

THE HISTORICAL POWER OF THE IMAGINATION:
NGUGI WA THIONG'O AND THE PRODUCTION OF PLACE

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

And through his words. Through this Kenyan man. Black and still with sun. And thru this Kenyan man. In exile from his country. We situate him in closer contact with the Philippines. Nicaragua. Cuba. The World.¹

On March 16, 1922, demonstrators gathered outside the Nairobi police station, across from the Norfolk Hotel, to protest the arrest of Harry Thuku, political leader of the East African Association (EAA). As the crowd's numbers increased, Colonial Secretary Sir Charles Browning urged them to disperse. For a moment it appeared that the demonstrators were prepared to move on, but a group of local women, led by Mary Muthoni Nyanjiru, had other ideas. They began to shout at and cajole their male counterparts to continue the protest. Insults from the women, such as *guturamira ng'ania*, the displaying of one's genitals to the thing or person cursed, spurred the men forward where they came face to face with 40 armed askaris, the branch of Kenyan police. The confrontation resulted in at least 22 fatalities of demonstrators and numerous injuries. Other estimates figure as high as 150 Kenyans were killed in the conflict.²

¹ Sonia Sanchez. 'Ngugi wa Thiong'o.' In Ngugi wa Thiong'o: Texts and Contexts. Ed. Charles Cantalupo. Africa World Press: New Jersey, 1995.

² Ngugi Wa Thiong'o. Penpoints, Gunpoints, and Dreams: Towards a Critical Theory of the Arts and the State in Africa. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998: 46.

Thuku had been arrested for his involvement with a growing worker's movement that sought to address issues like *gitati* (obligatory labor, paid or unpaid), taxes, low wages, deplorable urban conditions, and the *kipande* (registration evidence, to be worn by all males).³ He spent the next nine years in detention. Thuku's radical politics influenced and polarized the many political groups taking shape in the early 1920's Kenya. That women were/are involved in these sorts of political undertakings is not called into question. Women assert themselves politically whether overtly or via "hidden transcripts" throughout Africa's history.⁴ The question here is the women's role in agitating their men into action. What connection did these women feel for Thuku? What had Thuku done to so endear himself to this highly marginalized group of women, mostly prostitutes and underpaid farm workers? If African men were feeling the oppression of colonial influences at this intersection of time and place, then certainly their women, limited by patriarchal standards both within their communities and by British colonialism, experienced these stabs more deeply.

The British colonial enterprise operated on many levels. Some of the most obvious include the misappropriation of lands,

³ Greet Kershaw. *Mau Mau from Below*. Oxford: James Currey, Ltd., 1997: 181.

⁴ James Scott. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990.

exploitation of workers, cultural annihilations in myriad forms, and concretely, the abduction of women and young girls to be used in forced labor and/or sexual exploitation. It is unclear why Thuku would pursue these issues and hence become “a champion of women,” but his highly visible attacks of the working women’s plight eventually resulted in the cessation of forced labor for women. Thirty years later, one prominent politician in Jomo Kenyatta’s cabinet called out upon seeing Thuku at a meeting, “let me go shake hands with the old man who stopped my mother from digging roads.”⁵

This is a story about a place, a place whose boundary begins in geography and ends in exile. The first task must be to locate a pivot point from which to open the story. The Norfolk Hotel is a fitting place to begin because of its location on the frontlines of the contact zone.⁶ The Norfolk Hotel in downtown Nairobi oversaw the massacre following Thuku’s arrest. A grand hotel built in 1904, the Norfolk was also known as the “house of lords” for its popularity among white settlers as a gathering place to discuss the problems and joys of the day. What must these “lords and ladies” have thought about the drama taking place in front of their beloved private clubhouse? The conflict included more than the police and protesters involved in the

⁵ Audrey Wipper. “Kikuyu Women and the Harry Thuku Disturbances: Some Uniformities of Female Militancy.”

<http://uoguelph.ca/terisatu/MauMau/index.htm>. 37.

⁶ Mary Louise Pratt. *Imperial Eyes*. New York: Routledge, 1992.

demonstration. It was a symbol of the disparity created by cultural contact. Try as they might to control and calm the situation, the British colonial officers knew their grasp was tenuous and responded to ongoing protests with even greater violence. The permanence of the Norfolk Hotel however reassured the white settlers of their presumed cultural superiority. This structure would, in the future, come to symbolize other projects, other desires.

A discussion about the history of a place requires consideration of the changes of its meaning over time. The memory of places and events has diverse forms depending on the storyteller. The events of March 16, 1922 Nairobi have been called a “riot” by some historians and a “massacre” by others. What is the distance between a “riot” and a “massacre”? Even the “official” (read: western, imperial, legitimate) story changes. For example, the BBC reported recently that the Scotland Yard is looking into allegations that British forces committed atrocities during the Mau Mau movement in Kenya’s forests in the 1950’s.⁷ The prevailing images of Mau Mau rebels for many years had been as “savage”, “barbarian”, and even “cannibal,” but this recent press coverage suggests that perhaps it was the British forces that behaved “barbarically.”

⁷ BBC May 14, 2003.

Marshall Clough examines this shift in perception of Mau Mau with a study of thirteen memoirs created during the Mau Mau era.⁸ By exploring the memoirs of individuals involved in the movement, Clough offers “a critique of the public memory of Mau Mau in independent Kenya.” Clough, incorporating Benedict Anderson’s notion of “a narrative of identity”, asserts that the phenomenon of national historical memory “involves selective forgetting as well as a kind of creative remembering.”⁹

Ngugi wa Thiong’o, playwright, novelist, and professor of literatures, engages this process of creative remembering.¹⁰ Born in Kamiriithu, Kenya in 1938, Ngugi witnessed first-hand the impacts of the British colonial regime and, notably, the pains inflicted on his family and neighbors by anti-Mau Mau fighters during the movement. Currently living in exile, Ngugi’s fictional works have focused on the experiences of Kenyan nationalists confronting British imperialism. Of central importance in Ngugi’s work is the relationship between people and the spaces they occupy. Ngugi alerts us that,

Culture develops within the process of a people wrestling with their natural and social environment. They struggle with nature. They struggle with one another. They evolve a way of life embodied in their institutions and certain practices. Culture becomes the carrier of their moral, aesthetic and ethical

⁸ Marshall Clough. Mau Mau Memoirs: History, Memory and Politics. Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Reinner Publishers, 1998: 6.

⁹ Clough, 14.

¹⁰ See Appendix A for a chronology of Ngugi’s life, including corresponding events in Kenya’s history.

values. At the psychological level, these values become the embodiment of the people's consciousness as a specific community.¹¹

Ngugi's concerns with the uses and power of language define his work as inclusive, engaging, and personal. His political non-fiction essays are particularly pertinent for current discussions of cultural engagement because of his insistence on the importance of local productions of knowledge.

In 1994, over 200 scholars from Africa, Asia, Europe and North America gathered at the Penn State Berks Campus in Reading, Pennsylvania for a conference celebrating Ngugi's work.¹² The conference, titled Ngugi wa Thiong'o: Texts and Contexts, brought together poets, novelists, literary critics, professors and students in order to engage with Ngugi's works as well as the contexts through which he understands and expresses his experience. The goal of the conference was not solely a discussion of text, but the issues surrounding the formation such texts: history, revolution, language, transcultural contacts, liberation. Ngugi's work ably provides a foundation for such discussions. The editor of the volume of contributions that came out the conference, Charles Cantalupo, observed,

¹¹ Ngugi, Moving the Centre, 27.

¹² Charles Cantalupo. Ngugi wa Thiong'o: Texts and Contexts. Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1995.

Yet reading, writing, speaking, criticism and composition are an inseparable process, given the inclusivity and variety of Ngugi's oeuvre, which is merely reflected in the diversity of its exegeses. He is a writer who positively provokes and yet allows for the wildest possible range of readers' responses. Furthermore, to engage a text of Ngugi is inevitably to collaborate with him in the creation of a humane meaning for life.¹³

Of the 200 scholars attending the conference, nineteen contributors had been residing in Kenya. It was disappointing enough that this conference, the first of its kind to celebrate an African author, should take place on non-African soil, but even worse was the unavailability of funds for this group of nineteen to be supported in traveling for this historic occasion. These details would seem to contradict Ngugi's attention to location; on the other hand, perhaps this dislocation speaks to his notion of "the universality of local knowledge."¹⁴ In other words, it is not necessary to be from a specific culture to study it. The only requirement, according to Ngugi, is to be aware that local knowledge "is part of the main, part of the sea. Its limits lie in the boundless universality of our creative potentiality as human beings."¹⁵ Notions of authenticity and hybridity, popular approaches in postcolonial studies for understanding cultural interactions, are not key questions for Ngugi.

¹³ Cantalupo, xi.

¹⁴ Ngugi, *Moving*, 28.

¹⁵ Ngugi, *Moving*, 29.

Ngugi's conflict then is: how can he tell or re-tell the stories of a place (Kenya) that has at times been built by and for other people? In order to do the work of storytelling, Ngugi must first reclaim his place for his family, his neighbors, and himself. Ngugi consciously imagines through his plays, novels and short stories a Kenya fighting for liberation. This is not to say that his stories follow a formulaic pattern of sorrow, struggle, and liberation. On the contrary, his stories are steeped in history's dates, numbers, and primary actors; and clearly, Kenya's political history is not overflowing with happy endings. Ngugi's goal is not to create a fantasy of social harmony and equal economic opportunities, but to move toward a plurality of cultures, where people have the power to tell their stories, their histories from a center of their own selection.

The dialogue between Ngugi's fiction and his political essays and speeches reveals a deeper subtext for understanding a Kenya beyond the obvious explanations contained by traditional histories of warfare, political overthrow and peasant uprising. Ngugi's Kenya is a complex of tradition, post-colonial remnants, neo-colonial disasters, pan-Africanisms, family and a deeply nostalgic consciousness that longs not for some idealized past, but instead for an intellectually and spiritually liberated present. To study history through Ngugi is to embrace this longing. Unlike other forms of resistance literature that

“seek different historical endings,” Ngugi proposes that it is not the endings that deserve attention, but instead it is the process of history that needs to be interrogated.¹⁶ He achieves this balance through essays which relay the strengths and limitations of his literature. Reading his essays simultaneously with his fiction and plays is a contrast in tone, and an effective one that underlines the conflicting nature of re-telling history.

In the 1940’s, Ngugi attended both Gikuyu Independent (Karing’a) School, where he studied his local language, and Alliance High School, a British government-run school that insisted on the use of English for not only all schoolwork, but also for all interaction among the children. Later, he went on to study at Makerere University College in Uganda and Leeds University in England. Throughout his many years of education and travel, Ngugi’s perceptions of his home certainly changed and matured. In 1967, while studying at Leeds and working on his third novel, Ngugi first encountered the work of Franz Fanon, specifically his The Wretched of the Earth. Engaging with Fanon’s discussion of national betrayal in a neo-colonial context provided Ngugi the framework for understanding the paradoxes of living in a post-colonial state.¹⁷ Suddenly he had

¹⁶ Barbara Harlow, in Resistance Literature (1987), suggests this as a goal for literatures produced from an anticolonial standpoint.

¹⁷ Neocolonialism is the term used by Franz Fanon in his work The Wretched of the Earth to describe a policy of authority in which an educated indigenous middle class picks up after

obtained this neocolonial grammar for conceptualizing the struggle for freedom as one steeped in class relations across and within racial lines. His novel, Grain of Wheat, which was written during this time period, reflects this transformation of perception. The central and unavoidable theme of Ngugi's writing during this period is the significance of one's location in Kenyan social hierarchies. This location is further enhanced by other cultural factors such as language, education, gender and, notably, geography.

What role does geography, as a critical discipline, play for unraveling Ngugi's work? Can a center/periphery binary assist with this explanation? While I regularly resist the temptation to depend on oversimplified binaries, this is one occasion that benefits from such a discussion. Coming from the hills outside of a rapidly expanding Nairobi, Ngugi, an ethnic Gikuyu, negotiates his proximity and access to central and colonial versions of control and history-making. This distance is defined in terms of what Walter Mignolo calls "enunciation."¹⁸ Enunciation, for the purposes of this project, is the ability to mimic the institutional practices, gestures and vernacular of a politically dominant culture. Enunciation is also the articulation of agreed upon versions of history. How well Ngugi enunciates his

the initial colonizers have left to continue the exploitation of its working classes. New York: Grove Weidenfield, 1963.

