Journal for Literary and Intermedial Crossings

ISSN: 2506-8709

Journal homepage: https://clic.research.vub.be/journal

Submit your article to JLIC

"A Constellation of Lives": A Conversation with Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor

Eva Ulrike Pirker – Vrije Universiteit Brussel
Deniz Gündoğan İbrişim – Kadir Has University

Issue: 11.1

Published online: 7 May 2026

To link this article: https://clic.research.vub.be/volume-11-issue-1-2026

To cite this article: Owuor, Yvonne Adhiambo. "'A Constellation of Lives': A Conversation with Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor." Interview by Eva Ulrike Pirker and Deniz Gündoğan İbrişim. *Journal for Literary and Intermedial Crossings*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2026, pp. i1–14.

"A Constellation of Lives": A Conversation with Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor

Eva Ulrike Pirker – Vrije Universiteit Brussel

Deniz Gündoğan İbrişim – Kadir Has University

Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor (b. 1968) is one of Kenya's most accomplished contemporary authors, known for her intricate prose, lyrical sensibility, and profound engagement with memory, place, and belonging. Her body of work includes short fiction, essays, and two novels—*Dust* (2013) and *The Dragonfly Sea* (2019)—and spirals around the question of how individual and collective identities are transformed by history, geography and ecological entanglements. Difficult memories and (collective) amnesia permeate her oeuvre, which can be described as contributing to a larger mnemonic project. Time and again, this project situates itself at the crossroads of culture and environment, interweaving myth, politics, and the intimate textures of daily life. Throughout Owuor's texts, non-human agents recur, functioning as witnesses, archives and spaces of shelter. This conversation was inspired by explorations of the presence of trees in Owuor's writing, her fiction and literary journalism.

Keywords: Kenyan literature and culture, cultural memory, cultural hegemony, humanities education, resistance movements

A Conversation Across Continents

Why interview writers when you can read their works? It is a justified question in times in which perhaps too much focus is placed on personalities. In the neoliberal context of global publishing, writers are frequently expected to participate actively in the advertisement of their books by making appearances on stage and in the media as well as maintaining a presence on social media. They become objects of interest in their own right, sometimes independently of the books they published. Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor is a public figure in Kenya and beyond. Her acclaimed novels *Dust* and *The Dragonfly Sea* appear on syllabi of courses on African Literature, Postcolonial Studies, Memory Studies and Trauma Studies across the globe. Her carefully composed short and long fiction as well as her essays make an impact on readers far removed from Kenyan realities. And yet, they emerge from a consciousness that is deeply rooted and informed by the Kenyan and specifically Nairobian context from which Owuor hails. Understanding this context better is not a prerequisite for connecting with the works but inevitably opens perspectives and adds layers that would otherwise remain obscure. At times dense, at times opulent, Owuor's prose frequently leaves readers with an inkling of dimensions that they may not grasp. This performance, however, may be nothing other than a truthful replication of her own experience of humility in light of what is describable, sayable.

Owuor is not opposed to speaking about the work of writing and her situatedness as a Kenyan writer. Although referring to herself as a "fake extrovert", she regularly seizes the opportunity for public appearance, embracing it as part of a mission—an obligation to advocate for a more just and balanced culture of access and representation and for the concerns of the next generation.

Prior to the conversation, which was conducted online and recorded, Eva Ulrike Pirker had travelled to Kenya twice in 2025, once as part of a university delegation. Deniz Gündoğan İbrişim has published, and continues to work on, Owuor's writing. Together, they are preparing a jointly written article on Yvonne Owuor's engagement with arboreal memory in her literary and journalistic writing.

Fig. 1: Portrait of Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor. Images by Marco Giuliarelli

Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor: How was your recent trip to Kenya?

Eva Ulrike Pirker: It felt like travelling to several countries. I started out in Nairobi, then there were visits to universities on the coast, in Kisumu and Bondo, then Nairobi again. The regions, the cities, were so vastly different in terms of language, culture, landscape and geography. It was really interesting also because of the topic that we're exploring together, the presence and significance of trees. To honour our visit, we were invited to plant trees at Jaramogi Odinga Oginga University in Bondo. In Nairobi, I learned that trees had been cut down when the speedway was constructed.

Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor: Yes, to our annoyance. The one thing you're going to find is that Kenyans are very vocal about trees. There's one tree, a massive fig tree that they couldn't cut down because Kenyans and other Nairobians just showed up and created a ring around it. So they had to divert the highway. They had to divert a little bit of the expressway. They couldn't cut it down. The tree is still there to this day.

Eva Ulrike Pirker: I know about a fig tree that is very important in the Gikuyu culture, with roots growing down from the branches.[1]

Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor: Yes, yes, yes, yes, it shelters, it clings to what some call parasitic shrubs. Actually, its first importance is with the Maasai culture. The Gikuyu culture adopted it from the Maasai. The Gikuyu call it Mugumo, but the Maasai call it Oreteti. It is a fig tree, a Strangler Fig. If you are looking for a cosmology linked to the sacredness of that tree, the most detailed accounts I have found are embedded in the Maasai world.

Deniz Gündoğan İbrişim: You mention an Oreteti tree in your 2021 article for the *National Geographic*, which describes your journey into the Loita Forest.[2]

Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor: That hike into the forest in Loita was like a pilgrimage. Every time we approached a few trees, a wild olive, or this Oreteti, we had to pay respect, so to say. It was a very profound, otherworldly experience, going into that forest. I think it's probably one of Africa's last real remaining, still-intact indigenous forests

Eva Ulrike Pirker: On the coast, I noticed the omnipresence of the baobabs. At Pwani University, which is a relatively young university 60 km north of Mombasa, they explained that they had to build the campus around a very old baobab tree.

Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor: Yes, the reality is that, unless of course you're the government, you don't cut down a tree. You don't cut down a baobab tree. They're guardians, they're guardian spirits. It is like cutting down a human being, so to say. I think some of the timeless and cosmic-relational kind of sensibilities, the kind that still holds the universe in one's spirit, and gives us a greater sense of the things of existence still endure. You still find strong, strong resonances in our country. I hope that it continues, quite frankly. I like the idea of giving breathing space to all the things of life.

Eva Ulrike Pirker: *Dust* starts with a human life being 'cut down' in the context of protests, and there's a Jacaranda tree 'witnessing' this. Is there more reverence for trees than for humans?

Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor: No, it is a different kind of reverence. It's about attention to life. It's about attention to the things that live. Maybe 'attention' is the wrong word. I think it's about hospitality and the capacity of one's heart to receive life and to share life. I wouldn't say there's more reverence to trees or to an animal than to a human. If you're

---

[1] The sacred Mugumo tree, the "tree of Murungu", is an important presence, "towering over the hill, watching, as it were, the whole country" in the famous novel *The River Between* by the late Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (15).

[2] See Owuor, "My Visit with the Spiritual Voice of the Hidden Serengeti".

going to be an ass about life to a human being, you're going to be an ass about the life of a tree.

Deniz Gündoğan İbrişim: I'm originally from Istanbul. So I live very close to the Bosporus, and you have a section on the Bosporus in *The Dragonfly Sea*. I'm really interested in the idea of witnessing, witnessing life and witnessing with trees, witnessing with oceans, and an interest in different forms of healing. In thinking about trees, thinking with trees. Does it change the way you witness life or does it change the way you think about other forms of healing, maybe more-than-human forms of healing? That's what I'm really interested in from an academic perspective, but also from an everyday-life perspective, meaning how we live and how we witness life with animals, plants, landscapes, waters, rivers, seas and so forth.

Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor: Thank you, thank you for the question. I think especially in this age that kind of question is very important. I guess it has always been something intrinsic to me. I come from a lineage of women who are healers, who use plants, who are plant and bird people. I've been raised with a consciousness of the depths, layers and complexities of our reality. I don't know how to explain it. There's just a greater sense of the immensity and also mystery of existence, of our interconnectedness with the elements of existence: plants, creatures, trees, the ocean. Very recently, I literally ran to the ocean because I needed, I needed, the ocean so I could breathe easier. The ocean is mother, shelter, and healer for me. I needed her. I call her sometimes. When the world and city feel overwhelming. I've been thinking a lot about the stuff that is happening in Israel and Gaza; the grotesque shape our humanity has acquired. Our helplessness before the surge of evil. It got so overwhelming. So I run to the ocean to tell on humanity. Within two days, it purged, cleansed and lifted whatever I needed to offload. The ocean alchemises the horror, I guess. Not in a bad way, but just so that one's spirit is unburdened again. Who knows what that is about. I imagine this attitude shows up in my work.

