Decolonising the Human


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Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s decoloniality and political philosophy of liberation are prominently represented in his struggles for the decolonisation of the mind, especially in the politics of language in literature and education. What arguably distinguishes wa Thiong’o from other African writers is his unique observation of language as being. His take on language extends to more than viewing it as a carrier of culture and a means of communication; he sees it as a means by which the dis-membered being can be re-membered. This chapter, by focusing on language as being in the politics of wa Thiong’o, as reflected in his writings, deviates from views of language as deconstruction (Orwell 1977), language as a room without a view (Kafka 1937), language as unmaking (Marquez 1982), language as disillusionment and seduction (Nabokov 1995), language as a door through which reality escapes (Robbe-Grillet 1955), language as an expression of otherness (Nganang 2001) and language as just a narrative (Brink 2007). Wa Thiong’o’s unique focus on language has often been met with harsh responses. Peter Vakunta (2010, 75) argues that wa Thiong’o’s ‘pontifications against the use of imperial languages in African literature’ are ‘spurious’ and a stunt that is ‘simply seeking negative attention’. Vakunta is not alone in his criticism of wa Thiong’o’s linguistic stance; David Cook and Michael Okenimkpe (1997) state that wa Thiong’o’s thinking does not conform to any specific political, dogmatic doctrine, and Evan Mwangi (cited in Boehmer 1993) accuses wa Thiong’o of preaching Kenyan water and drinking Western wine, and of being an ideologically outdated author.
Wa Thiong’o’s dedication to the struggle for liberation of the African being needs to be understood from a decolonial locus, where the colonial being has been dis-membered through the erasure of their languages, and thus re-membering can only be achieved through the return to the languages of those whose humanity has been denied or questioned. Rendering a person’s language otiose is a violent decapitation of that person’s humanity; it is to dis-member their being. Humanitas, the Eurocentric concept of a human being, which excluded those on the margins of modernity, justified and solidified its humaneness through the usage and nuances concentrated in language. In his activism for the revival of African languages, wa Thiong’o coined the terms dis-membering and re-membering, which Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015) equates with coloniality and decoloniality, respectively. Wa Thiong’o’s take on linguicides and linguifams (linguistic starvation) as acts of dis-membering the African being marks him out as not just an occasional Marxist and post-colonial philosopher and novelist, as most readings of his work have mistaken him for, but as a decolonial philosopher. Wa Thiong’o argues that ‘our’ humanity (that is, those who exist in the zone of non-being) was denied by ‘them’ (those who exist in the zone of being, and give themselves the power to classify beings and non-beings), thus exposing the un-humanity of a structure of enunciation (institutions, categories of thought and languages) that built for itself an image of ‘humanity’ which allowed it to disqualify what did not fit its imaginary. In doing so, he moves beyond the language, culture and identity preoccupations of the post-colonialists; he has thus taken a different route from them in his disavowal of the racial imaginary of modernity upon which coloniality was erected.

Wa Thiong’o’s confronting of the linguistic dis-memberment of being is a decades-long fight against linguistic Darwinism and feudalism in colonial Africa, one that can be traced from his early student years to the 1962 Makerere Conference of African Writers of English Expression, in Kampala, Uganda (Wali 1963), where he participated in the deliberations on African literature. This fight was followed by several books and essays in which wa Thiong’o chose to be faithful to his language (see wa Thiong’o 2006), despite facing opposing views from other African scholars like Chinua Achebe (1975, 1978, 1989), Léopold Sédar Senghor (1962), Wole Soyinka (1988), Gabriel Okara (1970) and Biodun Jeyifo (2018). Wa Thiong’o’s call to decolonise language led him, in 1968, to become actively involved in the intellectual struggles
to transform the English Department at the University of Nairobi in Kenya, a department that remained colonial in content and structure. The document ‘On the Abolition of the English Department’ (wa Thiong’o 1995) was a call for the ‘decolonisation of the cognitive process’ (wa Thiong’o 2016, 42) and of the study of so-called universal literature, which in essence was European literature. In 1977 wa Thiong’o decided to abandon writing in English and turned to his native language, Gikuyu. In pursuit of his linguistic ideology, he published his first play in Gikuyu, *Ngaahika Ndeenda*, in 1977 (wa Thiong’o and wa Mırıı 1977), leading to his arrest by the Kenyan authorities. The issue of linguistic coloniality and coloniality of being has remained fundamental, and unresolved, in the era of post-colonialism. There is a need for an ongoing reassessment and reclamation of submerged and silenced languages, for the construction or rediscovery of an intelligible self.

