

MOVING AWAY FROM THE SOUND BITES OF BIG MEN

In November 2007, Kwani Trust invited a group of budding journalists and unpublished writers to a series of creative non-fiction workshops, to discuss and reinforce elements of storytelling in the reporting of the upcoming Kenyan elections. It was attended by a mixed bag: a novelist, a poet, a member of a Nairobi rap group who wrote in Sheng, a sportswriter who worked for a magazine that

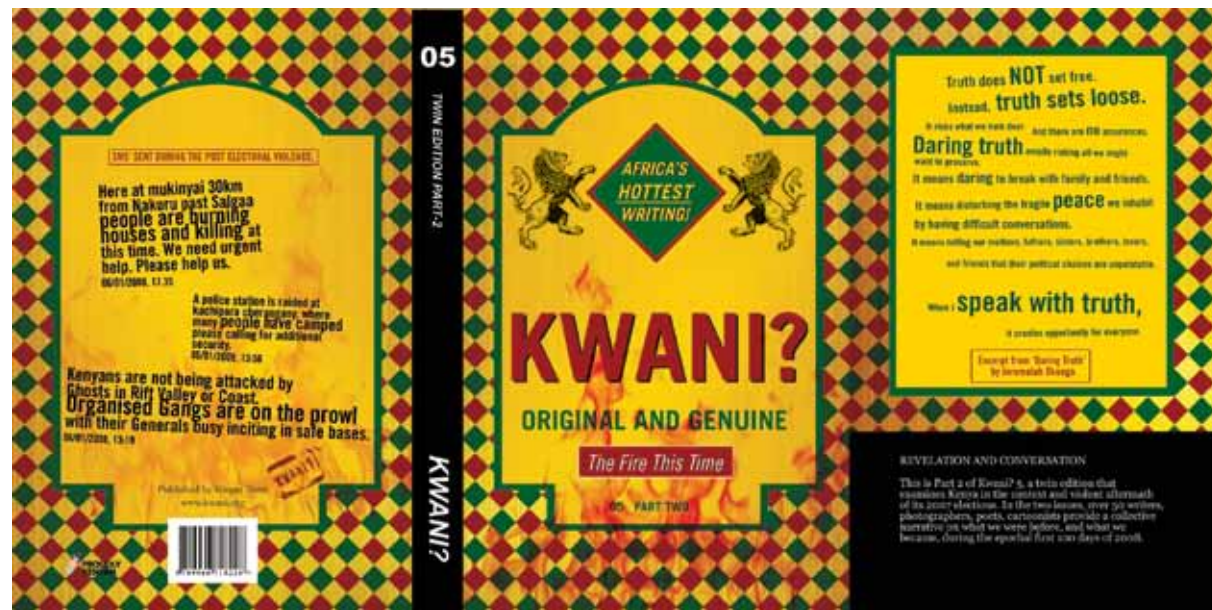
published in Kalenjin, and a broadcast journalist who worked for the government.

Although they were excited at the prospect of using fictive and literary elements in reportage, the journalists present were firmly held in the thrall of the 5 Ws and an H; the mantra of the school of objective journalism. They were skeptical of the whole literary premise: the workshop, if anything, for them was a vacation from police/City Council beat reality; at best, some hoped the workshop would make them better writers for the outlets they were working for. For Kwani, it was an ambitious exercise that would produce at least eight creative non-fiction reports from each of the participants at the workshop.

The premise behind the exercise was that any Kwani reportage and narrative on the upcoming elections would be interested in politics rather than politicians; human affairs, not demagoguery. We hoped to tell the individual's story as a citizen in the space called Kenya, their relationship with *serikali* or state or whatchamacallit, rather than building one-dimensional narratives from the sound bites of Big Men. What was the relationship between Kenyans and government was a question we had perpetually asked ourselves until then; in an election year, we had a chance to answer it.

We brainstormed during the workshops on economics, sociology and anthropology. How citizens' incomes were related to the state practice, and how could we use the story form to illuminate all these issues that had been drowned in the usual mainstream elections speak. Elections, thus, became the catalyst for Kwani's controlled "creative non-fiction" experiment; a lab in which we would judge how Kenyans come to grips with what the government – the state, Kenya – represents for them, be it the Mercedes-Benz convoy or increasing taxation.

My own first foray into creative non-fiction came during one of my final Journalism classes at Rhodes University where, after almost three years of 40-something weekly sessions of standard (read "drudge") journalism, doing anything but joining the 5 Ws and an H brand of journalism was deemed a wonderful escape. Tom Wolfe's mantra of the four devices that made the New Journalism – scene-by-scene construction, third person point of view, (realistic) dialogue in full and details of everyday



life – presented an escape from standard journalism. But in my final days of journalism school, I found it captured more about the rough and tumble ways of the politics of the place I came from than anything else I'd read up to that point.

