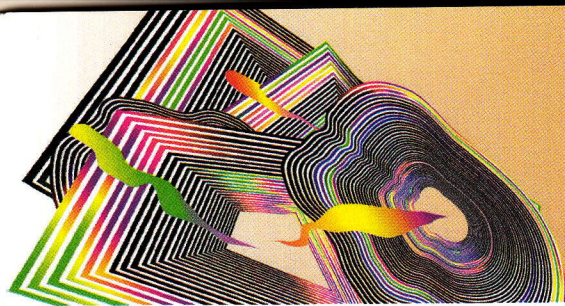


# Space and Representation:

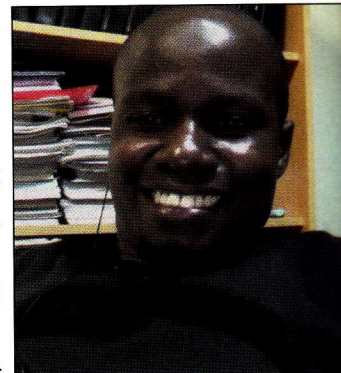
On "Authentic" identities and the façade <sup>of</sup> total revolution

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There are two ways to lose oneself: walled segregation in the particular or dilution in the "universal" – Aime Cesaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (1950)

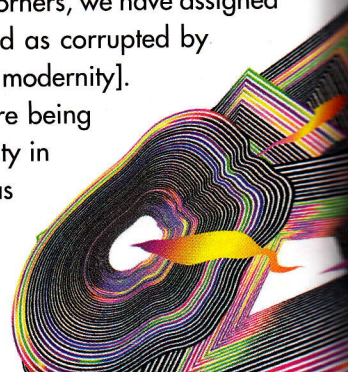
Sometime in April, I had a seminar on postcolonial studies with MA students at the University of Hargeysa. We had read a section from Ngugi's *The Language of African Literature*, and as the conversation unfolded, we touched identity and belonging – we also wandered and discussed a bit of the Somali diaspora – a conversation, which was particularly exhilarating. As we strolled out of class at the end of the session, one of the students came over and reiterated his position: "I do not consider these diaspora people as Somalis. You cannot hold an American passport and remain a Somali!"



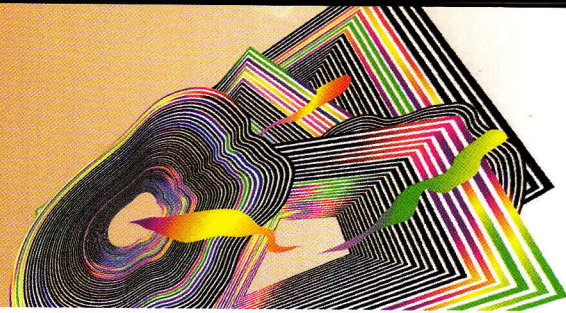
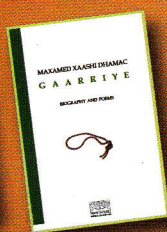
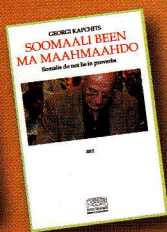
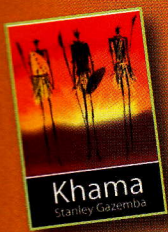
"How then do you want us to think about them? These people belong to clans here; they speak the language; own pieces of land, and have not abandoned their kindred. They send support every day. Why other them as not Somali?" I protested, again. From the look on his face, it was evident I had not made any sense. He came back with a sharp diatribe on their "un-Somali cultural behaviours" [I'm not sure I understood this really well], their excessive friendliness with foreigners pointing to the case of the Puntland President, Abdiweli Muhammad Ali who he accused of giving the Somali semi-autonomous region of Puntland to his American compatriots/friends, among other accusations. "There are so many white people roaming the presidential palace," he noted. With a colonial experience not long forgotten, and a persistent broken and vulnerable state in Somalia, it would be unfair to accuse my student of racism or even xenophobia.

