

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s *Wizard of the Crow* and Postcolonial Pedagogy

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ABSTRACT

The encyclopedic nature of Ngũgĩ’s *Wizard of the Crow* makes it an overt summing up of the author’s previous work. At the same time, the novel explicitly positions itself as a break from what came before by rethinking the anticolonial ideologies contained in the earlier work in light of what *Wizard of the Crow* references as an expanding postcoloniality. This shift can be seen in the philosophy of pedagogy the novel puts forward. Unlike the radical oppositionality of the anticolonial stance, postcolonial pedagogy is depicted as contingent, conflicted, but because of its decentralized, nonhierarchical nature potentially better able to redefine the field of possibilities than a radicalization of the master’s tools. *Wizard of the Crow* refuses to retreat from the intellectual’s obligation to oppose and critique global exploitation and inequality, positioning postcolonialism not as an abandonment or surmounting of anticolonialism as much as a re-imagining of its goals in changed circumstances. The novel seeks to imagine a decolonizing form of education that can stand against without replicating patriarchy and colonial hierarchy.

In his review of *Wizard of the Crow*, Simon Gikandi notes the way the novel invokes Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s previous work, most obviously by introducing one of the novel’s main characters while she reads *Devil on the Cross*. This intertextual clue leads Gikandi to argue that “*Wizard of the Crow* is a repetition of Ngũgĩ’s later novels, especially *Petals of Blood* and [. . .] *Devil on the Cross*” (“Postcolonial Wizard” 168). Gikandi points to how *Wizard of the Crow* can be usefully read as Ngũgĩ returning to the tropes of what Gikandi identifies as “the later political novels” of the 1970s and 1980s (167). But rather than just thinking about *Wizard of the Crow* as a rewriting of Ngũgĩ’s later novels, in this essay I want to look at how *Wizard of the Crow* returns to an issue that goes back to Ngũgĩ’s earliest published

fiction: the issue of education. *Wizard of the Crow* may not seem as obviously about education as some of Ngũgĩ's earlier work, and critics have focused instead on other aspects of the novel, especially its representation of storytelling. But as my discussion shows, *Wizard of the Crow* features a variety of teachers and educational situations, and proves to be deeply invested in exploring different philosophies of pedagogy.

Wizard of the Crow's encyclopedic nature makes it an overt summing up of all of Ngũgĩ's previous work. At the same time, the novel explicitly positions itself as a break from what came before by rethinking the anticolonial ideologies contained in the earlier work in light of what *Wizard of the Crow* references as an expanding postcoloniality. This shift can be seen in how the figure of the teacher is represented and in the philosophy of pedagogy the novel puts forward. Unlike the radical oppositionality made possible by an anticolonial stance, postcolonial pedagogy is depicted as contingent, conflicted, but because of its decentralized, nonhierarchical nature potentially better able to redefine the field of possibilities than the radicalization of the master's tools offered by Fanonian nationalism. *Wizard of the Crow* refuses to retreat from the idea of the intellectual's obligation to oppose and critique global exploitation and inequality, positioning postcolonialism not as an abandonment or surmounting of anticolonialism as much as a re-imagining of its goals in changed circumstances. The novel seeks to imagine a decolonizing form of education that can stand against without replicating patriarchy and colonial hierarchy.

My argument intervenes in two of the main critical debates surrounding Ngũgĩ's work: his representation of education and his representation of gender relations. The critical consensus in each of these debates traces a trajectory from colonial contradiction in early novels like *Weep Not, Child* and *The River Between* to a dialectical synthesis provided by anticolonialism in *Petals of Blood*. Critics focusing on education generally emphasize the successes of this anticolonial synthesis¹; by contrast, those focusing on gender see this anticolonialism reinscribing female subordination.² My argument calls attention to how *Wizard of the Crow* disrupts the teleology critics see in Ngũgĩ's novelistic career by opening back up the contradictions and exploring a postcolonial context in which synthesis may no longer be possible or even desirable. By looking at Ngũgĩ's representation of pedagogy and gender together, and by bringing *Wizard of the Crow* into the conversation, I show how the anticolonial ideology of education celebrated by the critics is critiqued in Ngũgĩ's latest work as still gendered and hierarchical.

Ngũgĩ tackles issues of leadership, education, and gender in virtually all of his writing. Covering all of Ngũgĩ's work on the subject is therefore beyond the scope of this essay; *A Grain of Wheat*, *Devil on the Cross*, *Matigari*, his plays and his essays are other places where engagement with these issues can be productively explored. Instead, I look at representative texts from three moments in his career that demonstrate how rather than a clear trajectory ending in an embrace of an anticolonial mode of teaching, Ngũgĩ continues to interrogate the postcolonial efficacy of anticolonial pedagogy by engaging with gender even more explicitly. The first section of my essay therefore focuses on how his earliest novels highlight the contradictions between education as a primary tool of colonial domination and emasculation versus an anticolonial aspiration that teaching be a heroic masculine activity in the service of dismantling that oppressive apparatus. From there, I turn

to how *Petals of Blood* submerges the first part of that contradiction by distinguishing the complicit neocolonial educator from the anticolonial ideal of the teacher as consciousness-raising man of action. The final section of my essay then argues that *Wizard of the Crow* breaks away from this teleology with a foregrounding of the same contradictions as the earlier novels, now embodied in the idea of post-colonial storytelling as the novelist's mode of an antimasculinist, egalitarian, still revolutionary form of pedagogy.

