Ngũgĩ: Reflections on his Life of Writing
Eds. Simon Gikandi and Ndirangu Wachanga
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Ngũgĩ: Reflections on his Life and Writing, published in 2018, is a collection of tributes, essays and reflections brought together to mark Ngũgĩ 's eightieth birthday. It was launched in Nairobi in 2019 at the United States International University (USIU) auditorium, with both editors and many contributors present, and with Ngũgĩ himself in attendance. It was hosted by the Vice Chancellor, Professor Tiyambe Zeleza, himself a distinguished scholar, who set the tone by contextualizing an exceptional event.

It is Micere Mũgo, Ngũgĩ's contemporary, who, with a spirited dignity and grace weighted with age, ushers us into the arena of celebration. In the section "Serenades and Beginnings," she performs "an unheard-of praise-dance-song" (27), a transgressive oral invocation that is at once a creative translation that glides over time and meaning, from orate to literary culture. She invokes Ngũgĩ's lineage, calling us to witness the rich tradition into which Ngũgĩ was born before his leap into modernity through the adoption of the Christian name 'James.' Mũgo then plunges us into the politics of identity, and gender dynamics, of a community that identified with 'mother'—a community both matrilineal and largely matriarchal. Ngũgĩ , who had four mothers (his father was polygamous) took his biological mother's name, becoming Ngũgĩ wa Wanjiku. He later assumed his father's name, as the scholar James Ogude says, in a significant rupture from that tortured relationship with colonial education and religion (165). Ogude, however, does not explore the tortured relationship Ngũgĩ had with his father, whose name he reclaims in the framework of assumptions about a patriarchal superstructure that Micere, in her poem, lays bare. Ogude speaks of Ngũgĩ's *reverting* to 'wa Thiong'o' in protest to Christian expectations. Yet this move is really in conformity to the European use of a 'surname,' a foreign concept in itself. And so this appropriation, which is itself a new departure, serving to establish a new paradigm, also represents the entrenchment of a form of patriarchy (through naming) as the natural order of things. Micere reminds us of the paradoxes of some of the traditions we have assumed, and which Ngũgĩ has himself struggled with.

Ogude summarizes Ngũgĩ 's *oeuvre* as the "wealth of cultural heritage that European colonialism had worked to deny and repress in Africa" (165), highlighting the immense odds that Ngũgĩ has fought against to reclaim and refashion "a new cultural aesthetics" (166). However, his contribution to the development of a "libertarian

discourse of decolonization" (166) sits side by side with what Ogude deems our capitulation to English, albeit in the face of an overwhelmingly global capitalism. Ngũgĩ continues to argue that language is our most effective tool against this onslaught.

In "Muthoni's Afterlives," Grace Musila describes that trauma of language negotiation in Kenya beautifully and tragically: "The girls whose mother tongues leaked onto their English pronunciations would be subjected to much laughter. They would wrap the shame of their mothers' languages under their tongues; and work hard to mute these cultural leaks" (174). She captures the absurdity of this shame, and the fact that we have had to contort ourselves quite literally to cut off our tongues in our adoption of English, here the language of power. Yet in Musila's piece, there is clear admiration of South African Nation languages, and the ease with which they are used interchangeably in communication, on TV and in different media channels. This facility was established as a cruel form of oppression where Africans were 'relegated' to their mother tongues, cutting them off from the central languages of discourse and public engagement. Yet its positive effect today, in an independent Republic, is that South Africans know and use these languages well, an outcome as contradictory as it is incidental to the original intention of Apartheid to marginalize and to silence.

