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BOOK REVIEW

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o *Decolonising the mind: The politics of language in African literature*

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CONTRIBUTOR

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Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986). *Decolonising the mind: The politics of language in African literature*. Melton: John Currey, 114 pp. ISBN: 0-435-08016-4.

This book review considers an enduring issue for Indigenous ontologies: the deeper impact of suppressing languages, in this case African languages, and particularly the results of holding back written forms. With specific reference to contemporary spatial theory, Ngũgĩ promotes the role of theatre to activate memory and reacquaint people with narratives and cultures apprehended by colonisation. I start with a short biography of Ngũgĩ and the historical context of the book.

Ngũgĩ was born in 1938. After his own studies he taught, wrote fiction, and made theatre. Of note Ngũgĩ later dropped the English first name James and stopped writing fiction in that language. Government laws that suppressed Indigenous languages is a key theme in this work. Indeed, it is shocking to learn that such policies were furthered in Kenya after independence in 1963. Ngũgĩ describes the independent nation as adopting a neo-colonial mindset, where multinational influences dominated economic and social life. Consequently, English remained the written language through the late 1960s and 1970s for Kenyan administrators, politicians, the military, and within universities. This position isolated and excluded most Kenyan people.

Completed during a period of exile from Kenya, *Decolonising the Mind* is non-fiction and was written in English specifically to make clear that colonisation has deeper impacts than one faraway nation ruling another. He writes that 'The bullet was the means of physical subjugation. Language was means of spiritual subjugation' (Ngũgĩ 1986: 9). He states that language is a carrier of culture and values in everyday life, and that it is 'inseparable from ourselves as a community of human beings with a specific form and character, a specific history, a specific relationship to the world' (Ngũgĩ 1986: 16). This latter sentiment conveys notions of place and belonging.

When first published this book was an important manifesto. One early reviewer wrote that 'the subversion of imperialism by writing in local languages will not be easy in a continent that is said to speak in many thousand tongues' (Bhola 1987: 103). The latter use of *subversion* perhaps misses the point as Ngũgĩ's argues that Indigenous languages had not been formalised in written forms. He describes the extensive work required to notate languages such as Gĩkũyũ. Clearer recognition of the cultural argument appears in more recent appraisals of *Decolonising the Mind*; MacPherson states that a 'misapplication [of English language] occurs when the literature, arts, technologies, and education of a people become dominated by a coloniser's language' (1997: 642). Indeed, Ngũgĩ dedicates the second section of his book to post-1960s African theatre. He criticises an overly conservative prevailing culture and explains the efforts of dramatists during the 1970s to portray Kenyan life in the times before western interaction.

Ngũgĩ makes some useful contribution to spatial theory as he explains how outdoor theatre had long been important to everyday life. He states that 'drama is closer to the dialects of life than poetry and fiction' (1986: 4). Working with others, he took performances to *empty spaces* outside formal theatres – effectively going wherever audiences lived. Oliver Lovesey, a teacher of English literature and cultural theory, underlines the importance of this work to 'encompass performative space, a contested political space for reflection and action' (2002: 140). Such plays were repeatedly banned in

Kenya and Ngũgĩ himself was sent to prison. He lived in exile for over two decades after his release.

Thinking about local languages reminds me of a more prosaic example from Wales. In 2016, I saw Re-Live Theatre's *Belonging / Perthyn*, which features a poignant scene where a man living with dementia is playing with soil at a care home. A support worker notes that he speaks Welsh as the soil reconnects him with his rural childhood. The audience is made aware that this man spent his adult life, including his marriage, speaking in a second language: English. Though this recent Welsh case is less overtly about coloniality than a century of experience in Kenya, it nonetheless echoes Ngũgĩ's view that language (and place) mediates our very being and illustrates that Indigenous ontology is embodied (Hunt 2014).

Decolonising the Mind is modest in length, well-paced, personal, and persistent in its argument. Moreover, its original physical A5 size (the version that I read) fits in the pocket and is therefore very portable. If I were to share a hard copy with somebody else, I would echo MacPherson's description as it being a 'valuable source of theory grounded in the lives of those most affected by the globalization of English' (2002: 644-645). Over time people have been enveloped in homogenised global cultures shaped by European language. Of note there is a lasting legacy from Iberian languages in the Americas (Mignolo 2000). Furthermore, I commend the attention that Ngũgĩ pays to theatre, and I value research approaches attuned to performance and embodied acts as archives of culture and history – see writing on Cambodian dance (Rogers 2023).

Competing interests

The author is Co-Editor of this Issue of Agoriad: A Journal of Spatial Theory.

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