THE ALIENATION OF LEADERSHIP: *WEEP NOT, CHILD AND THE RIVER BETWEEN*

The opening pages of Ngũgĩ's first published novel introduce education as a central issue in the author's imaginary. *Weep Not, Child* (1964) adopts a view of formal education as alienation and false consciousness, as the young male protagonist Njoroge is indoctrinated into European ways of seeing through his schooling. The earliest mentions of education associate it with the acquisition of wealth and opportunities for mobility, as Njoroge tells his brother "I think Jacobo is as rich as Mr. Howland because he got education [. . .] I was thinking that if both of us could learn and become like John, the big son of Jacobo, it would be a good thing. People say that because he has finished all the learning in Kenya, he will now go far away" (*Weep Not* 4). Education is thus important to Njoroge primarily as an escape from his community, and a little later in the same conversation he identifies "the home of learning" as England (5). Education also offers some hope of defending the nation: one character voices the view that "if people had education, the white man would not have taken all the land" (37) while Njoroge's father hopes that "education [. . .] would lead to the recovery of the lost lands" (39). But the schooling available to Njoroge is like the road that "came with the white men" and represents the modernization offered by colonialism. The road is "long and broad and shone with black tar, and when you travelled along it on hot days you saw little lakes ahead of you. But when you went near, the lakes vanished, to appear again a little farther ahead. Some people called them the devil's waters because they deceived you and made you more thirsty if your throat was already dry" (5). Ngũgĩ depicts the technologies of European colonial modernity—whether infrastructural projects like this road or the education system described by Gauri Viswanathan in *Masks of Conquest*—as offering a mirage of advancement that are ultimately not the real nourishment they promise.

Rather than turning away from education, though, Ngũgĩ's novels gradually seek alternative, nationalist vocations for the teacher. Even as *Weep Not, Child* presents education as European indoctrination, storytelling offers an alternative site of pedagogy where Njoroge must learn the truth of his people's history. Yet the novel depicts storytelling as a lecturing style that is explicitly patriarchal: storytelling is associated specifically with his father (23–26) and as the novel continues with men in general (50, 57, 67). While storytelling therefore provides Njoroge an avenue towards nationalist consciousness meant to counter the worldview imparted by formal education, the limitations of this alternative come to be embodied through the image of Jomo Kenyatta as Moses. Njoroge's desire to emulate this model of anticolonial leadership turns out to reinforce the view of himself as super-human and the people as passive and in need of uplift: as he thinks about the suffering of

the village, he takes heart that “God had done this often to the children of Israel. But He always sent somebody to rescue them” (95). Njoroge convinces himself that educational achievement will make him this savior, coming to this conclusion from two apparently contradictory inspirations: first, after hearing a sermon in church about the need to bring about an apocalyptic destruction of the existing world in order to redeem it; and second, when one of the middle-class collaborators with British rule advises him to keep working hard in school because “it is such as you who must work hard and rebuild the country” (92). That Njoroge’s inspiration comes from such contradictory sources shows how anticolonialism remains structured by the colonial model of education as patriarchal indoctrination. It therefore comes as no surprise when Isaka, one of Njoroge’s first teachers in the Europeanized school, later becomes a Mau Mau leader who passionately preaches armed insurrection, remaining within the lecturing model by delivering his anticolonial lessons via sermons.

All of Ngũgĩ’s novels explore this contradictory positioning of the teacher, as the novelist seeks to imagine ways for the intellectual to navigate between pushing the nation towards consciousness while avoiding a vanguardist condescension that views the people as empty vessels to be filled with superior knowledge. *The River Between*, written before *Weep Not, Child* though published a year after it in 1965, also foregrounds the question of education, but makes its connection to leadership of the nation even more explicit.³ *The River Between* is set during an earlier time period, as European culture is only beginning to make inroads in the rural east African valley where the novel is set. The conflict seems at first even more straightforward than that of *Weep Not, Child*, with Christian missionaries forcing foreign customs on what seems to be a romantic pre-colonial utopia. As the Makuyu side of the river begins to embrace Christian teachings, the community’s split is rendered physical as the other side—Kameno—tries to hold onto tradition. Christianity as it arrives in this setting carries an ideology of obedience to colonial power—Makuyu’s truest believer knows “it was his duty as a Christian to obey the government, giving unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s” (31)—and this same character also learns self-hatred, believing “circumcision to be so sinful that he devoted a prayer to asking God to forgive him for marrying a woman who had been circumcised” (31). In the context of European “contamination” (125) of local culture and of women’s bodies, the novel opens with the Kameno elder Chege teaching his son, Waiyaki, that his inheritance carries with it the responsibility to “fight back [. . .] to lead and save the people” (20). Chege’s oneness with the natural world, “for he knew, more than any other person, the ways of the land and the hidden things of the tribe” (7), allows him to tell Waiyaki that “salvation shall come from the hills” (21). Chege is like the leader as Moses from *Weep Not, Child*: he has access to a truth others cannot see, acquired from a privileged relationship with the natural world that he has processed for his people, and this specialized knowledge gives him a responsibility to push them to follow him.

While *The River Between* thus opens by presenting a stark world of binary oppositions, as the novel develops, it shows the same ambivalences as *Weep Not, Child*. Waiyaki aspires to fulfill his father’s prophesy, but isn’t sure what model of leadership will be most effective. Chege, despite being able to “see visions of the future” (*River Between* 7), has not been able to convince his people of the threat of

white invaders: “ever since he had warned the people against Siriana Missionary Centre and they had refused to hear his voice, he had talked little, keeping all thoughts to himself” (7). Chege’s failure seems to come from his idea of leadership as something placing him in the lecturer position outside and above the community; his access to truth gives him prestige as one of “the select few sent by Murungo to save a people in their hour of need” (3) even as it ironically alienates him from the community he seeks to help. The novel shows how this idea of the people, as in need of heroic saving, closely resembles the leadership style of Joshua, the Christian convert who has become a preacher in Makuyu. Joshua worries that “the blindness of the people” means that they “would not walk in the light” of Christianity (32); he is offering his people a different salvation than Chege’s, but finds his followers equally reluctant to being led. If Chege’s people are deaf to his warnings about loss of tradition, Joshua’s are blind to the enlightened European truth he wants to spread.