Your question is important for this day and age. We have more and more people from all over the world finding their way to ours. So many of their experiences include that of finding a sense of grounding, of healing, of restoration they did not know they needed. I mean, they don't even have to be African to get the sense that nature is presence, has agency, is to be related with. This way of being is a bit more accessible here in East Africa. Then, of course, you have the living archetypes, the 'animals'. You're in the presence of things, of other beings and nations. And if this is a part of our consciousness and reality, we are forced into a kind of humility in being. As a human being, we are important, yes, but we're not necessarily the centre of the universe. Maybe the word I'm looking for is the word, or the idea of, a constellation. A constellation of lives.

Eva Ulrike Pirker: And yet, at the same time, you have the global narrative of individualism, the imperative to "make something of yourself". You could say that it's a

culture of egocentrism and entitlement. It creates injustice and leads to protests. In July there was unrest in Kenya, and more recently in Tanzania…

Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor: I think the unrest was very important because there's a generational shift. What is fascinating about that generation is that they have a sense of place that is very different from that of my generation. It's a sense of the need to take full custodianship of their place, to take over theory world from the grasp of an older generation. A generation that has refused to leave. They're clinging to their positions and seats. You also see it in Europe. I see it all over the world, the Trumps of this world. A generation of mostly old men who have refused to leave the table for a new generation. The boldness of the unrest speaks to an emerging generation. I think the German word is Zeitgeist, and I think it will flow all over the world. I remember when I went to Germany soon after this, around August, for an event. There were all these young people who had come, and I thought in my hubris and pride that they had come for me. No. They had come because I was a Kenyan. And what they wanted to know was: How do they connect with their peers in Kenya? All these young people. And you know, I felt like a messenger between worlds. I took it well. I'm part of that generation that's been blocking their way. These young people in Germany, of all races by the way, had this sense of connection to, solidarity and engagement with what their peers in Kenya were saying and doing. You asked earlier about witnesses, so when somebody says 'what are we supposed to do when these young people are on the streets', I now maintain that my role is to cheer them on, listen, and be a good witness.

Eva Ulrike Pirker: Can you speak about your own education? You attended Kenyatta University.

Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor: Yes, I went there because I didn't make it into law school by one point, which later turns out to be serendipitous. I would have been, I think, a good lawyer, but I would never have ended up writing fiction. I did English Linguistics and History. I didn't even know these subjects would become foundational for my future career. Later, I went to the University of Reading, where I did an MA in Video and Film Development. I thought I was going to change the world through social development. I was going to make films for social development. The biggest lesson I learned was that social development is for the most part, in many places a big ponzi scheme, an awful game designed to strangle real growth in vulnerable nations. I also thought, I will never darken the door of any academic institution again. But a couple of years later, after writing found me, I got a scholarship and went to the University of Queensland. For the first time I was immersed in something that I really, really loved, which is creative writing. In that supportive environment, I developed and wrote *The Dragonfly Sea*. What an enriching and beautiful experience that was.

Eva Ulrike Pirker: I find your writing very filmic. It's very visual, some fast-paced scenes are structured in what almost feels like cuts. So I've been wondering if your training in film in a way also informs your writing.

Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor: It does. I came to writing through script writing and I feel now again that I would love to go back into film again. I've been doing film work around nature and wildlife. Working with nature organisations and film makers to train, mostly Global Majority world filmmakers who want to tell an organic African nature story so that we're not stuck with the single imagination and voice of what's his name? Sir David Attenborough. We are custodians of these gorgeous landscapes and nature systems, yet for so long, we have been stuck with those who always parachute in to tell an African nature story as if they are its protagonists, and then proceed to make the films and stories inaccessible to Africans. My role is to enter into the depths of Kenya and African nature story-ing with others. It is interesting that those coming here to train in our method not only Africans, but also those from Asia and South America, and the US too.