¹⁸ Walter Mignolo. Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000: 5.

cultural position with British imperialism early in his career depends on his willingness to accept colonial histories. One's ability to enunciate with persuasiveness corresponds to proximity to cultural accents. For example, the Gikuyu people who build their homes and raise their families in the forests of central Kenya do not have access to the British accents of control and "civilization" that presuppose economic and political opportunities. Geography is more than the terrain that describes a forest home; for Ngugi, it is also the journey one must travel to confront imperial distortions of power, namely, his journey to England, seat of his colonial oppressor, to continue his studies.

The binary analysis in this context is British imperial power, symbolized by duty to the Queen and English civility, contrasted with its British colonies, perceived by such imperial powers as backward and without history. While centers for the operations of either of these constructs are surely mobile, the imagined foci describing these groups hold strict parameters outlined by geographical dimensions. The geographical specifics are the archipelago of Great Britain and in this case, a Kenya that is always in opposition to presumed British ideals of order, purity and godliness. The usefulness of geography for this project thus can be seen in the allocation of value for such cultural artifacts as language and history-telling. For Ngugi to write

in Gikuyu, his first language, is to re-place his people's story at the geographic center. In his foreword to Homecoming, Ime Ikiddeh observes that a focus of Ngugi's work is,

the confusion in values that has resulted from a drastic historical change in the political, economic and cultural ethos; the effect of such confusion on both society and the individual psyche; and the need to retain what is ours and recreate from it a new set of living values.¹⁹

Ngugi's non-fiction takes the form of political essays, speeches and literary criticism. These works tackle issues of present social conditions through a lens shaped by the past. An understanding of Kenya's history is central to the concerns that Ngugi seeks to clarify.

Ngugi's short stories, plays and novels draw upon Kenya's history for information and inspiration. These stories provide yet another distinct avenue for expressing the suffering that is characteristic of negotiating cultural survival through the transition of a colonial government to a neocolonial government. The meeting of practice and ideology in art and politics is not often represented in this sort of ideological shift, but Ngugi, speaking from a position on the cultural frontier, exemplifies this intellectual journey from art to politics and back again, seamlessly weaving one into the other.²⁰

¹⁹ Ngugi. Homecoming. London: Heineman, 1978: xi.

²⁰ For more on the notion of living on the frontier, see Ann Laura Stoler's Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule (2002). She describes the frontier as 'both a site of enclosure and a site of contact' (p 80). Ngugi is seen as on the frontier for many reasons, one of which is his mobility to and from

This project is not meant to be a comprehensive catalog of Ngugi's life and work. Such a project would be especially difficult considering the author's ongoing work. I do not mean to construct an epitaph highlighting Ngugi's greatest works; nor do I intend to relay and describe the key pivotal points of his life.

This project will focus on the relationship between a specific, historical subject and a larger context outlined by several cultural characteristics. The first stage of the project will be to contrast the power of language as both a tool for liberation as well as a weapon wielded by hegemonic discourses to control subaltern groups. The second stage of the project is to evaluate literature as an historical methodology. The scholarship regarding the importance of literary sources to historical understanding is expansive, but the questions raised in this stage of the project seek to connect specific literatures to their political cousins in a global network. The focus will then turn to an examination of how neocolonial performance spaces exploit the power of language to further the political goals of the oppressive regime. A consciousness of ambiguity is also apparent in the function of memory for history-making, the final stage of the project. The driving force that connects these topics is the value of the imagination

a position of alterity with respect to positions of greater political power. His current position as a writer in exile re-invokes the politics of marginalization. The contrast here lies in his prior positioning as an empowered political figure in Kenya that could be bold enough to make demands of his intellectual community, such as the abolishment of the English Department at the University of Nairobi.

as a political strategy. The imagination can be a “powerful social and revolutionary force.”²¹ Ngugi calls upon the power of the imagination to re-write history. He achieves this re-telling not solely through written and oral words, but also in the manner in which he lives his daily experience.

Proposing to use the imagination as an historical methodology elicits questions of a text’s validity, or historical accuracy. Edward Said confronts this issue in his important work, Orientalism, by suggesting the fallibility of the “truth.” He explains that the author, whether of fiction or historical narrative, is always present in the text. “No one has ever devised a method for detaching the scholar from the circumstances of life, from the fact of his involvement (conscious or unconscious) with a class, a set of beliefs, a social position, or from the mere activity of being a member of society.”²²

That Ngugi is present in his literature and his political essays and speeches may seem obviously clear, but the author’s struggle with the his or her presence in the text is evident in this project as well. How covertly should I position myself within these pages? Is it the historian’s goal to disappear within the narrative? Said claims the impossibility of such ambitions. In discussing the centrality of

²¹ Robin Kelley. Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination. Boston: Beacon, 2002: 193.

²² Edward Said. Orientalism. New York: Pantheon, 1978: 10.

Orientalism for unearthing the complexities cultural contacts, Said extols the author to remember that “Orientalism is- and does not merely represent- a considerable dimension of modern political-intellectual culture.”²³ In other words, a central actor in the historical narrative is always the author herself. She does not do the mere work of a scribe; she performs, as well.

The author’s presence then must be in the foreground of any analytical project, covert or not. In an effort to frame this project with the utmost clarity, not only must I make my presence visible, I must confront the specific problems of authorship within the project’s parameters. Laura Charlotte Kempen sums up these problems when she asks if it “is possible for me, as a U.S. academic from the middle class, to transcend the ideological basis of my class and nation, and not reside within the mainstream tradition of colonialist criticism?”²⁴ After all, acts of writing and interpretation are never objective, transparent behaviors. How is this project of writing a cultural biography about Ngugi any different from the British writing histories of Mau Mau “atrocities”? Kempen suggests that she works as a “translator” and that since she “does not seek to conform these texts to Western theories,” her approach “is therefore not imperialist.”

²³ Said, 12.

²⁴ Laura Charlotte Kempen. Mariama Ba, Rigoberta Menchu, and Postcolonial Feminism. New York: Peter Lang, 2001: 5.

While Kempen articulates problems that are central to postcolonial studies in general, her proposal blatantly skirts the very issues she introduces. She does not attempt to speak directly to these questions because their answers would position her within the hegemonic discourse she seeks to avoid.

Instead, I plan to adopt an acceptance of these cultural distances, acknowledging my positions of privilege and using them to clear a space for Ngugi's work in a realm where he may not be readily accessible. Though the work of the "translator" is vital to cultural and historical studies, it cannot escape its dual role as "interpreter" as well, the work that brings nuance and bias to every conversation.

CHAPTER TWO

OFFERING LANGUAGE AS A TOOL FOR LIBERATION

The master's tools can never dismantle the master's house.²⁵

Access to the tools for memory-making is one of Ngugi's central concerns. The power to remember, also expressed as one's agency to write history, is contested terrain. Power in this context is a reflection of a Foucauldian sensibility that seeks to underscore power as a discourse based in language. The question revolves around the agents responsible for the normalization of language and thus agreed upon versions of history.

Armed with a consciousness of these problems, Ngugi confronted the leaders of the University of Nairobi for its bias/preference for English literature and language in the Department of English, which he argued, signaled a total lack of interest in African literature. In 1968, he and his colleagues, Henry Owuor-Anyumba and Taban Lo Liyong, co-authored a letter entitled, "On the Abolition of the English Department."²⁶ In twenty clearly articulated points, Ngugi outlined the problems of English literature curricula within the African landscape and mindscape, and presented some solutions for

²⁵ Audre Lorde. Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches. Trumansburg, N.Y.: Crossing Press, 1984: 110.

²⁶ Ngugi, Homecoming. Appendix.

redesigning a department of literatures whose goal would be to benefit Kenyan students in particular and African scholarship in general.²⁷

In the letter they argued that the English Department as it existed did more to discourage African scholarship than it did to promote African involvement in the literary arts. In an effort to announce the centrality of African languages and literatures they suggested:

- A. That the English Department be abolished;
- B. That a Department of African Literature and Languages be set up in its place.

With these two significant changes in structure, they sought to show that, “the primary duty of any literature department is to illuminate the spirit animating a people, to show how it meets new challenge, and to investigate possible areas of development and involvement.”²⁸

In no uncertain terms they “reject(ed) the primacy of the English language.” The repercussions of such impassioned testimony created a wave that moved beyond the importance of reshaping academic curricula. These words spoke to a political strategy for

²⁷ Louis Althusser’s work would suggest that the university is sphere of the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) that functions “massively and predominantly by *ideology*, but also functions secondarily by repression...” Calling for the abolition of the English Department disrupted the practices used by the “ruling class” to maintain ideological control of people. Similarly, using Antonio Gramsci’s language to describe this event reveals the university’s hegemonic practices by way of “domination” and “intellectual and moral leadership.” When Ngugi made these demands of the university, it was not just a response to his dissatisfaction with the curriculum, but also took a swing at the operating hegemonic discourse shaping his reality. For the essays by Althusser and Gramsci, see Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader. Editor John Storey. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998.

²⁸ Ngugi, Homecoming, 146.

invigorating a distinctly African consciousness and cultural heritage. This was no mere request for a change in course offerings at the university level; it was a demand for the re-placement of Africa to the center not only for the study of literature, but also for a re-centered understanding of African histories. The ultimate concern for these academic architects was that English culture had been substituted for African cultures in general through the presumed usability and superiority of its language.

In this new department, they suggested specific courses in languages and literatures that would be available for the students. The study of languages ought to be available because, they proposed, “through the knowledge of languages and linguistics we can get more from literature.” They recommended courses in Swahili, French, English, Arabic, and whenever possible, Hindustani, Kikuyu, Luo, Akamba, and other locally useful languages. Although the French language had been imported by the colonial enterprise, African literature in French maintained a wide readership throughout the continent and in the late sixties was one of the most common languages for African fiction. The core of the discussion of language revolved around the problems and creative license associated with the translation of a text from one language into another. To engage with a

text in the language in which it was originally written was the ideal scenario, so command of other languages was one key to this process.

In conjunction with this study of languages, coursework in literatures broken into four distinct categories would be available. They suggested the following categories: the oral tradition, Swahili literature, European literature, and Modern African literature. Study of the oral tradition, they explained, would elevate a student's awareness of traditional forms of storytelling and offers a way to understand the transmission of culture within a specifically African context. Perhaps the most significant possibility underlying the study of the oral tradition is that it "could suggest new structures and techniques; and could foster attitudes of mind characterized by the willingness to experiment with new forms, so transcending 'fixed literary patterns' and what that implies- the preconceived ranking of art forms."²⁹ In other words, study of the oral tradition embodies an overt act of resistance to cultural absorption by suggesting new forms of expression, an updated oral tradition, that are unique and potentially untranslatable. The consequences of such demonstrations

²⁹ Homecoming, 148. Orature, a phrase coined in the 1960's, refers to the study of oral traditions or what could also be conceived as oral literature. In this context, Ngugi views 'new forms' of oral literature as an intersection of traditional forms that tell a group's stories and fables with contemporary forms that focus on more current histories. In the next section of this chapter, I will address the production of Ngugi's play I Will Marry When I Want, which can be analyzed as a contemporary form of oral literature.

of new cultural forms could mean the downfall of Eurocentric modes of thinking, at least within the academy.

Most closely connected to this study of oral tradition would be a comprehensive study of Modern African literature. This coursework would encompass three forms: “the African novel written in French and English;” “African poetry written in French and English, with relevant translations of works written by Africans in Spanish and Portuguese;” and, “the Caribbean novel and poetry,” and Afro-American literature.³⁰ The interaction between studies of oral tradition and Modern African Literature could explore other realms as well, including dance, music, and drama, with courses in play-writing, play-acting, directing, lighting, and costuming.

Other components would include the study of Swahili and European literatures. There is no denying the influence of European literature on African modes of expression, especially around the academy. Ngugi and his co-authors had not sought to erase European literature from some imagined pure African consciousness, but instead to align academic priorities in a more balanced fashion. They were commenting on the inappropriate over-concentration on English literature. Even French literature, they argued, had been under-represented in Kenyan academic institutions. They expressed

³⁰ Ngugi, Homecoming, 149.

a desire to see other European literatures like Russian, German, and even American literature available.

