

ARTICLE

“On Reading Mau Mau”

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Abstract

During the so-called “era decolonization” in Africa, few historical events held more salience than what is most commonly known as the Mau Mau Uprising in Kenya (which covered the period from 1952 to 1960). This article examines not only how tropes about the nature and origins of Mau Mau were and are deployed across different semiotic landscapes, but also the ways in which their operations are made manifest through practices of reading. I argue that we should consider the idea of Mau Mau—whether it be central to a text or present a mere detail—as a catalyst through which broader claims are made, especially as they relate to the nature of history and the semiotic dimensions of the events that populate it. This article shows this through conducting a “tropology” of Mau Mau, in which the suffix *-ology* underscores reading its tropes as a particular mode of studying it.

Keywords: Mau mau; Kenya; history; Africa; Zanzibar; trope; tropology; figuration; revolution; Dedan Kimathi; Tom Wolfe; mau-mauing; aesthetics; ethnicity

On January 12, 1964, a man calling himself Field Marshal John Okello led a hundreds-strong group of militants in the capture of Zanzibar City. In contemporary descriptions of what would come to be seen as the opening salvo of the Zanzibar Revolution, the origin and nature of the insurgents was of central importance: “Of a total strength of 800, about 250 were mainlanders, who were disaffected by the government’s policy of “Zanzibarization” [the elimination of mainlanders from civil and police posts]; [the police] put up almost no resistance and, in some cases, joined the revolutionary mob.”¹ The group raided police armories (with some assistance from the police themselves) and gained access to weapons. At 7:00 am on the morning of the Revolution, according to both popular legend and Okello’s memoir, Zanzibari radios blared: “I am Field Marshal Okello!

¹ Central Intelligence Agency, “Intelligence Study. Zanzibar: The Hundred Days’ Revolution (ESAU XXX),” February, 21, 1966, 68, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/esau-28.pdf>.

Wake up, you imperialists. There is no longer an imperialist government on this Island; this is now the government of the Freedom Fighters.”² Okello adopted the same title of “Field Marshal” held by the likes of Dedan Kimathi and Muthoni wa Kirima, perhaps some of the most storied leaders of the Kenya Land and Freedom Army (hereafter “KLFA”), an insurgent organization to which the moniker of “Mau Mau” was attached by colonial authorities during the Kenya Emergency (which ran from 1952 to 1960; hereafter referred to as “the Emergency”). In addition, a central part of Okello’s self-fashioning was his claim that he had fought alongside the Kenyan Mau Mau during the height of the violent struggle against British imperialism during the apex of the war. As others have pointed out, this is almost certainly false.³ A strict focus on its veracity, however, obscures the central dynamic at play: the invocation of Mau Mau as a revolutionary trope that had profound effects on perceptions of what was happening in Zanzibar. In this article, I contend that what we see here is one iteration of what can be productively thought about as “reading Mau Mau”—not only on the part of Okello himself and his comrades, but also in the discourses that circulated about him and scholarly treatments of the Zanzibar Revolution as well.

“That which is ‘socially conceivable’ is what ends up being passed on,” writes Ann Lee Grimstad. “This explains recollections that Okello was a Mau Mau or soldier or policeman, because these were credible stories about a man who led a revolution.”⁴ The ways in which Okello’s mythologizing functioned both during and in the wake of the revolution offers us an illustrative point of departure for this article. It focuses our attention on the complex of processes that constitute ways of reading Mau Mau and how readers do so in diverse contexts. And it draws us in particular to consider the boundary between understanding Mau Mau as, on the one hand, a historical phenomenon, and on the other, as a concept whose meaning is mediated through articulating layers of discourses about it. Following Ato Quayson, I argue that taking up Mau Mau in such a way allows us to tap into “the generative quality of postcolonialism not as a temporal marker but as a mode of reading political, social, and cultural relations in different contexts and parts of the world.”⁵ Despite Mau Mau’s roots in the colonialist discourses of 1950s Kenya, this “postcolonial mode of reading” harbors the potential to yield profound insights into not only the many meanings ascribed to it in different times and places, but also their relationships with one another and the ways in which we interface with them as readers of Mau Mau ourselves. In examining how it is consolidated into tropes, this article offers insight into the “tropology” of Mau Mau, in which the suffix *-ology* underscores reading these tropes as a particular mode of studying this movement.

² Quoted in Ann Lee Grimstad, “The Voice of the Revolution: Remembering and Re-Envisioning Field Marshal John Okello,” in *Social Memory, Silenced Voices, and Political Struggle*, eds. William Bissell and Marie-Aude Fouere (Oxford: African Books Collective, 2018), 79; M. G. Vassanji, *The Gunny Sack* (Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 2005), 185.

³ Grimstad, “The Voice of the Revolution,” 83.

⁴ Grimstad, “The Voice of the Revolution,” 83.

⁵ Ato Quayson, *Tragedy and Postcolonial Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 5.

Thus, what follows is an analysis of the reading practices that grant us insight into how Mau Mau appears in contexts far removed in space and time from the Kenya of the 1950s. As such, this article takes up older lines of inquiry in the study of Mau Mau focused on its many “myths,” while also pushing far beyond them.⁶ So too does it build upon a recent body of historical work examining readings of Mau Mau in international contexts. For example, Gerald Horne has demonstrated that Mau Mau served as a kind of political barometer in the United States during the civil rights era, in which it functioned as a means of marking one’s views on the justness of violent agitation in service of political and social change. Where Black radicals saw an efficacious and overdue attempt to overthrow colonialism through the use of violent methods, moderates tended to view Mau Mau’s appeal to such groups as an obstacle to racial progress.⁷ Myles Osborne has explored similar political axes in his examination of views on Mau Mau in contemporary Jamaica, wherein the nation’s “middle and upper classes viewed the Kenyan conflict as an expression of atavistic savagery” whereas its lower classes (and most notably the Rastafarians and Garveyites among them) “were inspired by events in Kenya, which spurred visions of their own diasporic connections and dreams.”⁸

This article begins by continuing our discussion of Okello, and in particular his visit to Nairobi in March 1964, wherein the tacit threat of a “new Mau Mau” (or, at least, state anxieties over the conceptual and demographic elements that constituted it) loomed large for the nascent Kenyan postcolonial regime. The second section of this article takes up the tropology of Mau Mau within the domain of postcolonial African literature proper, and in particular its relationship to the figure of Dedan Kimathi, who comes to operate as its embodiment. Through an analysis of the American journalist Tom Wolfe’s *Radical Chic & Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers*, the third portion of this article considers one instance of how viewing Mau Mau as a threat of detribalization was articulated far beyond the African continent. As different as they are, the texts and contexts under consideration here demonstrate how a substantive examination of its tropology can be undertaken in relation to seemingly disparate manifestations of Mau Mau. We will see not only how tropes of Mau Mau are deployed across different semiotic landscapes, but the ways in which their operations are made manifest through practices of reading. I argue that we should consider Mau Mau—whether central to a text or operative as a mere detail—as a catalyst through which broader claims are made, especially as they relate to the nature of history and the semiotic dimensions of the events that populate it. Thus, this approach puts

⁶ For some of the most pertinent of these, see Bruce Berman, “Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Modernity: The Paradox of Mau Mau,” in *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 25.2 (1991); Dane Kennedy, “Constructing the Colonial Myth of Mau Mau,” in *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 25.2 (1992); John Lonsdale, “Mau Maus of the Mind: Making Mau Mau and Remaking Kenya,” in *Journal of African History* 31.3 (1990).

