

Clark Atlanta University

Of Nightingale Songs:
A Discussion of Ngugi Wa Thiongo's *On Something Torn and New*

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Ngugi wa Thiongo's *On Something Torn and New* is primarily a philosophical study of colonization's impact on language and identity. Thiong'o asserts that colonial powers consciously made the decisions to deconstruct indigenous cultural identity and supplant those identities with ones which foster subservient subcultures as extensions of the colonizing nations. To that end he does a magnificent job of illustrating this act throughout chapters one and two. Chapter one demonstrates the deconstruction of identity with a particular focus on what he calls "linguicide" or the systematic destruction and replacement of native language with that of the colonizer language. (Thiong'o 43). Chapter 2 focuses on the construction of cultural memory based on what he sees as the resurrection or "re-membering" of traditional cultural. That term, "re-membering" was something which presents itself as sort of double entendre as it indicates the importance of connecting with the past to establish identity as well as rejoining the pre-colonial social identity. Which in its prima facie state is quite brilliant but on second examination it becomes a glaring ironic issue. Thiong'o's case on the importance of language and identity and the need to remove colonial influence is itself an extension of colonialism. While extoling the importance of using native language and replacing colonial thinking with native cultural references Thiong'o consciously plays with the word "Remember." Not the Kikuyu word for remember but the English word remember. The hyphen transferring the double meaning and linking memory and reintegration to the community or "membering." The language he chooses; the way he thinks is not oriented in the traditional culture of his people but rather the result of colonialism. It is a fusion and while Thiong'o desperately searches for this pure African identity it is not inherently his. He has only known it as it is after it has mutated under colonialism and so can he really define and quantify an identity and culture whose pure state he's never experienced? Are not the interpretations only scraps and approximations and while he may recognize elements can he

separate what is native and what is colonial? This same logical paradox permeated the work and Thiong'o mainly seems to produce approximations of certain historical and cultural arguments he makes. Most notable are things like his views on the English and Colonialism.

Thiong'o makes a point of illustrating how the English colonized and butchered Irish culture. He claims Ireland is England's prototype for English colonization (Thiong'o 13). Except this ignores one crucial fact, England itself is a colonized nation. First by the Romans who colonized the native Britons, Picts, and Welsh. Secondly by the German who established colonies and eventually forced out the Britons. Thirdly by the Normans who were the pushed out Britons who colonized northern France and then invaded England and who went on to invade Ireland. The ethnic identity of the English is itself a colonial fusion of the Germans, Norwegians, Britons, and French this is without going into the complexity of including the Jutes, the Scoti, Picts, and the Welsh. In doing so he neglects crucial information in the formation of this colonial system and instead insinuates that it's a new invention of a singular ethno-state. This idea of singular identity is also repeated throughout the chapters. When Thiong'o speaks of the ancestors, whose ancestors are he speaking of? When he speaks of African Memory which and of who's memories is he speaking? He presents Africa as a singular entity rather than a vast expanse of peoples with diverse cultures who don't necessarily see each other as the same (Thiong'o 52). This is problematic as it simplifies African cultures as though there is no cultural diversity, but rather a singular culture with a few subcultures. This is perhaps the greatest sin of Eurocentrism as it reduces 10,000 peoples and their 100,000 histories to one false identity and also treats African cultures as if they're both completely isolated and monolithic rather than deeply involved with global affairs and long term fusions. When we speak of some of the greatest figures in the history of the continent without understanding the full complexity of their identity and moreover the vast network of influences

that define their lives how can we then understand Mansa Musa when we ignore the importance of his Islamic faith? Does the fact that his faith originates off continent make him somehow less African? Is he not born of the Malian dust and bathed in the waters of the Niger? It must be stated that this example is not directed in response to any specific claim regarding Mansa Musa but rather a theme of oversimplification in the name of making a directed point, but he does create the image of lost languages of Timbuktu of Ghana and Mali while ignoring that a significant language of those people is Arabic. He contends that languages of the Diaspora are havens created by Africans to protect their languages except that ignores that many of these languages are fusions. Jamaican Patois, Creole, and Ebonics are listed but Creole is not a language. Creole is a term to denote any of these fusion languages. Jamaican Patois is a Creole language. So then which Creole language is he speaking? If Louisiana Creole otherwise known as by its native name of Kouri-Vini, is a fusion of French Canadian, Native American languages, Malinke, Ewe, Yoruba, and Kinkongo spoken by African, Indians, and white French. Jamaican Patois is fusion of English and primarily which would mean that the language did not form from the collective slave population but rather a smaller subset of the population and thus does not represent Thiong'o's collective social resistance. Ebonics is entirely English but only a dialectic form and has been classified so for the past 20 years. His argument that they were created to be incomprehensible to their masters falls apart when the slave masters speak the language.