The rejection of English and the turn to Gikuyu embody a rejection of the Western European model of being. Wa Thiong’o’s several writings make it clear that language is central in dis-membering the mode of being-in-the-world-with-others. His radical but humanistic advocacy for the use of African languages in the writing of African literature needs to be understood well beyond the existing post-colonial language debates, or as just an idealistic, nativist, Third World fundamentalism or Afro-radicalism that seeks to take the Global South out of the world to some imaginary pristine authenticity of the impossible past. The advocacy for the indigenous languages should not be dismissed as reverse linguicide but understood as a decolonial call for space for, and recognition of, indigenous languages and being. Language cannot be separated from being, for languages are carried by bodies, hence how one deals with languages is how one deals with human beings (Mpofu 2019). Marginalising indigenous languages is the marginalising of the bodies that carry those languages. The advocacy to have African literature written in an African language comes from the observation that ‘creative imagination is one of the greatest of re-membering practices’ of a dis-membered being and of marginalised bodies (wa Thiong’o 2009, 16). Language is more than a communication system; it is a carrier of memory, a point that eluded Biodun Jeyifo (2018) in his critique of wa Thiong’o. The critique is based on issues of linguistic and communicative competence, and on ‘what … a would-be African writer [should] do who wishes to write in the indigenous mother tongue but whose language neither has a writing script nor print capitalism of
even an embryonic form’ (Jeyifo 2018, 143). What Jeyifo exhibits is a failure to appreciate that language extends beyond the literal and economic means of communication often attached to it; it assumes metaphorical connotations aligned to life itself.

Wa Thiong’o’s decolonial call for a decolonised mind, for restoration of being and dignity to the victims of coloniality, becomes the unmasking of linguicides and linguifams. His literary work is concerned with how a dis-membered people can relaunch themselves into the world that has no space for them (Thiong’o 2009). Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015, 23) states that wa Thiong’o’s decoloniality is ‘ranged against imperialism, colonialism and coloniality as a constituent part of the modernist politics of dis-memberment, alienation, exploitation and alterity’. Thus for wa Thiong’o (1986), decoloniality becomes a search for a liberating perspective aimed at restoring the humanity and being of the African after centuries of suffering dis-memberment. This chapter is written in English, a colonial language, which means my mother tongue is suppressed in academia, but also that the English language should be interpreted as part of the cultural equipment I use to challenge coloniality, by using its tools of domination to lay the seeds of its defeat.

**LANGUAGE AND BEING**

Frantz Fanon, having experienced what it means to be voiceless, learned that ‘to speak is to exist absolutely for the other’ (Fanon 1963, 17) for language is essentially being. To render one language-less is to render one a non-being, for non-beings, though they might communicate, do not have a language. The ability to think, enunciate and speak is a marker of being (Mignolo 2011a, xxiv). The colonised, branded as lacking a language and letters, cannot enunciate and therefore is not a ‘human’ being. Language is where the identity of the people is located, for language is not what human beings have, but what human beings are (Mignolo 2011b, 139). Walter Mignolo (2009, 160) clearly states that thinking is done by a ‘racially marked body in a geo-historical marked space that feels the urge or gets the call to speak, to articulate, in whatever semiotic system, the urge that makes of living organisms “human” beings’.

Wa Thiong’o (2009) discusses the mythical story of Osiris in Egypt, who was killed by his brother Set; Set then cut his body into pieces and scattered them all over Egypt. Isis re-members the scattered pieces of Osiris to life with
the help of a deity. The significance of the myth lies in that a dis-membered being is re-membered to wholeness. Wa Thiong’o is the Isis of the present who seeks to re-member to wholeness beings who are dis-membered through memory loss and linguicide. Every African writer has an Isis role to play, as African writers cannot afford to be intellectual outsiders in their own land – they ‘must reconnect with the buried alluvium of African memory – that must become the base for planting African memory anew in the continent and the world’, and connecting with memory must mean ‘a return to the base, the people, must mean at the very least the use of a language and languages that the people speak. Any further linguistic additions should be for strengthening, deepening and widening this power of the languages spoken by the people’ (wa Thiong’o 2016, 76). The decades-long linguistic advocacy and activism, the call to return to the base, the resurrection of African languages by African writers, is a means of restoring the being of those who exist in the margins of modernity, an act of re-membering.