⁷ Gerald Horne, *Mau Mau in Harlem?: The U.S. and the Liberation of Kenya* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009).

⁸ Myles Osborne, “Mau Mau Are Angels ... Sent by Haile Selassie”: A Kenyan War in Jamaica,” in *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 62.4 (2020), 719, 717.

into practice the idea that every particular “has to be seen simultaneously as both the expression of an implied particularity and the articulation of a threshold that opens out to other levels, some of which might serve to problematize and even distort the earlier perceived autonomy of the particular.”⁹

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According to some of the participants in the Zanzibar Revolution, John Okello “was chosen for his voice. He was to make announcements in his clearly non-Zanzibari Kiswahili so that people would pay attention and obey.”¹⁰ Born and raised in Uganda, that he would be easily identifiable as a so-called “mainlander” was thus no accident. In a 2013 interview, Ramadhan Haji Faki (who worked and fought alongside him) states that this was part of a conscious effort to link the revolution to “Mau Mau and how ferocious they were, insinuating that if people thought Mau Mau were involved, there would be no resistance.”¹¹ In other words, no small part of Okello’s aura was derived from the incentive to read Mau Mau in his figuration. In Okello’s case, we can see this across two different axes (each of which occupies an important place in the broader tropology of Mau Mau). The first is that of Mau Mau as a harbinger of the African Revolution writ large; an irruption of resistance emerging out of the very spirit of the continent and its peoples. The second, that Mau Mau was inherently linked to the existence, tactics, and demands of the (post)colonial *lumpen* classes, and in particular those segments of it viewed as racial threats by state powers. As we will see over the course of this article, early myths of Mau Mau served as a kind of primordial soup, in which there existed the potential for different, more coherent tropes about it to emerge (with these two in particular being among the most enduring). Covered broadly in the international press, the narrative of Okello’s life was a transnational one characterized by his crossing of borders while remaining anchored to a “homeland,” all in the service of fomenting revolution. This sort of characterization was bound to the anthropological discourse of “detrribalization” circulating widely during this period, a phenomenon particularly preoccupied with the dangers this theoretical process held for corrupting African men.¹²

In *Decolonization in African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa*, Frederick Cooper notes that during the first half of the twentieth century: “Colonial thinking was so deeply caught in the conception of the African as

⁹ Ato Quayson, *Calibrations: Reading for the Social* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), xxi.

¹⁰ Quoted in Grimstad, “The Voice of the Revolution,” 81.

¹¹ Quoted in Grimstad, “The Voice of the Revolution,” 81.

¹² A more robust account of this concept will be undertaken in the second section of this article. For now, it is enough to say that what came to be understood as “the problem of detrribalization” resulted from the perception of the psychological, social, and cultural instability produced by the conditions of “modernity” thrust upon “primitive minds.” Because of this condition of instability, the figure of the detrribalized African was often read as an unruly subject predisposed to criminality, violence, and revolutionary sentiment. As we will see, the specter of this figure haunted those for whom orderliness was the guarantor of social progress (both within the context of European domination and after).

immersed in ‘tribal’ culture and obedient to ‘chiefly’ authority that they could only conceive of a wage worker outside a village framework as ‘detrribalized.’”¹³ The figure of the detribalized African held a central place in many readings of Mau Mau during the time of the Emergency, serving as a kind of euphemism for anxieties over the incongruencies of the taxonomies of colonial order. The dissolution of stable ethnicity that was viewed as resulting from urbanization was only one side of the coin, with the other being the reconstitution of ethnicity in ways that evaded the control of colonial power. Coverage of Mau Mau in the Kenya of the Emergency, after all, was as preoccupied with the “corruption” of Kikuyu practices (most notably oathing and rituals) as it was the formation of class consciousness attached to more unidirectional understandings of detribalization. Put another way, it was as much a matter of “retribalization” as “detrribalization.”¹⁴ Even according to its own logic, the perception of African instability called into question major aspects of the imperial project, including its attempts to justify itself as an orderly and progressive enterprise. In the words of John Flint, because of this, “‘Detribalization’ was the ghost which haunted the system.”¹⁵ This specter was that of disorderly ethnicity, of forms of identity and consciousness over which (neo)colonial power could exercise no control.

For many contemporary observers, the event of Mau Mau raised the prospect of a decolonized Africa in which European influence was neither welcome nor tenable. How one read this, of course, was deeply dependent on political sympathies, anxieties, or desires, and views on what shape the future of the continent should take. For many in the West (and, indeed, throughout Africa as well), the sensationalist portrayals of barbaric violence that characterized international coverage of the movement were bound up with imaginings of the African future, and in particular what would occur if decolonization did not follow the “controlled” process envisioned by contemporary Euro-American powers and those sympathetic to these visions. Colonial myths of Mau Mau were the outcome of a metanarrative of African people based not only on Western stereotypes of savagery and primitivity, but also (and perhaps more acutely in political terms) a belief in the fundamental incompatibility of African subjects with modernity and capacity for self-rule.¹⁶ Such beliefs are key to understanding why the movement was viewed as being composed in large part of

¹³ Frederick Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 23.

¹⁴ For Cohen, “retribalization” was the process of constituting ethnic social identities in spaces removed from the “natural” loci of a given ethnic group. Although his work focuses primarily on the Hausa, we should recall the centrality of such a dynamic with regard to Mau Mau. The simultaneous focus on the part of colonial authorities on both “detrribalized” but nonetheless “Kikuyu” social formations in urban spaces such as Nairobi and the idea that Mau Mau was “bastardizing” the group’s older traditions and rituals are prime examples. Abner Cohen, *Custom and Politics in Urban Africa: A Study of Hausa Migrants in Yoruba Towns* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969).

¹⁵ John Flint, “Planned Decolonization and its Failure in British Africa,” *African Affairs* 83.328 (July 1983): 394.