Of course, many voices will disagree with this position. One other student who had been drawn to our conversation suggested that despite his "American-ness" President Abdiweli was running Puntland well. By implication, for this practical benefit – running the country well – he deserved all the right to be fully Somali. Aware that there are several Somalis in this category [official documents in Somaliland indicate that 15 per cent of its 3.5 million people population, are a diaspora community] I do not intend to open a debate on whether all Somalis are Somalis but some are more Somali than others. I intend to use this overview to illuminate larger debates on identity and belonging, and in other cases authenticity. In the horn and East Africa, space – both political [right to belong, say as a citizen] and intellectual [right to produce knowledge about a community] is being negotiated through arbitrary claims of nativity and authenticity that undermine the very basis of our cross-cultural and disorderly reality. You will often hear claims of Kenyans of Somali descent as not "Kenyan enough." The same claims, as mentioned above will argue that diaspora Somalis are not Somali enough.

The anti-colonial narrative continues to be cast through the arena of yearning for total revolution (David Scott 101-105, 135). Many anti-colonial elites have been criticised for harbouring "Eurocentric aspirations and their betrayal of the Africa or the subaltern." This rather ahistorical criticism is couched in the language of "total revolution" (ibid, 135), blind to the fact capitalist modes of production continue to connect the world (both former colonisers and colonised) in more ways than ever imagined. Indeed, hitherto reified categories, that is, First, Second and Third World – as ways of dividing and understanding the world – are fast becoming obsolete (Aijaz, 1992). Despite this apparent change of fortunes, we still clamour for an authentic ideal [real Somali, real African, or just Africans], which we assign specific sensibilities and competencies. Because these identities are increasingly becoming difficult to touch; are succumbing to influences/modernities from various corners, we have assigned as authentic, "that which is resisting (Mursic, 2013: 46)." The "inauthentic" then becomes defined as corrupted by Eurocentric ideas [in either fashion, music, religion, language, or scholarly aspirations – a Eurocentric modernity]. In the wake of the post-Garrisa Attack Somali-Kenya politics, where Kenyans of Somali descent are being othered across East Africa, we are once again called upon to rethink our claims to space and identity in the region. Somalia and Somaliland also provides us with a context for a discussion on authenticity as



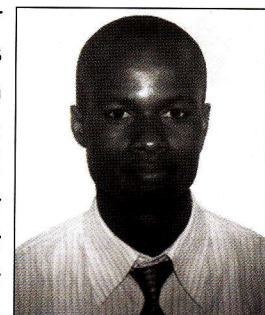




a concept, especially when debates between diaspora and homebred Somalis are examined [this will need more examination elsewhere].

The idea of “total revolution” is decipherable in Gayatri Spivak’s question: “Can the Subaltern [Africans, Indians, Women, Middle Easterners, or Somali] Speak?” This is especially so because of the challenges in defining the subaltern. Following Foucault, Spivak noted that, “the oppressed, if given a chance (the problem of representation cannot be bypassed here) and the way to solidarity through alliance politics...can speak and know their conditions.” But the question that remains [which I think Spivak does not answer]: “Who constitutes the subaltern? If we removed the dominant foreigner, and the dominant indigenous groups at all levels [of narrativity or social structure], how easy is it to find a tangible authentic subaltern or the people? Despite the easily recognisable effacement/oppression/misrepresentation of the subaltern, there seems considerable difficulty defining the subaltern.

I want to suggest that we move away from asking questions about whether the subaltern can speak or if anybody is listening and ask questions about the terrain in which the so-called subaltern speaks, as a more liberating way of shading light on the debates of representation, identities and decolonisation campaigns. In this sense, I want to suggest that questions of who should represent/speak for a certain category of society [women, tribal groups, nations, class, religious communities] should be considered obsolete. I have two reasons for this position: First, all formerly colonised spaces and the people that live these places are conscripts. This demands upon us, however reluctantly, to appreciate the permanent impress that history has over us (Scott, 135). Colonialism then becomes an important beginning moment in our decolonisation campaign, not that we admiringly look at it, but acknowledge that the political-cognitive terrain of the present [scholarship and human interaction] has been permanently re-organised by this and similar events in history (Scott, 127). Second, following Said (2003), I am suggesting a re-invigoration of philological cultural and textual analysis. This is not to acquiesce to cultural relativism [whose critic by the way has continuously failed to rid itself of cultural arrogance] but enabling space for in-depth textual analysis on the terms of the subject being studied. The idea of total revolution [especially in the decolonisation campaign] and even its cousin authenticity [with reference to identity, citizenship, belonging] are just “good but for absolutely nothing (Mursic, 2013).”



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