Eva Ulrike Pirker: So is this for an institution or in the context of an institution?

Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor: Yes, it's in the context of Wildlife Direct. Dr. Paula Kahumbu, who works with elephants is the director of Wildlife Direct. She also sits on the *National Geographic Board*. When she started asking why documentaries shot in Kenya were inaccessible to Kenyans, and to the communities that had provided the insights, she realized she had to fight with the global producers like the BBC to secure rights to show the films in Africa. Most of these western-based producers refused or demanded a lot of money. This isn't about entitlement, but fairness. The sharing of intellectual property. In the end Paula decided, you know what, we're going to carve our place. One of the things she did was then to—I guess—recruit me. You wanted to know how I got to do the piece for the *National Geographic*. It was through Paula's insistence that we had our own conscious writers in Kenya, and of course, it was during the time of COVID, so the old offenders couldn't travel

Eva Ulrike Pirker: So that's how you got the commission?

Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor: Yes. We all thought that things were going to drastically change; that there would be creative and producing equity, a real exchange. But, alas, no. They're all back to doing the old, familiar thing, which is sending mostly middle- aged white men to story and film African nature worlds and stories, without attribution to the cosmologies and peoples that had enabled these. A pity. You see that a third of their work, as you know, the wildlife and all the anthropological stuff is Kenyan or East African. It remains pretty extractive and possessive. It will change. A new generation that's less patient will force the change that we all need.

Fig. 2: In the Loita Hills, home of the Illoita, Maasai, spiritual sanctuary and key stewards of Naimina Enkiyioo (intact indigenous forest), an ancient arboreal sentinel, one of the holy trees of the people, keeps vigil over earth and sky. Two children in crimson 'shuka' pause mid-run beneath its canopy. (image and caption by Y. A. Owuor)

Eva Ulrike Pirker: We have been wondering about this engagement. In preparation of this interview and the article we are writing, we have been speaking about how omnipresent the *National Geographic* has been in our own cultural contexts. What about Kenya?

Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor: They film here, they produce here, but it's not as easily available as before. Anyway, *National Geographic* belongs to Disney. A corporate, profit-first mindset dominates. Yes, copies of the publication are widely available—certainly in the cities. There are a few notable Kenyan and African *National Geographic* Explorers now, so one has to nod to what has improved. Your question reminds me again that by Paula stating upfront, by her saying, Look, if you're going to film here and you film with concessions, the least you can do, especially when you're filming in community and drawing from their knowledge, is at least show them the film, share the film with them. Most of the time they wouldn't even do that. But now I think it's circling back to what we were talking about earlier: hospitality, humility and humanity. It would be the courteous thing to do. It would be the right thing to do. It's probably a cultural condition; the difference between a generous spirit and a hoarding one constituted from a sense of perpetual lack, even when it appears that you have everything.

Eva Ulrike Pirker: Some of their content is available on their website, but maybe not in Kenya.

Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor: They do make some of their content available online. My story, for instance, you can find. And I think it's also because, again, Paula insisted on

that. But you will not get access to the films unless you subscribe to something and pay for it. But as time unfolds, through the works of those like Wildlife Direct, we recognize the great opportunity. Afforded us to bridge the gap and populate the spaces with our own work, reflecting our aesthetic, and philosophies. We know there is a local audience for this.

Eva Ulrike Pirker: You also produced a short film clip to go with the online version, in which people are interviewed.

Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor: Yes, I had a producer, Cinematic Africa. We went with the whole film crew and I was—I guess—cast. My job was to be the seeker, 'to engage'. To be honest, it was a moving experience. Like finding lost cosmologies. We expected a more robust outcome given what we were allowed to learn by the Loita people. In the end, though, the producer, *National Geographic* had the last say and the last cut. For me, it was very interesting to see they chose to show. There is s something I would like to call them out for. Later we found out that some of their own people had gone back to the sites we had revealed to shoot their own thing without telling us.

It was rather annoying for me to see what they actually did choose to share. We would have made a different film. If we had the last cut, our decisions would have made the documentary entirely different. I'm not complaining, it's there, it's good, the text was intact. But it was a lesson as well that strengthened my decision to involve myself in African-centred nature film story conceptualization, development and training.

