don’t expect you to, breathe, laugh at your inadequacies, don’t balk at the erasure/ignorance of colonial legacies.

One of the conditions of being a racial or ethnic minority is invisibility. But here I was elected one of the speakers of my cohort, a position of some prominence. I had decided not to overthink it. I would do what came naturally to me, not fall over trying to imitate traditions. My experience as a student of character and situation had to be worth something in helping me navigate personalities, needs, and meanings. As long as I was willing to listen, I would be fine. Indeed, a big part of Wiko life is listening. Reflecting on, learning and experiencing from what others present as the work that keeps them awake at night; internalizing what people say about your work. My colloquium was invaluable in this regard. The following Tuesday I found myself better prepared when I gave a seminar at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development, where I presented “On Grief and Public Mourning,” the last chapter of my book. I had by then revised my book outline. I now had ten chapters – more compact, more thematically coherent, I thought. In the new year I was due to speak at the University of Edinburgh on “The Politics of Autopsies,” at the Humboldt-Universität on “Missing Bodies,” and at the University of Exeter on “Vigils and Wakes.” This would take me to the halfway point of my Wiko goal Number One, but even before I hit that target, I published “Missing Bodies”³ as a commemorative piece on Kenya@60, sixty years of self-rule.

3 <https://nation.africa/kenya/kenya-60/missing-bodies-and-the-making-of-kenya-60-4277092>.

Goal Number Two, learn German, had proved to be business that I would not complete, but great nonetheless for character building. I was amazed by what I retained with such ease – numbers, nouns, poems. I was appalled but not entirely surprised by what I was so poor at – pronouns, verbs, syntax. The online magic of Duolingo helped but could not save me. Every time I spoke, my atrocious accent tickled most of my classmates. I shrugged off their bemusement. My life as a post-colonial cultural critic had long freed me from ideas of correctness, singularity, either/or, so I laughed with them and even as I decided that time spent on German lessons would be better spent on my book, I delighted in the great friends I had made thanks to these German classes – Oren, Judie, Goggy, Igor, Arie, Ronie, Danny, Lynda, and Rose.

On Day Three in Berlin, Rose and I had quickly connected over lawn tennis. As we kept vigil over the US Open, our love for the game eased our mutual struggles with German. In the dead of winter, we staged tennis parties in the TV room at Villa Jaffé as we watched the finals of the Australian Open. I was heartbroken when Rose's six months at Wiko were up and we hadn't made it to a tournament anywhere in Europe. In early June, as she reacquainted herself with her home in Australia, we kept up our tennis-watching tradition – exchanging rapid text messages mid-match and sharing podcasts, video clips, and Twitter posts and news reports dissecting the tournaments. That's how she reminded me about the WTA 500 tournament at the Steffi Graf Stadium in Grunewald. Yippee! I ticked off goal Number Three on Sunday, June 17th, even though my newly discovered Wiko tennis buffs, Moritz Kraemer and his partner Nahema Marchal, couldn't join me. Alas, goal Number One stood between me and the rest of the tournament that week. I tried not to curse Tchavdar Marinov and his Nationalism and Folk Religiosity Workshop because his invitation to present a paper there was keeping my strategy alive after the University of Exeter seminar was rescheduled to 2024.

Wiko's culture of excellence is so distinct. I felt its pressure on my work – Dunia's attention to detail; the timely efficiency of the librarians; the calming energy of Frank Nörenberg and Sophia Pick; the unfailing warmth of Maike and Vanessa; the way Vera Pfeffer and Nina Kitsos sit patiently with a problem until it is resolved; and the remarkable wisdom of Daniel Schönpflug, Iris Fleßenkämper, and Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger. Wiko is a time to think and it is also a place to excel.

With five talks and five chapters done, it was time to see a little more of the city and its buzzing streets. In September, Alfred, Njoki Wamai, and I had carefully chosen a spot on Olivaer Platz to watch the Kenyans perform their magic at the Berlin marathon. I had

enjoyed a few brunches in Kreuzberg, and walking through Friedrichshain I stopped by the Suicide Club to flesh out a thought about where in my book I would fit in a section on Nairobi's clubbing-related deaths.