The ultimate difficulty in this process of redesigning curricula was outlining a new canon based an Africa-centered context. Clearly, the top priority had to be literary excellence, but how did one determine such qualities? Surely, it required a value judgment, but whose “values,” and what standard for “judgment”? For Ngugi and his co-authors, the answer was clear: “For any group it is better to study representative works which mirror their society rather than to study a few isolated ‘classics’, either of their own or of a foreign culture.”³¹ This response may seem to fly in the face of the question of literary excellence, or else it changes the standard altogether. Perhaps British colonial conceptualizations of what constitutes a literary canon simply do not fit into this project that Ngugi and his colleagues outline. The cultural distance is just too great to be confined by oversimplification in the form of a “value judgment.”

In an anthology of essays entitled Writers in Politics, Ngugi writes, “imperialism, in its colonial and neo-colonial stages, is the enemy of those human values of liberation. The literature reflecting an aesthetic that glorifies the wicked deeds of the imperialist

³¹Ngugi, Homecoming, 148.

bourgeoisie and its local allies is enemy literature.”³² This language defines a more deeply impassioned stance regarding the prevalence of English and English literature in the Kenyan school system. English cultural imperialism influences far more than academic structures; by calling it the “enemy”, Ngugi sounds the alarm for yet another profound return to African-centered practices and ideologies. Ngugi first formulated these words in an article debating the findings of a conference designated to re-examine the literature syllabus in Nairobi schools. Written almost eight years after the formal demand to abolish the Department of English at the University of Nairobi, these powerful words outline Ngugi’s refusal of English cultural artifacts as an example of English cultural superiority in a post-colonial world.

Ngugi’s theorizes language as both a tool for imperial oppressors to wield over their colonial subjects and as a weapon of resistance against such acts of cultural violence. Ngugi describes language as having two aspects:

One aspect is its role as an agent that enables us to communicate with one another in our struggle to find the means for survival. The other is its role as a carrier of the history and culture built into the process of that communication over time.³³

³² Ngugi. Writers in Politics. London: Heinemann, 1981: 40.

³³ Ngugi wa Thiong’o. Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms. Oxford: James Currey, 1993: 30.

If language is a carrier of history, then what happens to history when one's language is taken away? In British colonial Kenya, English was the official language for all governmental interactions and eventually became the language of education as well. Ngugi explains that there are two ways that imperial oppressors can hold language captive. The first is by attempting to erase any memory of a group's original language thereby evicting a group's stories and songs from the collective memory. With this work of erasure underway, the next mode of captivation is to "elevate the language of the conqueror."³⁴ These modes affect changes in cultural perceptions through the complementary actions of erasure and re-inscription.

For the British to maintain political control in Kenya during the colonial era, they had to instill a shift in Kenyan value perceptions of the most fundamental elements like history, language, and time. These shifts functioned to elevate British methods of control through education, politics, and artistic expressions like dance, music, and theatre.

In response to these tactics of cultural aggression, Ngugi made the decision in 1967 to switch completely to writing in Gikuyu for all of his fiction, and later for much of his non-fiction. In this way, Ngugi cleared a space for reclaiming Kenya's history for the people who had

³⁴ Ngugi, *Moving*, 32.

been slowly losing their stories over the course of Britain's colonial reign.

Many contemporary scholars have criticized Ngugi's return to Gikuyu, saying that writing in a local language such as Gikuyu can only mean that his words will be even more inaccessible to a wider readership. Chinua Achebe, award winning novelist from Nigeria who wrote in English, responded to Ngugi's decision by saying that even though English is the language imprinted upon him by colonial oppressors, it is also the language of his experience.³⁵ English, for Achebe, is not just a language of oppression; it is his personal tool for shaping, describing, and imagining his stories. Kamau Braithwaite agrees, describing his brand of English as

an English that is not the standard, imported, educated English, but that of the submerged surrealist experience and sensibility...It may be English but often it is an English which is like a howl, or a shout, or a machine-gun, or the wind or a wave.³⁶

Herein lays a great possibility for personal expression: one's ability to opt for one language over another. The act of choosing Gikuyu over English is itself an act of rebellion. Conversely, for Achebe and Braithwaite to construct an English suitable for their stories is also an

³⁵ Achebe, Chinua. "The African Writer and the English Language." Morning Yet on Creation Day. New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1975: 55.

³⁶ Braithwaite, Edward Kamau. "English in the Caribbean: Notes on Nation Language and Poetry." Opening up the Canon. Selected Papers from the English Institute, 1979, eds. Houston A. Baker and Leslie Fielder. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981: 21.

act of rebellion. All of these artists are involved in acts of resistance revealed by their abilities to imagine and tell the histories of their people. After all, the prerequisite for any world beyond oppression and alienation must be the ability to imagine it first.

Ngugi's perception however of the usability of English to describe and carry African experiences does not allow for such ambiguous notions of rebellion. In fact, for Ngugi, abandoning English for Gikuyu is a step toward breaking the bonds of "mental incarceration," which, according to Franz Fanon, is the deepest form of violence perpetrated by colonizers on colonized peoples. That the use of English has prevailed into the post-colonial era suggests a neocolonial acceptance of the colonial goal of cultural assimilation. Ngugi explores these ideas in Decolonizing the Mind, which focuses on the political power of language. Language functions to carry the content of revolution, but language can have many shapes, different structures. Ngugi's petition to the University of Nairobi to abolish the English department was an overtly political act that revolved around the centrality of language as a cultural carrier.

Political acts are also highly effective when presented as artistic expression. For example, the writing, performing and overall impact of Ngugi's play I Will Marry When I Want reveal a strong political agenda. Many theorists propose that all art functions politically,

whether intentional or not. Indeed, some scholars associated with Afrocentrist ideologies insist that artists interested in the liberation of their people from cultural oppression must offer works that support these goals. And if they do not consciously produce such works, then they do their people a great disservice. This notion suggests a political responsibility placed squarely on the shoulders of the artists, musicians and poets of the revolution.³⁷

With the production of I Will Marry When I Want, Ngugi embraced this responsibility and explored new possibilities for the uses of language in promoting political goals as well as for artistic expression. One of the significant differences between this play and Ngugi's previous work is that, for the first time, he removed himself from the intellectual constraints of the university and dove into a community theatre project with peasants in the rural village of Kamiriithu. With his colleague, Ngugi wa Mirii, Ngugi wrote the original play which was then altered and enhanced by members of the community. While the basic structure of the play retained its shape, much of the dialogue, song lyrics, and choreography changed to mirror the realities of life in a farm community.

³⁷ Ed. Mazama, Ama. The Afrocentric Paradigm. Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 2003. See especially Mazama's introduction for more on the importance of art and artists in shifting and establishing an Afrocentric paradigm. Mazama argues that an Afrocentric paradigm is necessary 'to systematically displace European ways of thinking, being, feeling, etc., and to consciously replace them with ways that are germane to our own African cultural experience' (5).

For Ngugi, community theatre became a way to move beyond the novel, a literary form considered by some to carry a “European bourgeois heritage”.³⁸ I Will Marry When I Want was a revolutionary enterprise two levels. First, it was the first of Ngugi’s plays to be written and performed entirely in Gikuyu. Second, and more importantly, the production of this play marked a convergence between the fruits of Ngugi’s creative expression and his audience. Simon Gikandi sees this play as a radical development in Ngugi’s career.

This play was to mark a turning point in the author’s aesthetic ideology because it enabled him to overcome the boundary separating him from his audience and his text from its context.³⁹

Ngugi himself views this play as a pivotal moment in his academic career as well as in his political life. Ngugi says of the experience in Kamiriithu,

The six months between June and November 1977 were the most exciting in my life and the true beginning of my education. I learnt my language anew. I rediscovered the creative nature and power of collective work.⁴⁰

The theatre events in Kamiriithu centered upon the Kamiriithu Community Education and Cultural Centre (KCECC), established in

³⁸ Simon Gikandi. Ngugi wa Thiong’o. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000: 160.

³⁹ Gikandi, 161.

⁴⁰ Ngugi. Detained: A Writer’s Prison Diary. London: Heinemann, 1981. 76.

1975 under the leadership of Njeeri wa Aamoni.⁴¹ Initially, the focus of the KCECC had been to expand adult literacy classes to combat the 80 percent illiteracy rate among adults in the region. Prior to the KCECC, most literacy curricula had been designed and presented by church missions and foreign companies. Generally these courses did not show much success for encouraging students to complete their studies. One of the key reasons for the lack of success is that the textbooks and assignments were either aimed elementary school-aged children or carried an overt political agenda that elevated European “civilisation” above their local traditions.

During the KCECC’s first adult literacy course which began in July 1976 students debated many of the fundamental philosophical questions that shaped their realities, like questions about the presence of poverty in their neighborhoods and why some people had adequate shelter and food while others did not. Out of these conversations grew an interest in continuing their educations and sharing this new learning with the community. They decided that community theatre offered the best opportunity for involving their neighbors in such a project. Ngugi and his colleague Ngugi wa Mirii, the acting chair of the centre’s education committee, were asked to draft a play in Gikuyu, “a play about the people, for the people, and in

⁴¹ Ingrid Bjorkman. Mother, Sing for Me: People’s Theatre in Kenya. London: Zed Books, 1989: 51.

the people's own language."⁴² The plays would serve three main purposes:

they would serve as entertainment and collective self-education; they would form follow-up reading material for the new literates; and they would raise money to finance other programmes, material culture and health for instance, and to meet the day-to-day expenses like chalk, writing materials and electricity bills.⁴³

The two Ngugis set to work and by April 1977 they had a working manuscript ready to present to the community. Rehearsals soon began and the construction of the stage and open-air theatre followed thereafter. Members of the community contributed according to their abilities and some even discovered hidden talents. Ngugi describes one young man who found that "he had a tremendous voice which, when raised in song, kept its listeners on tender-hooks."⁴⁴ A working model of the theatre had been built with matchsticks so the workers could make sure the plan would work. Everything from set design to the actors themselves was an exploration of learning anew; this was a truly community affair.

The play opened to a fee-paying audience October 2, 1977. Ngugi admits that the polished product was a "far cry" from the original script. He was pleased to see how the people altered and

⁴² Ibid., 53.

⁴³ Ibid., 76.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 78.

molded the script into a work that created a deeper expression of their reality. The experience profoundly inspired Ngugi.

I shared in their rediscovery of their collective strength and abilities, and in their joyous feeling that they could accomplish anything- even transform the whole village and their lives without a single Harambee of charity- and I could feel the way the actors were communicating their joyous sense of a new power to their audience who too went home with gladdened hearts.⁴⁵

To answer Gayatri Spivak's often debated question, "can the subaltern speak," Ngugi would extend a resounding "yes." The return to Gikuyu stepped toward not only re-centering an imagined Africa, but also mediated the notion of colonial silencing. One of the problems of theorizing colonial discourse is the presumption of a totalizing effect of a colonial presence on colonized terrain and that this presence represents a complete silencing of colonized peoples. Ngugi has embraced this question and simultaneously disregarded it by calling its bluff. The total silencing of expanses of peoples is not an acceptable or even realistic possibility when discussing relationships in the "contact zone."⁴⁶ Through community theatre projects like the ones created by and for the KCECC, Ngugi came to understand that these community members sang with clear voices readily heard by their neighbors. These voices persevere even when colonial and

⁴⁵ Ibid..

⁴⁶ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*.

neocolonial oppressors attempt to shut them down. In this way, Ngugi resists stabs at cultural absorption by upholding traditional forms of expression molded to suit contemporary issues and desires.

Bill Ashcroft asserts that, “the subaltern does not exist in some pure space outside the dominant discourse. The subaltern can never speak outside the discourse of power.”⁴⁷ But the subaltern can most certainly speak; the question as to whether or not those controlling the attempted process of cultural absorption can hear remains. Perhaps Ashcroft signals hybrid consciousness with these words, the home of cultural consequences such as creolization and metissage. These however do not seem to be Ngugi’s goals. While he does not directly speak to issues of hybridization, it is difficult to ignore Ngugi’s British colonial education and his international cultural experiences, which both influenced and possibly interfered with any longing he may have for an imagined purity of knowledge. He is aware of his liminal position in Gikuyu culture because of his ability to articulate the accents of British culture, thereby sustaining a position of relative power within the colonial discourse. Simultaneously, he maintains the “authentic” voice of the Gikuyu people, revealing deep connections to his family and friends in Kenya.