Dis-memberment captures not only physical fragmentation but also epistemological colonisation, as well as the ‘cultural decapitation’ that resulted in deep forms of alienation among Africans (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2015, 25). This dis-memberment of Africa was ‘simultaneously the foundation, fuel, and consequence of Europe’s capitalist modernity’ (wa Thiong’o 2009, 2). It is part of the ‘imperial/racist reason’ (Du Bois 1903) that doubted the being of the other, and is done, according to wa Thiong’o (2009), by uprooting Africans from their memory. Re-membering becomes the process of planting the memory and resisting Western modernity, as expounded by Hegel’s view of Africa without history, memory or discernable being (Hegel [1837] 1944, 99).

Valentin Mudimbe (1994, xii) shares the same understanding with wa Thiong’o, in that ‘the geographical expansion of Europe and its civilization … submitted the world to its memory’. Dis-memberment meant that African bodies became ‘branded with a European memory’ (wa Thiong’o 2009, 10). Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015, 25) adds that the long-term consequences of this dis-memberment process were human beings ‘out of sync with their being and human beings who have lost name, language, culture and identity. At play here were broader processes of mapping, naming and owning as part of the inscription of coloniality’. The effects of linguistic erasure included looking at oneself from outside of the self or with the lenses of a stranger; and
identifying with the foreign base as the starting point towards the self, that is, from another self towards one’s self, rather than using the local as the starting point, from self to other selves (wa Thiong’o 2012, 38–39). The effects of linguicides and linguifams have continued to be lived after the end of colonisation.

Thus to read wa Thiong’o’s advocacy for African languages from a post-colonialist perspective is flawed, as wa Thiong’o (1986) emphasised the linguistic impact of coloniality of being, as opposed to language as a mere carrier of culture and identity. Wa Thiong’o moves beyond colonisation logic that focuses on the 50 years of decolonisation and the supposed end of colonial empires, as he questions why the continent remains in a subaltern position within the global power hierarchy since the Atlantic slavery era (wa Thiong’o 1986). Coloniality is the racialised invisible power structure designed by the Euro-North American-centric modern world (Grosfoguel 2007) that hierarchises human beings according to racial ontological densities. Wa Thiong’o details the workings of coloniality as the biggest linguistic weapon, a weapon that annihilated a people’s being by making them ‘want to identify with that which is furthest removed from themselves; for instance, with other people’s languages rather than their own. It makes them identify with that which is decadent and reactionary, all those forces which would stop their own springs of life’, leading to a collective death wish (wa Thiong’o 1986, 3).

Gabriela Veronelli (2015, 108) describes coloniality of language as the ‘linguistic racialization of colonised populations as communicative agents beginning in the 16th century and continuing until today’. Linguistic classification through coloniality of language, which is equivalent to colonial racial classification, led to the dehumanisation and silencing of indigenous languages and the bodies that carry those languages. Opposite racial communicators became linguistically unequal, with the languages of the colonisers valorised as ‘real languages’, for they could create and transmit knowledges, whereas the ‘languages’ of the colonised were just vulgar mumblings incapable of carrying, let alone creating, knowledge. The colonised, as inferior and non-being, could not be communicative agents as they lacked the ability to express, transmit or produce knowledge: ‘The coloniality of language is an aspect of the process of dehumanizing colonized people through racialization. Because racialization is inseparable from the Eurocentric appropriation and reduction of the universe of the colonized, the relation between language and
racialization is performed within a Eurocentric philosophy, ideology and politics, which include a politics of language’ (Veronelli 2015, 119).

To appreciate language as being, one needs to remember the lived metaphor of Waiyaki wa Hinga, who was buried alive with his head facing downwards and not facing Mount Kenya as rituals demand, and King Hinsta, who was decapitated and his head put on display in British museums as a figure of art (wa Thiong’o 2009). The two shared the fate of physical dis-memberment, which wa Thiong’o likens to the dis-memberment of being through linguistic coloniality. The killing of these two is symbolic of the death of memory, memory that has been cut off from the head, an act that ‘dis-membered the colonised from memory, turning their heads upside down and burying all the memories they carried’ (wa Thiong’o 2009, 7). This memory, which is the consciousness and identity of the people, is carried through their own languages. The physical decapitation explained here is the linguistic lynching of being, as the metaphorical headless bodies are branded with European memory, a death knell of being.