¹⁶ Here, I follow the analysis of Siba N’Zatioula Grovogui in his excellent study of the history and construction of international law: Siba N’Zatioula Grovogui, *Sovereigns, Quasi Sovereigns, and Africans: Race and Self-Determination in International Law* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

so-called “detrribalized Africans,” “squatters,” and criminals—classes of individuals whose archetypes were easily conscripted into the argument that release from colonialism needed the steady hand of the West if it was not to descend into tribalistic violence and political chaos. The consequence of preoccupations with Africans untethered from the bonds of kinship and tribe, detribalization discourses cut across normative imperial frameworks and borders. Thus, even though a key part of its figuration invoked (often overtly neocolonial) hopes of “development,” the detribalized African was also viewed as a latent threat to the orderly framework of colonialist taxonomy and reliance on the static nature of the “customary.” This figure represented a paradox: on the one hand, detribalized Africans harbored the potential for becoming the “modern men” necessary for a decolonization process sought after by Western powers, but on the other, it raised the specter of anarchic populations cut loose from colonial conceptions of order.

When Field Marshal John Okello visited Nairobi after being exiled from Zanzibar in the wake of the revolution, both the Kenyan state apparatus and Western intelligence agencies responded with great concern. As we saw earlier, Okello worked to cultivate his Mau Mau–flavored mythology himself and had an easy time of it in an imperial semiotic landscape where *Mau Mau* was synonymous with *racial terrorism*. In coverage of his visit, we see that “Even in his defeat, the four East African countries still fear Mr. Okello as a security risk because of his singular hold on the illiterate, impoverished and discontented.”¹⁷ The rationale for the targeting and surveillance of Okello, then, was couched in language mirroring the same groups who had always constituted the Mau Mau threat in the eyes of colonial authorities: “Openly restless and resentful, these groups believe that independence under African rule has done little to change their lives from the days when East Africa was a British colonial domain.” Moreover (and in a manner that we will soon see echoed in our reading of *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*), there exists here an Okello who shares an essential affinity with the “illiterate, impoverished and discontented” people of East Africa; in other words, a kind of figural collapse between the level of the individual and the collective.

For a nascent Kenyan regime only months removed from formal independence (and which was still staffed by countless administrators from the days of British rule), the response to Okello’s visit was serious: “Roadblocks were set up outside Nairobi, the capital, amid apprehension over the motives behind Field Marshal Okello’s visit” and “Prime Minister Jomo Kenyatta and his closest associates were said to fear that a coup might be in preparation.”¹⁸ Even for an independent Kenyan state, then—which would in later years work to incorporate a specific version of Mau Mau into its national narrative—the ability to harness the discontent of the populations historically linked to the idea of the “detrribalized African” remained a grave security risk. In other words, the possibility that Okello might be capable of tapping into the frustrations of deor reethnized people in the slums of Nairobi represented a postcolonial spin on

¹⁷ Robert Conley, “Okello, Barred by 3 Nations, Back in First Home,” *New York Times*, March 17, 1964.

¹⁸ Robert Conley, “Kenya on Alert in Okello’s Visit,” *New York Times*, 1 March 1, 1964.

the colonial anxiety that a “new Mau Mau” might emerge at any moment. Indeed, in contemporary Kenya there also existed the question of whether the movement called “Mau Mau” had ended at all or if the failure to realize its highest aspirations meant that the struggle was ongoing. This was understood to constitute an existential threat to the existing state because of the articulation of Mau Mau with the African Revolution and the possibility of its betrayal, regardless of whether Kenya had an African in its presidential palace. Thus the concerns present in accounts detailing Okello’s time in Kenya: “He slipped away in an unidentified car and disappeared into [Nairobi]’s African quarter, where thousands of unemployed are openly resentful that Kenya’s newly won independence has not brought them jobs.”¹⁹ The very structural existence of an African *lumpen* class—one which received an anthro-, socio-, and psychological expression in the figure of the “detrribalized African”—haunted the postcolonial state as much as it did its predecessor.

Okello’s presence in Nairobi, and the Kenyatta administration’s reaction to it, emerged in tandem with other events unfolding contemporarily. As an American CIA fact-finding report from 1968 notes: “Within less than a week of the Zanzibar revolution, mutinies broke out in the neighboring East African states of Tanganyika, Uganda, and Kenya. There was a general suspicion that these events were somehow interrelated, and this view contributed to the speculation that they might be part of a coordinated Communist plot to take over the area.”²⁰ In hindsight, the powers that be in East Africa largely discredited the many rumors in circulation that the revolution had been part of an overarching plot. Apparently, the CIA was in consensus with the Kenyan administration that there was no tangible connection between it and the subsequent mutinies, only what they both agreed was an “emotional link” between the Zanzibar revolt and the uprisings in East Africa. What exactly was meant by an emotional connection isn’t stated clearly, but it was this which simultaneously generated a warm reception for “Okello the Mau Mau” in the slums of Nairobi and a heavy-handed increase in security measures from Kenyatta’s government. That the same regime, who would go on to render its own (Kikuyu-centric) version of Mau Mau into a narrative of a national liberation struggle only a handful of years later, also lived in fear of its essential character is a compelling testament to the transgressive core one encounters in pursuing a tropology of Mau Mau. Indeed, it is precisely the nature of this core—and in particular, its attachment to the African Revolution writ large—that this article attends to next.

The African Revolution (Betrayed)

Penned in 1971 by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o and Mĩcere Mũgo, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* provides us with a point of entry into how Mau Mau operates as an emblem of the African Revolution, as well as the ways in which its “betrayal” have manifested within the context of the postcolony. Moreover, it is perhaps the clearest

¹⁹ Conley, “Kenya on Alert in Okello’s Visit.”

²⁰ “Zanzibar: The Hundred Days’ Revolution,” ESAU CIA report, 45.

example of how the idea of Mau Mau and the figure of Kimathi as its embodiment can function as an articulated whole, a profoundly significant point of connection we will return to in our subsequent examination of Niq Mhlongo's 2013 novel *Way Back Home*. *The Trial* is set in the Kenya of the Emergency and shepherds the audience through the colonialist persecution of the KLFA's most notorious leader.²¹ Strictly speaking, the play covers a rather short period of time: it spans just a few days, during which the legal proceedings to which Kimathi is subjected unfold. But this timeframe is consistently destabilized through the inescapable presence of the Kenyan past. Indeed, when Ademola Dasylyva describes *The Trial* as "a deconstructed history of colonial Kenya," he highlights precisely this aspect of it.²²

Throughout the play, what are in theory temporally bounded scenes are punctured by dramatic entrances of figures acting out dynamics from this past, such as older violent struggles against British colonialism (as in the appearance of Koitalel Arap Samoei, the storied leader of the Nandi resistance during the early twentieth century) or the portrayal of precolonial practices (such as the performance of dances invoking tradition). History operates almost as an agent itself, asserting itself and fading away in order to emphasize particular portions of dramatization and articulate the primary action of the play with the meaning of other events in the past. Because the narratives of Kimathi and Kenya are woven together, there is both a micro- and macro-tragedy on display—in essence articulated as the same phenomenon at different scales. This has profound consequences for considering the nature of the characters themselves, and Kimathi in particular. As Dasylyva puts it, Kimathi becomes "more of a legend than an historical fact."²³ It is this aspect of the abstraction of Kimathi that is most compelling in thinking about the topography of Mau Mau. Because he is the embodiment of an unadulterated Kenyan nationalism (whose performance occurs on the postcolonial stage), his figuration is necessarily connected to the mythologies that coalesced around the struggle for its attainment. Further, we are invited to think about Kimathi as the embodiment of the African Revolution itself, in all of its temporal and geographical variation.