The death of former president Daniel Arap Moi in February 2020 has prompted a revisit to the repressive twenty-four-year rule, during which Ngũgĩ was first released and then pushed into exile. His passing marks the end of an era for a generation of Kenyans. It also sparked discussions, sometimes publicly for the first time, of issues that have either been spoken in whispers, or repressed. It is in this context of fear that Willy Mutunga's review, which was written well before Moi's death, is unusually bold. It also represents the kind of complication in the Ngũgĩ narrative to which the editors refer in the "Introduction." Not only does he remind us of what we lost: for instance, that "The Department of Literature [which subsequently lost all luster] was then the leading radical and revolutionary department at the University of Nairobi" (69). Also a matter of speculation for a long time, here is a rare confirmation of Ngũgĩ's involvement in the underground movement known as the December 12th Movement (DTM), which produced the publication *Pambana* (Struggle) from the 1970s. Indeed, I heard Ngũgĩ quietly remark at the launch that Mutunga, a lawyer and former Chief Justice of Kenya (who was seated next to me on the panel), saved his life several times. This information contextualizes Levin Obonyo's piece on declassified British records. Obonyo confirms the constant surveillance and unrelenting pressure that the Moi government continued to exert on an exiled Ngũgĩ, to have him expelled even from Britain. The local banning of Ngũgĩ was so successful that an entire generation was not allowed to know or to engage him. His influence nevertheless percolated, for example in Mutunga's subsequent interpretation of law into transformative jurisprudence. It is Ngũgĩ's holistic framing of our local contexts—historical, social, economic and political—that shaped his philosophy

of justice into a "robust, decolonized, indigenous, progressive, patriotic" engagement (73).

The book is rich in contributions, from previously published pieces such as "What is in a Name?" by Ime Ikiddeh—which recounts Ngũgĩ's dramatic confrontation with the Church over dropping his Christian name, thus critically reminding us that the question of our identity is entangled with that of our so-called modernity. Gichingiri Ndigirigi's is a keen reading of the "Autobiographical Prototypes," of the overlaps from Ngũgĩ's fiction against his more recent life-writing, while Eddah Gachukia reminds us that in the early days of African literature, what was not written simply did not exist. Carole Boyce Davies touches on the importance of theorizing from positions other than those drawn by a western aesthetic, reflecting on Ngũgĩ's contributions on the global, and decolonial; and Jane Plastow recounts the performance of *Ngahika Ndeenda* in Tigrinya, in Asmara, Eritrea. James Currey's is a reflection on Ngũgĩ's impact on the decolonizing of publishing, while Kimani Njogu shares recollections from the establishment at Yale of the journal *Mutiiri,* a periodical but also discursive platform that according to Chege Githiora demonstrated the full potential of an African language. Also responding here to the challenge of writing in local languages, Kiarii Kamau of EAEP problematizes, in Gĩkũyũ, the experience of Ngũgĩ's visit to the upmarket Karen Country Club. He raises questions regarding the significance of the ideological shift of the ground beneath Ngũgĩ's feet, and how he might re-engage with a local constituency that no longer fits into the perceived oppositional categories of the past, with the untidiness and overlaps of the now Kenyan local.

In the Appendix are rare pieces by Ngũgĩ, such as his acceptance speech on the conferment of an honorary Doctorate, which he dedicated in memoriam to the erudite literary scholar Grant Kamenju. The book includes a broad spectrum of people who have been a part of Ngũgĩ's journey, and provokes new and ever more urgent, complex questions and reflections even as it revisits paths well-trodden. At the launch in Nairobi, Wachanga showed a documentary on Ngũgĩ, then still a work in progress, that works in tandem with the book. There is much to offer in this truly impressive gathering, and much to celebrate of this writer whose impact not only in Africa, but also on the world stage, has forced a reckoning with issues of identity, of language, and of the future. This truly is a writer whose interventions have come at great personal cost.

Included in the collection is a poem dedicated to Njeeri by Ngũgĩ as a special memento. It was their marriage vow, '*Ndai ya Wendo'* (200), translated here by Simon Gikandi as "A Riddle of Love" (221). It was performed by USIU students, in three languages, at the launch: in Gĩkũyũ, in English, and in Chinese. If the performance in Gĩkũyũ was at once familiar and a testament to Ngũgĩ's determination to make natural the use of our nation languages, it was the inclusion of Chinese that was, conversely, greeted with the most excitement. The use of this new language signals China's

growing influence and strategic ascendancy not only in Kenya, but also on the global stage.