The turn of the sixteenth century becomes important, as it sets the stage for the racialised linguistic hierarchy leading to the denial and dis-membering of those who embody difference, and the automatic awarding of humanity to colonisers who possessed ‘languages’. Elio Antonio de Nebrija, in celebrating his invention of grammar for the Castilian language, explained to Queen Isabella the purpose his work would serve, namely to elevate the Castilian language from a vulgar status to the status of a language that could express knowledge, a language worth learning for ‘many barbarians who speak outlandish tongues’ (Mignolo 1995, 38; Nebrija [1492] 1946). For Nebrija, language alone distinguished human beings from other living systems, from wild animals, for language is the unique distinction of man (Mignolo 1995, 39). Any letters or other symbolic characters that the colonised used to write were described as works of the devil and not ‘languages’, a view articulated by Diego de Landa Calderón, a Spanish Franciscan priest and bishop of Yucatán, in regard to his encounters with Amerindians and the accompanying epistemisticides: ‘[they] found a great number of books in these letters, and since they contained nothing but superstitions and falsehoods of the devil we burned them all, which they took most grievously, which gave them great pain’ (De Landa Calderón cited in Mignolo 1995, 71).

By being given a prescribed grammar, Castilian became a language of knowledge, since knowing meant having a language and having a language
meant being able to express this knowledge. But as the racialised perspective would have it, the colonised did not have knowledge since they did not have language, and lack of language disqualified a person from humanitas. It is this context that gave birth to Oduche in Achebe’s *Arrow of God* (1964), Ocol in Okot p’Bitek’s *Song of Ocol* (1964) and Joseph in wa Thiong’o’s *The River Between* (1965). These characters are examples of those who aspired to whiteness, to be human as defined by the racialised perspective. Wa Thiong’o’s ideas are in tandem with those of Nebrija in that they both hold that language is more than just a vehicle of communication; it is a means to one’s identity and to articulation of one’s reality and humanity.

Coloniality of language was not a spinoff or an accompanying process of colonisation, but colonisation itself. Colonisation was a linguistic process. Coloniality reduced the colonised to inferior thing-beings, reducing their communication to infantile blabbers (Quijano 2000), thus establishing the relationship between language and being. Wa Thiong’o’s advocacy and use of African languages is resistance to linguicides and erasure of being. Concerning African languages and their peripheralisation, Kwesi Wiredu (1992, 302) says that in light of the global privileging of Eurocentric knowledges, languages and coloniality in the world, in Africa ‘conceptually speaking then, the maxim of the moment should be: African know thy self’. Wiredu and wa Thiong’o gesture towards epistemic disobedience that prefers a radical refusal of identifying, seeing and knowing the African being in terms of Eurocentric lenses. The motion of African self-knowledge that Wiredu points to is central to the advocacy of indigenous languages, counter to Eurocentric fictions of racialised linguistic hierarchies. Language, as argued by James Baldwin (1979), defines the other. Wa Thiong’o, by using Gikuyu in his writings and broadly advocating for the use of indigenous languages, is the ‘other’ who resists and refuses to be defined by a language or languages that refuse to recognise him and his humanity.

Wa Thiong’o challenges the humanity of the master’s language and the perceived lack of humanity in the languages of the colonised. Through the discourse of the Anthropos (the other), he seeks to restore the humanity of those colonised through linguistic liberation without resorting to reverse linguicides and Afro-radicalism. Wa Thiong’o’s linguistic shift, as evidenced in some of his literary works written in Gikuyu, is an attempt to delink from, to get outside the linguistic prison of coloniality. Coloniality defined what
Language is and what it is not, and in the process linguistically classified beings and thing-beings, which wa Thiong’o, through linguistic disobedience, is exposing as just the darker side of the modernity that keeps the colonised mentally and spiritually imprisoned. The dominant language, then, becomes the criterion against which the level of civilisation of the colonised will be measured, as ‘the colonised is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country’s cultural standards’ (Fanon 1963, 18).

WA THIONG’O GOES NAKED
The conversation between Prospero and Caliban in Shakespeare’s The Tempest gives a better interpretation of wa Thiong’o’s analysis of language and being in the age of coloniality. Caliban has no ‘language’, and has to be taught and given a language; therefore he is in debt to Prospero’s kind human gesture, his gift of language (wa Thiong’o 2009, 2012, 2013). Language becomes a colonial tool of auto-enslavement and loss of being for ‘when you did not know yourself, I gave you language’ (wa Thiong’o 2009, 16), and ‘I created you, but of course, in my image’ (wa Thiong’o 2009, 39); ‘your language was mere babble. I gave you purpose’ (wa Thiong’o 2009, 29), says Prospero to Caliban. Language is the conception of one’s being and that of others. This linguistic logic of conquest leads to linguicides and linguifams (wa Thiong’o 2009, 18) resulting in loss of memory and remembrance. The loss finds its epitome in Wizard of the Crow (wa Thiong’o 2006), where Tajirika’s quest to become ‘white’ means losing his name and his language. Loss of one’s language means a loss of being; adopting the colonising languages means achieving human status. Tajirika becomes a representation of a native dis-membered from his memory, dis-membered through language.