There exists a tension in reading Kimathi alongside Mau Mau in this way. This is so because of the particularisms harbored within the phrase "Mau Mau," itself; that is, the murkiness of its origins and constitutive embeddedness in modes of

²¹ Julie MacArthur offers a succinct description of the historical trial: "On 19 November 1956, Mau Mau rebel field marshal Dedan Kimathi stood or, more accurately, sat in front of Her Majesty's Supreme Court of Kenya at Nyeri and asserted a 'plea of not guilty.' After eight days of trial, Chief Justice Kenneth Kennedy O'Connor found Kimathi guilty of unlawful possession of a firearm and ammunition and sentenced him to be 'hanged by the neck until dead.' Early on the morning of 18 February 1957, Dedan Kimathi was hanged to death and buried in an unmarked grave in the grounds of Kamiti prison." Julie MacArthur, "Introduction: The Trial of Dedan Kimathi," in *Dedan Kimathi on Trial: Colonial Justice and Popular Memory in Kenya's Mau Mau Rebellion*, ed. Julie MacArthur (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2017), 1.

²² Ademola O. Dasylyva, "Playing with History, Playing with Words: Ngũgĩ and Mugo's *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*," in *Spheres Public and Private: Western Genres in African Literature*, ed. Gordon Collier (Matatu, 39; Amsterdam and New York: Editions Rodopi, 2011), 532.

²³ Dasylyva, "Playing with History, Playing with Words," 532.

meaning-making. As Dane Kennedy points out about the origin of the name, “The term arose from a linguistic void, its etymology a mystery. A signifier in search of signification, it lay open to whatever meaning anyone wished to attach to it.”²⁴ Even so, it is critical to attend to the power dynamics that inform which readings of Mau Mau circulate more widely than others and how they come to do so. There is no doubt, for example, that the colonialist mythologies of it were central to the ways in which it was ascribed meaning during the Emergency, and indeed long after. In their 2015 foreword to the edited collection *Dedan Kimathi on Trial*, Ngũgĩ and Mugo themselves assert that “The mumbo-jumboish term Mau Mau was a British creation to obscure the clarity of the aims of the name Land and Freedom. This very mumbo-jumboism has often fueled a scholarship that tries to diminish the armed wing of the entire anticolonial liberation by describing the struggle that Kimathi led as a civil war.”²⁵ Thus, a crucial aspect of *The Trial* is a critique of the moniker of “Mau Mau” and its replacement by what its authors view as a clarified vision of the struggle. Whether “Mau Mau” was specifically created and consciously intended to obscure the aims of the KLFA is debatable, but there is no doubt that Mau Mau’s existence as a colonialist myth invoked African barbarism and irrationality is a key piece of its genealogy. It is, however, crucial to note that the phrase “Mau Mau” became attached to the Kenyan liberation struggle for even those sympathetic to its aims (especially outside of Kenya), many of whom very easily identified it as a struggle for land and freedom even with this moniker.

When considered this in tandem with the fact that *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* has come to be performed all over the world, we cannot dismiss its association with the label of “Mau Mau,” regardless of authorial critique of the obfuscation baked into this name. And as Kimathi stands in for the Kenyan liberation struggle as a whole, his articulation with Mau Mau is inescapable. It is because of this that we can see the trope of Mau Mau as the African Revolution in his figure—and, significantly, the politics of its betrayal by way of acquiescence to neocolonialism. In the play, “trial” operates as a *double entendre*. On the one hand, there is the general framing of the legal process, described repeatedly by the authors as a “farce”; on the other, there is what is more accurately described as the *trials* of Dedan Kimathi, which draw into focus the play’s engagement with classic tragedy and the temptation of Christ. Indeed, this latter dimension of the play’s engagement with trial reads as a postcolonial African rendering of Jesus’s testing in the wilderness as conveyed in the books of Matthew and Luke. Whereas the account of the temptation of Christ occurs as a series of exchanges between the Son of God and Satan, what we see in *The Trial* is a set of dialogues between Kimathi (the son of the revolution) and a rotating stable of (neo)colonial collaborators. In one, Kimathi is visited by a trio of bankers—one European, one Indian, one African (the last of whom never utters a word). In another, by Africans bearing the titles of the Politician, the Business Executive, and the

²⁴ Kennedy, “Constructing the Colonial Myth of Mau Mau,” 241.

²⁵ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o and Micere Githae Mũgo, “Foreword,” in *Dedan Kimathi on Trial: Colonial Justice and Popular Memory in Kenya’s Mau Mau Rebellion*, ed. Julie MacArthur (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2017), xvi.

Priest. Taking up the structural function of the biblical Satan, each of them works to convince Kimathi to acquiesce to the neocolonial order of things, offering him riches, power, and (most importantly) the illusion that sovereign power can be attained through its being *granted* to Kenya by the British rather than *seized* by the Kenyan people. In an exchange between Kimathi and the Politician, for example, we see the following exchange:

Politician: We shall form one country-wide political party and serious negotiations will soon be in progress. In State House. In London. We shall sit around a conference table. We shall be given independence.

Kimathi: Give! Given! Give! Given! Given! Beggars. Hands outstretched. Ten cents. Thirty pieces of silver. Independence on a silver platter? Away. Vile Creatures. Rats. Blood suckers. What? Blood? Yes. Your people's blood. Our people's blood. The blood of us workers and peasants.

The Politician is nothing short of a postcolonial Judas, with Kimathi occupying the place of the (soon-to-be) martyred Christ. Thus, Kimathi (and in turn the Kenyan liberation struggle in general) is rendered synonymous with resisting the temptations offered by the neocolonial order. By its very nature, acquiescence to an independence that is “given” makes one vampiric—a betrayer of the great hopes of the revolutionary dream and exploiter of the masses in whose name righteous struggle has been waged. As Simon Gikandi puts it, “[The authors] want to use the dramatic stage as an extraterritorial space in which Kimathi, now freed from the colonial imaginary, can function as a symbol of the masses.”²⁶ If there are those who have invoked the liberation struggle in the service of pursuing power with such a schema (as the Politician does), such forces have engaged not only in a betrayal of Mau Mau and the Kenyan masses, but also the African Revolution itself. This component of Mau Mau's tropology—as the African Revolution (betrayed)—has exercised a degree of influence often overlooked in studies of it. For another illustrative example of this, we can turn to a very different “Kimathi,” by way of Niq Mhlongo's 2013 novel *Way Back Home*.