While each side gradually becomes more and more entrenched in wanting to establish the “purity” of their beliefs (87), *The River Between* focuses on the in-between character of Waiyaki who hopes to reunite the warring groups through a hybridized identity.⁴ In order to help his people, he seeks out education so that he might “learn all the wisdom and all the secrets of the white man” (20). In the process, Waiyaki becomes convinced that education is the key to salvation, and establishes a set of indigenous schools to be alternatives to the missionaries’ Siriana Secondary School. Seeking to replace the content of the colonial schools with native teaching, however, fails to address the problem of pedagogical form: as Apollo Amoko puts it in his reading of the novel, “through Waiyaki, the colonial school in *The River Between* is figured [. . .] as a discursive space that could strategically allow for cultural renewal and anticolonial resistance” (42). But adopting the colonial technology to new ends is not enough, and this project fails as Waiyaki falls into a vision of himself as “shepherd” (*River Between* 96)—a metaphor that Joshua also uses (85) and entails thinking of his people as “sheep” (99). Waiyaki desires simultaneously to “serve the people” (67) as well as to “awaken” (69) and “uplift” (87) them, contradictory goals that he cannot reconcile. Even his idea of service is ultimately selfish: in one moment he “saw a tribe great with many educated sons and daughters” even as he relishes “all of them acknowledging their debt to him” (87). Waiyaki’s ambitions gradually distance him from understanding the community: his father realizes soon after Waiyaki starts school that “he could not really understand his son” (54) while his friend Kinuthia begins to wonder “if the vision of a new light had not blinded” Waiyaki (118). *The River Between* ends with Waiyaki being rejected by his people because he is less able to understand their needs and desires than the more cynical populists who come to see him as a threat.

The failure of the various models of leadership available seems to come from the impossibility of imagining a relationship between leader and people that retains the leader’s pedagogical ability to show his people truths they cannot see by themselves but doesn’t enforce a hierarchy between those with privileged knowledge and those without. As in *Weep Not, Child*, the central hierarchies in *The River Between* are again generational and gendered. In other words, the modes of leadership presented in both novels are explicitly patriarchal. Not only is wisdom embodied by elders, but specifically by elder men. One of the primary injunctions

repeated to Joshua's Christian daughters is "obey your father" (34), a sentiment Chege's son agrees the daughters must follow (49). Meanwhile, Chege's use of storytelling serves a similar role to the stories of Njoroge's father in *Weep Not, Child*, to offer an alternative history to that of the European schools. Yet these stories end up providing justification of patriarchy: "Long ago women used to rule this land and its men. They were harsh and men began to resent their hard hand. So when all the women were pregnant, men came together and overthrew them [. . .]. It was then Waiyaki understood why his mother owned nothing" (15). Chege tells this story as the history of his people, but the emphasis on female sexuality as making women unfit to rule seems obviously intended to naturalize current inequalities in gender roles. Fidelity to male ancestors is emphasized through a story that denigrates the matrilineal passing on of inheritance potentially embodied by female pregnancy. The hierarchies and exclusions embedded in the storytelling tradition Chege represents cannot finally be reconciled with the democratizing consciousness-raising lessons the protagonists of these early novels seek to spread.

THE ANTICOLONIAL RESOLUTION: *PETALS OF BLOOD*

Weep Not, Child and *The River Between* thus end with a crisis of faith for their protagonists, who cannot imagine a way forward for the male intellectual amidst the competing demands of pedagogy without hierarchy. In the case of Waiyaki, though, there seems to be a gradual realization as the novel closes that his weakness was in not attaching his educational project to a more overtly political movement. As Clifford Robson puts it: "[Waiyaki's] lack of interest in political action leave[s] him prone to the attacks of enemies [. . .]. His vision of a highly learned people blinds him to their real needs" (20). *Petals of Blood* (1977) posits a model of teaching that offers a resolution to what the earlier novels identify as contradictions by fully embracing a heroic anticolonial pedagogy that it can oppose to neocolonial quietism or collaboration. *Petals of Blood* features teachers seeking to bring knowledge to the folk and instill in them a revolutionary consciousness. The novel is able to resolve the earlier ambivalences by focusing on pedagogical content and no longer worrying about the lecturing form. Two novelistic techniques enable this submerging of contradictions. First, whereas *Weep Not, Child* and *The River Between* each features a single protagonist who embodies both the positive potential for anticolonial pedagogy as well as the contaminating guilt of that activity's association with colonialism and Christianity, in *Petals of Blood* those two aspects of the teacher are divided between two characters, Karega and Munira, so that the anticolonial teacher can ultimately be fully embraced and the neocolonial rejected. Secondly, rather than placing stories meant to teach the reader about Kenya's history in the mouths of characters whose authority can be called into question, *Petals of Blood* conflates the narrative voice and point of view of the characters in a way that naturalizes those stories and makes the novel itself an anticolonial lesson.

In both *Weep Not, Child* and *The River Between*, the ambivalences over education are embodied by a single character. Njoroge in *Weep Not, Child* and Waiyaki in *The River Between* each attempt to use their experiences in the colonial educational system to navigate between either a backward-looking return to tradition or a full embrace of the colonial modernity spread by Christian missionaries. *Petals of Blood*

places two teachers at its center in order to depict both a colonial pedagogy but also an anticolonial alternative. Munira picks up his project where Waiyaki left off: “Some of us who had schooling . . . we tended to leave the struggle for Uhuru to ordinary people. [. . .] But now, with independence, we have a chance to pay back” (*Petals* 10). In this statement, Munira articulates both the intellectual’s hesitance to be part of the political movement as well as a vaguely nationalistic understanding of his postcolonial vocation as a chance to serve his people. As the novel continues, though, Munira remains unable to commit to anything larger than himself until he becomes a born-again convert to an evangelical Christianity sponsored by Billy Graham and other apostles of US neocolonialism (306).