Eva Ulrike Pirker: It's only three minutes long.

Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor: It's only three minutes and we had footage of probably 150 minutes. Really outstanding, unique stuff, you know, like the fireflies. We had fireflies that were four different colours. We went to a waterfall. It took an eight-hour hike to find this incredible waterfall where a river we had followed from its swamp life tumbles over a pale cliff. Truly striking images that *National Geographic* chose not to use. That's the character of that beast, I guess. We truly need to evolve our own resonant structures of production and delivery.

Eva Ulrike Pirker: So do you think they wanted to embed it in a narrative of tragedy or catastrophe? Of loss?

Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor: Old habits die hard. It's also a matter of creative agency, an assumption of authorial voice, and the belief that any breaking idea or image must originate from a particular site, isn't it? There were things they had already missed: the importance and vitality of the Loita to the whole Mara-Serengeti triangle, its cosmological centrality to that larger story. This happens because they are not of the

place, not of the country, not of that cosmology. They carry an established reputation and brand to protect, and so they fall back on what they know; the narrative tropes they have always reached for. Yet for a new generation of African nature story creator, and across a diversity of platforms and tools, new opportunities have opened for a different kind of storying and producing.

Eva Ulrike Pirker: Were they immediately receptive to the idea or did you have to convince them?

Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor: They were highly receptive to that which they had not considered'. I was struck by that. But again, it goes back to that hunger for so-called 'discovery', to be the breaker of the news. But in the end it boils down to who tells the story, from which angle, directed to which audience and, then, who can claim first rights to the telling. My own experience being edited was quite educational. I enjoyed it, but I struggled with being told that the text needed to be accessible to an American mid-west demographic, who apparently are the main subscribers. That was quite something to learn. Made me really curious about every other global demographic keen on the nature story and how to reach them in the near future!

Eva Ulrike Pirker: We also discussed your authorial appearance, your journalistic self, as it is presented in the text. It seemed to us that it's almost construed as a projection foil, especially if your reader doesn't know who you are. The experience comes across as immediate, transparent but you don't reveal anything about yourself in terms of your gender or your background.

Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor: The lesson I got from the late Binyawanga was to always give way to the story. I valorise the story. If that's the story that comes through and the story has no place for me, that's fine. So it's the story, the pursuit of the story, that inspires the choices I make. And perhaps I was also avoiding that nature documentary/writing trope where those who experience the splendour of African nature immediately turn themselves into the protagonist, the active agent, the one around whom the ecosystem now breathes moves and has its being.

Eva Ulrike Pirker: The mode of writing comes organically with the story?

Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor: Yes, I follow the story. I follow the story.

Deniz Gündoğan İbrişim: We've also been very struck by how you use archives. You complicate conventional ideas of archives. You draw on different archival forms. There's the ecological archive, for instance; there's the personal archive; and there's this 'ritualistic' archive.

Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor: I like that. Thank you. I hadn't noticed, but thank you. I do treat the archive very much as a palette. A palette for the painting of the story, of the work.

Eva Ulrike Pirker: These days we're concerned about who will have access to and study this kind of work. Education is under pressure and scrutiny everywhere. The humanities feel it acutely. The study of literature and the place of literature in society no longer seems to be deemed important in many places. On the other hand, we know that people read, that they organize book clubs, so there seems to be a reading culture regardless of politics. What are your thoughts? It may be a big question.

Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor: No, no, it's a good question. It makes me suddenly think, why do I keep writing then? Your concerns are correct. I don't know what's happening in Czechia or Belgium, but when the young people here protested, when they were on the streets, they were making references to a book of Kiswahili literature, called Kifo Kisimani.[3] It's very interesting to me as a response to the government that re-emphasizes this so-called CBC thing.[4] Literature used to be an obligatory subject. Suddenly it's no longer obligatory. One of the things that I realized happened right across the African continent in 1984 with the IMF's 'strategic adjustment programs' was the removal of history from the school curriculums. I thought it only happened in Kenya, but it happened everywhere. It was deliberate. Also in the US, the humanities are of course being attacked and are being defunded. I suspect it's very wilful by a certain class who understand that with literature and with history, you develop critical thinking faculties and a capacity to read time through patterns. I suspect a lot of the stuff is going to go offline. A bit like the old cafés in Vienna. A psychic revolution is inevitable. Maybe with social media, there'll be new ways in which literature and history is encountered. But, still, we're human. We need story the same way we need breath. Whether it takes a form of books or something else, storytelling and storymaking are inevitable.