A few journalists working for mainstream media, however, didn't see it that way. They interrupted the workshop with variations on two themes: "Is it not problematic to narrate reality with fictive elements?" and "How do I start thinking through story, when I've been taught that reality takes place within 5 Ws and an H?"

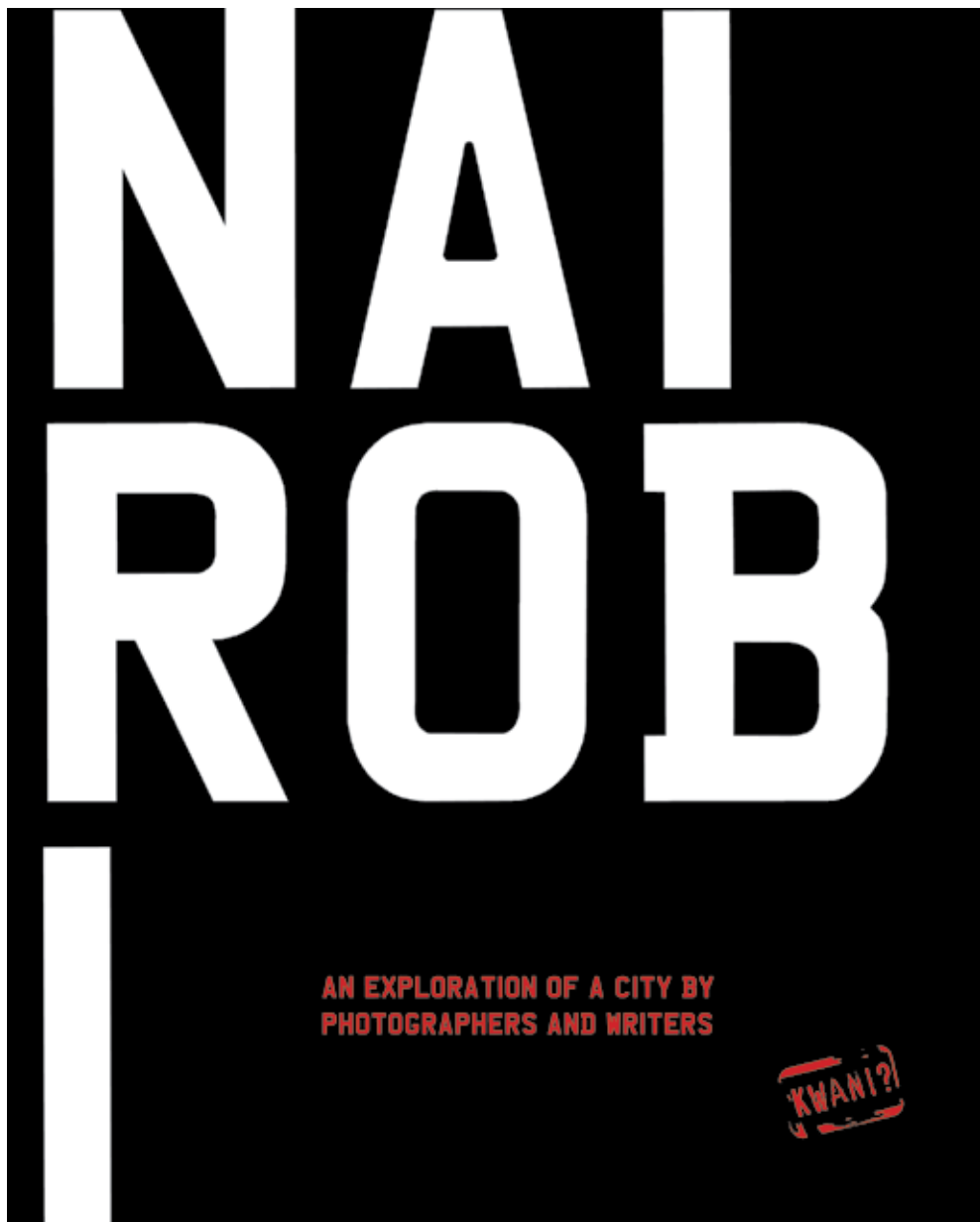
They were pertinent questions, but one month later when the writers were in the field, Kenya did a neck-breaking cartwheel. Stories of the street kid turned councillor – the kind of narratives we were seeking – became, in retrospect, the same kind of prescriptive and normative electoral discourses that we wanted to avoid in the first place. The stories we had commissioned had to be reevaluated. Some of the writers reported that they could only work in friendly zones based on their tribe, caught in the bloody mistakes of their fathers and grandfathers: one Luhya writer had to leave Kangemi, a predominantly-Kikuyu slum in Nairobi where he had lived for all his working life; poet Samuel Munene had to watch where he trod in Mathare and Kariobangi in case he ran into Luos and Luhyas who were attacking members of his tribe, the Kikuyu; and in an ironic twist of history, our two Canadian writers, Arno Kopecky and Tim Queresenger, who had been in Kenya for mere months, could roam the breadth of the land just like their forefathers had done at the turn of the last century.