⁴⁷ Bill Ashcroft. Postcolonial Transformations. London: Routledge, 2001: 46.

Ingrid Bjorkman traveled to Kenya in 1982, five years after the first production of I Will Marry When I Want, to interview the people who had seen the performance.⁴⁸ The questions propelling her research sought to uncover how community theatre influenced participants socially and politically. Soon after her arrival in Kenya, rehearsals for Ngugi's most recent play Mother, Sing for Me had begun at the centre. A great deal of excitement circled around this latest production and groups came from around the region to witness rehearsals. Over 10,000 people saw the show in rehearsals.⁴⁹ Mother, Sing for Me held so much appeal because it was aimed at a broader Kenyan audience both in content and in structure. For example, the songs which make up two-thirds of the play are in five different languages: Gikuyu, Kamba, Luo, Luhya and Giriama. Records would tell us that Kenyan officials viewed such popularity as a threat and the production was ultimately shut down by government authorities before opening night.

Bjorkman's initial interest in the impacts of I Will Marry When I Want was overshadowed by the rumblings and recent memories stirred by Mother, Sing for Me. She decided to shift her focus

⁴⁸ Ibid.. Bjorkman clearly details her research methodology and actual fieldwork in this volume. In addition, she provides a concise historical background highlighting the events that led up to the establishment of the KCECC, both in terms of a general understanding of Kenyan history as well Ngugi's involvement in the community.

⁴⁹ Ngugi. Barrel of a Pen: Resistance to Repression in Neo-Colonial Kenya. Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1983: 44.

accordingly and redesigned the specific questions of her project while maintaining the overall analysis of community theatre. Her analysis derives from interviews with 37 audience members from six different Kenyan ethnic groups. In addition, she collected other materials related to the production, such as a tape recording of the performance, over 200 still photographs of rehearsals, newspaper clippings, various academic papers regarding the play, and alternate translations of the play itself.

Bjorkman sees five key results of the analysis. Her analysis focuses on Mother, Sing for Me, but one could easily transpose these ideas to I Will Marry When I Want. One, as the play was a multi-lingual experience, it forced members of the audience to communicate with one another. Two, because the play deals with the broader details of imperialism in Kenya's history, the play "expresses what the majority of people have experienced," thus creating a sense of unity.⁵⁰ Three, another way the play established unity was by taking the people's side in the struggle for land rights and freedom from cultural oppression. Four, in response to acknowledging a shared oppressor, audience members described a "sense of commitment" and "a feeling of resolution and hope." And finally, the play was successful because it re-told Kenya's "actual" history, not some imagined, fantastic story

⁵⁰ Bjorkman, 89.

beyond their realm of possibility. It was the story of their personal experience and it resonated beyond the village's borders.

The experiences at Kamiriithu sparked a new theoretical energy for Ngugi, leading him to understand the power of performance in new and profound ways. What was the conflict between Kenyan authorities and their community theatre project? How could he explain the continual harassment and hostility directed toward this work of creative expression defined by and for the people of the village? Ngugi offers this way of understanding these tensions:

The war between art and the state is really a struggle between the power of performance in the arts and the performance of power by the state- in short, enactments of power. The conflict in the enactments of power is sharper where the state is externally imposed, a situation of the conqueror and the conquered for instance, as in colonialism.⁵¹

He came to see the political importance of theatre, not simply in performance, but also in other aspects of its production, for example, content, audience, and significantly, performance space.

Ngugi defines performance space in three ways. First, he sees performance space as “a self-contained field of internal relations: the interplay between actors and props and lights and shadows.” This conception of space is bound by both material and immaterial walls. The material walls are architectural while the immaterial walls take

⁵¹ Ngugi. Penpoints, Gunpoints, and Dreams: Towards a Critical Theory of the Arts and State in Africa. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998: 39.

their shape in the interaction between the audience and the physical space around them. A second way of defining performance complements this notion of bound space by taking the power of performance away from the theatre space and inserting it into the community itself. In other words, Ngugi also sees performance space in its external relationship with other facets of the community, like factories, schools, and places of worship. Finally, at the intersection of a performance space's internal and external factors, Ngugi envisions a relationship to time as another way to understand space. Performance space always exists in relation to "what has gone before- history- and what could follow- the future." Ngugi asks, "what memories does the space carry and what longings might it generate?" Many years after the events in Kamiriithu, Ngugi will again confront these issues with the production of his play The Trial of Dedan Kimathi at the National Theatre in Nairobi, where these concepts of the political power of performance space will be unavoidable.

This chapter has outlined three events from Ngugi's life in which he established his own position on the political power of language. The call for the abolition of the English Department at the University of Nairobi, Ngugi's switch to Gikuyu, and the theatre events at Kamiriithu all reveal a commitment to the liberation of his people from cultural oppression, using language as a fundamental tool for

articulating these goals. Ngugi theorizes language within both political and artistic spheres, suggesting that the overlap is at once helpful and challenging. These realms influence and constrict each other, and it is through language that such forms take shape.

CHAPTER THREE

LITERATURE AS HISTORICAL METHOD

I want to talk about the past as a way of talking about the present...The novelist is haunted by a sense of the past. His work is often an attempt to come to term with 'the thing that has been', a struggle, as it were, to sensitively register his encounter with history, his people's history.⁵²

Discrepancies in telling the story of the Mau Mau movement and the Emergency in Kenya in the early 1950's underscore the problematic nature of doing the work of history. Does such ambiguity imply that the journey to historical understanding is impossibility?

Hayden White offers this statement:

When we seek to make sense of such problematical topics as human nature, culture, society, and history, we never say precisely what we wish to say or mean precisely what we say. Our discourse always tends to slip away from our data towards the structures of consciousness with which we are trying to grasp them; or, what amounts to the same thing, the data always resist the coherency of the image which we are trying to fashion of them.⁵³

While White's admission of the distance between lived experience and interpretation is useful for analyzing an author's perceptions, this notion of ambiguity in history-making infers an ultimate inadequacy in any project designed to make sense of the past. The question of objectivity plagues historians regardless of their attachment to

⁵² Ngugi. *Homecoming*. Heinemann: London, 1978: 39.

⁵³ Hayden White. *Tropics of Discourse*. *Tropics of Discourse*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978: 1.

postmodern theoretical concerns. Perhaps it is the inversion of this equation that reveals the greatest potential for understanding. Contrary to an insistence on objectivity for the work of history, some might argue that it is in subjectivity that the historian can most closely approach the topic of study, complete with the author's biases and perceptions in the open and available for more extensive interpretation.

In Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary, Ngugi provides an autobiographical account of life in detention, a reality for many of the writers and activists of post-Mau Mau Kenya. Six weeks after I Will Marry When I Want was shut down by the district commissioner citing "public security" as the cause, Vice President Daniel Arap Moi signed the detention order to have Ngugi arrested and detained in prison. There were no official charges filed and consequently no trial was held. He was held for one year at Kamiti Maximum Security Prison.⁵⁴

Certainly his work in Kamiriithu with the community theatre influenced the government's decision to imprison him, but other factors can be seen to substantiate the government's perception of Ngugi as a threat to Kenya's social stability. It would be hazardous to presume that one seemingly radical act could condemn Ngugi; after

⁵⁴ Sicherman, Carol. Ngugi wa Thiong'o: The Making of a Rebel: A Source Book in Kenyan Literature and Resistance. London: Hans Zell Publishing, 1990: 11.

all, Ngugi's life and actions up to his detention and after clearly are those of a person who is seeking to dismantle the imperialist evils he sees in his society. The work to abolish the Department of English at the University of Nairobi is just one example from Ngugi's life that supports the perception of him as a "radical anti-colonialist," a phrase he uses to describe himself.

Another example of Ngugi's struggle for cultural liberation came in 1969, when the Ministry of Education refused to allow Odinga to speak at the University of Nairobi, sparking protests and demonstrations that lasted for two months and resulted in the closing of the University. Odinga had been elected the first Vice-President of Kenya following liberation in 1964. Two years later, he was forced to resign his post, with the government claiming a growing estrangement between Odinga and other members of the cabinet. In Odinga's "Resignation Statement" he wrote that "the underground enemy" – foreign interests- "has temporarily succeeded in creating an invisible government" through its proxies in the Kenya government.⁵⁵ A highly visible and outspoken politician, Odinga was arrested and detained shortly after the episode at the University of Nairobi. Following his release in 1971, he again sought the road to politics, but he would never regain power on a national level.

⁵⁵ Sicherman, 171.

Ngugi's response to the Ministry of Education's attempt to silence Odinga was to resign from the University of Nairobi. He argued that not allowing Odinga to speak was but one example of violations of academic freedom on campus. Ngugi aligned himself with Odinga's struggle and through this solidarity showed himself to be openly at odds with President Kenyatta's neocolonial government. As the first African member of the English department at the University, Ngugi himself held a highly visible position within the academic and political circles of Nairobi throughout the sixties and early seventies.

The bedrock that explains the government's ability to treat its citizens so poorly is outlined in the Preservation of Public Security Act of 1966.⁵⁶ This legislation retained the provisions of the Emergency Order of 1939 which permitted detention without trial, censorship, the prohibition of public meetings, and allowed the President to declare a state of emergency. The act also enabled the President to suspend human and civil rights at his own discretion. Ngugi sees the act as "a total negation of all the democratic and human rights of Kenyans enshrined in the constitution."

With this legislation firmly in place, the government's power seemed limitless. The University of Nairobi in particular answered to

⁵⁶ Ngugi, *Detained*, 51.

the government's call for conformity, first by banning the Students' Organization in 1972 on the grounds that it was "dangerous to the good government of Kenya."⁵⁷ Then, two years later, the University of Nairobi was closed for much of the year due to student disturbances. The student protests demonstrated against a new loan scheme, expulsions, expatriate control of their education, and British policies in Rhodesia and South Africa. That February, over 2000 students met with rioting police on campus.. The police used tear gas and batons to silence the demonstration.

Meanwhile, Ngugi's academic career at the University held great promise. By 1971, Ngugi had been reinstated in the newly formed Department of Literatures and supervised the final revisions of the updated literature syllabus. Then in 1973, Ngugi was promoted to Senior lecturer and Acting Head of the Department of Literatures. This was yet another noteworthy event in Ngugi's life as he became the first African to head a department at the University of Nairobi. And again in 1977 Ngugi achieved another first for Africans at the University; he became Associate Professor of Literature in the department that he helped to build. The atmosphere at the University of Nairobi during these stormy days shifted moment to moment

⁵⁷ Sicherman, 90.

depending on political currents. Indeed, these were tense and confusing times for students and teachers alike.

For Okot p'Bitek, the Ugandan poet, Ngugi's acceptance into the academy indicated a growing complacency for Ngugi.⁵⁸ Okot p'Bitek's fear was that "now that Ngugi had been accepted by the institutions of education and power in Kenya, he could no longer be interested in incorporating popular and oral culture into his work or the literature curriculum." On the contrary, Ngugi, on the verge of embarking the community theatre project at Kamiriithu, readied himself for some of the most groundbreaking intellectual and revolutionary events of his life. As described in the previous chapter, the experiences at Kamiriithu profoundly changed Ngugi and deepened his awareness of the power of the people and art to initiate social and political change.

The events at Kamiriithu ultimately led up to Ngugi's arrest and detainment. The government could no longer look away from Ngugi and the excitement surrounding the community theatre projects. Early in 1977, the year of his arrest and imprisonment, Ngugi's play The Trial of Dedan Kimathi received praise at the Second World Africa and Black Festival of the Arts and Culture in Lagos, Nigeria. The University of Nairobi Traveling Theatre, which had been invited to

⁵⁸ Gikandi, 195.

perform at the festival, garnered international attention, thus propelling Ngugi into the global spotlight.

