

Amariliano
EYES

a novel

D. Nandi Odhiambo



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SAMPLE

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PREFACE

In the fall of 2019, I received an email from a colleague in the Philosophy Department at UH Manoa with the subject line “Okoth.” I was at the MLA Conference in San Francisco, and I had a paper to present the following morning on Martin Heidegger’s essay “The Origin of the Work of Art.” So, I logged out, intending to look at the message later. While cleaning out my inbox six months later, I saw the email again, and that was when I learned, for the first time, about Daliso Okoth’s philosophical work *Being, (historical) Beyng, and the being of beings*. I ordered a copy from Amazon and, upon its arrival several weeks later, promptly read it. Its subject matter ranged from an exploration of the Newtonian roots of modern science and the implications of technology, and to an analysis of phenomenology from Edmund Husserl to Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In Daliso’s book, the Heideggerian description of Being (*Sein*) is identified as an ontological conception of the primordial or foundational ground of existence. Historical Beyng (*Seyn*) is understood as an event (*Ereignis*) or happening that appropriates Being (*Sein*) and both conceals and unveils beings (*Seiendes*) on the material plane. As such, there is a distinction in phenomenon between semblance (*Schein*), how something manifests as a thing it is not, and appearance (*Erscheinung*), signifying something that does not directly present itself but is announced through something else. So, our understanding of being-in-the-world depends on our ability to authentically discern the link between what manifests (the first signification) and what is hidden by appearance (the second signification). Daliso uses this framework to critique the current scientific, technological, and political landscape by identifying two main areas that alienate us from a complex relationship to Being; first, the proliferation of axioms or assumptions that ground the scientific, technological, and political determinations of our contemporary situation; second, the use of technology as an enframing (*Gestell*), a mode of revealing an understanding of the world as a standing reserve, or resource to

be ordered, controlled, and exploited (that fosters solipsism and boredom). Ultimately, Daliso's work argues for the need to think what arises from excavating a mode of sensing hidden intensive relations of heterogeneity or difference from the generalizing scientific paradigm.

After finishing the book, I reached out to a mutual acquaintance, got Daliso's contact information, and emailed the philosopher to let him know of my admiration for his scholarly endeavour. Soon afterward, the Covid pandemic spread globally, and since I was immersed in my duties as department chair, along with teaching an online graduate seminar on German Idealism, I subsequently forgot about the message.

In the summer of 2020, I received a reply from Daliso. He thanked me for my kind words and informed me he'd read my second book, a post-structuralist re-reading of the later Ludwig Wittgenstein.¹ We arranged to speak on Zoom later that week, and during our conversation he mentioned *Amapiano Eyes*, a novel he was writing about the immigrant experience. We spoke at length of a mutual interest in amapiano,² a hybrid form of collaborative house music using improvisation, piano melodies, and a log drum as a percussive bass line that emerged from the townships of South Africa. And as a consequence of this enjoyable meeting, we began a series of informal chats that evolved into a friendship in the months before his tragic and untimely death.

To honour his memory, I have assembled the novel Daliso was working on at the time of his passing by drawing on an archive of unpublished chapters, boxes of notebooks, relevant emails, and selected diary entries. The book is based on *Amapiano Eyes*, a concept he describes in the introduction to *Being, (historical) Beyng, and the beings of being* as "an unfolding thought (and use of language) that combines an improvisational and intuitive way of seeing that arises from networks of relationships among fluctuating degrees of intense and often catastrophic forces. It

1. *Philosophical Investigations* (1953).

2. *The Pianos in Zulu*.

is a form-of-life that is constantly in flux, presenting a perception of time characterized by modes of variation, not bound by established habits and memories that standardize thinking (in) language. It has what Maurice Merleau-Ponty describes in *Phenomenology of Perception* as a style, one that constitutes the significance of an alternative orientation toward existence, a presence in the world analogous with and divergent from one's own body-with-its-history. This method or procedure emphasizes the ontological or foundational forces that shape external reality (extimacy), including the potent intensities of embodied experiences in the flesh, the affective impact emotions leave on our bodies, and the enigmatic feeling-affects that persist in our minds (intimacy). Hence, *Amapiano Eyes* relies on the percepts or intuitions of sensory perception to see or disclose differences (that matter), conveyed through an approach to time marked by ceaseless variation—contractions and relaxations, instances and generalizations, implications and explications—that engage with ethical questions concerning hospitality toward the foreigner or outsider (*Auslander*) in our midst” (Okoth 2018, 74).

