

Allegory and the Retrieval of History: Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *The River Between* and *Matigari*

Eriks Uskalis

There is a need for analysis of postcolonial writing which, instead of assuming dissent as a given, locates its forms and conditions of possibility within contexts that both determine and set limits on its expression. If dissent is defined by the effects of the power against which it reacts, it follows that different contexts will call for varied expressions of dissent. In terms of literary production the effects of dissent are often seen as shifts in form and genre. Through acts of dissemination and interpellation, the state, as well as the relative hegemonic strength of colonial and postcolonial discourse, have significant ramifications on the formation of the context of dissent. I would argue, then, that an analysis of dissent which takes these factors into consideration should “study what was able to emerge within, and against, what seems at first glance to be a dominant field of social perception” (Polan qtd. in Lipseitz 31).

It should come as no surprise that class plays a major part in the conditions out of which literature is produced, but the tenets set out in the above statements work against dismissals of texts which do not express dissent in terms of class. Class formations, in postcolonial times, are often too overdetermined to provide coherent forms of dissent. This can be fleshed out by a discussion of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's novels *The River Between* and *Matigari*. The latter, published in 1987, features the same concerns as the former, published in 1965, two years after Kenya became independent. The two texts, however, are stylistically very different. I will argue that decades of class betrayal, and the breaking of Gikuyu codes of seeing have made it necessary for Ngugi situate his novel, *Matigari*, beyond the categories of (social) realism. Central to my argument here is the notion that in both novels allegory stands in as a positive act of compensation where other forms of dissent are unavailable for various historical reasons.

Ngugi's early ambivalence towards *Mau-Mau*¹ is compounded by the ambiguities of writing a realist novel with a single, central protagonist. These problematics are compensated for by the allegorical descriptions of land and natural elements. In the later novel *Matigari*, Ngugi is much more certain of his relationship with *Mau-Mau*, but the context of his writing has changed to involve a repressive regime whose rhetorical codes involve those of realism, and whose official discourses have denied *Mau-Mau*. Here allegory acts as a transgressive form that retrieves history and works against the codes of these official discourses.

Both novels feature a messianic character who is initially rejected by the community and is then later seen trying to foster unity amongst 'the people.' Both begin with descriptions of the natural surroundings of a village or city before the main narrative is situated within them, and both texts end outside the village or city. The similarities continue: early on, the main character breaks up a fight between two people, one of whom is obviously stronger than the other. Finally, the end of each novel can only symbolically point toward the future after the main, messianic character has been forced off the scene.

The River Between, the earlier of the two novels I discuss, narrates the story of Waiyaki, a man who believes he is destined to save his society after his father, Chege, a respected elder, tells him of a prophecy that a son will come from the hills "to save the people" (20). This sense of destiny is extremely personalized, a detail that sparks contradictions within the novel, and lays emphasis on the fact that dissent cannot be fully articulated. Instead, it must be embedded within allegorical forms. Waiyaki habitually desires to appeal to the people through notions of comradeship and brotherhood, but he continually deals with matters of decision by relying on his own, personal strength, a move that alienates the community. An example of this pattern can be seen when, in a meeting on education, Waiyaki manages to increase his own stature, but alienates Kabonyi and neglects to forge a reconciliation between the two ridges. The personal, in terms of stature, respect, and jealousy, is often privileged over the demands exerted by the community, and at times becomes the main motivating force of the novel.

This inversion of priorities is evocative of Ngugi's sense of uneasiness and the messianism that surrounds Waiyaki. His unease is located at the level of the unconscious, as Abdul JanMohamed has described as, "the close sympathy between the narrator and his hero" (208), a tension between the personal and the social which incites a negotiation at the level of ideology. Although written not very long after the *Mau-Mau* uprising, the novel is set several decades before, as if to imply that Ngugi feels ambivalent about the uprising and chooses to negotiate this by situating the novel in the past, a narrative strategy that obviously contrasts sharply with the way Ngugi directly addresses *Mau-Mau* in the novels following *The River Between*. The novel is set in the 1920s, when the first anti-colonial political associations, such as the Kikuyu Central Association, were set up in order to voice grievances and seek solutions to them. The largest of these grievances was mass outrage over the fact that white veterans of the World War had been offered large tracts of the best land in Kenya, land that was taken from the Gikuyu. It should be noted that the introduction of large scale farming over vast areas of land was contingent on the compliance of a generally reluctant black workforce. Significantly, at the time issues such as the practice of female circumcision, religion and access to education were, in addition to land relocation, the causes of conflict between the Gikuyu, the colonial government, and Christian institutions. Government and mission schools had sought to deny access to education for female students who had been circumcised, and 'Kikuyu Karing'a' independent schools had been set up as radical alternatives.