All of these factors led up to Ngugi's arrest and imprisonment and subsequently the writing of Detained. His memoir, which was written after his release from prison, recounts day-to-day experiences as a prison inmate as well as his philosophical journey toward unraveling the process that allows a state to imprison its artists. A personal story of his feelings about life in detention, Detained also tells the story of Kenya's history in the post-Mau Mau and postcolonial era. So this text contains a story within a story, one about a man and another about a nation. The tension between the personal memoir and the broader history suggest some problems for analyzing this text. Is it effective to attempt both projects at once? Does one story take precedence over the other? Or, can they share the center? How does the reader know when conventional historical techniques are at work in contrast to the author's personal experiences? In other words, is Ngugi capable of or even interested in objectivity?

One of the primary themes of Detained, writes Simon Gikandi, is "the power of art to unmask the state by exposing its moral bankruptcy; writing is here presented as one of the most potent

instruments against the ‘culture of silence’.”⁵⁹ While in prison, Ngugi worked diligently on the first draft of what would become Caitaani Mutharabaini, translated from the Gikuyu as Devil on a Cross.

Because he was not allowed to possess any sort of writing paper during his detainment, he recalls hoarding toilet paper on which he would transcribe his ideas for plot lines, character development, and other aspects of the novel. The authorities had attempted to silence him by removing the tools of his craft. By calling upon makeshift tools to continue his art, Ngugi aligned himself with other detainees who sought to continue creative expression throughout their imprisonment. For example, in his memoir, Ngugi sees a parallel with Kwame Nkrumah, who had been imprisoned for his political views prior to Ghana’s independence and his subsequent role as the first president of a liberated Ghana. When Ngugi had first read Nkrumah’s prison memoir, he questioned the necessity of collecting toilet paper to document one’s thoughts. Could a writer really be so desperate for expression that writing on toilet paper could be seen as a solution? But now, having lived those details, Ngugi discovered a previously unidentified solidarity with other political detainees throughout Africa and beyond, thus unearthing the roots of Ngugi’s understanding of

⁵⁹ Gikandi, 198.

the possibilities for Afro-centrism, which will come to influence his ideas about cultural freedom.

For Ngugi to persevere under these circumstances meant a refusal to be silenced. In order to make such a refusal, Ngugi first had to stake a claim to moral authority. One could argue that the very existence of this memoir implies just such a claim. Simon Gikandi suggests that

it is precisely because of the centering of self in the narrative of imprisonment that Ngugi is able allegorize his own experience and turn them into fables of the class struggle in the postcolony and the incomplete history of decolonization. Everything revolves around the moral authority that detention bestows on the writing self.⁶⁰

Ngugi bases this claim to moral authority in history and uses details from economics, politics and culture to support his stance.

The evidence he uses as proof of his experience can be called “authenticating devices.”⁶¹ Authenticating devices for Ngugi in writing Detained are items like photographs of the protests following Ngugi’s arrest, facsimiles of the detention orders, and reprints of the correspondences leading up to as well as following his time in prison. These documents all reflect a physical reality that seemingly cannot be refuted. Through such tangible sources, Ngugi traces the

⁶⁰ Gikandi, 200.

⁶¹ Jeannine DeLombard. ‘Mzee’s New Clothes: Neocolonial Detention as a Spectacle of Invisibility.’ Ngugi wa Thiong’o: Texts and Contexts. Ed. Charles Cantalupo. Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1995: 52.

chronology of his detainment. These historical documents represent the physical evidence supporting Ngugi's version of history, and hence his position in claiming a moral authority beyond the reach of his captors. In this way, Ngugi is doing the work of a historian, compiling and documenting the material sources that underscore his historical perspective.

There is nothing mysterious or natural about authority. It is formed, irradiated, disseminated; it is instrumental, it is persuasive; it has status, it establishes canons of taste and value; it is virtually indistinguishable from certain ideas it dignifies as true, and from traditions, perceptions, and judgments it forms, transmits, reproduces. Above all, authority can, indeed must, be analyzed.⁶²

Edward Said most likely offered this warning to encourage an analysis of culturally oppressive regimes like those defined by colonial and neocolonial enterprises. Perhaps this suggestion also functions as a reminder to question even the radicals, the heroes, and the poets of the revolution.

Jeannine De Lombard and Simon Gikandi analyze Detained in distinctive ways. Gikandi continues Ngugi's own analysis of the relationship between state power and art to interpret Ngugi's detainment.⁶³ By retracing the details of Ngugi's memoir with attention to Ngugi as an artist who has been silenced by the state, Gikandi theorizes that the act of writing while in prison constitutes,

⁶² Edward Said, Orientalism, 20.

⁶³ See Penpoints for an expanded discussion of the role that art plays in state power.

for Ngugi, “the ultimate defiance against state terror.”⁶⁴ Ngugi, Gikandi argues, rewrites Kenya’s history in Detained, simultaneously raising up heroes to their proper places and identifying colonialism as Kenya’s enemy.

While De Lombard articulates similar ideas, she uses vastly different language to outline her theoretical approach. Drawing a parallel to Hans Christian Anderson’s fable of the Emperor’s New Clothes, De Lombard recognizes two elements of Detained: witness and testimony.⁶⁵ Ngugi himself retells this fable in Detained, revealing a consciousness of his imposed invisibility. De Lombard’s attention to this use of metaphor both within Ngugi’s story and as a way of reading Ngugi function to explore these notions of witness and testimony. As a political prisoner, Ngugi stakes a claim to the experience of a corrupt neocolonial state. That he has personally witnessed this cultural violence is reason enough for the state to imprison him. Out of witnessing such injustice comes Ngugi’s commitment to write. In other words, his historical situation leads to the work of testimony whereby he makes himself visible not only to his compatriots but to the state as well.

⁶⁴ Gikandi, 202.

⁶⁵ Jeannine De Lombard. ‘Mzee’s New Clothes Neocolonial Detention as a Spectacle of Invisibility.’ Ngugi wa Thiong’o: Texts and Contexts. Ed. Charles Cantalupo. Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1995: 49.

These two readings of Detained bring complexity to the understanding political memoirs in general and Ngugi as a political figure in particular. Detained can be distinguished from conventional memoirs and autobiographies because it is involved in the grander political processes associated with struggle and liberation.⁶⁶ Ngugi states in the Preface to his memoir,

I have, therefore, tried to discuss detention not as a personal affair between me and a few individuals, but as a social, political and historical phenomenon. I have tried to see it in the context of the historical attempts, from colonial times to the present, by a foreign imperialist bourgeoisie, in alliance with its local Kenyan representatives, to turn Kenyans into slaves, and of the historical struggles of Kenyan people against economic, political and cultural slavery.⁶⁷

The essence of this memoir is solidly personal, but it also encompasses a scope beyond Ngugi's prison cell into other realms of Kenya's story.

It must also be distinguished from other forms of "prison writing" because, unlike many other political detainees, Ngugi came to writing prior to his detainment, in contrast to prisoners who begin writing only as a result of detainment. Typically, political detainees with a previous history of writing approach their prison memoirs with an eye toward the larger political situation that has brought them to

⁶⁶ Barbara Harlow. Resistance Literature. New York: Methuen, 1987: 121.

⁶⁷ Ngugi, Detained, xi.

detainment in the first place. Prisoners, political and otherwise, who begin writing while detained tend toward more personal narratives.⁶⁸

The value assigned various narratives is not however up for questioning. One of the central issues for Ngugi in writing his prison memoir is to highlight the solidarity he experiences for his neighbors, whether they are his childhood acquaintances in the village where he grew up, his colleagues at the University, or especially the men in his cellblock. Gikuyu-speaking or not, Ngugi's experience in prison brought him in contact with other men struggling against a neocolonial government that abused them physically, economically and culturally. The excuses for detaining the men in Ngugi's cellblock ran the spectrum of Kenyan crises beginning with what Ngugi calls the Kenya People's Union crisis of 1969 and culminating in the events at Kamiriithu in 1977. Ngugi conceptualized himself as representative of an "anti-imperialist peasant/worker consciousness," and as "a part of a living history of struggle."⁶⁹

The easy presumption to make is that Ngugi identifies his politics as Gikuyu-centered, a reaction to his return to Gikuyu for his literature in addition to his focus on Kamiriithu, located in Gikuyu country, for community projects. That assertion misses the point. While Ngugi rarely uses the term Afrocentric to describe his

⁶⁸ See Harlow for a discussion of "prison writing" and the differences in styles.

⁶⁹ Ngugi, *Detained*, 123.

perspective, it is precisely within this vocabulary that the significance of Ngugi's work resonates to other fields of interpretation.

Reading Detained creates a sense of coming together for a common cause. The reader becomes a participant in the struggle against imperialist rule. Given Ngugi's attention to authenticating devices and other graphic details regarding Kenya's history, one absorbs these stories of oppression and becomes an ally to Ngugi and his people's strife. This is not to devalue Ngugi's experiences as commonplace or ordinary in any way. Instead, the experience of Detained aligns its readership on a unified axis and promotes a politics devoted to Pan-African ideals.

While Pan-Africanism and Afrocentrism share an intersection of goals, these terms define distinct modalities for achieving those goals. Pan-Africanism in action takes the shape of organizations that further the achievements of continental and diasporic Africans. The Pan-African Congress of 1919 in Paris was the first of its kind. Since then, art and cultural festivals, political conferences and economic unions have used the ideals and nomenclature of Pan-Africanism to forward a unity steeped in African cultures and desires.

Afrocentrism looks toward the future in a similar way but is shaped by other priorities. For example, Afrocentrists seek liberation through a paradigm shift that places Africa at the center for

interpreting Africa's history. Afrocentrism is not however a counterbalance to Eurocentrism because it does not propose a universal mode of historical interpretation. In other words, Afrocentrism insists upon a locality approach for analyzing the production of knowledge.⁷⁰

Danjuma Modupe outlines three components to the rise to Afrocentric consciousness: *grounding* in the African historical and cultural experiences; *orientation* toward the interests of Africa and African peoples; and, *perspective*, a self-conscious way of looking at the world.⁷¹ The intersection of these pyramidal elements generates a “consciousness of victoriousness.” Modupe’s framework breaks down the power of the imagination to its basic operating units. Modupe here explains precisely how to imagine a future where people, individually and collectively, have the autonomy to determine and describe their lives. The imagination is what propels the process of producing a people’s history. The marriage of these three components forms the foundation and prerequisite for liberation from cultural oppression, in a specifically African context. Using Modupe’s

⁷⁰ See C. Tsehloane Keto’s Vision and Time: Historical Perspective of an Africa-Centered Paradigm for an expanded history on the development of Afrocentric ideologies. This text is also useful for its discussion of the contrast between Afrocentric and traditionally Eurocentric theoretical approaches. (University Press of America: New York, 2001.)

⁷¹ Danjuma Modupe, ‘The Afrocentric Philosophical Perspective: A Narrative Outline.’ The Afrocentric Paradigm. Ed. Ama Mazama. Africa World Press: New Jersey, 2003, 63.

pyramidal elements to understand Ngugi's standpoint shows the intention necessary to disrupt neocolonial versions of history.

Grounding, orientation and perspective shaped by African ideals clearly represent Ngugi's goals, political and otherwise.

For Ngugi, the writing of Detained was an opportunity to explore the ways political detainment could unite people across racial, ethnic and political lines. The first step toward unity was to see the other inmates at Kamiti as partners in the struggle for liberation. Moving out from this center, Ngugi conceived a solidarity that transcended political and cultural boundaries. In his acceptance speech for the Lotus prize in literature, awarded by the African and Asian Writers, Ngugi wondered aloud about the possibility of cross-cultural connections.⁷² "What are the links that bind us?" Ngugi, steeped as he is in an Afrocentric consciousness, leaps from these boundaries to launch a united awareness for all colonial people. He says, "this is an African story: it is also an Asian story and any cursory glance at the history of China, Indo-China, India, Africa, the West Indies and Afro-America, will see the testimony in tears and blood." The links that bind, then, are "a shared experience of the past, a shared hope for the future."

⁷² Ngugi, Writers in Politics, 102.