So the assembled novel, *Amapiano Eyes*, is a phenomenological inquiry that listens to and hears the diverse ways of perceiving the flux of time in an intricate play of semblance and appearance (in language) responding to itself. Each of the five books corresponds to a particular philosophical concept, and the start of each chapter is introduced by a quote from *Being, (historical) Beyng, and the being of beings*. This approach, I contend, provides an ontological horizon (of a Difference-in-itself) that informs the ontic or everyday domains (of specific difference) present in the intertext. So this encounter between intimacy and extimacy, the inside and outside of the outside, the native and the foreigner, reflects Daliso's larger desire to raise questions about the nature of (hidden) singular differences (that matter) in our shared environment.

Dr. Theophilus Ogot

BOOK I – Thrownness³

2020

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³ According to Martin Heidegger in *Being and Time*, thrownness (*Geworfenheit*) is a term that describes how at birth human beings are thrown into finitude, a pre-given world where we find ourselves already in history alongside other entities in a factual or concrete situation.

CHAPTER I

“Being (*Sein*) appeared as Beyng (*Seyn*) in flesh and gave self-hood to beings (*Seiendes*) in bodies.⁴ Arising spontaneously, it brought nature into view, gathering (the colour of) sense in an occasion/event (*Ereignis*) that called beings and things to come to pass under the law” (Okoth 2017, 7).

The experience was all at once clear and obscure, like it may not have happened. But Daliso Okoth’s body was still in time, so he could assure you it did.

Standing at the kitchen sink in his muggy Waikiki⁵ apartment, he dropped a SIM card into a cup of salt water, and then he stared out the fourth-floor window into the building’s communal garden, encountering a nothingness that became something grasped in layers of refracted light waves. Adumbrations of green glimmered in the leaves of the plumeria trees exposed to the midday sun, and because he didn’t want to lose his body putting beauty in his mind again, he turned on a tap, allowing cold water to flow over his forearms to remind himself he was a foreigner in-between here and not-here in time-space.

“Eh, aloha,⁶ Daliso!” his roommate, Kalani, interrupted, coming into the kitchen wearing orange boxers and a matching surgical mask, an issue of *Popular Science* tucked under his arm.

4. See Preface for further distinction between Being (*Sein*), historical Beyng (*Seyn*), and beings (*Seiendes*).

5. Waikiki, meaning “spouting water,” refers to the rivers and springs that once flowed from the Ko’olau Mountains, nourishing the lo’i (irrigated taro patches) and loko i’a (fish ponds) that once thrived in the area. By the 1450s, Waikiki had become the governmental centre of O’ahu. Although historical accounts often describe Waikiki as “swampland,” this term carries negative connotations that obscure its former richness, characterized by the vibrant ecosystem providing for both the ali’i, or nobility, and the local people. Labelling it as “swampland” helps to rationalize the urban development that dominates the landscape today. See *Waikiki: A History of Forgetting and Remembering* (2006).

6. A word expressing different feelings; as, love; affection; gratitude; kindness; pity; compassion; grief; the modern common salutation at meeting and parting. See Lorrin Andrews, *A Dictionary of the Hawaiian Language* (1865).

His oily muscles glistened with sweat from a recent four-hour weight session followed by a whirlpool and sauna.

“Aloha!” Daliso replied, sliding a black mask over his mouth. “You finished with the magazine? I’d like to chuck it out when you’re done.”

“You mento or what?” Kalani said. “There be gold in this here.”

“Gold?”

“Uhuh, like fuck whatever happened before the Big Bang.” Kalani was all about material presence. Matter. Observable laws in nature that cause things to exist. Neurotransmitters firing. Adrenaline. Serotonin. Dopamine. “Experience can’t verify any of our speculations about what happened prior to it.” He waved the irrefutable evidence from the magazine in the air before taking a tablespoon from *his* drawer, a carton of milk from *his* shelf in the fridge, and a box of Count Chocula cereal from *his* side of the cabinet. “Knowledge comes from scientific methods using mathematics, braddah.” He slapped the magazine onto the kitchen counter, opened it up, and pointed to a sentence. “Causally chained facts dictate what is real, and quantifiable measurements determine what is actual.”