Alternating between present-day South Africa and 1980s Angola, the arc of Mhlongo's novel follows two tracks. The first details the social dynamics, paranoia, and tragic movement of a group of exiled South African militants in a camp named after Amilcar Cabral in the Angola of the days of the revolution. In the wake of a surprise attack on the camp by the South African National Defence Force, accusations of betrayal and espionage consume its community of freedom fighters. Two figures emerge to the forefront of an increasingly maniacal leadership (*noms de guerre* Comrades Pilate and Idi), becoming increasingly hellbent on both unmasking traitors to “the movement” and exacting various revenges based on personal grievances. They harbor a particular animus toward a militant going by the name of Lady Comrade Mkabayi, whose dedication to the

²⁶ Simon Gikandi, “Dedan Kimathi: The Floating Signifier and the Missing Body,” in *Dedan Kimathi on Trial: Colonial Justice and Popular Memory in Kenya's Mau Mau Rebellion*, ed. Julie MacArthur (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2017), 329.

cause is of no question to readers. Despite being one of the only characters in the book worthy of our respect, by the end of the novel we see her driven to insanity, subjected to all manner of brutality, and murdered at the hands of her comrades. Exile and its consequences loom large in this thread of *Way Back Home*, with Amílcar Cabral Camp serving as a microcosm of the more general condition of exilic consciousness and social life in the time of anticolonial war.

The second track of the novel follows the story of Kimathi Tito, who lives in present-day South Africa. Although the reader is made aware of his revolutionary past through discussions of his involvement in the South African struggle against apartheid, the particular role that he occupies in the past time of the novel's first track is unclear throughout the book. Kimathi is a businessman of sorts, cast as emblematic of the grift- and corruption-oriented types who angle for government contracts in the hopes of gaining enormous sums of money—and particularly those who do so through the invocation of their revolutionary credentials. The bulk of this part of the narrative revolves around Kimathi and his associates' attempt to secure a lucrative coal-mining contract, an effort that ultimately fails. As this unfolds, we see Kimathi consumed by rampant alcohol abuse, regrets related to his estrangement from his wife, and constant envy of men more successful than himself. But more than any of these elements, this thread of the plot presents us with a Kimathi haunted by the specter of a young woman named Semani. Drawing from the stylistic wells of magical realism, Mhlongo offers us a study of Kimathi's psyche consumed with remorse and the (often literal) ghosts of his past, which he experiences first as madness, then as curse. With heavy foreshadowing throughout, in the final pages of the book Kimathi is revealed as having been none other than Comrade Pilate himself, the most sadistic of Lady Comrade Mkabayi's torturers. In a parallel fashion, we learn that Semani took on the *nom de guerre* of Mkabayi after fleeing her school for fear of political persecution and traveling to Angola to engage in the armed struggle against apartheid.

The many names attached to characters throughout *Way Back Home* offer us a thicket of paradoxes and metaphors. Kimathi, of course, but also those such as Mkabayi (the famed Zulu regent of the Qulusi kraal) and Idi. In their antinomies, figuration and trope are deployed as ways of commenting on the messy “before and after” of African decolonization; the hope and romance of struggle and independence, and the disillusionment of neocolonialism and postcolonial systems of exploitation.²⁷ Nowhere is this clearer, of course, than in the novel's central character: Kimathi/Pilate. Early in the novel, we learn that he was born in 1969 “on 31 October, which meant he shared a birthday with his father's struggle hero, Mau Mau leader Dedan Kimathi Waciuri.”²⁸ The figuration attached to the category of “struggle hero” appears frequently elsewhere in the book, with countless names of other freedom fighters invoked as a kind of pantheon of revolutionary anticolonialism. In its consolidation into trope, the moniker

²⁷ Such a framing is deeply caught up in the dynamics of postcolonial tragedy identified by David Scott; David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

²⁸ Niq Mhlongo, *Way Back Home* (Cape Town: Kwela Books, 2013), 19.

“Kimathi” operates as a synonym for “Mau Mau” in both the romantic and tragic readings of it we encountered in *The Trial*. The lavish lifestyle and callous capitalism of Kimathi the businessman sits in constant tension with the righteousness of the cause with which his name is most commonly associated, that great inaugurator in the African Revolution. With references to many of the world’s most recognizable luxury brands peppering virtually every page of Kimathi’s story (forming, in large part, the core of his current identity), we are tasked with meditating upon the paradoxes of the South African postcolony and the cynicism of how Kimathi invokes his revolutionary credentials.

If the Kimathi of *The Trial* is a kind of Christ figure, we see quite the opposite in the Kimathi of *Way Back Home*. A far cry from the embodiment of the African Revolution who never acquiesces to the seductions of neocolonialism, the latter figure has succumbed to every temptation imaginable. The weight of this history of succumbing is bolstered, even has its foundation, in that other name that Mhlongo’s Kimathi bears: Pilate. In considering how this dimension of his characterization operates, it is worth underscoring how the figural contingency that is embedded in “Kimathi” extends as well to the name of “Pilate.” In the Western tradition, the trope of Pontius Pilate is most often encountered as a kind of shorthand for the abdication of responsibility (or even the persecution of the righteous) by the powerful. *Way Back Home* is no exception in this regard, and because of this it is worthwhile to examine more robustly the consolidation of this particular trope. The figural politics of Pontius Pilate have themselves been embedded in historical processes with a wide array of manifestations and distinct trajectories. In both the Ethiopian and Coptic churches, for example, Pilate is believed to have converted to Christianity and bears the status of saint and/or martyr. For the dual figuration of Kimathi/Pilate to operate in the way it does in Mhlongo’s book, we require both a specific reading of Mau Mau (the hope and romance of the African Revolution) and an equally specific reading of Pilate (wherein the “washing of his hands” can be read alongside the betrayal of the revolution).

Thinking this contingency allows us to see how Kimathi and Pilate perform similar work in their operation as tropes, functioning as decontextualized (though culturally specific) narrative devices that invoke moral dynamics and claims that might break down differently according to the contexts in which one interfaces with them. To return to Quayson’s framing, the particularisms of these tropes in *Way Back Home* offer us thresholds for problematizing their autonomy and shaping Mhlongo’s critique of the bankruptcy of revolutionary signifiers in the upper echelons of contemporary South African society (and ANC party culture specifically). We thus see why so much of Kimathi’s narrative in *Way Back Home* clusters around cosmopolitan consumption. How are we supposed to digest the semiotic weight of “Kimathi” alongside brand names such as Moët, Gucci, or Bentley? A profound dissonance is inescapable in the very arrangement of these words on the pages of *Way Back Home*, a stylistic element of the book that invites us to dwell within the paradoxes of postcoloniality. And it is also in this space that one gains a sense of how the trope of Mau Mau as the African Revolution betrayed takes on a specifically South African dimension. The emptiness of Kimathi and his associates’ promises to better the lives of rural

South Africans and limit environmental destruction in their pursuit of a coal contract is intimately linked to his descent into madness (or cursedness, depending on one’s view of the book) and eventual death. If in *The Trial* Mau Mau is articulated with the postcolonial condition of Kenya, in Mhlongo’s book it is abstracted from place, and its role as a signifier necessarily takes on a dissociated quality. The fact of its deployment as a means of critiquing the political hollowness of the ANC in particular—or, put another way, the ways in which the party has “washed its hands” of revolutionary sincerity—attests to this. Yet across both of them, Mau Mau/Kimathi’s existence within the pantheon of decolonization is a distillation of the African Revolution itself; a part that contains the essence of the whole, a single petal of a larger bloom.

