Women and Migration
Responses in Art and History

EDITED BY
DEBORAH WILLIS, ELLYN TOSCANO AND KALIA BROOKS NELSON
As a visual artist my thoughts, my cognitive strength, my memories and my art presentations are mostly visual. I use visual resources testimonials and quirky or qualified theories to surround images. When Deborah Willis invited me to participate in *Women and Migrations* I was not only honored, but also interested in how she envisaged my involvement in a workshop that mostly focused on written work.

As a result of this invitation I pushed myself to change how I do my presentations. Surrounded by all these remarkable women writers, academics and scholars, I felt compelled to write what I had to say and showed only two visual works.

On the afternoon of my presentation, I unfurled my handwritten paper and read, slowly, sonorously and deliberately, my and my family’s story of migration. I thus created movement in the form of the writing I had done and the reading I was doing, and liberated myself from having to come up with off-the-cuff remarks, a most uplifting motion.

I am my own quintessential ‘Woman in Migration’. Ever since I was fifteen, when in a stormy argument with my father I swore to leave home ‘and never come back’, and when, at seventeen, I proceeded to do so, I have been moving, or planning to.

In Latin *migrationem* means ‘removal, change of abode’. In Greek, *ameibein* is ‘to change, to go, to move’. Migration is mutation.

My father outlined a dream for me: a dream he never experienced himself, but instead made up for his four children. He and my small,
hardworking mother are from the hills of Nyeri, a very green, very cool, very lush part of the country of which we are all part. Nyeri is in the central province next to the second highest mountain in Africa, Mount Kenya.

Formerly part of British East Africa, and prior to that a place of over forty-two distinct languages and ethnicities, Kenya sits smack on the equator.

On December 12, 2018, Kenya will be fifty-four years old. I think my mother has clothes in her wardrobe older than that.

I am the second of four children. She, my mother, is the second of ten; all but two are still alive. One, a twin of my aunt, died at birth; another, the last born, died of a brain tumor in 1971 at the age of three. All my mother’s siblings (with the exception of the oldest, a boy) completed their higher education, and most of them went on to university.

They are all children of the war. Even the youngest was born way before independence, during the ‘Emergency Years’. The state of ‘emergency’ was declared by the governor at the time, Sir Evelyn Baring, during the years of the Mau-Mau Rebellion. This war took place almost exclusively in the highlands of Central Kenya where my ancestors are from. It has emerged that some members of this group never used the term Mau-Mau, and instead called themselves the Kenya Land and Freedom Army.

So all my grandparents who were born out of this deeply coveted green, rainy land — in the shadow of Mount Kenya, during a time of tremendous turmoil — raised their families through drastic transition, during the birth of our nation, the arrival of the Presbyterian Church and the British Administration who came to facilitate the settlement of our land with their people.

My grandfather was very industrious; he learned how to drive early and really well and was rarely home during those long difficult years. He built his fortune driving trucks all over Eastern Africa for tourists and for the transportation of goods.

My grandmother (‘Cúcú’ in the language of Kikuyu), enterprising and diligent, was never idle, and it was she who raised those babies almost entirely on her own. Eventually she converted to Christianity to be able to visit the medical clinic, to go to school and to avoid the suspicion and cruel life of being considered a Mau-Mau sympathizer or, perhaps even worse, a heathen.
As a young pubescent girl in preparation for marriage, she had to undergo the obligatory rite of passage to womanhood: circumcision.

My Cūcū also had her earlobes pierced and stretched to fit the wide and beautiful traditional wooden earrings. When she chose the church over Kikuyu life, she was left with the dangly looped skin of her ears, which she had snipped and sewn back to where it had been stretched.

In those days there was not much anesthesia and I often wonder: what hurt more? The incision of the knife to cut a hole for her stretched ear lobes, or the small, precise, ritualistic slicing-off of the clitoris hood, or perhaps the cutting and stitching up of her earlobes back to something the British would no longer consider primitive.

All in all, I come from a line of serious, strong, stubborn women. Each of them made decisions to ultimately survive through movement and through hard work, and during every change and to every destination they brought with them their families and their skills.

All the way from Cūcū Annie, my great-grandmother, who pretended she had been baptized and took on an English name, although she never actually respected the unwise and unknowable British land-grabbers; to my maternal grandmother, Wathira, who insisted on going to school, learning how to drive and converting to the new religion.

Then, my mother, the nurse, the midwife, the gardener and the healer. She was accepted to nursing school in Athens but, afraid to travel so far away from her family, she settled for Uganda. Here she completed her training and returned home to her newly independent, slightly volatile country and a new husband.

I have been pressed by the many motivated matriarchs who knew that progress came through a willingness to move and adjust and survive with swift and safe motion through time and unfamiliar landscapes. My mother still remembers that as a child she was constantly playing second mother to her siblings. She still remembers having to pick up and relocate to the ‘villages’, as they called them, concentration camps where Kikuyu families were trapped and surveyed. They took with them all that they could carry, but had to leave many, many things behind.

The eldest people, the ones who held the greatest share of our knowledge, our oral culture and traditional ways, did not survive. They were unable to move fast enough, if at all. Almost all who were taken
along died from the cold and unfamiliar housing given to the interned families.

Soon, the fight for self-determination would take shape and out of the population of young leaders in our nascent country, a group who could lead Kenyans to independence emerged.