Daliso hid his irritation by talking in a monotone. “What about the ground that makes thought possible?” he asked. “What about primordial depths or foundations that make anything possible? What about before the Big Bang?”

“I don’t do sci-fi,” Kalani replied.

Ignoring the pots and pans he’d left to pile up in the sink for several days, Kalani fucked off to his room to feed before recording a podcast of his latest scientific observations on his laptop, moving toward a not-too-distant future full of what he deserved. A lover who ran ultramarathons. A red Tesla. Bank. A team of people who helped him stay on top of the socials and financials. For reasons that remained unclear to Daliso, a few years ago Kalani dropped out of the physics department at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, where he was pursuing a PhD. Now his daily routine began with a sleep, Body Battery, and stress-level reading on his smartwatch. Once he’d had at least

one ninety-minute cycle of deep sleep *and* REMs, he'd be away on a day built around developing his body with healthy habits that began with a drink of egg yolk (mixed with almond milk if available at the corner store). Then he worked out for forty-five minutes on an elliptical in his room, showered in cold water for three minutes, brushed his teeth with a battery-operated toothbrush, spritzed his hair with a honey-rich moisturizer, and dabbed his lips with a stick of shea butter. After dousing himself with coconut oil, he sprayed Hugo Boss cologne on his wrists, chowed on a protein bar, then did the rounds with Facebook, Twitter, Tik Tok, Snapchat, and finally Instagram. It always took him till noon to respond to messages and give his followers new content, adding posts with links to everything that was going on in the culture. Police beatdowns. Red carpet photo ops at the Oscars and Grammys. War in the Persian Gulf. Then, after loading up on carbs, he filled his afternoons with weight work to develop body mass and appointments as a fitness instructor for wealthy female clients from all over the island. Home visits were his specialty, as were the holistic methods he used to fit the specific needs of his clientele. If he noticed a weakness in the strength of the adductor muscles, he'd be on next-level shit, making certain the lifting, circuit training, and a newly implemented paleo diet was on point. Then, at least once a month, he'd bring a different one of them—fit, toned, and smelling of fragrances from Sephora—to lounge with him on the hammock on the lanai.⁷

Daliso paid Kalani 1,500 bucks a month for the use of a bedroom, a bathroom down the hall where he could get a hot shower, a kitchen with one shelf in the fridge for his groceries, and two shelves in a cupboard for his crockery and cutlery. As a cost-cutting measure, he couldn't touch the air conditioner, which meant he had no choice but to put up with the 80 per cent humidity during ho'oilō.⁸ He also coughed up one hundred extra each month for access to the rope hammock on the lanai

7. A patio or veranda.

8. Winter (November–April), and kau is summer (May–October).

outside Kalani's bedroom. And since he'd depleted his savings while finishing *Being*, (*historical*) *beyng*, and *the being of beings*, he'd taken a job building condos on the leeward side. Unfortunately, the pandemic led to layoffs, and for the past two months he lived on a strict budget that barely covered his rent. He'd been working on a novel, but the financial constraints made him uncertain about what to do next. He needed to regroup and come up with a way to make a living while writing that wasn't dependent on working in an ecosphere of the weird as fuck: long hours for shit pay, crystalline silica dust that messed with his lungs, his flesh a source of extracted labour. Thoughts he hadn't had yet claimed him, and while he waited to be grabbed by them, he despaired over whether it was possible to recognize an idea he hadn't yet had. So, as the days piled up, he mostly stayed in his room with the door closed, reading or sketching rough scenes for his book while avoiding contact with anything that made unsolicited demands on his time.

A dog yelped next door.

"Don't fucking hit him," a woman said.

"This is my house," a man replied.

Plates smashed. Pots clattered. A door banged shut, and footsteps quickened in the crunch of pebbles on the path beneath the building's facade covered in life-sized moulds of pink flamingos. An engine roared to life, followed by a seventies rock guitar solo wailing from speakers. Then a car sped past the road sign, written shakily in black paint, warning people to slow down.