Once we received the material from the field, it became clear that there were other genres of texts that could fill in what we hadn't captured, especially

in geographic ways. We were told of an enterprising young man who had started an SMS service to which those caught up in the conflict could send SMSs to explain what was going on in their part of the country. We also felt that we needed material from the different hotspots to interview individuals about their experiences during the conflict in their own voice. We called these testimonials, and university students and community activists collected dozens of them.

While the violence progressed through January, different groups of artists – writers, poets, photographers, musicians, cartoonists and visual artists – congregated and started collating work, focusing on what was going on in their local communities, offering a counter-narrative to the discourses that were taking root overseas. Writers especially felt that the foreign media and its correspondents had started drawing a picture of the violence that was essentialist, simplistic and lazy. Kenya was immediately seen as the new Somalia, once again an atavistic space; a failed nation that could not hold democratic elections. Others called it Rwanda, declaring that a new genocide was underway. For local artists, consensus on the reasons for and against the conflict was not necessary; countering foreign pre-determined narratives that did not carefully deconstruct the issues and fallout certainly was. Poets held public performances. Cartoonists and photographers held monthly exhibitions. Visual artists held weekend meets.





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All the work that was collated during the first 100 days of 2008 informed the compilation of the double edition of Kwani 05. The new aim, expanding in the original brief of finding new ways to talk about the electoral process, was to collate the most comprehensive collection of diverse texts and narratives on the democratic process's violent denouement. These included photographs that the mainstream media had refused to publish, and cartoons that had not made the newsprint.

Ultimately, however, we found that the reverse occurred: the mainstream media ultimately picked up on the testimonials of ordinary citizens once we had collected them. It still didn't change the fact that the mainstream media tended to solely focus on politicians in the peace process, and concentrated on police on citizen violence, as well as an overwhelming call for peace without investigating the still-valid questions of electoral injustice that was the catalyst for the violence in the first place. Aesthetically, we at Kwani felt challenged on how to make all this into a coherent narrative that showed the positions of all sides involved. We also understood that there were several underlying issues to the violence and that it was key to show that it went beyond the basic vote. And we also had to create a visually exciting text whose form complemented the content.

Some of the work that was developed in the workshops has been said to be the most comprehensive creative non-fiction work carried out

on the state of Kenyan society, especially around the elections. Following in the shoes of veteran journalist, Phillip Ochieng, the quirky 90s journalist in *The People* newspaper, Kwani has always tried to emphasise the dictums of Wolfe's work.

Our attempt in Kwani 05 to explore elections within the relationship between state and subject through the use of non-standard journalism generated a lot of press and excitement. Elections stories in the mainstream media had either been politician sound bites, anaestheticised constituency profiles or columnists' rants. We felt that several of the pieces had entered the heat and dust of the campaign trail, characterised political players in ways we all recognised but had never read, deconstructed electoral and campaign processes that were either taken for granted and summarised in results, captured the language of election battle in all its Kenyan idiom and somewhat collectively underlined what a certain Kenyan-ness on the political scene was: a continuing game that took place every five years played by our political class against the rest of us. For good or bad, we felt that we had told several aspects of the Kenyan electoral story at a human and deeper level.

But there have been failures, and one learns more from those on what the strengths and weaknesses of the creative non-fiction form are. One is that creative non-fiction is very good at hiding biased frames from its practitioner and audience. Detail, realism, dialogue dazzle and disguise predetermined positions that are bad journalistic practice. Creative non-fiction is best actualised with a humble recognition of other narrative forms and research methodologies. It's one thing to have the style but another thing to recognise that social science methods are what get you the information

and help you ask the right questions. A grounding in political theory, sociology and even anthropology are great tools for the form – they help one recognise the context within which reality is happening. Any alternative frame of knowledge or discourse is a plus. There is also always the danger of a zero-sum take when talking about or practising creative non-fiction. That it fits everything. I always tell classes or workshops when I'm presenting on the work we've done that for me the only difference between non-fiction and fiction is that you can be legally sued for the former as long as your characters can prove to have the same identity as those in that kind of narrative. Since I started working in Kenya and at Kwani, I am always blown away by the essential lack of difference between fiction's truths and non-fiction's facts to illustrate concerns and themes of where I come from.

It's knowing when to choose what form that really matters.

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