Moving forward, past the early seventies when I was born, into the nineteen-eighties, I found myself contemplating my life as a creative young woman. My academic results could certainly get me into good schools, but I was yearning for something I simply could not define or find in my home country. After playing the principle role in a major play at my Catholic school, I was presented by a family friend with the idea of an alternative path towards completing my education. I applied and attended high school for two years in Wales, and emerged unashamedly aware that I was an artist.

When I returned to Nairobi I was offered a job at an old fort in the northernmost point off the coast of Kenya, a small island called Lamu. I was offered work as the main muralist and designer of one of the rooms belonging to a museum of the environment.

This was a really strange choice for a fort building that had stood as an armory, a prison, and a monument to the presence of early Oman/Arab traders in the area. Nevertheless, the Swedish government had offered a lot of funding for this environmental museum and so the project proceeded.

In Lamu, my days were filled with the work of mixing egg tempera with colors that were non-toxic and absolutely unprotected from the festering fungus of a humid tropical climate. Everything I painted turned into a shade of moldy gray within a few weeks of application. In this moist, coastal air, mildew grew on the damp edible paint surface.

I was determined not to rot there myself, so I began to apply to schools that offered art degrees, only to realize how far I would have to move to accomplish these dreams and hopes.

One particular day, after a long night of writing and working, I heard the clamor and clang of the farm handlers and decided to go out into the pitch-black night to find out what the noise was all about. To my surprise I found the young men standing over a long snake whose only crime was to be a legless animal in a culture fearful of snakes, in spite of how common they are.
I begged them to stop pounding at his head, since the poor animal looked perfectly lifeless, lying long and battered in the grass. They agreed to go to bed and leave the sad remains till morning time.

As fate would have it, in the morning, on my way to work, I encountered something seriously strange. The animal, which the night before lay lifeless and beaten, was no longer where we had left him. I looked around but I was running late and I had edible paints to mix and murals to complete at the fort. I left the snake-finding task till after work.

Upon my return home, I asked the farm guys if they had any idea where this young reptile had gone. They walked me over to see; it turned out that the poor animal and his pounded head had tried to crawl away and had moved across to another spot in the garden where he finally lay motionless, even more dead than the night before.

I came up with a most phenomenal idea.

To prevent the creature from resurrecting again, and also to preserve the remains of this most beautiful body, I decided we must skin the poor thing. Having never skinned a snake in my life, and knowing my only help was to come from a pair of squeamish snake-fearing farm workers, I proceeded with caution and an inflated sense of confidence. How else could I have possibly justified and explained such a ridiculous task?

We proceed to cut off the head of this unlucky animal and then split the skin down the belly, following some unknown snake-skinning formula that all of a sudden I became keenly aware of.

After much cutting and scraping and separating and removal of flesh from membrane we discarded and burned the meat.

If none of us was certain about snake skinning, when it came to the task of preserving the animal’s beautiful outer covering we were all nothing short of clueless! The next and final activity was the most important one and it almost carried a spiritual significance — though we were not sure why. We found a wide wooden board and began to nail the soggy piece of skin onto it, until all six foot five inches of him was pinned down like some peculiar, sacrilegious crucifixion.

This encounter with the snake that was stoned and would not die, and the ensuing decapitation and skinning, has never left my psyche. According to the host family, our skinning technique was so uninformed that the animal continued to decay and reek weeks and months after it had been stretched and nailed.
I left Lamu soon after this experience and journeyed to New York City to study, but not before my local women friends had properly embraced and amused me with their stories. They spoke of *Nguvas*, sea creatures. They explained how the goat-footed women were the daytime disguise of these sirens as they walked and haunted the streets of this little ancient boat village.

After the leaving, the schooling and the living, it took me many years to properly locate and exhume my memories of the snake, the head and the stories of the sea women, the henna-covered brides and their ululating relatives, but eventually they all came back to me one painting at a time.

The Biblical serpent that tempted Eve, that stood for human curiosity, the search for knowledge and doubt, was the instigator to the banishment and cursing of woman. Coincidentally, this ritual that I had clumsily enacted became a symbol of my own search for knowledge and autonomy. It became a metaphor for the banishment that I would receive for my search and shamelessness in leaving.

Many of the stories and memories of my childhood have returned to me in random order, sometimes threatening to undo reality, constantly inspiring me to create un-realities and sur-realities in the form of majestic paintings cobbled together with watercolor and photography.

I was freed by my flight away from home, from my paradise life in Lamu, from the snake and the garden. This escape allowed me to be magnificently untethered for many years to come.

After years of longing, and feelings of melancholy, I was finally able to harness my mobility. I began to create with a deep personal connection to both studios, in Nairobi and New York. Traveling between the place of my upbringing and the place I call home, bridging my workspaces which were both essential to my art-making, I began collecting my fragments, my new family, my basket of spells and supplies. I moved towards my father’s unrequited dream, to red soil, black cotton and petrified roots.

I now mold and mush the materials that I missed and yearned for, making rust-colored surfaces that vaguely resemble anthills or stomped and parched foot-paths. Some sculptures begin to mimic the pattern of keloids — a condition only found in melanated skin. I use the roots retrieved from my neighbor’s land and I find pebbles and crystals,
beads and seeds, feathers, broken glass and stringy twigs. They are all part of this new chapter of my making, my migration and mutation, in which Brooklyn and Langata speak to each other in a harmonious story of art-creating, extending past the journey I started with the words ‘and I’m never coming back’.

It is this narrative that I must recall and reclaim to find my way back home, to be next to family and the earth and the soil that bred and fed me.