Despite the evident centrality of these themes the novel is curiously amorphous, in some ways deliberate, and in others less consciously markers of various unresolved political positions and contradictions. By 'amorphous' I mean to suggest that there are breakdowns where the themes do not connect in the expected places: Waiyaki is never sure how to connect education and the prophecy, for example. Indeed, education itself remains undefined, as Waiyaki never talks of the subjects to be taught, nor the methods to be employed. This lack of connection is symptomatic of a general inability or lack of desire to communicate; messages are sent but not delivered, people wait for others and

fail to meet them, and people consider talking to others only to decline invitations for dialogue. There is also no physical geographical centre: Waiyaki is intimately connected to the land mostly in deeply personal ways, such as on the journey taken with his father to the 'sacred grove' (14–21). Despite the fact that this journey is partly an initiation into the ways of the 'tribe,' one's experiences while on the journey are never shared, and are therefore rendered inert for readers of the novel. A lack of communication is further evident when Waiyaki leaves for school "without the knowledge of any but his father" (21). The lack of communication is even more exacerbated when Waiyaki learns that the prophecy was not spoken of by the Gikuyu, but chooses to keep the information to himself.

Within the novel a rift between the personal and the social is initiated when Chege sends Waiyaki to the missionary school to "learn all the wisdom and the secrets of the white man," so that he may be better equipped to save his people. This necessarily leads to a separation between Waiyaki and the 'tribe,' implying that the 'tribe' cannot be saved from within and through its own symbolic resources, but must instead reach outside itself. Waiyaki then represents the syncretic subjectivity of the colonized, and also demonstrates the dialectic whereby education is perceived both as an ideological tool used to separate the individual from his/her community, and as a method of gaining a form of power through which the colonized and colonizer can engage in dialogue and demand.

Waiyaki's visits home gradually reveal him to be alienated from his community, unable to respond to ceremonies and rituals, and yet the rift between individual and community is presented even more starkly than this. Waiyaki nurtures his personal dreams and the belief that he is the prophesied saviour alone; he only tells his friend of the prophecy near the end of the novel. Moreover, he never consults anyone over decisions and frequently is resentful when personal questions are asked of him, questions cannot and should not be translated into areas of community concern. This is especially true of Waiyaki's reaction when asked about his relationship with Nyambura, the uncircumcised daughter of the Christian preacher: "What had Nyambura got to do

with them? What? Could he not do whatever he wanted with his own life? Or was his life not his own? He would tell them nothing about Nyambura” (128).

In this confrontation with the community council Waiyaki is so convinced that he is right he cannot bring himself to argue his position—the prophecy almost comes to represent the achievement of talent and status of one exceptional individual without requiring this individual to connect with the society. Thus, while he is acclaimed by the community, the community is not aware the prophecy, which Waiyaki keeps to himself, and in turn, he himself is unaware of his social roles and responsibilities. He is told that he is in the Kiama (83), that he has become one of Joshua’s followers (111), that he will marry Nyambura (112) and that he is no longer a teacher (130). While all these statements concern social roles, they are not all true, and while they are framed as questions within the text, Ngugi has written them so that they appear to be facts. Facts, more importantly, of which Waiyaki is unaware, thus acutely demonstrating the rift between the individual and his community.

The novel ends with the collapse of any potential that the prophecy will be fulfilled through Waiyaki: he will not disown his beloved Nyambura, and their fate is to be decided by the Kiama, run by Waiyaki’s enemies. The failure to fulfil the prophecy is narrated in such a way as to suggest that it is not the fault either of Waiyaki, or of the messianic quality of the prophecy, but instead it seems that it is the fault of the intransigence of the ‘tribe.’ Waiyaki’s downfall is caused by his love for Nyambura, which is a transgression of the oath he made to serve the ‘tribe’ in its purity. Nyambura, being uncircumcised, violates this purity, but Ngugi’s presentation of Waiyaki’s impossible decision—between the personal and the community—demonstrates sympathy for the protagonist. The ‘tribe’ has produced Waiyaki through the prophecy: although it is stated that only Chege and Kabonyi know of the prophecy, Chege is presented as the complete embodiment of the ‘tribe,’ which implicitly argues that the prophecy therefore belongs to the whole ‘tribe’ and suggests that Waiyaki is consistent with it. Having produced Waiyaki through its cultural resources, the ‘tribe’ goes on to invoke the important cultural practice of ‘oathing,’ an act that precipitates Waiyaki’s downfall. The invoca-