The second bit of unfinished business that I had dragged with me from Nairobi, our son's wedding, was completed without a hitch but with a ton-load of fatigue. Ten days later, the family gathered again, this time in Berlin to mark my 60th birthday. That didn't go without surprises as the girls Stef, Wanda, and Nyambura, the latest addition to our family, planned a second birthday dinner with Yael and Oren Harman, whose daughter Sol was marking her 3rd birthday!

Thanks to the generosity of Sultan, I had made it to the Opera; but despite all of Yael's best efforts, I never made it to the skating rink. Alfred and I still wanted to watch a play and to enjoy some music at a jazz club. Where had time gone? Berlin's commemorative landscape is a treasure hunt for any student of cultural memory. I found this was also true of Potsdam, Tübingen, Reutlingen, and Dresden. The things that have been selected for memorializing and the ways they are remembered in these cities are so intriguing, so instructive about the economics of memory work. One of the highlights of my museum visits was the exhibition "Roads Not Taken. Oder: Es hätte auch anders kommen können," which I went to with Lynda, Alfred, and Mwarigha, a friend who visited us from Canada so that we could fulfil a long-held desire to drive to Prague.

As our time at Wiko drew to a close I reflected on the new goals and excess baggage I had picked up, activities and events that had not been in my purview when I first arrived in Berlin. The choir and Pilates were pure joy and were also moments of reckoning with what I will never achieve. German comfort with nakedness and doorless showers drove me away from its efficient public swimming pools, but its endlessly cool temperatures and the relatively flat terrain of Berlin led me to try out a new sport – running. "Couch to 5K," the wonderful app that Susan Marks introduced me to, led to the formation of the *Wiko Waddlers 2023*, aka the Five Ducks – Judie, Claudia, Insa, Lynda, and I. I wonder how they are doing. I am still working to achieve a straight 5K run, no pausing, no walking, no dawdling. Unfinished business.

Recreational activities helped me push to the back of my mind unfinished business Number One, the state of Kenya's politics. Not forever though. On Friday, May 5th, I found myself on the lawns of State House Nairobi. I had been invited by the Federal Republic of Germany to accompany Chancellor Olaf Scholz on his official visit to Kenya. What?! I gathered myself. This was a fresh vantage point from which I could study the

culture of politics and the politics of culture – in both countries. As we moved from one official function to the next, with my role as interlocutor necessitating shifting nationalities, I revisited my ideas on cultural hybridity, multiple identities, and the work of belonging. I am still unpacking the many meanings of that visit and its implications for Kenya's tangled politics, its sinking economy, and its perpetual relegation of culture to an afterthought.

On our last day at Wiko, Alfred and I tackled a tough reckoning on our bucket lists – a search for the landmark of the Berlin Conference of 1884, that site where our fate as postcolonials was sealed. Wilhelmstraße 76. There is no building, no towering monument to/of atonement, just a tall plaque bearing an edited (hi)story in German, English, and French. A sense of anti-climax tangled with numerous unnameable emotions. There was so much to think about regarding cultural geographies and the force with which ideas from a place can disperse across oceans for centuries and also about the (im)material forms that reconciliation can take.

Speaking of (un)finished histories, as soon as I settled back home in Eldoret, I finally found the intellectual bandwidth to complete a report that I had been working on since May – the assessment of the Lisa Maskell Fellowship for the Gerda Henkel Foundation. Now, I am staring out of the window on a flight from Eldoret trying not to overthink the Championing Culture panel that I will soon moderate at the Nairobi LitFest. I pick up my phone to capture a striking image of the clouds. The fluffy white form reminds me of some unfinished business with Berlin's snow. When will I get round to making a video collage of changing seasons from those photographs that I took – religiously – every Sunday at circa 9 a.m. from the window of my Villa Walther bedroom? Enough of (re)membering my life at Wiko. Let me get back to Chapter Six, "The Template Eulogy," so that my book on death can come to birth. After all, the only good book is a finished book.