The Afrocentric paradigm is the launch pad for Ngugi to imagine and write about Kenya's histories, but it also compels Ngugi to envision cultural liberation for all oppressed people, regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, politics, and even gender, as will become evident the following discussion of the Mau Mau rebellion. In this way, Ngugi writes the history not only of his own experience, but he also participates in the history-making of people outside a specifically African context. Literary forms like the novel and the memoir are the tools that Ngugi incorporates to build an understanding of history, whether it is an understanding of the past or an expression of the present.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE STORY OF A PLACE

One could, without fear of correction, say that had there, in fact, been no Norfolk Hotel, there might never have been the capital. It was at the Norfolk that all new arrivals gathered, then men with money, ambition and foresight to found a Colony, for Kenya as a country has only existed since the turn of the twentieth century.⁷³

Mau Mau has been difficult to assimilate into the usable historical memory of Kenya because of its own perceived nature- its violence, its apparent radicalism, and the ethnic and regional character of its support- and because of the disparity between the explicit and implicit goals of the movement and the sociopolitical system, carried over from colonial times, which has dominated the independent nation.⁷⁴

Before Ngugi's play The Trial of Dedan Kimathi could open to audiences in Lagos, Nigeria for the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture in 1977, Ngugi and his co-author, Micere Mugo believed that by right and obligation the play should be performed for the Kenyan people. After all, the storyline of the play chronicles the life of one Kenya's greatest cultural heroes, Dedan Kimathi who led Mau Mau forces against British imperialism.

The Festac 77 Drama Group, the theatre troupe that would be performing the following year in Lagos, devised a plan to perform the play for Kenyan audiences at the Kenya National Theatre in October

⁷³ <http://www.lonrhotels.com/norfolk/history.html>. Website advertising for the Norfolk Hotel.

⁷⁴ Marshall Clough. Mau Mau Memoirs: History, Memory and Politics. Lynne Rienner Publishers: Boulder, Colorado, 1998: 4.

1976, the month that Kenyans set aside to celebrate their cultural and historical heroes. It seemed only appropriate that The Trial of Dedan Kimathi should be performed at that time and in that place. The symbolic value of the production could not be ignored. Another reason for selecting the month of October was that a Unesco general conference had been planned to occur at that same time in Nairobi. Perhaps it could do Kenya's image some good to show local African theatre at work.

When approached by the Festac 77 Drama Group with its proposal for a production of their plays, the management of the National Theatre informed the troupe that all dates were booked and no changes were possible. Oddly enough, of the two performances scheduled for that time, one was a French ballet and the other a British comedy. These were the theatrical performances that would represent Kenya to the Unesco general conference? To Ngugi and his colleagues, this situation was unacceptable.

As a result of notices released in the press the Ministry of Social Services, the governmental organ set up to administer cultural institutions, which then insisted that the National Theatre put aside some dates for the Festac 77 Drama Group which would perform two plays: The Trial of Dedan Kimathi and Betrayal in the City by Francis Imbuga. These two plays received eight days to use the space

between the over thirty combined productions of the French ballet and the British comedy. The allotment of time was surely out of balance, but Ngugi and his colleagues were excited for the upcoming theatre event.⁷⁵

Every one of the Festac performances was sold out and both plays received praise from Kenyan and non-Kenyan audiences alike. The most memorable time during these productions for Ngugi was opening night of The Trial of Dedan Kimathi.⁷⁶ First, it held special significance because Dedan Kimathi's wife and children were prominent members of the audience, who stayed on until late in the evening with the cast sharing stories of the war and singing songs.

The second reason opening night was special to Ngugi is what happened at the end of the performance. During the last song and dance, members of the audience stood and joined the actors as they danced out of the theatre and into the streets. The congregation made their way through the streets of Nairobi, dancing and singing songs about their heroes. As they approached the Norfolk Hotel, the police politely turned them away. They responded without antagonism and peacefully headed back to the National Theatre. Ngugi observed that "it was as if the cast and the members of the audience were trying to create an open space all around the Kenya

⁷⁵ Ngugi, Penpoints, 50.

⁷⁶ Ibid..

National Theatre building, a space which would allow them to communicate better with the spirits of those who had died in 1922.”⁷⁷

A place carries the memories of its people.⁷⁸ Next door to the Kenya National Theatre sits the Norfolk Hotel, colonial witness to the massacre that followed Harry Thuku’s arrest in 1922. The bodies of the victims of the massacre laid on the ground, where, years later the National Theatre and the University of Nairobi complex would stand as the latest participants in Kenya’s history.

In The Trial of Dedan Kimathi, a woman loyal to the Mau Mau movement defends Kimathi to some children, saying,

It is true children, that Kimathi could do many things. Even today they sing of the battle of Mathari; the battle waged in Mount Kenya; the battle of Naivasha. Yes, they sing of the enemy aeroplanes he brought down with only a rifle! He was a wonderful teacher: with a laugh that was truly infectious... But above all, he loved people and he loved his country. He so hated the sight of Africans killing one another that he sometimes became a little soft with our enemies. He, Great commander that he was, Great organizer that he was, Great fearless fighter that he was, he was human! Too human at times.⁷⁹

The process of coming to the history of the Mau Mau movement corresponds to the stories surrounding Dedan Kimathi: part living

⁷⁷ Ibid..

⁷⁸ ‘Place may be seen as the material and experiential site in which the traces of history exist in the erasures and re-inscriptions of language...the re-embedding of time and space in this way may also be seen to articulate a strategy of resistance and transformation.’ See Bill Ashcroft’s Post-Colonial Transformations for a discussion of the importance of place in postcolonial spaces. (156).

⁷⁹ Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Micere Mugo. The Trial of Dedan Kimathi. Heinemann: London, 1977: 62.

flesh and part mythic legend. The Mau Mau movement, whose headquarters were buried deep in the forests of Mount Kenya and the Aberdare Mountains, defies a positivist approach to historical understanding. Songs, stories of oathing practices, and British propaganda shape the various perceptions of what Mau Mau means, within both the Kenyan context and also regarding British versions of the struggle. Exploring ideas about Dedan Kimathi, the person and the hero, is another way of confronting the tension between Eurocentric conceptions of history and its counterpart, a localized, imaginative version of history.

Unfortunately, many of the written documents on Kimathi come from the British imperial archives, documents like school reports, his arrest report, the court proceedings following his arrest, and British newspaper clippings. In addition, the memoirs of the Mau Mau detainees often refer to Kimathi and his charismatic leadership. Born in 1920, Kimathi showed an aptitude in his schoolwork and had attained the fourth year of primary education by the time he was eighteen. After being expelled from school as a “trouble-maker,” Kimathi joined the army, but soon deserted on the grounds that the living conditions were poor and the work was humiliating. Some

reports suggest that he worked as a village school teacher around this time.⁸⁰

He worked his way through the ranks in the Mau Mau army and eventually “led the most militant phase of the independence struggle.” In a ceremony reminiscent of Gikuyu traditions, the Mau Mau forces named him Prime Minister of the Emergency Government in 1955. One year later, after a manhunt many historians have compared to safari-style big game hunting, Ian Henderson captured Kimathi and brought him to Nairobi. Charged with unlawful possession of a firearm and possession of ammunition, he was found guilty and was sentenced to death. After an unsuccessful appeals process, he was hanged on 18 February 1957. He is buried in an unmarked grave at Kamiti Prison. As recently as 16 January 2004, controversy surrounding his death and burial still exists.⁸¹

These details do not reveal much about Kimathi’s significance as a leader of the freedom fighters or his status as a hero to the people of Kenya. The idea of this man, the only Mau Mau fighter to have a street in downtown Nairobi named after him, contains a

⁸⁰ Sicherman. 134.

⁸¹ The East African Standard. “Search for Kimathi Grave Ends in Failure.” 16 Jan 04. <http://web.lexis-nexis/universe/document>. 3/4/2004. In January, eight of Kimathi’s fellow prisoners at Kamiti Prison joined a search team in the attempt to locate the exact site of Kimathi’s grave. The attempt was unsuccessful because all eight of the men selected different plots. Each of the men claimed to have been present when Kimathi body was lowered into the ground. The Government lifted the ban on Mau Mau in 2003, and has since announced its plans to exhume Kimathi’s remains and honor him with a State burial.

mystique that is at once a symbol of heroism for the Kenyan people and simultaneously implies threat to imperialist goals. This is the intersection where the work of history merges with literature to tell a story about the past that holds meaning for the present. Through artists like Ngugi, Kimathi, the hero, leaps from the pages as a symbol of the struggle for liberation.

The Trial of Dedan Kimathi depicts the events surrounding Kimathi's imprisonment and trial. The scenes move back and forth through time and the setting changes from the courtroom to the forest to his cell in jail. Clearly, the focus of the play is the character of Kimathi, but other characters support his role, namely the woman and two children who struggle to free him from prison. In the final scene, it is the two children who evolve into genuine freedom fighters and prepare themselves to do whatever it takes to save their hero. A gunshot and sudden darkness, the symbol of Kimathi endures, both physically and conceptually.

One Kenyan reviewer of the play said that the play "puts the facts bare and affords us even greater understanding of why so many shed blood that we might be free."⁸² Understanding however is not the same thing as uncovering "facts". Ngugi and Micere perceive their play in very different terms. They insist that,

⁸² Ngugi, The Trial of Dedan Kimathi. Backflap.

The most important thing was for us to reconstruct imaginatively our history, envisioning the world of the Mau Mau and Kimathi in terms of the peasants' and workers' struggle before and after constitutional independence. The play is *not* a reproduction of the farcical 'trial' at Nyeri. *It is rather an imaginative recreation and interpretation of the collective will of the Kenyan peasants and workers...*(my italics)⁸³

Ngugi and Micere tell the people's story through Kimathi, his hardship and his success. The imagination drives the process of history making and deepens understanding, but it also blurs and conflates the "facts" that frame the story. Even though these authors clearly attach themselves to the creative process of playwriting, many members of the audience, including the reviewer quoted above, interpret the play as "factual" regardless of its proximity to historical events.

The Mau Mau movement grew out of a growing economic and political disparity between Africans and white settlers beginning in the 1920's and ending, some people believe, with the capture of Dedan Kimathi in 1956. Three particular groups comprised Mau Mau loyalists regardless of ethnicity: peasants, the urban poor, and squatter laborers in the White Highlands. As people began to form their own organizations to combat imperial policies of oppression, political conflict within groups indicated a need to set standards for loyalties.

⁸³ Ibid. Preface.

The Mau Mau movement has been perceived differently depending on one's political associations. British propaganda during the conflict viewed the fighters as "barbarian" and the struggle itself was imagined in terms of a "slave revolt." Some have even tried to explain Mau Mau as a civil war brought on by "tribal" conflict alone. In contrast, leaders within Mau Mau often refer to themselves as the "Kenyan Land Freedom Army." Mau Mau, in its most basic terms, describes a period from 1950 through 1956 when Kenyan people, mostly Gikuyu, fled to forest training camps where they readied themselves for battle against British colonialists and the Africans supporting the imperialist agenda. The guerilla war resulted in over 13,000 casualties, of which over 11,000 were freedom fighters and most of these were Gikuyu, according to official figures. The end of the war, signaled by Kimathi's capture, was ultimately a result of several factors, namely sustained military pressure from British troops, loss of civilian support, and internal conflicts. As with other examples of guerilla war, this type of warfare is as much about politics as it is about fighting, and politics was a key avenue for unifying diverse interests for common loyalties within the movement.

One of the ways Mau Mau solidified membership was through a practice known as "oathing." Greet Kershaw compiled an enormous amount of data pertaining to oathing practices before and during Mau

Mau.⁸⁴ Kershaw began her fieldwork in 1957 just when Mau Mau loyalties declined due to pressure from British imperial forces. Her work initially focused on why oathing gained such popularity among anticolonial groups. Not wanting to tread on culturally sensitive topics, Kershaw found that the best way to get information was by simply listening to conversations that happened naturally, instead of formulating structured questions which tended to alienate her from her interviewees. From these conversations, she gathered that oathing was widespread throughout the villages she studied. Originally, oathing served as a “tool of unity” among gender-specific age groups, but was then “radicalised to include and unite most Kikuyu, regardless of age or sex, against colonialism.”⁸⁵

Oathing took on many forms from region to region, but one thing is clear; the greater number of oaths a person took indicated their proximity to the central power structure within the Mau Mau movement. One male initiate described a woman named Waithera, who had taken five oaths, implying that she must have been a strong supporter of the movement.