While Munira shows how the educated elite can become passive through their distancing from the struggles of peasants and workers, *Petals of Blood* presents in Karega a virile alternative unseen in the earlier novels. The novel contrasts Munira’s trajectory towards further alienation with Karega’s growing class consciousness. The two share many characteristics, including the same educational background and eventual employment together in Ilmorog’s school. But the two teachers articulate their different ideologies specifically in terms of pedagogy. Munira insists that politics have no place in the classroom, that a teacher’s job is to teach “simple facts [. . .] just so [students] can pass their CPE. Yes, information, not interpretation. [. . .] Let’s teach facts, facts, and not propaganda about blackness, African peoples, all that, because that is politics, and they know the tribe they belong to” (246). Karega views the kind of detachment Munira articulates here as neocolonial capitulation to a status quo that promotes Westernization and devalues local culture:

I do not agree with that approach [. . .] I cannot accept that there is a stage in our growth as human beings when all we need are facts and information. [. . .] Are there pure facts? When I am looking at you, how much I see of you is conditioned by where I stand or sit; by the amount of light in this room; by the power of my eyes; by whether my mind is occupied with other thoughts and what thoughts. [. . .] Now let’s look at this propaganda which is Not Facts. The oppression of black people is a fact. The scattering of Africans into the four corners of the earth is a fact [. . .] That our people resisted European intrusion is a fact [. . .] Our children must look at the things that deformed us yesterday, that are deforming us today. They must also look at the things which formed us yesterday, which will creatively form us into a new breed of men and women who will not be afraid to link hands with children from other lands on the basis of an unashamed immersion in the struggle against those things that dwarf us. Liberation: no child is ever too young to think about this. (246–47)

In this long speech, Karega explains the pedagogical theory that he has been struggling towards throughout the novel. His inability to accept a form of teaching disconnected from the practical problems of his community, his desire to include locally relevant material in the classroom, his fascination with a litany of masculine black resistance fighters from Toussaint Louverture and Nat Turner to Kwame Nkrumah and Amílcar Cabral (137), all come together after his meeting with the radical lawyer gives him an ideological framework in which to forge his identity as anticolonial intellectual. Karega must ultimately leave the formal educational system in order to pursue this activity, and brings his pedagogical impulse to the

task of educating workers to give them a consciousness of their exploitation and how to organize against it.

Petals of Blood thus posits an anticolonial role for the intellectual that seems able to overcome the guilt over alienation and betrayal that characterize the earlier novels. But even as the novel presents Karega as a heroic masculine alternative to Munira's dislocation from the community, the correspondences between the various intellectual characters potentially undermine the idea that Karega can escape from the structural challenges Munira fails to overcome. The pairing of Karega and Munira repeats the larger political struggle between the radical lawyer who mentors Karega and the corrupt Member of Parliament who is ultimately most responsible for selling his constituents to tourism and multinational corporations. All of these characters share similar educational backgrounds, and the MP even sees himself in Karega, finding it "strange, that he should be talking the way I used to talk" (178). The lawyer, too, despite being the most revolutionary character in the novel also displays hints that personal ambition may undermine his commitment to the community: "[Karega] had not quite been able to understand the lawyer: he genuinely loved people: he could see and even analyse what had happened in a way that few others could do: yet . . . he seemed at the same time fascinated by property and the social power and authority it gave him" (301). Karega and the lawyer see their duty as raising the consciousness of the people, but they do so in the same style used by the English schoolmasters from the colonial school who "would lecture them" on how "Jesus and Shakespeare had changed the English language" (215). The lawyer is able to see how these lectures were not meant to "prepare me to understand things" but instead "to make us accept our inferiority so as to accept their superiority and their rule over us" (165). Yet Karega, too, can only imagine how to "enlarge [the students'] consciousness so that they could see themselves, Ilmorog and Kenya as part of a larger whole" (109) through the mode of implanting this new information in the minds of his listeners. Munira observes almost immediately that Karega makes his anticolonial plea by "beginning to lecture me, probably from a book" (59), and as the novel continues Karega falls back into long speeches that frequently succeed in persuading people to his cause but replicate the lecturing form learned in the colonial school.

While on the level of plot, *Petals of Blood* therefore explores an anticolonial model of intellectual work that adapts colonial technologies to oppositional ends, the novel's style enacts the same process.⁵ In Ngũgĩ's earlier novels, storytelling emerged as a site where alternative versions of Kenyan history could be presented to combat the colonial version taught in schools. *Weep Not, Child* and *The River Between* explicitly attached those stories to the fathers, Ngotho and Chege, who use storytelling to pass familial and local knowledge on to their sons. The ambivalence of those early novels comes from the clear sense that this knowledge is not pure but is situated as ideologically connected to the patriarchal traditions represented by these fathers: the stories told by the fathers carry an obvious truth-value in teaching the sons (and by extension, the readers) of the inequalities and injustices wrought by colonial incursions, even as that truth-value is not located as transcendental or outside of the story. In fact, these earlier novels make the truth of the fathers' stories tenuous enough that Simon Gikandi can refer to *Weep Not, Child* "undermin[ing], in a systematic and blunt manner, the paradigm of prophetic restoration associated with paternal figures" (*Ngugi wa Thiong'o* 83),