tion of oathing reveals the ambiguities encoded within the novel, and it is as if the logic of the text, and its lack of distance between the narration and characterization of Waiyaki, was structured to manufacture the love between two people who are emblematic of the two different impulses in the 'tribe': Christian Gikuyu and precolonial Gikuyu. This conflict, represented as an intolerable choice, means that the text ultimately does not have to deal with the consequences of the messianism contained within the prophecy.

Despite channelling the 'energies' of the novel into the personal and away from the political, it is possible to find dissent encoded within the novel's 'political unconscious' and to see it doing more than simply enacting the divisions of ideology and contradictions within Gikuyu cultural practices. The physical setting, with its and close connections between the community, and its geography of, the river and the soil acts as an allegory of dissent since it articulates, at a discrete level, the political demands of the Gikuyu and the *Mau-Mau* uprising. The opening and closing paragraphs of the novel show a close link between the land and the people:

The river was called Honia, which meant cure, or bring-back-to-life. Honia river never dried: it seemed to possess a strong will to live, scorning droughts and weather changes. And it went on in the same way, never hurrying, never hesitating. People saw this and were happy...

The land was now silent. The two ridges lay side by side, hidden in the darkness. And Honia river went on flowing between them, down through the valley of life, its beat rising above the dark stillness, reaching into the heart of the people of Makuyu and Kamenno. (1, 152)

Although Ngugi avoids the impulse to resolve the ambivalence concerning *Mau-Mau* by situating the novel into the past, concerns filter through in positive ways by the symbolic distancing of the colonizers and the reintegration of the community with the land. Framing the events of the novel by descriptive passages that focus on the land somehow compensates for the problematic passage highlighted earlier in

which Waiyaki becomes more aware of the land, and the names and functions of various plants, but only does so while on a trip which locates him outside the community and, moreover, must be kept secret. The use of allegory allows for some movement into the political unconscious, whereas the contradictory state of Kenyan politics, and the contradictory positions Ngugi himself held at the time offer no direct political solution.

Bernth Lindfors, discussing Ngugi's early journalism, shows that at the time of writing the novel Ngugi was concerned with liberal rather than radical politics, was sceptical of seeing all issues as political, and suggested that the African writer should be objective and as critical of himself and his community as he is of the colonizer, emphasising that he "must touch on and capture the intricacies of a human situation with compassion and understanding" (23–41). Ngugi is also on record as having been deeply Christian at the time the novel was written. Drawing on Georges Balandier's work on messianism and nationalism, JanMohamed writes that "the political energy and frustration of a colonized people will manifest themselves in messianic and revivalist religions because all normal *political* channels for these energies are blocked by colonial repression" (221). This statement situates ideology not as false consciousness but as a result of the contextual and structural materials available to dissent. The lack of a politics for Ngugi personally, and of any outlet for the Gikuyu politically, explains the internal logic of the novel. Given that the novel was written at the time of independence, I would stress that the ambivalences belong more within Ngugi's personal realm, rather than the larger Gikuyu community's political realm, although this needs to be qualified by the fact that independence was already promising to be a betrayal of the aims and ideas of *Mau-Mau*.

By the time *Matigari* was written the situation was very different. Ngugi was by then a radical Marxist writing in the context of post-independence betrayal and within a repressive state whose official discourses have denied *Mau-Mau*. As early as 1968, President Kenyatta had said that, "*Mau-Mau* was a disease which had been eradicated, and must never be remembered again" (189). Ngugi's subsequent writing can be seen as an attempt to work against this statement—to remember *Mau-*

Mau. There are intriguing problematics in all this. The Gikuyu elite's class betrayal left the 'tribe' fractured and its codes of seeing cracked and abused. Interestingly, this same Gikuyu hegemony, in a sense enables Ngugi to portray Gikuyu symbols as a general nationalism.