While women could not be oath administrators, all oaths “incorporated features relating to female sexuality,” specifically

⁸⁴ Greet Kershaw. Mau Mau from Below. James Currey Ltd.: Oxford, 1997.

⁸⁵ Tabitha Kanoga. “Kikuyu women and the politics of protest: Mau Mau.” <http://www.uoguelph.ca/terisatu/MauMau/index.htm>. 9/29/03.

menstruating women.⁸⁶ Women who participated in oathing ceremonies often subjected themselves to sex acts that did not follow traditional Gikuyu mores, suggesting that such “unnatural” behaviors would “invoke a greater sense of commitment and dissuade initiates from divulging details of the oath.”

Women freedom fighters made up five percent of the total movement. Considering Gikuyu women’s limited access to decision making during the Mau Mau era, for even five percent to leave their home to take up the struggle is a significant proportion. Many women went to the forest voluntarily, while others fled abuses from British troops and loyalists. Women who stayed in their villages supported the movement by secretly transporting weapons and food to and from the various headquarters to outposts dotting the region. Ngugi acknowledges these women in many of his stories, celebrating their contributions to the struggle for freedom. In his novels, he sketches the women he had seen at Kamiriithu working together for the good of the community; or any of the women he knew from Kenya’s history, like Mary Muthoni Nyanjiru who led the Harry Thuku rebellion or Moraa wa Ngiti who agitated against the British presence as early as 1904 and was considered “a famous prophetess and something of a witch doctor-cum-sorcerer recognized for her authority.” Ngugi

⁸⁶ Ibid..

created “a picture of a strong determined woman with a will to resist and struggle against the conditions of her present being.”⁸⁷ Initially relegated to traditionally gendered jobs, women gained greater mobility within the social structure of Mau Mau. Women participated in all aspects of the movement, from domestic chores to commanding troops in battle.

As resistance figures, African women must contend with what Terry DeHay calls “a double bind.”⁸⁸ In their struggle for liberation, African women must confront colonial patriarchal practices in addition to traditional gender roles within their specific cultural landscapes. DeHay observes that “since women are ‘doubly different,’ doubly Other, they seem to require a kind of double deconstruction.” However, conceiving of all African women to share a parallel experience of subjugation not only essentializes women’s roles, but works to erase them as empowered participants in the historical context. In doing a work of history that is inclusive with respect to men’s and women’s presence in the story, the historian must be careful to tell these stories with the greatest textuality as possible.

In response to women’s changing roles during Mau Mau, Gikuyu men, who made up the majority of Mau Mau freedom fighters,

⁸⁷ Ngugi, *Detained*, 10.

⁸⁸ Terry DeHay. “Models for Resistance: A Double Bind.” In *Ngugi wa Thiong’o: Texts and Contexts*. Ed. Charles Cantalupo. Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1995.

shifted their expectations of women as a way to show support for the movement. As a result of re-conceiving gender roles, many of these men discussed what it meant to them to be a man in many of the memoirs that came out of the Mau Mau era.

Marshall S. Clough has assembled thirteen memoirs coming out of the Mau Mau movement in an attempt to identify one source of “usable history” for Kenya.⁸⁹ These memoirs, Clough argues, “are important as sources for understanding Mau Mau history and as documents in the ongoing ‘Mau Mau debate’.”⁹⁰ This analysis is immensely useful for details about what life was like for the “forest fighters” and their experiences in the forest and also in detention. Using personal narratives to establish a framework for Kenyan history, Clough outlines important information about the struggle that otherwise has been excluded from the scholarship on Kenyan history.

Luise White however sees these memoirs as much more than an avenue to Kenya’s history: she incorporates the personal narrative as a way to explore perceptions of masculinity in the Mau Mau movement.⁹¹ It is not enough to analyze changing women’s roles

⁸⁹ Marshall Clough. *Mau Mau Memoirs: History, Memory and Politics*. Lynne Rienner Publishers: Boulder, Colorado: 1998.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*. 3.

⁹¹ Luise White. “Separating the Men from the Boys: Constructions of Gender, Sexuality, and Terrorism in Central Kenya, 1939-1959.” <http://www.uoguelph.ca/terisatu/MauMau/index.htm>. [cited 9/29/03]

because men's roles were changing as well. Feminist scholarship has much to offer the interpretation of the Mau Mau memoirs. Instead of relegating men's stories to a catalog of solely historical processes, they can be read as narratives of changing masculinities. In these memoirs, the men wrote about being men and all that it entails: work, domestic chores, courtship, and fatherhood. These memoirs are not exclusively concerned with the politics around land issues, wage labor, and other economic concerns. They also represent possibilities for a gendered understanding of men's perceptions of liberation.

During the production of The Trial of Dedan Kimathi at the Kenya National Theatre 1976, the performance space opened into the streets of Nairobi and the audience members joined in the performance. The boundaries of performance space blurred, breaking down conventional notions of theatre space. A theatrical production of Mau Mau offers many insights for understanding the movement and the people involved. In another respect, an historical production can complement the process. In other words, Mau Mau itself can be seen as a performance. Reading Mau Mau as a performance of political desire and of national unity reveals the connection between the performers (the forest fighters) and the spaces (the forest, and

subsequently, Nairobi) they occupy. From this perspective, history is a performance and Kenya is the theatre.

As discussed previously, performance space for Ngugi falls under three specific definitions: relationship to internal and external fields and in relationship to time. The performance of Mau Mau began in villages where people's homes became increasingly disturbed due to British colonialist policies of land re-appropriation. As men and women fled to the forest, the performance space included the distances traveled and the lines of continued communication between the forest fighters and those who stayed in their villages. Traditional Gikuyu gender roles portray women's lives within the home and men's lives in the public sphere. Though there were some exceptions, this construct generally prevailed during Mau Mau. The performance of protest for many women took place from their homes while men performed in the forest and across the distances they traveled.

Time represents another parameter for discussing the politics of performance space. When Ngugi writes that performance space must be seen in relationship to time, "what has gone before-history-and what could follow-the future," time and space come together to form a unit of history. For example, consider a picture of Kamiriithu, Ngugi's childhood home during Mau Mau or the desert landscape that would become the city of Nairobi. Both of these ideas are bound by the

intersection of time and space. Kimathi's story as an historical production then is bound by the Mau Mau years and the spaces it occupied. The Trial of Dedan Kimathi, the theatrical production, transcends such limitations because it is bound by time only in the sense of its performance time. Regarding the events around the play's production in Nairobi, the performance space spilled out of the architectural constraints of the theatre building. In this sense, a theatrical production wields greater flexibility and mobility than an historical production. Again, the historical and the literary link up to enhance the understanding of the past.

The story of a place is complete when the set, the performers, and the audience all come together. The Norfolk Hotel is a story about rebellion when Harry Thuku is involved, but when Karen Blixen, author of Out of Africa, tells the story of the Norfolk, it becomes a story of white privilege on Kenyan terrain, complete with afternoon tea parties and safaris into the bush. The story of the forest during Mau Mau requires Kimathi's presence, as a leader and martyr of revolution. The stories of these places overlap and influence each other. Ngugi's work, his novels and plays, bring these places together so that a place like the Norfolk Hotel carries meaning for Harry Thuku and the performers of The Trial of Dedan Kimathi alike.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

Above all, surrealism considers love and poetry and the imagination powerful social and revolutionary forces, not replacements for organized protest, for marches and sit-ins, for strikes and slowdowns, for matches and spray paint. Surrealism recognizes that any revolution must begin with thought, with how we imagine a New World, with how we reconstruct our social and individual relationships, with unleashing our desire and building a new future on the basis of love and creativity rather than rationality...⁹²

The Norfolk Hotel stands as a symbol for diverse cultural projects. Playground to white settlers such as Karen Blixen and her cohorts, it represents a British colonial history of Kenya. Purity, civilization, and order all are hallmarks of traditional colonial conceptions of “good government.” In the Norfolk’s heyday as a sanctuary for white settlers, it was seen to exist in contrast to its surroundings. The Kenyan landscape itself could not have been stranger to the colonists coming from Great Britain. Kenya did not have the green rolling hills and year round water that white settlers remembered from their homelands. Kenya was disorder and drought; it needed technology and agriculture. Above all it needed progress, so went the imperialist rallying cry, economic and cultural progress to be

⁹² Robin Kelley. Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination. Boston: Beacon Press, 2002:193.

precise. The Norfolk symbolized these notions of imperial progress on an otherwise hostile terrain.

In addition to the Norfolk functioning as a “contact zone” between white settlers and indigenous Kenyan people, it operates as a realm of contact for Kenyan people over time. In this performance space, Harry Thuku, Dedan Kimathi and Ngugi wa Thiong’o meet in the plaza in front of the Norfolk Hotel, their stories intertwined to add verses to Kenya’s history. Stories and songs transcended time to carry meaning from supporters of Harry Thuku to participants in The Trial of Dedan Kimathi. An understanding and an appreciation of the importance of a place, the Norfolk Hotel for example, is key to understanding how a people’s memory of the past can be useful for creating a vision of the future. For the purposes of historical understanding, time contains a people’s story; during the action of the historical moment however, time can be a way of reaching into the past for inspiration and finding hope in the present.

The Norfolk’s role as a performance space for Kenya’s history can also be seen in relationship to Ngugi’s conception of internal and external factors. Internal factors like city streets, high rise buildings, and the police determined the boundaries of the Norfolk as a performance space on the night the play spilled onto the streets. The external factors are more difficult to trace. At the end of the evening,

what feelings did the participants take home with them? Did they share the story of the evening's events with their neighbors and family members? Is it a memory that continues to inspire them? Has the story about audience members joining the cast and dancing into the streets become a part of their collective memory, their history?

Revolution has many shapes. Armed rebellion, political overthrow, strikes, and demonstrations are physical manifestations of revolution. Ngugi wa Thiong'o is a revolutionary of another sort. Artistic endeavors like plays, novels, speeches, and essays are the tools he uses to free culture from oppression. He engages the work of "creative remembering" to tell a different story of Kenya, one that is at odds with colonial versions. The revolution that Ngugi designs upholds the individual within the community. The meaning of a place like the Norfolk Hotel changes in Ngugi's hands to become a zone of resistance and protest, one that contests notions of colonial and neocolonial superiority.

Geography as a critical discipline sustains the imagination by producing a visual, though watery, context for framing Ngugi's historical work. Conceptualizations of place are a central characteristic for Ngugi. Arguing for the importance the visual experience, Joan Scott claims that, "seeing is the origin of knowing. Writing is reproduction, transmission- the communication of

knowledge gained through (visual, visceral) experience.”⁹³ Ngugi produces a cultural cartography of Kenya such that the reader follows the contours of Kenya’s history via its landscape. Whether in the forest, the village, or traveling through urban Nairobi, Ngugi is always conscious of the place of experience. The mindscape is dependent on the landscape. Architecture and open space are not always complimentary, but they work simultaneously to influence one’s relationship to surrounding spaces.

Thinking about Ngugi’s use of place to tell stories is helpful for understanding the relationship between text and context, or in other words the intellectual artifact and its place of origin. For Ngugi, these worlds are inseparable. The text (one’s identity) is a product of the context (one’s relationship to space), and in turn, contexts are shaped by how a text reveals its stories. Ngugi tells a story about Kenya, but Kenya is also a story about Ngugi and the people who share his experience. Similarly, Ngugi’s story of exile is a story of crossing cultural ambiguities into uncharted spaces of contact and assimilation. In this sense, exile is a place as well. It occupies a space of experience that is just as bound by limitations as a place like Kenya is.

⁹³ Joan Scott. “Experience.” In Feminists Theorize the Political. Edited by Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott. New York: Routledge, 1992: 24.