“Mau-Mauing the Goddamned White Man”: The Threat of Disorderly Ethnicity

In tandem with its articulation with the African Revolution, the consequences of the ascription of ethnic disorderliness to Mau Mau can be seen well beyond the borders of Kenya (as different as the constellations of the “ethnic” in these differing historical conditions might be). Drawing from a core element of Okello’s figuration we encountered in the first section of this article, our next line of inquiry into the topology of Mau Mau comes to us from a very different kind of work, published only months apart from *The Trial* in a vastly different context: Tom Wolfe’s two-essay collection *Radical Chic & Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers*, the latter of which provides an account of a tactic of the lumpen classes in San Francisco that took its name from the liberation struggle in Kenya. Though rife with cynicism and often questionable in its analysis, Wolfe’s essays nonetheless provide us with generative insights in pursuing a tropology of Mau Mau. Namely, it shows us how even cynical and relatively ungrounded readings of Mau Mau nevertheless contained an acknowledgment of the potentiality (in Wolfe’s case we might say the *specter*) of the African Revolution writ large. As we will see, the difference between Wolfe’s reading and those we have already explored (perhaps with the exception of that of the Kenyatta regime’s reaction to Okello’s visit in certain regards) lies not in their incongruity on this aspect of Mau Mau’s tropology, but rather the perception of the disorderliness and desirability attached to it.

The contours of such perceptions are fundamentally linked to the reader’s position in relation to the *lumpen*-ness of Mau Mau, which in the case of *Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers* manifests as the looming threat of a potential uprising. As Annmaria Shimabuku puts it in her study of biopolitics in postwar Okinawa, the lumpenproletariat “marks the constant threat of crisis; it is an interruption in the teleological view of history.”²⁹ Though often dismissive in its treatment of the nature and efficacy of Mau Mau, Wolfe’s essay contains undercurrents of middle-class anxiety and fear akin to watching a pot that one knows might boil

²⁹ Annmaria M. Shimabuku, *Alegal: Biopolitics and the Unintelligibility of Okinawan Life* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), 71.

over at any moment (what we can think about here as being the specter of the African Revolution). The more well known of the two pieces in the collection, *Radical Chic* is a stylized account of a party hosted by the composer Leonard Bernstein for the Black Panther Party at his lavish New York City apartment on January 14, 1970. Before being published in book form alongside *Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers*, the piece ran as a serial in *New York* magazine. A classic in the genre of new journalism that had its apogee in the 1970s, it lampoons what Wolfe sees as the hollow progressivism of New York City's upper class. The essay offers a scathing critique of an American liberalism that finds in radical politics nothing more than an opportunity to augment one's own prestige in high society. "This sort of *nostalgie de la boue*, or romanticizing of primitive souls," writes Wolfe, "was one of the things that brought Radical Chic to the fore in New York Society."³⁰

As an accompaniment to *Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers*, *Radical Chic* provides an introduction to what can be considered the central theme of the two essays: the relationship between a racialized *lumpenproletariat* and establishment liberalism within the United States of the late 1960s. Wolfe writes the relation between these two entities as a sort of dance or game, within which aesthetics (and, as we will see, their weaponization) serves as a primary terrain upon which they interact. Wolfe's portrayal of Bernstein and his ilk marks them as archetypal "limousine liberals," whose hosting of controversial figures is more preoccupied with cultivating an image as progressives than any principled political stance. Indeed, figures like Bernstein, despite his expressions of solidarity with them, deride the analyses that members of the Panthers put forth. Those in this circle of New York's elite occupy an empty and fetishistic relationship to the Panthers, imbibing their words as a "ghetto gospel" without harboring the will or capacity to take them seriously. Something of a precursor to critiques of "slacktivism" and "virtue signaling" leveled at American liberals in more recent years, Wolfe's portrayal of liberal engagement with radical politics is boiled down to its aesthetic utility in a symbolic economy oriented to the reification of the status quo.

The central preoccupation of *Radical Chic* is the aesthetic dimensions of liberal high society's cultural hegemony, and as such the essay dedicates far less space to the Black Panthers themselves. When commentary on their aesthetic practices does appear, it is to convey the sense of militancy and revolutionariness of the clothing and hairstyles most closely associated with the group. In *Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers*, however, the aesthetic consciousness of the lumpen classes is of central importance. The narrative of this essay revolves around a kind of dialectical relationship—the San Francisco poor who do the "mau-mauing" and the establishment bureaucrats who do the "flak catching." Wolfe's description of "mau-mauing" portrays it as a tactic of intimidation by way of cultivating an affect intimidating enough to terrify the bureaucracy into bending to one's will. Though inextricable from a cartoonish aesthetics of Blackness rooted in Western myths of Mau Mau, those who go mau-mauing in Wolfe's essay are a diverse bunch: "Before long everybody in the so-called Third World was into

³⁰ Tom Wolfe, *Radical Chic & Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970), 13.

it. Everybody was out mau-mauing up a storm, to see if they could win the victories the blacks had won. San Francisco, being the main port of entry for immigrants from all over the Pacific, had as many colored minorities as New York City. Maybe more."³¹ In a manner similar to discourses of detribalization, the motley groups that we encounter in these scenes are characterized as a disorderly rabble whose being destabilizes orthodox taxonomies of ethnicity (and, indeed, race). "So the Chinese, the Japanese, the Chicanos, the Indians picked up on mau-mauing from the bloods," writes Wolfe, "Not only that, they would try to do it exactly like the bloods, try to wear naturals like the bloods, even if their hair was too straight to do it. There were Spanish and Oriental dudes who washed their hair every day with Borax to make it fluff up and sit out."³² In Wolfe's presentation of their cultivating the aesthetic necessary to go mau-mauing, these groups put on an Africanness rooted in colonialist myths of Mau Mau that troubles the existing boundaries between ethnic groups. Or, put another way, the passage highlights the class being of "the lumpenproletariat as a potentiality omnipresent across disparate groups."³³ However, when encountering his framing one wonders whether the cartoonishness Wolfe ascribes to the mau-mauers is, in fact, anything more than a rhetorical tactic that provides a justification for the dismissal of the political content of the tactics in question.