Language as the house of being (Heidegger 1982) is laden with identity, culture and memories of the people who use the language; George Steiner (1992, 128) emphasises this by adding that ‘it is not man who determines being, but being via language [that] discloses itself to and in man’. Coloniality, as a form of dominance, remained with formerly colonised persons and communities long after flag independence, and after the arrival of what have been called post-colonial societies and experiences; maintained through coloniality of language and inferiorisation of the colonised, it kept colonial relations between the former coloniser and the former colonised intact. Language as part of the colonisation process was more than just communication of meaning; it was
communication of power, not a model of signs but one of war and battle that determined power relations (Foucault 1980).

Coloniality of language dehumanises by denying the language of the colonised, by placing it in dichotomous relations that are not equal but hierarchically defined by the location of the language. Wa Thiong’o’s linguistic disobedience should be understood as an act of regaining African humanity, and a refusal to surrender to the illusion of modernity and its promises to grant the peripheral Anthropos the humanitas status. Wa Thiong’o’s works should be read against the logic of coloniality: he deliberately seeks to decolonise both language and being, thus opening up alternatives and possibilities for other imaginaries of language and being, expressing what Catherine Walsh (2009) calls the paradigm other, a paradigm that emerges from colonial difference. In essence, a reading of wa Thiong’o shows how the logic of coloniality manifested itself through language and denied the humanity of the other, giving rise to the call to decolonise the ‘mind’ (wa Thiong’o 2006) and the ‘imaginary’ (Gruzinski 1999), that is, knowledge and being.

Jose de Aldrete and other colonialists on a mission to civilise the barbarians established a link between linguistic behaviour, clothes and good manners, and being civilised (Mignolo 1995). Those who existed in the zone of non-being were described as lacking all markers of civility, that is, lacking a language, clothes and manners. A causal relationship was established between language and clothes; thus the lack of alphabetic writing and mastery of colonial languages relegated one to the status of a naked beast with no language, for language distinguished the beasts from those that spoke ‘our’ language. Wa Thiong’o, by advocating for and also writing in African languages, assumes the beast status and therefore goes naked, as he fails to adhere to the linguistic behaviour that is equated with civility. Going naked means discarding the colonial idea of being and rejecting the ‘civilisation’ imposed in the name of modernity, and this involves decolonising the mind. By delinking from English, wa Thiong’o delinks from the Western idea of civilisation. Colonial languages used as a form of psychological subjugation by colonisers have to be decolonised, and wa Thiong’o does so by writing in his indigenous language as a way of liberating the imprisoned being from the metaphysical empire (wa Thiong’o 2006, 16). His metaphorical nakedness is a decolonial process of re-membering. The lack of civility he enacts by writing in Gikuyu and advocating for the humanity of the African is a desire for self-definition.
and attainment of sovereign subjectivity. Re-membering is resistance to the objectification and dehumanisation of Africans. It is a struggle to regain lost humanity even after administrative colonialism; wa Thiong’o (2013, x) argues that ‘the physical empire’ has been pushed back but ‘the metaphysical empire remains’.

Civility was defined by the coloniser in terms of letters and clothes. In their eyes, the indigenous people lacked letters (grammar), and lack of letters meant lack of language. Walter Mignolo (1995) establishes that in the culture of the European Renaissance, letters and civility went together and were markers of one’s humanity. Christopher Columbus joined the bandwagon of those who argued for the relationship between language, nakedness and being, noting in his journal entry about the Guhanahani natives that ‘God willing, when I come to leave I will bring six of them to Your Highness so that they may learn to speak’ (Columbus [1492–93] 1990, 31). The indigenous Africans stood accused of walking around without any clothes, which meant that their beastly status was never in doubt: they lacked both markers of civility, that is, letters and clothes. Their nudity disqualified these colonised communicators as beings. Mignolo (1995) adds that there is an implicit connection between linguistic behaviour and good manners as signs of civility, hence speech came to be used to differentiate human beings from barbarians. By disregarding English in favour of his indigenous Gikuyu, wa Thiong’o lost civility and went around without the clothes of the master’s grammar and letters. From a racialised perspective, Gikuyu has no Eurocentrically valorised expressivity. By going naked, wa Thiong’o expressed his being outside of the logic of coloniality, moving away from the monologic colonial perspective of language to a plurilogic understanding of language that is accommodating of the periphery in expressing their realities, and thus exposes the hidden workings of linguistic coloniality and its denial of being to the indigenous people.