A more completely hegemonic social set of codes and values means that dissent must be articulated within those codes, precisely because other codes are rendered inactive or unavailable. This hegemonic manipulation of signs fosters the reproduction of dominant ideologies and dominant power structures, since it is difficult to formulate radical dissent within discourses which function to perpetuate existing power relations. Conversely, incomplete hegemony allows for a wider circulation of different and more radically oppositional codes. This notion of code-manipulation is complicated and over-determined in *Matigari*, which in many ways is the most self-conscious encoding of Christian and Biblical allusions in any of Ngugi's novels, and is more thoroughgoing, in this respect, than *The River Between*. There are any number of examples: the sharing of food in prison clearly parallels Christ's Last Supper; Guthera's selfless devotion after conversion evokes Jesus and Mary Magdalene; Matigari is at times seen as a figure of the Second Coming and, like Christ in the desert, he has the ability to last a long time without food and water. These references are used allegorically and politically; Christian allusions are always placed within a wider social context, and indeed, in *Matigari*, actual church leaders are mocked and satirized.

There are two main reasons, determined by political context and the context of production, for this extensive use of Christian references. One is Ngugi's decision to write the novel in Gikuyu (and then to have it translated into English) as "a parabolic narrative . . . supposed to allow Gikuyu readers to orient themselves in the familiar tradition of orality and the Bible" (Gikandi 165). Gikandi similarly states that around 1963 "*Matigari*" became "a signifier of *Mau-Mau* and function[s], on a higher discursive level, as a trope mediating the colonial past and the postcolonial moment" (161). *Matigari*, then, becomes a way of talking about *Mau-Mau* in a context where it is being denied; language and religious discourse are thus deployed as weapons in hegemonic engage-

ments. This strategy is linked to the second main reason for the presence of Christian and Biblical references. David Maughan Brown persuasively argues that it does not imply a re-conversion on Ngugi's part, but instead shows a belief that liberation theology offers an ideological framework in which the rights of the dispossessed are foremost, and that it is also linked to Christian churches in Kenya being more vocal throughout the 1980s in their criticism of the government ("Rehabilitation" 173–80).

Matigari, set in the period of postcolonialism, frequently projects the action back to the *Mau-Mau* struggle. The main character is constructed outside of time, at once being a person within history, but also straddling history, time, and myth so as to confuse the distinctions between them. His name is not revealed until well into the novel, and this initial namelessness suggests that he in a sense symbolizes everybody, an idea Ngugi develops through the suggestion that roles are interchangeable:

But at the same time all wondered: who really was Matigari ma Njiruungi? A patriot? Angel Gabriel? Jesus Christ? Was he a human being or a spirit? A true or false prophet? A saviour or simply a lunatic? Was Matigari a man or a woman? A child or an adult? Or was he only an idea, an image, in people's minds? Who was he? (158)

Both Matigari and Guthera tell their stories several times in the third person so that the personal experience is distanced through the manner of its being told, but at the same time the personal is dispersed into intersubjectivity, as if the story could be that of anyone and, in many ways, is everyone's. A novel firmly set within postcolonialism nevertheless deals with the battle between colonizer and colonized, a battle which, in this novel, is personalized through the characters of Matigari and Settler Williams. The struggle between the two characters winds its way through the text, and its narrative has the sensation of displacement in that the battle is a battle between two single protagonists rather than two communities. This structure lends the battle a mythical and legendary texture, which effectively projects it outside of history.

The above comments should in no way be seen as an ideology critique of Ngugi's novel, although the way the novel has been described might suggest that he has somehow turned full circle by suddenly projecting and displacing history onto myth. Rather, the novel recovers and retraces history, but it does so by displacing it initially, and allegory has an important function in this double articulation of history both as material struggle and as myth. The struggle between Matigari and Settler Williams is displayed in terms that have the earmarks of Frantz Fanon's view that the colonized must replace the colonizer rather than come to some agreement, a view echoed by Matigari's statement "He and I cannot share the same roof" (144). The stylized struggle is summed up:

Take me, for example. Settler Williams and I spent many years in those mountains you see over there, hunting one another down through groves, caves, rivers, ditches, plains, everywhere. I would sometimes catch sight of him in the distance, but by the time I was ready to fire, he had disappeared in the bush, and he would be swallowed by the darkness of the forest.

At other times he would push me into a corner, but by the time he fired, I had already ducked. I would roll on the ground, crawl on my belly, and I would thus slip through his fingers. And so, day after day, week after week, month after month, many years rolled past.