while Amoko calls attention to how *The River Between* offers “a myth of origins that remains firmly attuned to its fictiveness even as it appears to assert its anticolonial necessity” (40). *Petals of Blood* contains stories about the history of colonialism that resemble those told in the earlier novels, but they have now become part of a naturalized narrative voice that calls less attention its own contingency. Long excursions into the historical claims of the Kenyan people to the land are attributed only through the passive construction “it is said” (68) or by opposing “our present day historians, following on similar theories yarned out by defenders of imperialism” with “legends passed from generation to generation by the poets and players of Gichandi, Litungu and Nyatiti supplemented by the most recent archaeological and linguistic researches and also by what we can glean from between the lines of the records of the colonial adventures of the last few centuries” (67–68). This form of anticolonial storytelling distrusts the colonial archive, but puts faith in an oral archive where truth can be gleaned. Even when these stories are credited to characters within the text, as when Nyakinyua tells the story of European arrival, her story begins without quotation marks and the reader only becomes aware that she has been the one telling this story when she has finished. Narrating this female elder’s story of “the founding patriarch” (120) in free indirect discourse naturalizes the story and makes it appear to be the narrative voice of the novel, appropriating the woman as storyteller to an almost invisibly patriarchal version of the past. Rather than using characters within the novel to depict the pedagogical value of stories, as in *Weep Not, Child* and *The River Between*, *Petals of Blood* more directly seeks to implant this information in its reader by positioning these stories outside of any one character’s point of view.

Petals of Blood thus enacts for its readers the sort of anticolonial processing of the world that Karega and the lawyer carry out for other characters within the story. The stories are not expected to speak for themselves, but need authorial explanation to make sure the reader learns the right lesson. Abdulla’s injury in the Mau Mau rebellion that leaves him crippled is *not* open to the reader’s interpretation: towards the end of the novel, its metaphorical function is explained directly, that “we were all like Abdulla but instead of our limbs it was our souls that were maimed” (297). Similarly, Wanja’s life of prostitution *must* be read as national allegory: “She had chosen, then, the side of the Kimerias of post-Independence Kenya” (336). The novel’s desire to provide not only the stories but the correct interpretation of them leads to Karega’s point of view eventually becoming the dominant voice of free indirect discourse, with his ultimate observation on “the true lesson of history” appearing in the voice of the narrative rather than in quotes: “that the so-called victims, the poor, the downtrodden, the masses, had always struggled with spears and arrows, with their hands and songs of courage and hope, to end their oppression and exploitation: that they would continue struggling until a human kingdom came” (303). *Petals of Blood* eliminates the ambivalence over adopting the pedagogical techniques of the colonial education system in making itself a lecturing text meant to deposit a consciousness-raising lesson in its readers.

EMBRACING POSTCOLONIAL CONTINGENCY: WIZARD OF THE CROW

Wizard of the Crow is not as obviously about education as some of Ngũgĩ's earlier novels. It centers instead on a different metaphor for the intellectual, as "post-colonial witch doctor" (405). Critics like Joseph McLaren have emphasized the novelty of *Wizard of the Crow* in terms of its critique of globalization as a new form of imperialism and international domination for Africa. Ngũgĩ's most recent novel imagines how the committed intellectual needs new methods to engage with this changed postcolonial reality. Through the figure of the postcolonial witch doctor, the novel explores the issue of pedagogy by foregrounding the same contradictions seen in the earlier work. *Wizard of the Crow* returns to the ambivalence and contradictions of *Weep Not, Child* or *The River Between*. But whereas these earliest novels end with their male protagonists failing to imagine a successful way of inhabiting the teacher identity without alienating themselves from the community, *Wizard of the Crow* offers a pedagogical project that does not sweep aside the contradictions—this is not the resolution offered in the anticolonial nationalist pedagogy of *Petals of Blood*. Instead, *Wizard of the Crow* shows a postcolonial teaching style that embraces ambivalence, challenges patriarchy, and offers a new questioning teacherly project distinct from colonial, neocolonial, or anticolonial pedagogy.

The central conflict in *Wizard of the Crow*, between the Ruler's regime and those who oppose it, is figured explicitly as a discursive struggle. The proliferation of truths, rumors, gossip, and propaganda that carries the story forward reflects the Ruler's desire to position himself as the "sole voice of the people," and his attempts to wipe out those he labels "terrorists" (25) who call themselves "the Movement for the Voice of the People" (24). This exploration of the relationship between totalitarianism and narration—and the potential of storytelling to either reinforce or undermine dictatorship—has been articulated by many others, memorably in Junot Díaz's novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. In a long footnote, the narrator of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* asks: "What is it with Dictators and Writers, anyway? [. . .] Rushdie claims that tyrants and scribblers are natural antagonists, but I think that's too simple. It lets writers off pretty easy. Dictators, in my opinion, just know competition when they see it. Same with writers. Like, after all, recognizes like" (97).⁶ Similarly, the multiplicity of truths in *Wizard of the Crow* seems obviously meant to contrast with the desire to monopolize narration on the part of the Ruler.

Yet in addition to featuring a cast of competing storytellers, *Wizard of the Crow* also is peopled by a wide range of teachers. Kamĩĩ's first love, Wariara, initially pursues a teaching career, though her failure to land a job in education leads her into sex work (66–70). Kamĩĩ's father, Mwalimu Karĩĩĩ, also has a past in education, losing his job "because of his attempts to unionize teachers in his area" (129). The father's story directly evokes the stories from the colonial and decolonization era that Ngũgĩ told in *Weep Not, Child*, *The River Between* and *Petals of Blood*, where educators and union leaders took center stage. But while these secondary characters invoke the presence of teachers so central to the earlier novels, the most prominent characters from *Wizard of the Crow* with a background in teaching are primarily members of the male ruling class, Aburĩĩa's patriarchs.