In Wolfe's presentation of it, mau-mauing is a kind of game. The object is to intimidate the bureaucrats who administer San Francisco's poverty programs into doling out resources by harassing them, applying pressure through intense questioning, and creating a situation where the threat of violence appears to be imminent. A critique of the state of the American welfare system, of course, looms large. Paradoxically given its referent, however, Wolfe's mau-mauing is also constitutively nonviolent: "The idea was to terrify but don't touch. The term mau-mauing itself expressed this game-like quality. It expressed the put-on side of it."³⁴ In this dynamic, the aesthetics of wildness and militancy cultivated by mau-mauers is of central importance. Near the beginning of the essay, a man named Chaser assembles a group to go mau-mauing:

When you go downtown, y'all wear your ghetto rags ... see ... Don't go down there with your Italian silk jerseys on and your brown suede and green alligator shoes and your Harry Belafonte shirts looking like some supercool toothpick-noddin' fool ... you know ... Don't nobody give a damn how pretty you can look ... You wear your combat fatigues and your leather pieces and your shades ... your ghetto rags ... see ... And don't go down there with your hair all done up nice in your curly Afro like you're messing around. You do down with your hair stickin' out and sittin' up! Lookin' wild!³⁵

³¹ Wolfe, *Radical Chic & Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers*, 39.

³² Wolfe, *Radical Chic & Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers*, 40.

³³ Shimabuku, *Alegal*, 71.

³⁴ Wolfe, *Radical Chic & Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers*, 47.

³⁵ Wolfe, *Radical Chic & Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers*, 38.

Two aesthetic referents are at work here. The first, of course, is Mau Mau itself. It is no accident that Chaser instructs those he has assembled to look as “wild” as possible, perhaps one of the most defining features of international representations of Mau Mau.³⁶ One can draw an easy connection between the apparently deliberate cultivation of unkemptness and menace that characterizes Wolfe’s description of these would-be agitators and the images of Mau Mau fighters plastered on the pages of newspapers the world over. In general, British wartime propaganda “depicted them as subhuman savages capable of almost any act of depravity meant they could inspire a quite extraordinary level of fear among their opponents.”³⁷ Interestingly (and in ways we will see echoed in Wolfe’s text shortly), such propaganda also held a utility to those engaged in the liberation struggle themselves, insofar as it consolidated the movement’s image as fearsome warriors.³⁸ It is this, in fact, that Wolfe misses (or perhaps refuses to acknowledge); there exists in the myth of Mau Mau within this context the kernel of the African Revolution writ large. The second aesthetic referent at play—which in the context of the book also serves to link this article to *Radical Chic*—is the Black Panthers. The “combat fatigues, leather pieces and shades” Chaser offers up as a kind of uniform to mau-mauers invokes classic images of the group and relies on the specter of Black Revolution that they embody. Thus, while Wolfe’s piece details the emergence of a social phenomenon whose constitution is completely unrelated to the actual tactics of the Kenyan “Mau Mau,” what makes it effective (and what produces Wolfe’s latent anxiety) are the images and narratives that circulated about the Emergency in Kenya and, importantly, the ways in which these interface with White consciousness in the contemporary United States.

In sum, Wolfe has little respect for mau-mauing as a tactic (even as he seems vaguely sympathetic with the social conditions that produce it), and he alludes at several points to its inability to produce structural change. After one successful agitation, he presents the mind of the crowd as believing that “We’ve mau-maued the goddamn white man, scared him until he’s singing a duet with his sphincter, and the people sure do have power.”³⁹ He qualifies this, however, by emphasizing that all that has really occurred is a kind of elaborate shakedown. Although Wolfe’s description of mau-mauing thus focuses on the weaponization of radical aesthetics and (in Wolfe’s view) ultimate inability to effect structural change, mau-mauing is presented as a sharp tactic of a racialized *lumpenproletariat* with a profoundly prescient read of the socio-political landscape. Both the

³⁶ For a more robust account of Mau Mau’s relationship to the condition of wildness, see Christian Alvarado, “Mau Mau as Method,” in *History in Africa* 49 (Fall 2022): 22–32.

³⁷ Myles Osborne, “The Rooting Out of Mau Mau from the Minds of the Kikuyu Is a Formidable Task’: Propaganda and the Mau Mau War,” *Journal of African History* 56 (2015), 84.

³⁸ As Osborne points out, “Fighters used this to their advantage. Their actions ranged in scale and scope: hamstringing cattle—or cutting ‘steaks’ from live beasts—was common. Sometimes, they left threatening notes on dead bodies, or strung dead animals from trees. At other times, they wrote letters to the [*East African Standard*] to try to convince the government that Mau Mau was spreading beyond the Kikuyu.” Osborne, “The Rooting Out of Mau Mau from the Minds of the Kikuyu is a Formidable Task,” 84.

³⁹ Wolfe, *Radical Chic & Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers*, 44.

dismissiveness and anxiety that shape Wolfe’s views on mau-mauing betray a deep degree of fear and discomfort attached to the possibility that what they represent are, in fact, something far more revolutionary than a depoliticized aesthetic. The potential that mau-mauing might portend not just a simple shakedown of the welfare system, but a much more profound level of revolutionary violence and upheaval haunts his reading of it. The “put-on-ness” that Wolfe focuses on is described as a *side* of mau-mauing, and its very existence implies an ability to read and deploy the appropriate tropes (including the operation of its revolutionary potential). Indeed, in reading *Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers* ourselves, we are invited into the same process. It is precisely this that is useful in thinking about how the two dimensions of reading Mau Mau under consideration in this article (as revolution and as constitutively *lumpen*) are articulated in different ways and to different ends.

* * *

In the wake of formal decolonization both on the continent and outside of it, the African Revolution haunts in different ways. Through its examination of Mau Mau’s consolidation into trope, this article has examined a series of instances wherein this can be seen: the discourse of “Okello the Mau Mau” and subsequent writings wherein the two tropes we have explored functioned together in different ways. Though this article has followed a roughly chronological structure, it should be understood that the possibility of these tropes to work together or separately does not follow such a clear path. Indeed, what should be emphasized here is the “need to observe the many variations to the structure of the whole that themselves help disclose the contestatory temporalities inherent within such wholes.”⁴⁰ We should consider the possibility that they have existed alongside each other since the earliest rumblings of something called “Mau Mau” in Kenya; or, at least, its proliferation through global information systems.⁴¹ Thus (within this muddiness, and as explored in the account of Okello’s visit to Kenya), there necessarily exists something combining elements of both. To the extent that one can speak of Mau Mau in our own time, it exists as a kind of an amalgamation read in different ways—a referent, the knowledge of which might be either extremely tenuous or well informed, but which can be situated within this tropology either way.