Neither of us was prepared to surrender. Sometimes I would hit him and think that I had provided him with a ticket to hell. But just as I was about to come out singing songs of victory, news would reach me that he had been spotted elsewhere, searching to destroy me. On other occasions his bullets would catch me. I would crawl, limp and hide in caves to recuperate, waiting for my bones to mend. (20–21)

The original dispute is based on land issues after Settler Williams takes over the house Matigari has built and lived in with his family. William's black servant, John Boy, thwarts Matigari's first attack on Williams. Outnumbered, Matigari escapes to the mountains, pursued

by Settler Williams. The original confrontation takes place in 'real' time while the subsequent battles and struggles seem to take place in mythical, displaced time. The stylized struggle between the two is further realized in the confrontation between Matigari and the sons of those who have thwarted him for so long. Matigari articulates the struggle in emblematic terms by referring to "the black-man-who-produces" and "the white-man-who-reaps-where-he-never-sowed" (46). During this confrontation John Boy's son says that he never fully knew his father's fate, a point emphasized by the minister later:

Major Howard Williams and John Boy went to fight against terrorists during the war for independence—well, let's call it that for lack of a better phrase. It is believed that they died fighting. They were awarded medals in absentia for their courage and selflessness. (123–24)

The sense of displacement that stems from a lack of closure again situates them out of time, out of history. These comments on the presentation of struggle in the novel can be more fully stated by reference to the passage quoted above. The struggle here is displaced more literally by being located in another place—"those mountains you see over there"—this sense of distance acts as an allegory for the way the *Mau-Mau* struggle can seem to be far in the past when viewed from the political morass of postcolonial Kenya. The geography beyond the city acts as a site where a now displaced history took place. Nevertheless, narrative stylistics both displaces history, and denies that its object is history insofar as it imbues history with the sense of something of which is past and finished, whose legacy is an eternal "news would reach me that he had been spotted elsewhere" (124). This statement contributes a sense that distant history is still relevant, that there is continuity, and that perhaps history is there to be recovered. As is the case so often in Ngugi's writings, dissent is formulated through the display of disconnectedness, only to reveal links that are then recovered as available and real. Matigari personifies and carries the history of the nation within his own person: he claims, "I am as old as this country" (112). The novel returns to this idea more obliquely through the narrator's statement that "His words

seemed to remind them of things long forgotten, carrying them back to dreams they had long before” (56). It has already been mentioned that the novel contains elements of the transference of subjectivity in which seemingly individual qualities are shared in a process that displaces individual subjectivity, and that this process is especially located within the figure of Matigari. More specifically, Matigari seems to represent everyone and everything, including the *Mau-Mau* struggle—he embodies it and is the retainer of its memory. A rift appears within the two elements when Matigari-as-everyone is not recognized and appears to the people as a stranger. When his fame grows he visits disparate groups to ask where he may discover ‘Truth and Justice,’ but these groups, enthralled with animated discussions of Matigari, neither recognize him, nor what he stands for. A group mythologizing Matigari’s encounter with some children, claim that the stones thrown at him turned into doves, “fell silent and just stared at the stranger as if he had struck the wrong chord of a popular melody” (73).

Earlier, Matigari is portrayed as not having complete knowledge of the present ‘real time’ situation: “This man has indeed spent a long time in the forest, she thought to herself. He should first go home and sleep off the fatigue of many years. Who but a stranger would not know that the police were always fighting against students and workers?” (40). There is a rift, therefore, between Matigari as the embodiment of everyone, and Matigari as the embodiment of the memory of *Mau-Mau*, a rift which allegorizes the fracture between past and present at a time when the hopes of independence dissolve in the face of the postcolonial state. The representative of this repressive and authoritarian regime is linked to language usage and control. Matigari asks the whereabouts of truth and justice within a song or a poem, but is merely told, by the Minister for Truth and Justice, to stop speaking in parables (113). At an earlier point the Minister promises to speak “the plain truth” (101), and his discomfort with Matigari’s parable suggests a suspicion of metaphor and allegory, for it is there that the Other in the form of the plurality of language is articulated. At the same time, the Minister’s language is politically all-powerful, as his decrees become law immediately they are voiced, “His decision is just and true. It is now law” (118).