The Ruler himself, the center around which much of *Wizard of the Crow* and Aburiria revolves, is a former teacher. He began his ascent to power as “assistant headmaster of an African school on a settler’s farm in western Aburiria” (231), making him the direct evolution of Waiyaki and Munira. Among his many honorifics the Ruler is referred to as “teacher of teachers, the number one teacher” and “the source of all the knowledge in the world” (541). The Ruler is particularly aware that to fulfill his aspirations to define himself as the beginning and end of Aburirian reality requires that he not only control the various forms of media in the country but also have “mastered all the book learning” (541). His various henchmen are equally products of their experiences as teachers. Titus Tajirika, who eventually succeeds the Ruler as Emperor of Aburiria, began his career as “a substitute teacher, his employment depending on women teachers going on maternity leave,” which seems to explain some of his resentment towards women, including his wife who “as a certified teacher [. . .] had been the more secure of the two” (450). A background in the education field thus appears in *Wizard of the Crow* to be a near prerequisite for ascent into the neocolonial oligarchy.

Among these members of the ruling class, John Kaniürü most closely repeats the story of Waiyaki: Kaniürü is an artist from the lower classes who becomes involved in teaching because of vague aspirations to help the nationalist movement “build a new tomorrow” (80). Throughout the novel Kaniürü remains the artist searching for a way to give his art meaning, especially in a context where his ability to marry is hampered by a wealthy father-in-law-to-be who thinks “drawing pictures was the work of cripples, children, and feeble women or men afraid to use their muscles” (81). Seeking out a way to be an artist and hold onto his masculinity, Kaniürü gets a job making architectural sketches for the government because of his “imagination” and “inspiration” (109), and then later uses “his calligraphic skills” in forging superiors’ signatures in order to embezzle money (536). His experience as portrait artist gives him a mind for faces that makes him an effective government informant, and eventually, Kaniürü finds “a definite role for art in human life, or at least in his life” (656) by painting a camouflaging scene of heaven to turn the rapidly inflating Ruler into a god: the Ruler marvels at how “Kaniürü’s wiles had [. . .] changed a thing of shame and weakness into one of power and glory. Here was a good example of committed art” (667).

Despite his ability to give his intellectual work a political importance and therefore restore his masculinity in the father’s eyes, as a university teacher who “hated university students with a passion” Kaniürü presents a negative pedagogical model (564). His is the mode of dominating teaching practiced by the men of the ruling class, even those without explicit experience as educators. The scene in which Sikiokuu instructs Tajirika on how to give his confession demonstrates this model. As Tajirika undergoes torture, Sikiokuu coaches him to implicate one of the rival ministers in inspiring Tajirika with the idea to overthrow the Ruler: “What you are saying is that somebody else infected you with the illness? [. . .] Maybe your friend Machokali,” Sikiokuu asked, a little irritated at being forced to voice the name. [. . .] “What you are trying to say is that Machokali gave you the virus” (398). Sikiokuu eventually succeeds in getting Tajirika to repeat the version of events that will eventually lead to Machokali’s execution, with Tajirika reflecting on “how restful it was to surrender one’s mind to another person” (401). Sikiokuu’s pedagogical approach here, of the lecturer insisting on his pupil “seeing

Machokali through Sikiokuu's eyes" (401), is the approach to education used by the Ruler's government throughout *Wizard of the Crow*. Sikiokuu's desire in these interrogations to force Tajirika to see the world a certain way is reflected on the national level in the Minister of Education's plan to put together a collection of the Ruler's "theory of politics" to give everyone in the country a unified curriculum and way of seeing (163).

This mode of teaching—as the dominating teacher molding the passive students to his desires—is explicitly gendered in the novel through the depiction of Kaniürü's relationship with women. In his relationship with Nyawīra, for example, he "always believed, even after they divorced, that he could convert her to his own way of looking at the world. He was the man to lead and she a woman to follow" (147). Kaniürü, like Sikiokuu, wants to force others to see things his way, in this case in terms of gender roles that require female submission. Indeed, it appears that within *Wizard of the Crow*, that no matter their political persuasion, the men agree on patriarchy. At the state house, all of the rivalries between Machokali and Sikiokuu take a backseat when "the treachery of trusted wives" comes up (240), and when Kaniürü argues with Nyawīra's father about her role in subversive activities, the conversation ends with both agreeing, "women. They surely know how to bring disaster into homes [. . .]. That's why our ancestors denied women the right to own property" (291), a statement directly echoing Chege's story justifying female dispossession in *The River Between*. The source of the Ruler's power comes in part from the international agreement on the necessity of patriarchy for stability: the Global Bank and US Ambassador express repeated concern about whether or not the Ruler can keep the women of his country in check, and the Ruler at one point reflects that "male authority at home was absolute, and this was the one belief shared by despots and democrats alike, colonialists and anticolonialists, men and women and leaders of all established faiths" (262).

While *Petals of Blood* shows the anticolonial opponents of European indoctrination adopting the system's tactics to fight against it, *Wizard of the Crow* depicts the underground opposition developing a different form of pedagogy. The figure of the Wizard of the Crow in particular, as a sometimes genderless character inhabited at times by Kamĩtĩ and at times by Nyawīra, provides a different, postcolonial kind of teacher. Rather than lecturing to people or attempting to instill in them a certain set of beliefs, Kamĩtĩ poses questions to lead people to realizations that can potentially help them towards a new consciousness. Kamĩtĩ's use of questions encourages people to see themselves differently. Unlike Kaniürü's and Sikiokuu's insistence on imposing their vision on others, Kamĩtĩ uses a mirror to make people self-reflective, and potentially self-critical of their own way of seeing. When as Wizard of the Crow he presents Kaniürü with a mirror and tells him to look in it because "it sees everything [. . .] even what is most hidden" (358), Kamĩtĩ doesn't have to analyze his patient: the mirror requires the patient analyze himself. He calls the attention of Tajirika and Vinjina to their "white-ache" through literally putting a mirror to the sources of their aspirations (180). The results of this form of teaching are much less immediately measurable than Kaniürü's or Sikiokuu's preference for forced indoctrination, and in fact Tajirika returns to his desires for whiteness as he seeks out a doctor to replace his body parts with white ones. But Vinjina gradually becomes more and more aware of her oppression as a woman, and after a few conversations Nyawīra observes that Vinjina's "awareness of being

wronged was the first step to political self-education" (431). As Vinjina commits herself to helping Nyawira, she becomes "no longer a passive recipient of other's ideas, fully participating" (465) and eventually realizes "she was in solidarity with people she had once thought evil" (632).