For a prime example of the former, we can turn briefly to a 2016 article ostensibly accounting for increasing support for the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement written by Lorrie Goldstein of the *Toronto Sun*. “If you want to understand the rapid rise of Black Lives Matter in Toronto,” writes Goldstein, “read Tom Wolfe’s *Radical Chic and Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers*.”⁴² “In today’s context, BLM are Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers,” he concludes. At best,

⁴⁰ Quayson, *Calibrations*, xxxii.

⁴¹ For more on the role of colonial propaganda, see Osborne, “The Rooting Out of Mau Mau from the Minds of the Kikuyu is a Formidable Task.”

⁴² Goldstein, Lorrie. “Why Black Lives Matter, matters,” *Toronto Sun*, July 9, 2016, <https://toronto.sun.com/2016/07/09/why-black-lives-matter-matters>.

Goldstein's analysis of Wolfe's essays are predicated on a deeply uninformed view on the history, nature, and aims of the Black Lives Matter movement. At worst, it is a bad-faith attempt to smear a movement for justice *and* an elementary reading of Wolfe's essay. The portion of Goldstein's argument that holds the most water is his application of Radical Chic-ness to Canadian liberals: "Think of Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne wading into a BLM demonstration at Queen's Park to agree with them that systemic racism exists. The problem is neither the Radical Chic nor their Flak Catchers have any real idea of what's going on in black ghettos—in Toronto, we call them 'vulnerable neighbourhoods'—because they don't live or go anywhere near them." Indeed, the cooptation of the Black Lives Matter movement by centrist political organizations and leaders has been a common point of critique for many in recent years.⁴³

Yet this truism belies the more general weakness of his analysis. According to Goldstein, "Mau-Mauing means to denounce and intimidate someone—named after the Mau Mau, a secret society of African warriors who led a revolt against British rule in Kenya." Leaving aside what appears to be quite a tenuous grip on the history of the Kenyan struggle against British colonialism, what is interesting for our purposes is what he connects it to: Black Lives Matter. Goldstein presents the movement's tactics as focused solely on optics. After quoting some of his favorite passages from *Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers*, he writes: "Sound familiar? That's why BLM doesn't care if we're offended by their tactics. They want us to be offended, since their notoriety helps them get their message out. So far, so good." In his estimation, then, BLM is about causing offense in order to achieve some nebulous (and no doubt nefarious) aim—just as Mau Mau did decades before. Yet, as in Wolfe's essay, there sits beneath this sneering tone the fear of a vast potential shift in the social order. Indeed, Goldstein's entire premise relies on the notion that a fundamental cultural shift is underway, one that might ultimately have effects as radical as Mau Mau; yet again, in other words, we see the specter of the breakdown of a certain order. This is not to suggest a historical equivalence between movements as different as the liberation struggle in Kenya and BLM; indeed, what I am pointing to here is the consistency of Mau Mau's tropology *in spite of their differences*.

Such a reading, wherein present-day campaigns for racial justice are dismissed by appealing to conservative registers in reading Mau Mau are in stark contrast to other recent invocations of it. Writing on behalf of the Greenville, North Carolina-based Mapinduzi ("Revolution" in Kiswahili) collective, Dedan Waciuri and Yusuf Askari wa Watu's article "Why We Need a Mau Mau in Amerikkka" provides us with a radically different reading, though equally rooted in Mau Mau's lumpen-ness and embodiment of the African Revolution writ large.

⁴³ One need only recall the widely circulated images of US Representative Nancy Pelosi and Senator Chuck Schumer—prime embodiments of milquetoast American liberalism—kneeling in kente cloth for eight minutes and forty-six seconds for a photo shoot in the wake of the murder of George Floyd for a recent example. The act was widely lambasted as a publicity stunt intended to coopt political capital from grassroots movements against police brutality and white supremacy in the United States. Radical Chic indeed.

The very *noms de plume* of the authors themselves articulate the piece with not only the figural power of Dedan Kimathi Waciuri, but also the enduring possibility of revolution (from Kiswahili, “Askari wa Watu” means “soldier of the people”). So too does the manner in which the authors read Mau Mau as a rejection of (neo)colonialism in all of its insidious forms: “One thing that has been highlighted about the British government in its attempt to destroy the peasant revolt in Kenya was its use of the Africans that were willing to stand on the side of the British empire aka Loyalist or Home Guards.”⁴⁴

In a framing that would be squarely at home in Ngũgĩ and Mugo’s *The Trial*, we see here not only the enduring salience of the revolutionary trope of Mau Mau, but also a testament to the generative potential of engaging with its broader tropology. “We must look at everything African organizations have accomplished,” write Waciuri and Askari wa Watu. “Let us learn from our elders and ancestors. Let us apply their past struggles to our present struggles. Let us learn from the programs of the Black Panther Party, the African Blood Brotherhood, the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front, the New Jewel movement, and all the other African-led organizations that have fought for our liberation.”⁴⁵ The transcontinental pantheon of the African Revolution, the many petals that form its larger bloom, is thus central to how the collective situates its political project—and Mau Mau retains a particularly privileged place within it. In their words, “For Mapinduzi, it will always be that righteous struggle of African peasants in Kenya that will continue to guide our movements in the streets and strengthen our commitment to organization.”⁴⁶

These recent invocations of Mau Mau demonstrate not only the persistent utility of Mau Mau as a referent deployed across vastly different political and semiotic landscapes, but also their continuing embeddedness in a topological landscape that has been both consolidated and subject to change since the days of the Emergency in Kenya. This article has shown this across a selection of particular contexts, in each of which one can see the processes of meaning-making to which Mau Mau is subject articulated with the African Revolution writ large (on the one hand) and the prospect of disorderly forms of ethnic and racial consciousness (on the other). This has a profound significance not only for those interested in the literary dimensions of Mau Mau’s mythological lives, but also historical analyses of the manifold contexts in which it has been “read.” Cultivating a more robust understanding of the processes of reading to which Mau Mau is subjected centers our attention on both the figural dimensions of it as an idea and the material, political, and social impacts this figuration has produced. Analyzing readings of Mau Mau grant us insight into the claims of resonance and dissonance we see in contexts as diverse as postcolonial African literatures, American cultural criticism, and countless

⁴⁴ Mapinduzi Collective, “Why We Need a Mau Mau in Amerikkka,” *Hood Communist*, February 10, 2022, <https://hoodcommunist.org/2022/02/10/why-we-need-a-mau-mau-in-amerikkka/?fbclid=IwAR0sYqfQiAPSiDbInCtUJ0810-moLc31h8bxGltIqIgrShlKF9a4Rn-FO2g>.

⁴⁵ Mapinduzi Collective, “Why We Need a Mau Mau in Amerikkka.”

⁴⁶ Mapinduzi Collective, “Why We Need a Mau Mau in Amerikkka.”

(counter)revolutionary discourses that have shaped debates about decolonization the world over.

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