Realism is an appropriate form for those in power for it maintains, as self-contained and self-evident, that there is no other. Other stylistic forms, such as metaphor and allegory, then, are the almost natural forms of expression of anti-hegemonic forces as they attempt to realize the potential for another way of seeing. Writing of postcolonial allegory generally, Stephen Slemon argues that:

Such acts of post-colonial literary resistance function counter-discursively because they 'read' the dominant colonialist discursive system as a whole in its possibilities and operations and force that discourses' synchronic or unitary account of the cultural situation toward the movement of the diachronic.² (3)

Arguably, this is why allegory comes to be the dominant form of expression in Ngugi's later novels. Allegory appears to be contradictory, for at the same time as its impulses are plural or at least double, and it displays in its mechanics more than one way of articulating something, its impulse is also to constrict and work towards closure as it takes over its object, assuming a direct one-to-one reference between its machinery of expression and its object. The difference, then, is that realism does not acknowledge the mediation of language while allegory doubles its object by acknowledging different expressions of it through language, while still taking over that object. This move towards closure and totality in allegory is as important for the anti-hegemonic project as are the plural aspects of allegory; both elements are put to work in *Matigari*.

The characters in *Matigari* are as allegorical as those in Brecht's drama; they function as emblems of class, establishment and gender, although this strategy is problematized here through the slippage of subjectivity into intersubjectivity. As allegory works towards closure, so does the narrativization of the characters who are pared down from the nation into a small family. A poignant example of this contraction is when Matigari, who appears to know everyone as if they form a small close-knit unit, is irritated when it is suggested he might not know of Settler Williams and John Boy (47).

The nation is rewritten in terms of a small community, connections between people are again emphasized as in Ngugi's earlier novels. These

connections contain both elements of allegory, the move towards closure through an emphasis of totality, and the opening out or exposing of plurality as demonstrated in figuring the nation as site of authority while centralized rule is rewritten in terms of a self-supporting community. However, the major allegorical impulses are contained within the figure of Matigari as the embodiment of a psychic split between the community and the memory of *Mau-Mau*. This struggle and the hopes for independence seem very distant when those who have taken over power, including some who were involved in the struggle itself, have betrayed those ideals. It is this sense of distance that has led to Matigari and the struggle being presented as outside of history: the mythical feel at once seems to project the struggle even further back to the origins of the nation or community, but at the same time the struggle is represented as eternal, but never grasped and transformed into real historical time. Situating a seminal event in the history of the nation as outside of history through allegory, then, serves as a means to regain that history; the importance of that event is recovered and restated.

Although both novels feature messianic figures, it is Matigari who represents intersubjectivity through the diffuse and provisional nature of his character, while Waiyaki is narrated through the personal codes of fame and status. Both characters are pushed off the scene at the end of each novel, but while continuity in the earlier novel can only be contained in the narration of the healing powers of local geography, in the later novel there is a sense that the protagonist's task will be continued by someone else. The allegorical ending of each novel is different, therefore, in that *Matigari* is situated within the social, while *The River Between* is situated within natural elements. These differences aside, it appears as if *Matigari* is a rewriting of *The River Between*, but with a stronger allegorical impulse. By the time of *Matigari* it was apparent that hopes of independence had soured and that history had repeated colonialism in the form of neo-colonialism: hence an impulse for Ngugi's return to the themes and concerns of a novel written before independence. The differences and similarities between the two novels also demonstrate how the form of dissent can be determined by historical and ideological circumstances. If *The River Between* contained elements of allegory, its author's view

of history was not particularly radical. *Matigari*, as I have argued, written by a more radical author, has staged a return to allegory because its machineries of representation are best suited to cross time and recover a seminal event in the history of the nation. The way in which nationalism is deployed through Gikuyu codes in Ngugi's writing can be seen as an attempt to overcome the class betrayal enacted by the Gikuyu elite during *Mau-Mau* and subsequently in the post independence period.