Daliso went to his bedroom: a place to crash with a closet, a ceiling fan whirring above a slow-leaking air mattress, and a bulbless lamp on the floor. He removed the SIM card from the cup of salt water, bent it until it broke in two, and threw it into a plastic shopping bag he used for garbage. Using a foot, he pumped air to lift the sagging middle of the mattress from the concrete floor. He plugged in his phone to recharge, and then lay down to gather his energy for the drive to meet Norrie on the North Shore. He'd smoked indica earlier, so everything should have been manageable. Handleable. But he'd lost control again of the way people popped up, leaving command words in

his head, compelling him to obey. Nausea knotted his belly, so he turned onto his back to relax while staring up at the white flecks of the asbestos-filled popcorn ceiling. He felt a tickle on the side of his face and opened his eyes to the sight of a one-and-a-half-inch cockroach dismounting from his chin. He leaped up, grabbed a can of spray, and doused the fucker. It flipped onto its back, and its legs curled before it grew still. Too tired to sleep, Daliso lay back on the mattress in poisoned air. And the more he looked without seeing, the more he couldn't stand to listen to himself. Going on and on. His mind not giving a shit that he wanted it to stop.

Daliso woke with a start and hit Snooze on the beeping alarm clock. Like everyone else, he was already in a mood, oriented to this or that, always affected by how the world appeared to him. His heart palpitated, fluttering beneath his rib cage, and as he lay in bed, trying to get up the motivation to get on with his plans for the day, he watched the wind play in the curtains, his thoughts yo-yoing between wanting and not wanting to disappear (it wasn't yet clear to him which of the two he preferred). Trapped in flesh, he didn't know how to backtrack, undoing damage caused by another bout of anxiety. Once again, his body was stuck in limbo, where the expanse of the long-while in the short-while dragged in protracted lengths of meaninglessness. And the more he tried to accept the emptiness of his being, the less he could get the words to match the infinite vastness of the whole of Being.

Overdressed like always in a long-sleeved dress shirt that drooped with pleated yellow folds, Daliso knocked on his neighbour's door. He waited until it was opened by a rotund man in a white surgical mask with an unconcealed 9 mm strapped to a holster around his waist.

"Howzit?" Mel said.

"Bad time?" Daliso asked.

"Brother, there's never a good one."

"Can I get two bags of sativa edibles?" Daliso wondered if he should mention the argument Mel had with his wife earlier. "If

it's no trouble, of course."

"Come in," Mel replied.

Daliso followed him past a row of bookshelves in the hallway. Then he stood in a room with women's bikinis, sports bras, and swimsuits in plastic bags scattered on the floor, or hung on coat racks among boxes of burner phones and piles of unopened bills on a desk.

"Boon-Mee bolted the bedroom door again last night." Mel looked in a mini-fridge. "Unbelievable. We met at the Hilton in Bangkok. Did I tell you this already? Yes? No? A desk clerk knocked on my hotel room door and introduced her. Then he excused himself to take care of a dispute at the front desk. She undressed. 'No. no.' I stopped her. 'Not required,' I said. She burst into tears because she was afraid the desk clerk would beat the crap out of her if she didn't make him happy. And with no sexual favours given or received, I bought plane tickets for both her and her dog to fly to Honolulu." He handed Daliso a couple of zip-lock bags. "Now she locks me out of the bedroom because of the fucking pandemic, and I'm the asshole for complaining."

Mel was a sixty-two-year-old haole⁹ who grew up on a Big Island horse ranch before moving to Waikiki in the late eighties. He'd opened a sporting goods store he sold after the value of his property appreciated, and he retired to live in his two-bedroom apartment near Kapiolani Park. Boon-Mee, his third wife, was roughly half his age, and he did with her what he'd done with the others—demonstrated his solicitude by taking her high-end shopping on Luxury Row, patiently waiting as she filled paper bags with designer handbags, shoes, and clothes. Or else treating her to dinners in expensive restaurants or taking her on trips to five-star hotels with full-service spas. But since the virus hit the island, they'd been stuck together in the apartment, where they argued, mostly about the dog, a French bulldog she treated like her child. He was recovering from prostate cancer and had high blood pressure, so he didn't need to feel less valued than a fucking animal at such a risky time.

9. A Hawaiian term referring to white people or foreigners.