The disobedience of writing in Gikuyu and the advocacy for indigenous languages meant ‘speaking’ outside the colonial linguistic boundaries and outside the racially prescribed relationship between language and being. Wa Thiong’o’s seminal work, Decolonising the Mind (1986), clearly articulates that colonialism deprived the indigenous people of their power to ‘speak’, deprived them of their identity and humanity, and forced the colonial languages on them, imposing an alien identity and categorising them as non-beings unless they carried the European memory. Language in
indigenous languages and advocating for their space and recognition is an act of re-membering, re-enacting and restoring the humanity of those bodies that carry those languages.

While Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka and Léopold Sédar Senghor embraced the use of English and French in their writing to speak to the empire and its victims, wa Thiong’o refuses to wear the empire’s clothes, and speaks back to the empire naked in Gikuyu, as well as through his advocacy of African indigenous languages. He claims the right of those on the margin to speak, produce and transmit knowledge in their language, thus opening up alternative linguistic centres (wa Thiong’o, 2012). As a way of naming linguistic racialisation, Veronelli (2015) coined the term ‘monolanguaging’ as a way of capturing the linguistic hierarchy of superiority and inferiority. Monolanguaging questions the ‘communicative interaction between people who perceive themselves as having a language in the full sense, and animal-like beings who are assumed to have no language but who can be trained to understand the former well enough to be able to follow their orders and do what they want’ (Veronelli 2015, 124). In wa Thiong’o’s literature, African languages are communal places of resisting erasure and conceptualisation of communication and communal life, outside the prison of the coloniality of language. It is through languaging that those at the receiving end of the darker side of modernity can keep their memories and their being alive. Speaking in one’s languages challenges the racialised concept of monolanguaging, as one assumes the voice needed to engage in a dialogue with one’s native audience.

Linguicides include colonisation of the cognitive base and also a struggle for all levels of power (wa Thiong’o 2012); Fanon (1963, 38) adds that ‘colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native’s brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it’. The imposition of colonial languages was a calculated erasure of memory and forced amnesia. The imposition is also evident in the geographical markers of identity, where for example Lake Namlowe became Lake Victoria, Mosi-oa-Tunya became Victoria Falls. To be included in the category of human, the colonised periphery had to adopt the universal languages, from the time of the ‘discovery’ of the New World to the current era of flag independence. Language continues to be a contentious issue, as was evident in the #FeesMustFall student protests of 2015–16 in South Africa which, among
other things, called for the use of indigenous languages in teaching and learning in higher education. According to Nebrija ([1492] 1946), ‘Indians’ had to be taught the Castilian language if they wanted to climb up the ladder of humanity, for at the time of their conquest they lacked language, knowledge and manners. This also speaks to wa Thiong’o’s and other Africans’ experiences in school.

The teaching of colonial languages was a calculated, racialised attempt to erase the language and humanity of the colonised; Veronelli (2012, 89), like wa Thiong’o, observes that ‘colonised people had to be sent to school and trained in the disciplines of linguistic docility to forget their ways of life. Only they would be inside the prison’. Francis Nyamnjoh (2012) adds that education continues to legitimise illusions of the superiority of Eurocentric knowledges and languages under the guise of abstract universalism. Education in post-colonial Africa remains a tool to lighten the darkness of the African for the ‘interest of and for the gratification of colonizing and hegemonic others’, including African intellectuals and elites who act as ventriloquist puppets of coloniality (Nyamnjoh 2012, 129).

Robinson Crusoe prided himself on teaching Friday how to speak (wa Thiong’o 2009, 10), attesting that ‘first I let him know that his name to be Friday, which is the day I saved his life … I likewise taught him to say “Master”, and then let him know that was to say my name’. Coloniality of language and being was enforced through formal colonial education, just as ‘Friday’s body no longer carries any memory of previous identity to subvert the imposed identity’ (wa Thiong’o 2009, 10). The type of education that the colonised student had to go through was a process of linguicides and forced memory erasure. Education was weaponised by coloniality to achieve memory loss, as observed by John Spencer (cited in Kane 1963, 21) in that education (school) is ‘better than the cannon, it made conquest permanent. The cannon compels the body and the school bewitches the soul’. Formal education institutions became sites for dis-membering the African child. Through linguistic erasure and naming, Friday is denied his being and is reduced to Crusoe’s property. Europe planted its memory on the African body through the vast naming system of language.

