

Reflections (in lieu of notes) on Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o in Münster

The great Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o came to speak to us in Münster but he didn’t have anything to say. We took no notes from his address. There were no pithy phrases or must-record wisdoms to write down and incorporate into our teaching and research work. To be sure, he told some wonderful stories and read from his memoirs. That was entertaining. In a question-and-answer session after the readings, the moderator, Frank Schulze-Engler, managed to put three questions to Ngũgĩ about African literature and language, and he asked Ngũgĩ to talk about his latest book, *Globalectics: Theory and the Politics of Knowing*. A few questions came from the floor and we heard a few more stories. All of this was enjoyable, overall, but not what we expected. It was not a didactic experience.

This is exaggeration, perhaps. He *did* have some good turns of phrase; he *did* say something worthwhile about colonialism, capitalism, globalisation, I now seem to remember, but I can’t recall what exactly. And as I’d put my notebook back into my bag halfway through his talk, not having written down anything, resigned at that point to disengagement from writing, I now look at a blank page where there should have been notes and I ask myself: “What did I learn from Ngũgĩ?”

If this was a common experience of GAPS’ members who attended the same event - chatting with people afterwards seemed to affirm this assumption - consider this diatribe an attempt to salvage the Ngũgĩ experience from the wreck of failed expectations. The following is corny but appropriate: I think the fault, dear Brutus, was not in our speaker, but in ourselves.

I very nearly learned nothing from Ngũgĩ in Münster because I positioned him as I position all speakers at an academic conference. To be fair to the organisers, the session was advertised as “Reading and Discussion: Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o,” but Ngũgĩ was nevertheless framed by me as a writer/scholar/intellectual who would properly stand behind the podium, read from his written text, and demand nothing more of me than that I sit quietly, take notes, and respond at the appropriate time, i.e., at the end of the address, with a learned question or comment. But Ngũgĩ refused to conform to these erstwhile parameters of established behaviour for speakers at a conference. What’s more, he refused to allow me to remain a contentedly passive receiver of his wisdoms. If we reflect on what he did, we will see that he continually sought to disrupt the speaker/listener, active/passive, producer/consumer dichotomies we expect of such fora. His talk took on all of the characteristics of oral storytelling. His text was, at once, performed and a *demonstration of the performative* that we so often read about in written form but rarely experience aurally, visually, ‘live’, in postcolonial studies. I refuse to accept this as essentialising Ngũgĩ as ‘African storyteller’ because I also acknowledge the multiplicity of his textual practice, which encompasses novels, plays, essays and lectures, in various languages and formats. Clearly, this makes Ngũgĩ more than just an oral storyteller. What I am interested in considering here is the nature of oral

storytelling, generally, with specific reference to aspects of Ngũgĩ presentation at the GAPS conference in Münster.

Ngũgĩ's address began even before he arrived at the podium. He held up two packets of throat lozenges (or some such), positioning them on either side of his neck, to indicate he had a sore throat, thus asking us to excuse his weak voice. He did not need to say a word. He was communicating by acting out. At various other moments during his talk he engaged in mime and play acting. Several times, he showed us the open palm of his hand to help us visualise the spatial arrangements of the compound he grew up in, his thumb representing his father's hut and four upright fingers representing the huts of his father's four wives. He explained that stories were told and family communal life occurred in the flat, open space between the huts. It was a beautiful, memorable image. We could say that Ngũgĩ's most treasured childhood memories are contained in the palm of his hand. We saw 77-years-old Ngugi peel off his jacket and jog on the spot to show he was warming up for his task. He re-arranged seating on the stage, at the suggestion of Schulze-Engler, to maintain eye-contact with his audience. He acted out a lesson in naming and perspective, moving between two different locations on stage to demonstrate his refusal to walk in someone else's footsteps, to refuse to maintain the named position ('James Ngugi') the coloniser had designated for him. Ngũgĩ reminded us of the somatic experience of oral storytelling.

What about those curious moments when he diverted from the main storyline to explain the meaning of certain words? He did this with "slate" and "moat". It was curious because he might have guessed we had an advanced enough knowledge of the language to know what a slate and a moat were. (Dammit! He wasted three minutes of my time as a listener, twice, explaining the meaning of a word I understood.) What was going on here? Again, the fault was ours. We forgot that Ngũgĩ was in oral storytelling mode. Ngũgĩ stopped his story first at "slate" and specifically asked us if we knew what it was. Some of us nodded, maybe some of us made guttural sounds in the affirmative, but Ngũgĩ did not hear us say "Yes, we know what a slate is." The same lack of response came with "moat" a little later.