Eva Ulrike Pirker: We've asked many questions. Do you have a question for us?

---

[3] Kithaka wa Mberia's play *Kifo Kisimani* (2001) used to be widely read in Kenyan secondary schools. It centres on such themes as corruption, police brutality and questionable governmental practice.

[4] Introduced in 2017 by the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development, the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) replaced the 8-4-4 system with a 2-6-3-3-3 structure, emphasizing learner-centered pedagogy, continuous assessment, and the development of practical competencies, talents, and values rather than rote memorization (KICD). Internationally, organizations such as UNESCO frame such reforms as part of a broader global shift toward competency-based education, driven by the need for transferable skills, adaptability, and lifelong learning in changing economic contexts, while more recent UNESCO work emphasizes a "human-centred" approach and cautions against reducing education to narrowly economic or measurable outcomes (UNESCO).

Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor: Yes, I do. What's happening there? One of the things we are hearing about Europe: Are you guys going to lead our humanity into a world war?

Eva Ulrike Pirker: Well, I think people are paralyzed, worried about the proximity of war and the possibility of a war. The political situation is very confusing. It seems that in Western Europe today, we are just not very used to this type of crisis, or what some call 'multi-crises'. Maybe we have been fooling ourselves and now there's a moment of reckoning. I think people are trying to ward it off, but there is a sense of paralysis and passivity. I see it in academia. I'm more immediately worried by the paralysis in the humanities.

Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor: So, there is also paralysis in the humanities where you are?

Eva Ulrike Pirker: Totally. I mean, we've all learned to look after our own little space and protect that. But we haven't really learned to mobilize for the courses that we're teaching and the things that we stand for, or are supposed to stand for. Those who don't keep their heads down face threats. A professor of gender studies who was our guest recently, is organising 'self-defence trainings for academics'.[5] She has a point. We're shocked and we don't know what's next. There's all this entanglement with the US and there's pre-emptive compliance. People are deleting certain words from their 'rhetoric', from their institutional self-descriptions. That's very, very worrying. It's what's worrying me.

Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor: I'm with you. I'm still with you. Actually, part of the reason I was avoiding Europe this year was, having lived through what we call the 'Moi- era', and experiencing the oppressive vibes For me, it was very uncanny going to Germany and feeling, as if I'm a rainmaker looking at the clouds, looking at the signs and saying: Are you guys not seeing this? But I think that's exactly as you say, it's not just even the paralysis in academia, but the general kind of paralysis in the civilian population, the decision not to look and not to see.

Eva Ulrike Pirker: But for those who look, it's disturbing. So it's a difficult line to walk. But looking away cannot be an option. There are some people who cannot look away, who are more directly targeted and who require our solidarity. So should one mobilize alternative structures of education outside the 'educational system'?

Yvonne Adhiamo Owuor: I think that will have to happen. One of the things that has happened because of the young people's protests here is the young people themselves

[5] This reference is to Andrea Pető's contribution to the podium discussion "Gender Anxieties and Institutional Practice" in the context of the annual symposium of the Vlaamse Vereniging voor Algemene en Vergelijkende Literatuurwetenschap (VAL), which took place on 28 November 2025 in Brussels. The recurring training covers "self-censorship awareness, personal security, and mental health support" as well as the development of "resilience and adaptive strategies to protect academic freedoms and maintain intellectual integrity in increasingly complex environments." (*Comparing Anti-Gender Politics*)

are organizing their spaces of reflections, incredible poetry slams. Another example is The Drunken Café. It's a cafe you can come to eat or drink, but the main thing about the cafe is that they invite scholars, artists and thinkers to present ideas. I mean, even if you were in town and they found out you're in town, they'd probably invite you there and you speak for 30 minutes on any topic, and the audience can ask you questions. This happened as a result of a new generation asking deeper and harder questions about society and their place in the world.