Wa Thiong’o (2000, 159) decries the dehumanisation of Africa’s peoples and their languages even in a global arena like the United Nations, pointing out that ‘if you look at the United Nations and all its Agencies, there is no
requirement for an African language, although all the other continents are linguistically represented in the United Nations, and Europe has the lion’s share of that situation’. This is true, as captured in the closing statement of the ‘Asamara Declaration on African Languages and Literatures’ (2000) issued at the conference titled ‘Against All Odds: African Languages and Literatures into the 21st Century’, held in Asmara in January 2000. Though tiptoeing around the gravity of the matter, the declaration describes the current inferior status of African languages, stating that ‘we have noted with pride that despite all the odds against them, African languages as vehicles of communication and knowledge survive and have a written continuity of thousand of years. Colonialism created some of the most serious obstacles against African languages and literatures. We noted with concern the fact that these colonial obstacles still haunt independent Africa and continue to block the mind of the continent’ (Against All Odds Conference 2000).

Though modest in its analysis, this international conference did agree that African languages cannot be sidelined in the struggle for Africa’s humanity. Wa Thiong’o spurred on Africa’s linguistic transformation, a process which, according to Ali Mazrui (2004), cannot be achieved through the master’s language if genuine advancement of African languages is to be achieved. Such advancement is only possible if African people are involved ‘as full and equal partners in the struggle to challenge the semantics of the dominant discourse and to inscribe new meanings and uses that a counter-hegemonic discourse has the potential to arise’ (Mazrui 2004, 78). By writing in African languages, wa Thiong’o is involving those masses of African people in the advancement of their indigenous languages.

Before his turn to indigenous language, wa Thiong’o, like most of the early generations of African literary writers, adopted the use of these imposed languages. It was a case of trying to use the master’s tools to dismantle the master’s house (Lorde 2007) until he made his radical shift from the use of European languages to the use of an indigenous African language, as a way of fighting imperialism. This Damascene shift expressed the realisation that one cannot use the master’s medium of being to resurrect the African being, which would be like whispering in the graveyard. His return to his native language is premised on the belief that his writing ‘in Gikuyu language, a Kenyan language, an African language, is part and parcel of the anti-imperialist struggles of Kenyan and African peoples’ (wa Thiong’o 2009, 28). The choice of language
that a person uses is central to how they define themselves and how others define them. Martin Heidegger (1993, 217) states that ‘those who think and those who create with words are the guardians of this home [of being]’; hence African writers are guardians of the house of being, and that house of being is language (Heidegger 1982).

As the guardians of the house of being, African writers have always been faced with a choice, either to write in their native tongues, thus reaching a limited audience, or to use a ‘global’ language for a global audience. When ‘faced with this dilemma, African writers are forced to write in an adopted language imported through colonization, yet this allows them to champion the cause of their people on the world stage’ (Bandia 2009, 15–16). Ironically, Achebe and other African writers who chose the coloniser’s language over their own are, in wa Thiong’o’s view, the Oduche in Achebe’s Arrow of God (1964). In Arrow of God, Ezeulu, the Chief Priest, sends one of his four sons, Oduche, to learn the wisdom of the Whiteman as he will be his ‘eyes there’ (Achebe 1964, 189). After learning enough of the said wisdom, Oduche comes back home and imprisons the sacred python in a box. Wa Thiong’o identifies this class of African writers as the Oduches who have an incurable desire to be identified with the colonisers from whom they learned their lessons (wa Thiong’o 2009). He says that ‘Oduche’s story is that of all other graduates of the prison-house of European languages, they capture the python, a symbol of people’s being and imprison it in a box to suffocate and possibly die’ (wa Thiong’o 2009, 50). Wa Thiong’o (2009) directly calls out Senghor, a Senegalese writer, for cannibalising African languages to enrich the French language – he is the Oduche who seeks to imprison the African python in a French box. Wa Thiong’o says of Senghor that he ‘hardly ever talked of enriching any African language, and the only time he showed enthusiasm for African languages was when he banned Ousmane Sembene’s Ceddo, (a brilliant film about slavery in which the characters speak their language) because Sembene had spelt Ceddo with two d’s instead of one’ (wa Thiong’o 2009, 55).