We are reminded of two things about oral storytelling, performed as Ngũgĩ knows it. First, the storyteller *must* have his/her audience follow the story. He/She will not continue if something is not understood or misunderstood. An explanatory digression is required. Ngũgĩ is duty-bound to engage us in his narrative and he strategically tests our engagement ("Are you still with me?") by inserting questions at *unexpected* moments. These are not questions which function as rhetoric. In oral storytelling modus they demand answers, sometimes even discussion and debate. When we did not respond as required to his specific question, what choice did he have other than to divert to explanation? He needed to be certain we were in the loop of his story. Second, oral storytelling performance is not one-way discourse; it demands interaction. The English poet and scholar James Fenton tells of a poetry festival he went to where an 'American' poet accused an 'African' poet (his adjectives are no more specific than that) of stealing the limelight from conventional, read-from-the-page poets by singing and playing

musical instruments (9). As Fenton reports it, the American accused the African of getting the audience into a mood that prejudiced them against the type of poetry that he, the American, had to offer. The African is reported to have responded thus:

You American poets [...], and you European poets, you think you are very important, whereas I am an African, and I don't think I am important at all. When I go into a village and begin to tell a story, the first thing the audience will do is interrupt me. They will ask questions about the story I am telling, and if I do not work hard, they will take over the story and tell it among themselves. I have to work to get the story back from them. (Fenton 9)

Ngũgĩ was working hard, inviting us to participate in the story, not wanting to maintain sole proprietorship of it. As Ngũgĩ himself writes in an essay: "Performance involves performer *and* audience, in orature this often being a *participatory* audience" ("Notes towards" 7, my emphasis). The genre of oral storytelling burdens us as 'listeners' to partake of the story. We make the story, too, in the moment of its telling.

Actually, there were multiple instances of interaction in Münster. Ngũgĩ asked other Gikuyu speakers in the audience to embellish his story about the moat, as he searched for a way to describe the stakes or stocks or sharpened sticks that might be inserted in a trench (instead of water) to prevent escape from a building it surrounds. He sought out a speaker of Gaelic Irish in order for a name to be correctly pronounced. And he continually sought affirmation or clarification from others who'd shown him around Münster during the day as to names, places, histories and spectacles of the locality. The story he had to tell, then, as it looped back in on itself and extended haphazardly forward – like an out-of-shape coil spring viewed from side on – was not one Ngũgĩ could have foretold the destiny of before he started to pull and push and prod it, and it was a story that became embedded in its particular place and time: Münster, Thursday, 14 May 2015. It can never be shaped again.

There is another story Ngũgĩ tells, this one embedded in a preface to the English edition of his novel *Matigari* (1987). Matigari is a revolutionary figure who seeks justice in a land ruled by corruption and misery. Ngũgĩ explains in the preface that just a few months after the novel was first published in Gikuyu in 1986, "intelligence reports had it that peasants in Central Kenya were whispering and talking about a man called Matigari who was roaming the whole country making demands about truth and justice" (viii). Police ordered Matigari's immediate arrest. It took them a while to realise he was a fictional character. They ordered the 'arrest' of the book instead, raiding Kenya's bookshops to seize every copy of the novel (viii).

I approached Ngũgĩ afterwards at the reception downstairs to ask him about this story. I was keen to hear from the horse's mouth, as it were, whether it was apocryphal paratext, meant to be read as embellishment to (and in the same frame of mind as) the fictional story that followed, or whether the events as reported had really occurred. He assured me the police search for Matigari was a "true" story.

But he emphasised twice in a brief conversation that it was the power of the rumours about Matigari – the word-of-mouth stories that people told of his heroic deeds – that most frightened the authorities. Not Matigari himself but the stories of what he might do, the hope he gave people, posed the biggest threat to Kenya's powerbrokers. In other words, the *orally-performed* stories of Matigari, having been shared among the people, having taken on a life of their own, became the most transformative, the most powerful.

Works Cited

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12th GAPS Summer School

"Border Stories: Narratives of Peace, Conflict & Communication in the 20th and 21st Centuries"

The 12th GAPS Summer School „Border Stories: Narratives of Peace, Conflict & Communication in the 20th and 21st Centuries“ took place at Augsburg University between 7 and 11 September 2015. The program for these five days was exemplarily well-structured; the time slots were well-managed and created an overall program that was balanced, dialogic across the various points of the program, and well-structured in terms of time management: while maintaining the dense stimulation characteristic for summer schools, there were neither “overkills” nor “lulls” anywhere in the program.

On the first two days, four of the six seminar sessions took place, as well as one keynote lecture (Timo Müller) and two presentations by Henry Beissel (one reading, one keynote lecture). Wednesday was more of a transitional day, featuring another reading by Henry Beissel, as well as an interactive multimedia session on Afrofuturism that was open to everyone; Dorothea Smartt's reading took place in the evening. The last two days featured the final two seminar sessions as well as the two workshop sessions, as well as three keynote lectures by Mita Banerjee, Katja Sarkowsky, and Hubert Zapf, and the plenary & closing