Deniz Gündoğan İbrişim: But on the other hand, where am I coming from? I was in Istanbul after obtaining a PhD in the US. When I think about Turkey and Turkish academia, it has always been disrupted. From the start. You mentioned slam poetry in Kenya. We are also finding ways. Now we are carrying academia outside of campuses because we cannot teach gender, for example. I teach trauma and memory, so I cannot speak about certain traumas in the history of Turkey, the Kurdish and Armenian trauma and so on and so forth. So what we are organizing now is an initiative called—I am translating it in a very literal way—"academia is resisting".[6] So we try to convene public classes outside of the campus and it's called "resistance academia" or "academia is resisting". Whatever we cannot speak about on campuses is now publicly out there. Young people, elderly people, people from academia, people who are not from academia but from other professions: they all come and they learn.

Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor: That is amazing and inspirational. One of the things I co-curate, that has become an 'off- space' for these kinds of questions is our Macondo Literary Festival in September. It's a dynamic and creative space where audiences interact with books and authors. The young people have claimed the space in refreshing ways. We bring literary scholars and authors together in one place, to explore big human ideas, and exposure to the thinkers the young people had not engaged before, like Frantz Fanon, thinkers that they were not able to access in school, they're now accessing themselves. It's quite impressive what's unfolding there, and hopefully the political system cannot see it so that it just grows.

Eva Ulrike Pirker: It gives us hope. We have a lot to learn from Kenya.

---

[6] Direnen Akademi (literally "Resisting Academy") is a public, open-access educational initiative that aims to sustain free, autonomous, and democratic academic knowledge production outside the formal structures of the university. It organizes open lectures, courses, and discussions across disciplines, addressing a broad public and fostering collective learning beyond institutional boundaries. Its background lies in an earlier open lecture series launched by academics at Boğaziçi University (Istanbul, Turkey) in April 2016, which sought to bring academic knowledge into dialogue with the wider public. These lectures continued on campus for several years with local municipal support but were effectively interrupted after 2021 due to political and administrative interventions in the university. In response, academics, researchers, and alumni re-established the initiative outside the university as "Direnen Akademi," carrying forward the commitment to academic freedom, solidarity, and public-oriented scholarship.

Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor: We have so much to learn from each other. What I've learned from these young people is how much they care for each other, and also share information across worlds. They exchange ideas and strategies with one another. Of course, some of it is their own kind of information: How to deal with the tear gas, for instance, they learned this from their Hong Kong peers. A truly 'transboundary' generation. You are right, despite everything, there is an air of hope for our world because of the new generation.

Acknowledgements

While working on this publication, Deniz Gündoğan İbrişim was resident researcher at the Centre for Literary and Intermedial Crossings (CLIC), Vrije Universiteit Brussel, and Eva Ulrike Pirker received funding from the European Research Council for the project "Meritocracy and Literature: Transcultural Approaches to Hegemonic Forms" (MERLIT, Grant agreement ID: 101088378). Views and opinions expressed in the conversation are those of the authors.

Works Cited

Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD). *Basic Education Curriculum Framework*. NKICD, 2017.

Kithaka wa Mberia. *Kifo Kisimani*. Marimba Publications, 2001.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. *The River Between*. 1965. Heinemann, 1988.

Owuor, Yvonne Adhiambo. *Dust*. 2013. Alfred A. Knopf, 2014.

Owuor, Yvonne Adhiambo. *The Dragonfly Sea*. 2019. September Publishing, 2021.

Owuor, Yvonne Adhiambo. "My Visit with the Spiritual Voice of the Hidden Serengeti." *National Geographic Magazine*, December 2021.

"Increasing Resilience for young researchers of anti-gender politics and mobilizations in CCE and NME countries? Call for Applications." *Comparing Anti-Gender Politics,* 29 Oct. 2025, https://www.comparing-antigender-politics.eu/news/call-for-applications-cost-action-training-school-increasing-resilience-for-young-researchers-of-anti-gender-politics-and-mobilizations-in-cce-and-nme-countries/.

UNESCO. *Reimagining Our Futures Together: A New Social Contract for Education*. UNESCO, 2021.