Wa Thiong’o’s advocacy for indigenous language has been labelled a form of nativism (Ashcroft et al. 2001) and a Third World fundamentalism that seeks to banish colonial languages and being. Wa Thiong’o does not employ this false colonial logic of banishment in the name of re-membering, for one cannot use the same exclusionary logic of coloniality to restore the humanity
of those who have been dis-membered. Decolonisation of language is not the pursuit of ‘othering’ and the exclusion of colonial languages, but a call to decentre those languages and the accompanying racialised linguistic hierarchy. What wa Thiong’o refuses to accept is the villagising of indigenous languages and bodies, and the reduction of the indigenous to mere local specificities with no impact on the universal canon of humanity. Asserting the humanity of the dehumanised cannot be done by sanitising the linguistic wound, but through languaging in indigenous tongues. This is not a philosophical contradiction for writers who have weaponised and domesticated colonial languages in the struggle for decolonisation, but rather an alternative way of unmasking the racist linguistic hierarchies.

It should be noted that through his philosophical journey, wa Thiong’o has come to clarify the place of colonial languages in challenging the empire and its idea of the human (wa Thiong’o 2012), as he continues to write in English. His advocacy for indigenous languages is not a call to erase the colonial languages and the bodies that carry those languages; it is part of the decolonial struggle which Gayatri Spivak (1996) calls strategic essentialism as opposed to Third World fundamentalism and Afro-radicalism, although vigilance should be exercised to avoid strategic essentialism declining into the essential (Mpofu 2019). The writing in a colonial language by wa Thiong’o seems to be a *contradictio in adjecto*, but Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014, 238) sums up this perceived contradiction as an enabling one:

The fertility of a contradiction does not lie in imagining ways of escaping it but rather in ways of working with and through it … An enabling contradiction is a contradiction that recognizes the limits of thinking or action in a given period or context but refuses to view them at a distance or with reverence, as is typical of conformist thinking and action. An enabling contradiction is inflexible with the limits and rather comes as close as possible to them and explores their own contradictions as much as possible.

Wa Thiong’o’s language as being is not about revenge or erasure of colonial languages, but rather a practice of decentring colonial languages as the only real languages and the Eurocentric idea of humanity as the only humanity. The future imagined by wa Thiong’o is one of co-existence of languages, where all languages are equal in their differences. In his *Globalecitics: Theory*
and Politics of Knowing (2012), there is delinking from the colonial centre to cultivate pluriversal centres, as exemplified by the concept of ‘globalectics’, which is derived from the shape of the globe. Aimé Césaire (1972) agrees that there is no one centre, and any point is equally a centre. Wa Thiong’o (2012) calls for a globalectical existence that embraces wholeness, interconnectedness, equity of potentiality of parts, tension and motion. In a globalectical existence, languages and cultures are a network not in terms of a racialised hierarchy, but on an equal level without doubting the humanity of the other, thus moving away from the Eurocentric linguistic and cultural universe.

Writing in indigenous language and advocating for their use is wa Thiong’o’s practice of strategic essentialism, one that articulates the ‘discourse of the Anthropos’; it is a ‘body politics of the Anthropolos which forces humanitas to think through exteriority, to localise and contextualise itself in its historical and geopolitical determination’ (Luisetti 2012, 50). It is a refusal to surrender to the racialised linguistic hierarchy, a refusal to put on the metaphorical clothes of civility. Wa Thiong’o challenges the silencing and criminalisation of indigenous languages and bodies, and calls for a new humanity built on differences and on respecting multiple local particularities.

CONCLUSION
Wa Thiong’o’s narration of the story of a farmer who brought up an eagle among the chickens (2009, 97–98) is a befitting conclusion to this discussion. The eagle was raised as a chicken and could not remember its eagle-ness. It knew the language of chickens, hence it assumed the being of a chicken and could not fly, nor dare to try. It took a hunter to make the eagle re-member its being. The eagle only starts to fly after it re-members its wings. Wa Thiong’o assumes the role of the hunter, who through the use and advocacy of African languages reconnects Africans with their being, re-members their memory and reminds them how to fly. Through the concepts of dis-memberment (coloniality) and re-membering (decoloniality), and by practising epistemic disobedience, he consistently challenges linguistic feudalism and argues for the collapsing of a racialised linguistic hierarchy, so that there is no one universal linguistic centre that uses language to assign the status of being and non-being. By engaging in linguistic disobedience, wa Thiong’o excludes himself from the ‘magic of the Western idea of modernity’ and its ‘ideals of humanity’ (Mignolo 2011a, 161). His lack of patience with ‘feeble’ African
men of letters (wa Thion’o 1986, 1997) who have rushed to defend the language of the centre, and appropriated it as their own at the expense of indigenous language, speaks of his disappointment with the African community’s keepers of identity and knowledge.

REFERENCES


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