Creative remembering to write history is problematic. It refuses objectivity from the outset, making no claims to universal understanding. In addition to evidence like “authenticating devices” and other more conventional historical tools, creative remembering depends on the imagination for inspiration. How is the imagination useful for the work of history? Instead of focusing the imagination’s limitations as an historical methodology, Ngugi, in a recent collection of essays entitled Penpoints, Gunpoints, and Dreams: Towards a Critical Theory of the Arts and the State in Africa, explores the possibilities of histories informed by the imagination, or as he describes it, “conscious dreaming.”⁹⁴

He explains conscious dreaming as “reason riding on the wings of imagination and powered by emotions.” Not only can conscious dreaming tell stories about the past, but it also has something to say about the future. It is forward thinking because it “embodies the dreams of humankind for a more spiritually healthy existence.” For Ngugi conscious dreaming implies an intention for the future. To have an art experience then is to free the conscious mind and prepare it for the extraordinary, or in the words of Suzanne Césaire, “a permanent readiness for the Marvelous.”

⁹⁴ Ngugi wa Thiong’o. Penpoints, Gunpoints, and Dreams: Towards a Critical Theory of the Arts and the State in Africa. Oxford: Clarendon, 1998.

Robin Kelley in his Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination resurrects surrealism from the art history archives as a way to discuss the centrality of dreams for political and historical analyses.⁹⁵ Surrealism, writes Kelley, “is not an aesthetic doctrine but an international revolutionary movement concerned with the emancipation of thought.”⁹⁶ Kelley embraces surrealism as a powerful revolutionary weapon, capable of operating on many levels. While surrealism is most well known for its connections to art and literature, it also wields power as a way to understand social movements. For example, the power to dream or imagine a world free from cultural oppression is prerequisite to any sort of revolutionary action. As Kelley states, “revolutionary dreams erupt out of political engagement.”⁹⁷

The challenge of surrealism as an historical methodology resides in the pre-conceived notion that not only is surrealism a reflection of an exclusively artistic moment, but also that it is simply too steeped in European and Euro-American thought to be useful for understanding the politics of black radicalism. Indeed, surrealism has its origins in the West, but it “is rooted in a conspiracy against Western civilization.”⁹⁸ Kelley explores and reverses these problems of

⁹⁵ Robin Kelley. Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination. Boston: Beacon Press, 2002.

⁹⁶ Kelley, 5.

⁹⁷ Kelley, 8.

⁹⁸ Kelley, 159.

perception with a discussion of the interaction between surrealism and jazz. For example, how can jazz, or music in general, be surrealist?

Initially, some early surrealists like Andre Breton and Giorgio de Chirico resisted music as a medium for exploring surrealism, saying that it could not express freedom the way the literary and plastic arts could. An essay titled “Music Is Dangerous” by Paul Nougé written in 1929 shifted this perception by highlighting music as “capable of bewitching spirit.” The transformative power of music speaks to surrealist ideals of revolution and freedom. Surrealists quickly connected with the music of Thelonius Monk which “appealed to their struggle for complete freedom and the overthrow of bourgeois concepts of beauty and art.”⁹⁹ Following this appropriation of jazz music as surrealist, many thinkers then turned to the blues for inspiration. Blues music, they estimated, supported revolution on many different levels. Because a central theme of the blues is sexual liberation, surrealism identified with this call for sexual revolution. Some surrealists went so far as to say that the blues was “true poetry” for its ability to transcend harsh realities and uphold desire.

The evolution of surrealism as a political force gained speed when a small group of Martinican students working in Paris

⁹⁹ Kelley, 162.

discovered the potential of surrealism to achieve their objectives. Aimé Césaire understood their project of using surrealism to reject racism and celebrate revolution. Together with his wife, Suzanne and other writers, Aimé Césaire published Tropiques, a journal considered, “one of the most important and radical surrealist publications in the world, lasting from 1941 to 1945.”¹⁰⁰ Césaire went on to write Discourse on Colonialism in 1950, “a fusion of ideas drawn from surrealism, communism, Negritude, and national liberation movements.”¹⁰¹ Discourse inaugurated a surrealist approach to anticolonialism by speaking in political, yet poetic terms. By dreaming a new postcolonial moment, Discourse provided the model for shortening the distance between fantasy and reality, ideology and practice, politics and poetry.

In Penpoints, Ngugi theorizes the relationship between art and the state. Seeing the actions of the state in terms of its performativity means that not only does the state embody hegemonic discourses that oppress a people’s “psychic spaces,” but that the alternate possibility exists as well; when reappropriated by the people for the goals of cultural liberation, the state’s performance spaces can be the site of revolution, hence the meeting place of politics and art. But in order

¹⁰⁰ Kelley, 168.

¹⁰¹ Kelley, 169

for any of this to occur, one must have the power to imagine or dream. Ngugi writes,

For me, dreaming to change the conditions that confine human life is the mission of art, and it is often in conflict with that of the state as we have known it up to now, in Africa and the world. In such a situation art has the right to take up penpoints, to write down our dreams for a world in which, at the very least, there are no prisons and gunpoints.¹⁰²

The surrealist notion that positive change must be imagined before it can happen is clear in Ngugi's work. The power of dreaming and the imagination in describing human experience presupposes any political or social effort, and thus must be an integral part of the historical process.

¹⁰² Ngugi, Penpoints, 132.

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Appendix

Ngugi wa Thiong'o
(1938-)

The following is a brief summary of important dates in Ngugi's lifetime. Significant events in Kenya's history have been included to contextualize Ngugi's personal experience.

- Background: 1932-34 Carter Land Commission declares land appropriation for white settlers, establishes White Highlands as a white preserve of 16,700 square miles; largest area is in Limuru. Land alienation forces Gikuyu people out of their homes. By 1948 218,000 Gikuyu become squatters in Highlands.
- Born 5 Jan., 1938 in Kamiriithu, Limuru (in the White Highlands). The same year Jomo Kenyatta publishes Facing Mount Kenya.
- 1940-45: 75,000 men serve in Kenya Africa Rifles (KAR), one third of which serve outside of Africa. Men returning from war come with stories of Indian independence movements and black American assertiveness. Also, new interest in material items, such as radios, newspapers, cigarettes, boots, etc. means they will require wages that will provide for such expenses.
- 1947-48: Ngugi attends Church of Scotland Mission.
- 1948: oath-taking becomes widespread, which turns into Mau Mau movement. Mau Mau is the term used to describe the various economic and ethnic groups of Kenyans who joined together to fight British imperial policies, especially land reforms.
- 1948-55: Ngugi switches to a Gikuyu independent school, which is seen by Africans to offer, 'stronger...more correct education.'
- 1952: Governor Evelyn Baring declares a state of Emergency in response to Mau Mau activities.
- 1953: Lari massacre. 97 villagers killed. Responsibility for the attack is disputed. British attribute it to 'bestial' and 'fanatical

Mau Mau.’ Mau Mau sympathizers say that local leaders have arranged it to throw suspicion on forest fighters; some people believe that British-managed policemen masquerade as Mau Mau to discredit the movement. British arrest 1400. 135 sentenced to death; 77 hanged, some before their cases were even heard. Many of the people arrested were not in the area at the time of the massacre.

- 1953-55: nearly one million rural people, mostly Gikuyu, repatriated to Reserves. They are made to settle ‘in easily guarded, prison-like villages, located handily near the roads and grouped around Home Guard and police posts.’ These become known as ‘Emergency Villages.’ The process is known as ‘villagization’.
- 1954: Ngugi’s elder brother joins Mau Mau, remaining in the forest until 1956. In 1955, Ngugi’s mother experiences ‘three months of torture at Kamiriithu home-guard post.’
- 1955-59: wins a place at Alliance High School.
- 1955: returns home to find his family house destroyed and entire village razed and being rebuilt in villagization project as a part of anti-Mau Mau campaign
- 1956: Dedan Kimathi, leader of the Mau Mau movement, captured and executed 4 months later. Between 1952 and 1956, according to official figures, 11,503 (mostly Gikuyu) killed fighting government forces, 1819 loyalist African civilians, 101 African in government forces, 32 white settlers, 63 Europeans in security forces, 29 Asians.
- 1957: Ghana becomes the first African country to gain independence.
- 1959: Ngugi enters Makerere University College, Kampala, Uganda.
- 1960: Emergency officially ends. 80,000-90,000 had been detained in camps.
- 1961: Ngugi marries Nyambura; six children eventually born.

- 1963: Kenya gains internal self government with Kenyatta as Prime Minister. He calls for white settlers to stay on, saying 'What the government needs is experience and I don't care where it comes from, I will take it with both hands.' Following year, Kenya gains independence with Kenyatta as President.
- 1964: Ngugi earns B.A. from Makerere and begins study at Leeds University on scholarship. Publishes *Weep Not, Child*. The government passes legislation making strikes illegal; unions become ineffective.
- 1966: government passes the Preservation of Public Security Act, retaining provisions of the Emergency Powers Order of 1939, which permits detention without trial, censorship, prohibition of public meetings, declaration of state of emergency. Act enables President to suspend human and civil rights at his own discretion. Ngugi wins first prize for anglophone novel at First World Festival of Negro Arts at Dakar, Senegal.
- 1967: Ngugi returns to Kenya from England and becomes Special Lecturer in English at University College in Nairobi. He is the first African member of the Department.
- 1968: Ngugi call for abolition of English Department to be replaced by the Literature Department, on the grounds that African languages and literature need to be elevated within the African context, thus reflecting 'the realities of the twentieth century and the world.' *Decolonising the Mind*.
- 1969: student demonstrations at the University of Nairobi to protest the University's refusal to allow Odinga Oginga to speak, the outspoken former vice-president. Ngugi resigns from University claiming that this is but one example of the University's abuse of academic freedom.
- 1970-71: Ngugi goes to Northwestern University as a Visiting Associate Professor. Later in '71, Ngugi returns to U of Nairobi and supervises the final revisions of the syllabus for the new Literature Dept.
- 1972: Students' Organizations banned because they are 'dangerous to the good government of Kenya.'

- 1973: Ngugi promoted to Senior Lecturer and Acting Head of the Department. First African to head a dept at U of Nairobi.
- 1974: University of Nairobi closed for much of the year due to student protests.
- 1975: J.M. Kariuki brutally assassinated in the Ngong Hills outside of Nairobi. Known for his widely acclaimed memoir *Mau Mau Detainee*. A popular political frontrunner who campaigned against corruption, his murder was 'one of the most unsettling events of postcolonial Kenya.'
- 1976-77: Dissatisfied with the limitations of the university setting, he embarks upon the community theater project at Kamiriithu. With co-author Ngugi wa Mirii, he writes a first draft of *I Will Marry When I Want*. The play is edited and adapted by the community members and is ultimately performed in the open air theater built by community members. People come from all over the region to see the rehearsals. The sold-out play opens to a fee-paying audience of 2000 people.
- 1977: December 30, police raid and search Ngugi's home. Arrested without charges and detained at Kamiti Security Prison. Works on his novel *Devil on a Cross*. Prison authorities refuse to give him paper, so works on scrap and toilet paper. Subject to many abuses including isolation.
- 1978: students protest Ngugi's arrest. Ngugi adopted by Amnesty International as a prisoner of consciousness. Ngugi released 12 Dec, after almost one year of detainment.
- 1979: 400 academics sign petition asking for Ngugi's reinstatement at the University of Nairobi.
- 1982: government shuts down community theater project at Kamiriithu, withholds permission to allow theater troupe to travel to Zimbabwe to perform, and destroys open air theater. Builds a technical school in its place. While in London for the publication of *Devil on a Cross*, Ngugi remains there in exile on hearing of his impending arrest in Nairobi.
- Travels widely and accepts many teaching and research positions, including: NYU, Yale, U of Bayreuth, Africa Center in

London, UC Irvine. Gives many papers at conferences. Begins to study filmmaking. Moved to the U.S. in 1989.

- Has spent the last 20 years living in exile due to President Daniel Arap Moi's highly corrupt government.
- 1994: conference held at Penn State University, Berks Campus: *Ngugi wa Thiong'o: Texts and Contexts*. Over 200 scholars from all over the world participated. The largest ever conference devoted to an African author.
- 1997: begins work on *The Wizard of the Crow*.
- 2002: Distinguished Professor at the International Centre for Writing and Translation at UC Irvine. Mwai Kibaki elected third president of Kenya and begins investigations into allegations of corruptions during Moi's term as president.
- 2003: Ngugi considers visiting Kenya with his family.
- 2004: *The Wizard of the Crow* will be published this year, first in Gikuyu and Kiswahili, and later translated into English. Early reviewers are calling the 1,200 page epic a candidate for a Nobel Prize.