Kamiti's questioning pedagogy is frequently used to try to heal the powerful of Aburiria, who *Wizard of the Crow* seems to foreground as those needing re-education. But he wearies of that role, sounding like a disillusioned artist when he describes how "My divinations were an appetite for evil. Take Tajirika and his ilk; did I not breathe new life into him, increasing his self-confidence in doing evil? [. . .] I was an accessory to the very evil that revolted me" (207). This disillusionment ultimately prompts Kamiti to "turn my back on healing, divination, and the money, to embrace the life of a hermit in the wilderness" (207). He only returns to playing the Wizard to help more modest people, such as Maritha and Mariko. When this older couple comes to the Wizard for help in defeating the temptations of other people's flesh that they blame on Satan, he warns them: "I have no magic potions to give [. . .] I have no magic incantations; just continue in the path you have been walking. But look to how you walk" (279). The Wizard doesn't seek to convert Maritha and Mariko or to challenge their Christian beliefs.⁷ Even if those beliefs are part of what has led them to their problematic relationship with sexuality, the Wizard listens to them and understands their belief system, and he tries to work within that belief system to persuade them to take small steps towards changing their mindsets. He does call their attention to the gender roles that have created inequality in their relationship, asking "Is there anything in the Bible that says a man must not cook?" (280). In spite of Kamiti's specific injunction about reflecting on their division of domestic labor, he calls this the "one custom that you may want to change, as it does not offend your faith"; beyond that, he only asks that they "Talk, tell stories [. . .] Then warm some water. Undress each other. Wash each other. Then take turns rubbing oil onto each other [. . .] Is it not you, Christians, who say that the body is the temple of the Lord?" (280). Kamiti succeeds in teaching Maritha and Mariko a new way of interacting that leads them out of gratitude to help the Movement for the Voice of the People.

In addition to his use of questions and the mirror to make people look at themselves in a new way, Kamiti educates people through stories. Stories in *Wizard of the Crow* often have significant political functions, destabilizing the government by undermining the Ruler's version of the world or passing along coded information for the underground planning protests. Stories have the ability to sicken or to nourish, with the Wizard's most devoted chronicler, A. G., telling stories to listeners who "came away with food of the spirit: resilient hope that no matter how intolerable things seemed, a change for the better was always possible" (96). For Kamiti, stories teach, in a style the novel explicitly identifies as Christ-like. While Ngũgĩ's early novels look to Moses as the bringer of the light of truth to the ignorant, Kamiti speaks in parables. At the end of one such story, Tajirika marvels: "So even children's stories can teach us a thing or two about the ways of the world" (380). Kamiti's weary reply, "No wonder Jesus wept" (381), is only the most overt of the novel's effort to play up the religious resonances of his teaching style.

As male teacher, Kamiti might seem to fit into the explicitly gendered mode of teaching embodied by the men of the Ruler's regime. But he breaks away from this gendered model in his relationship with Nyawira, and it is with her role in

Wizard of the Crow that Ngũgĩ marks his most radical departure from his early novels. *Weep Not, Child* and *The River Between* featured female characters who existed only to highlight the existential and ideological struggles of the male protagonists. In the middle novels of *Petals of Blood*, *Devil on the Cross*, and *Matigari*, women like Wanja, Warĩnga, and Gũthera have more important roles but ultimately these novels focus on their sexual exploitation as metaphor for the neocolonial prostitution of the nation.⁸ In *Nyawĩra*, *Wizard of the Crow* makes the main revolutionary a woman, and has the Movement for the Voice of the People directly address the place of women in the nation. Domestic abuse, sex work, domestic labor, and many other issues relevant to women become the grounds on which the Ruler's regime is challenged.⁹

This new attitude towards gender marks a critique of the patriarchal lecturer from the earlier novels and a way of imagining a pedagogical relationship between equals in which each teaches and each learns. Kamĩtĩ certainly teaches Nyawĩra a number of important lessons, especially about Aburĩria's historical and cultural connections to India as well as respect for the natural world (266–67). But Nyawĩra is consistently the one who is able to give Kamĩtĩ a political framework within which to understand his own experiences and what he has seen: one of the main trajectories of *Wizard of the Crow* is Kamĩtĩ going from an initial "indifferent" belief that injustice and suffering "is the way of the world" (62), to his eventual decision to join the Movement for the Voice of the People in order to collectively challenge the status quo. Nyawĩra, as the novel's most consistent advocate of "oppos[ing] the right of might with the might of right," is directly responsible for teaching Kamĩtĩ to "use your God-given powers of divination for the benefit of the people, the movement" (210). Creating a relationship of equals as the model for a positive postcolonial pedagogy allows the novel to build towards Nyawĩra's realization in returning to the waterfall where Kamĩtĩ had taught her about the natural world: "The difference between their previous sojourn and now was most noticeable in her. Then she was the pupil and he the teacher. Now they were both pupil and teacher" (722). There is a relationship of equality and mutual respect, and in this feminist dismantling of hierarchy the novel offers a model not of active lecturer and passive recipient but of co-equal intellectual pursuit.¹⁰