Thiong'o contends that Afro-Centrism is the opposite of Euro-Centrism (Thiong'o 38). Thiong'o does not seem to understand or at least does not address the problem with this statement. If Afro-Centrism is defined in relationship to Euro-Centrism, then inherently it is then a reaction and thus a product of Euro-Centrism. It is not native to African traditions as those African traditions exist independent and prior to European ideas of identity. If Afro-Centrism is the

opposite of Euro-Centrism, then it is the mirror reflection of Euro-Centrism and if one is to reject Euro-Centrism then this subsequent reflection must also be rejected as its contours, shape, and form are the same. It would then be best to evaluate the impetus of this dichotomy and recognize the influence and reactions to this false European construct of identity when evaluating Africa, Europe, and the rest of the world as well. Any preconceived notion of identity levied on a culture which does not accept the entirety of that culture and seeks to redefine it by that observing people concepts can be seen as colonizing. Thiong'o is so driven to heal the sense of loss within himself that he is in fact proposing to overwrite other cultural identities to create and justify his own sense of self and that in itself is one of the most destructive Eurocentric principles.

There are other glaring omissions most notably is his characterization of Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association. He characterizes Garvey's thoughts as "Africa for the Africans, those at home and those abroad." Which is what Garvey said. But Garvey had vastly different views of who and what African means. The charter for the UNIA actually wants to colonize Africa and bring the "savages" Christianity. Garvey sought to create a new African identity to supplant all existing African cultures based on his teachings and leadership and spread that globally.

Section 3. The objects of the Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities' League shall be: to establish a Universal Confraternity among the race; to promote the spirit of pride and love; to reclaim the fallen; to administer to and assist the needy; *to assist in civilizing the backward tribes of Africa*; to assist in the development of Independent Negro Nations and Communities; to establish Commissionaires or Agencies in the principal countries and cities of the world for the representation and protection of all Negroes, irrespective of nationality; *to promote a conscientious Spiritual worship among*

the native tribes of Africa; to establish Universities, Colleges, Academies and Schools for the racial education and culture of the people; to conduct a world-wide Commercial and Industrial Intercourse for the good of people; to work for better conditions in all Negro communities. (UNIA Charter).

Those two lines are most important in understanding Garvey's views. Garvey does not see natural African cultures as being civilized. He wants to correct them via this idea of civilization which is characterized by Western values which are spelled out Colonies and Imperialism. "To promote a conscientious Spiritual Worship among the native tribes of Africa." They make a point of identifying two key things; Conscientious and native tribes. This envisions the worship of native tribes as then not truly spiritual but then what of the Christianized urban African peoples? They then are juxtaposed against the native tribes and are thus both civilized and conscientious. This could be misconstrued as out of context if it were not for the fact that it's from the official UNIA Charter which compares to Thiong'o's source of *The Philosophy and Opinions of Marcus Garvey* compiled by Marcus Garvey's wife after his imprisonment. Still, the possibility does exist that perhaps Garvey did not believe what he put in the charter of his flag ship organization or perhaps he changed his opinion. Both are equally as possible.

There are also his claims that the Native American's still reside in their homelands (Thiong'o 46). He understands they were forced onto reservations but does not seem to either know or want to mention the fact that those reservations are largely not in their homelands. The Seminoles were moved 1200 miles from their home at gun point in the Winter, same for the Cherokee. The Trail of Tears covered more than 5000 miles across 9 states. Just to give some perspective, Brazil is only 1770 miles from Liberia which is why so many slaves were sent to

Brazil. If he means native land to be the continent, they don't have a concept of a continent. It is an entirely foreign land to them which was part of the reason why they were sent there.

There are a lot of generalizations which just aren't true in relationships to assumptions he makes about America which comes off as odd because he has lived in America for nearly 20 years by the time he published the book. In contrast, his discussion on the idea of reverence for the dead as a means of continuation for cultural identity is eloquent and the idea of the creation of a new identity in contrast to Post-Colonial Africa is intriguing but the question remains whether this new identity which he describes as African is truly African in a traditional sense or is itself its own thing? At what point does a culture become far enough removed from its origin to form a new culture? If the collective memory, language, tradition, religion, and customs can show root similarities but are different enough to be not directly recognized between the two peoples can we really call them the same? Just to give an example along the same lines is not American culture different from Europe's or Africa's or Asia's for that matter? Can white Americans 300 years removed from France or Germany still speak those languages or practice those traditions? Thiong'o makes these leaps without providing concrete evidence. So while the idea of this massive singularity amongst the soul of black folks creates a sense of pride and tradition which might uplift people searching for something to cling to, is it okay to push this narrative if it is not categorically true or is this nothing more than the same ego centric assertions made by Europeans to justify their abuse of the otherness of the rest of the world? There is a possibility that Thiong'o's desire to reconnect to the idea of identity he so craves are merely his own manifestations superimposed on ghosts who would not recognize what he has become or seeks to be. Furthermore, in linking identity with a past so distant does this act not serve as a rejection of the past which is imminently present? Do we spurn our mothers and fathers and the suffering they endured to attach ourselves

to

our

Re-membered visions because we think those visions are somehow more real to who we are than the memory we already possess? While Thiong'o says "let the caged bird sing, but let it sing in its own language," referencing Claude McKay's poem "Sympathy," he neglects something very obvious (Ngugui 65). He forgets that the bird, caged or free, will sing in the only language it has ever known and that is what makes it its own. The words, regardless of the language, are an extension of the heart, mind, and soul and the nightingale will sing as beautifully in Mandarin as it will in Ginkuyu.

Works Cited

Thiong'o Ngũgĩ wa. *Something Torn and New: An African Renaissance*. Basic Civitas Books, 2009.