If one of the features of colonial states was that "the chain of authority from the top downwards was untouched by any principle of representation or consultation" (First 208), the same can be said of postcolonialism, as witnessed by President Moi's remarks in 1984:

I call on all ministers, assistant ministers and every other person to sing like parrots. During President Mzee Kenyatta's period I persistently sang the Kenyatta [tune] until people said: This person has nothing [to say] except to sing for Kenyatta. I say: I didn't have ideas of my own. Why was I to have my own ideas? I was in Kenyatta's shoes and therefore, I had to sing whatever Kenyatta wanted. If I had sung another song do you think Kenyatta would have left me alone? Therefore you ought to sing the song I sing. If I put a full stop, you should also put a full stop. (qtd. in Ngugi *Decolonising* 86)

This is a graphic example of state discourse interpellating the subject through its control of the identifications of and recognition between 'I' and 'you' while establishing an authoritarian rule. A subject distinct from the state is recognized, but only insofar as to bind it to the state, and the subject's potential for dissent is not recognized, since such identification and recognition is geared towards the subject seeing its and the states interests as coincident. Some years earlier Kenya had effectively become a one party state (Sicherman 93), and the government was arresting, holding without charge and torturing dissidents, and generally using the full force of state apparatuses very effectively. This is the context in which Ngugi wrote.

The form of the dissent found in Ngugi is determined by the relative hegemony the Gikuyu 'tribe' holds within the Kenyan superstructure,

and the extent to which the Gikuyu dominated the *Mau-Mau* struggle. This relative hegemony allows Ngugi to present Gikuyu traditions and symbols as a general Kenyan nationalism. The sense in which nationalism is symbolic and cannot be easily contained or explained through a binary model of power is relevant here. The disillusionment of post-independence Kenya is due to a sense in which there are felt to be few opportunities for dissent due to the ideological authoritarian rule imposed by the government. A black/white, colonized/colonizer model of power is obviously inappropriate in this situation, and Ngugi's class analysis is modified and articulated by a nationalism that symbolically heals and makes the nation whole. A class analysis that sees the nation as diverse works side by side with a nationalism that sees it as a whole. Ngugi's novels demonstrate the ways power is diffused, how that diffusion works to make power more effective, and how power works against any potential for intersubjectivities to develop expressions of dissent.

Ngugi readily names power and the forms it takes but, if there are statements of rare and admirable political directness, it is rarely *narrated* in simplistic terms, and this complexity is particularly the case in the construction of female characters, for example, Wanja in *Petals of Blood* and Waringa in *Devil on the Cross*. Both women are seen at some point to interact in an integrated community, narrated as participation within conversation as the free exchange of language which does not coerce or threaten, but reveals previously hidden links. But they are then made to act out more individual lives after the various intersections of power within society disrupt or render transient this active intersubjectivity. Wanja becomes a prostitute and is subsequently presented in the form of a caricature; the construction of Waringa is more positive, but the main frame is that of the subject's self-sufficiency and her ability to survive without the support of the intersubjective community.

Working against forms of power that construct the individual, Ngugi refuses to see the public and private as separate spheres, and instead constructs plots and characters that are revealed to be intimately connected. These links perform an attempt to narrate the nation as a people. However, nationalism can also be seen as a form of homogeneity because

it attempts to construct subjects by transcending the articulations of gender and class identity. Nationalism is therefore a precarious form of dissent; its diffuseness means that it can be inverted and enacted in as many ways as there are constructions of 'the people.'

Dissent in the novels of Ngugi is embodied through a precarious nationalism whose tenuous position is carefully narrated against a background of the network of power relations of which the individual is an effect. Ngugi's earlier novels revolve around competing cultural constructions of the self. Here a construction of the self, based on an individual ego, is denied desire for an intersubjective experience or some kind of experience in which the subject only recognizes itself fully in through its interaction within group or community. As this article has demonstrated, this idea is more fully expressed in the form of nationalism in the later novels. Here individual subjects are shown to be constructed through networks of power.

In all the novels *Mau-Mau* can be read as the connecting force, or as the location through which these constructions of the self and narrations of power relations must pass or be checked against. It is useful to end by reiterating that the style of Ngugi's novels changes and is determined through the marginalization of *Mau-Mau*, both through the passage of time and in the consciousness and official discourse of the nation. Despite the fact that Ngugi's writing moves towards expression in Marxist terms, his earlier novels are written in the realist style, while fantasy and allegory make up the stylistics of the later novels. An important historical event in the construction of the nation is neglected, and for this reason the codes of realism become unavailable for the narration of *Mau-Mau*; something more metaphorical is needed in order to recover the memory of *Mau-Mau* against power interests who would rather forget it.

Notes

- 1 Mau Mau was a nationalist movement which waged a guerrilla war against the colonial government in the 1950s. See JanMohamed 186–201.
- 2 Obviously I suggest that literary resistance also works against dominant post-colonial, as well as colonial, discursive systems.

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