In the teaching styles used by Nyawĩra and Kamĩtĩ, *Wizard of the Crow* imagines a pedagogy unlike that seen in Ngũgĩ's prior novels. Being a postcolonial wizard in this novel involves asking questions that force personal reflection, telling stories that meet the listener halfway and leave room for his or her interpretation, and avoiding didactic lecturing that assumes one person can provide answers to everyone. The inability of the Ruler's regime to identify the leaders of the opposition as well as the ability of Nyawĩra and Kamĩtĩ to find safety blending in with the "multitude" (251) demonstrate some of the advantages in this decentralized and non-hierarchical politics. This mode of teaching is not always the most efficient way of persuading people or converting them to the cause: many of the Wizard of the Crow's patients never really see the light. This form of teaching offers contingency, not resolution. *Wizard of the Crow* therefore turns away from anticolonial synthesis and accepts contradiction, making the case that if the alternative is using force to impose a singular patriarchal vision of the world, that in the long run a postcolonial questioning educational method will be more democratic and more sustaining.

NOTES

1. Both Carol Sicherman and G. D. Killian stress how Ngũgĩ's focus on education as alienation in his earliest novels gives way to the resolution of *Petals of Blood*, in which Karega must accept that "his mission as a union leader will be as a teacher" (Killian 46); by the time he wrote *Petals of Blood*, then, "the subversion of the mind" created by Ngũgĩ's Makerere education "had been undone" by his adoption of "Marx and Fanon" (Sicherman 33).

2. A number of critics have written about how women function in Ngũgĩ's novels; see in particular James Ogude and Elleke Boehmer. These critics tend to agree that the author's work "privileges political struggle over and above other forms of social struggle that women are engaged in" (Ogude 124). Boehmer lays out this argument through a trajectory emphasizing continuity despite apparent development in Ngũgĩ's representation of women: she argues for a shift from how the earliest fiction "upholds the patriarchal order by establishing archetypal roles and patterns of relationships" where women can only be "silent victim" (148) to Ngũgĩ's "diligent efforts to include women in the 'people's' struggle" (144) in *Petals of Blood* and *Devil on the Cross*. Even in the novels of the 1970s and '80s, though, Boehmer sees the female protagonists "as inspiration in a struggle that is still defined and operated by men" (150).

3. Patrick Williams presents an insightful reading of *The River Between* as a "contest for leadership" (22).

4. Simon Gikandi refers to Waiyaki's "split personality" as product of the "inherent tension between the idea of culture as a collective project and as a manifestation of individual will" (*Ngugi wa Thiong'o* 64) and later the desire to "master modernity as a prerequisite to communal regeneration" (66). For Gikandi, Waiyaki thus becomes a reflection of both Ngũgĩ's own ambivalences as a product of colonial education as well as the double consciousness of an entire generation of political leaders like Jomo Kenyatta (65).

5. Stewart Crehan's article, "The Politics of the Signifier," also examines how the style of *Petals of Blood* reflects its political aspirations. He identifies the novel's "implied attitude towards the peasant [. . .] that they are a repository of virtue who are merely useful as a stagy chorus" (9) as part and parcel of the novel's "monologism" where "the voice is always talking *down* to the people or speaking *for* them" (12).

6. Elena Machado Sáez provides an insightful analysis of how the form of Díaz's novel reflects this idea of author as dictator.

7. The students from my World Literature class raised the point in a class discussion about how the Wizard of the Crow cures Maritha and Mariko. They did not directly connect this example to the idea of teaching, but the way their observation fits into the argument I am making in this essay offers a good illustration of how the teacher sets up a framework for discussion, the students bring their own points of view and experiences to bear on the conversation, and the teacher can help provide tools for analyzing and understanding those observations.

8. Boehmer discusses the ways that despite Ngũgĩ's intentions to make women central in his later fiction, these attempts "distance and objectify women" (143); she also notes that in the nonfiction *Decolonising the Mind* Ngũgĩ "never mentions a woman writer, not in his numerous inventories of canonical literary names nor in the list of respected figures which he himself suggests for the university curricula" (145). The list of Nyawĩra's favorite African women writers in *Wizard of the Crow*—"Have you read Buchi Emecheta of Nigeria, *Joy of Motherhood*? Tsitsi Dangarembga of Zimbabwe, say, *Nervous Conditions*? Mariam Bo of Senegal, *So Long a Letter*?" (83)—seems only the most direct example of how this novel seeks to correct the problematic place of women in Ngũgĩ's earlier work.

9. Brendon Nicholls agrees that “*Wizard of the Crow* constitutes an unprecedented advance in its advocacy of women’s issues and concerns; seeing “perhaps the novel’s most courageous move” as the “frank and mature allusions to the debilitating illness of HIV/AIDS that has swept the African continent” (181). The novel’s advocacy of safe sex is certainly laudable. Taken in the context of the story from *The River Between* of women losing their power from pregnancy, Nyawira’s insistence that Kamiti wear a condom during sex also seems inextricable from the control of reproductive rights as a necessary part of women’s ability to challenge patriarchy. At the same time, the motif of the Ruler’s pregnancy as the major factor undermining his power taken in tandem with Nyawira’s need to avoid becoming a mother in order to pursue her revolutionary identity shows how there are significant aspects of female sexuality and reproduction that remain problematic in Ngugi’s writing.

10. Gikandi borrows from Doris Sommer’s *Foundational Fictions* to point out how *The River Between* and *Weep Not, Child* use “romantic love” to pair its respective protagonist with a member of the community representing some of the traits he is lacking, making romance “an imaginative mechanism for overcoming the divisions embedded in the polis” (Ngugi wa Thiong’o 66). This allegorical use of romance in the earlier novels makes the relationship of Nyawira and Kamiti all the more significant as a new way of imagining political and social relations.

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