Ngugi and the Geology of Memory

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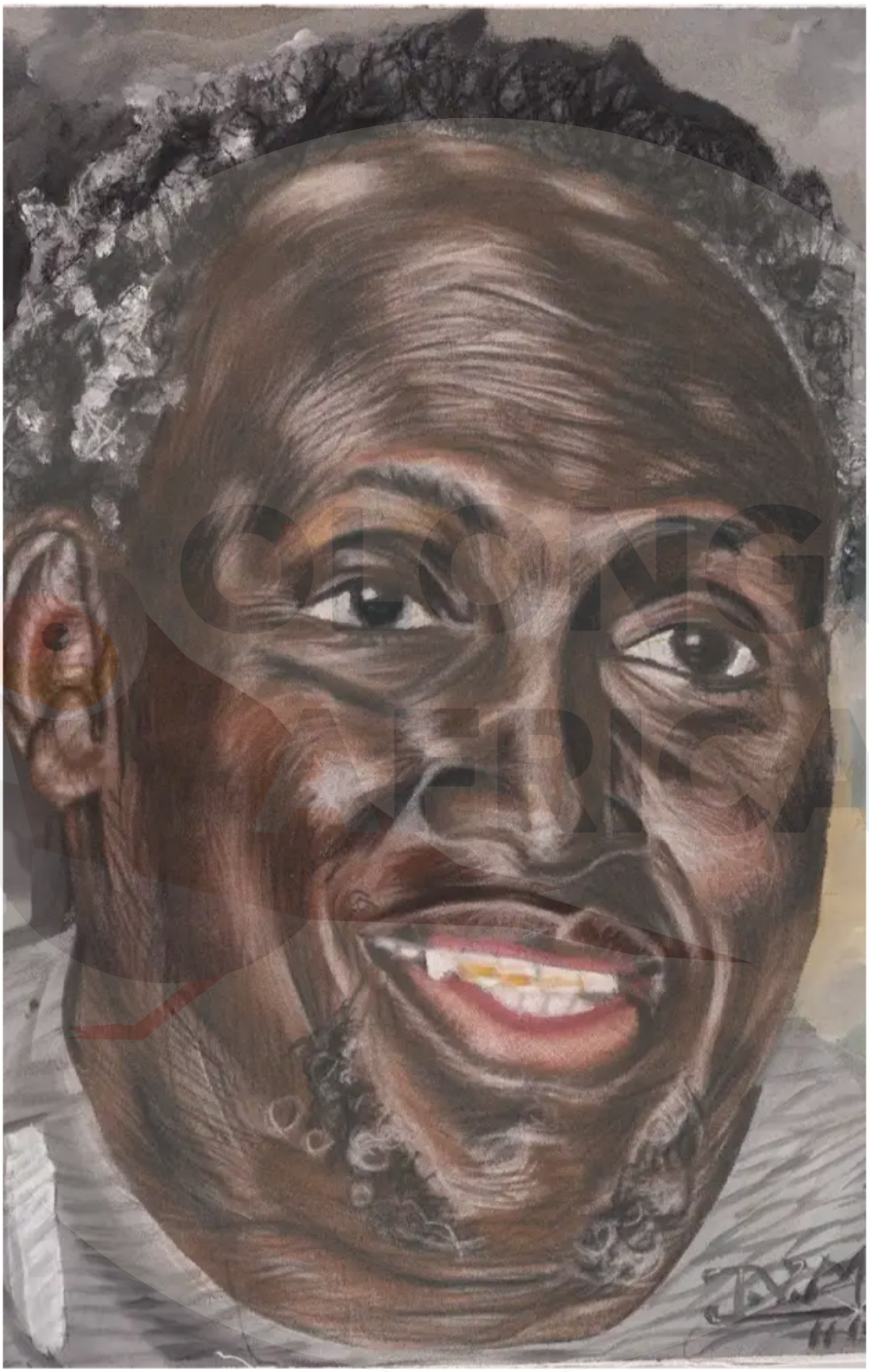
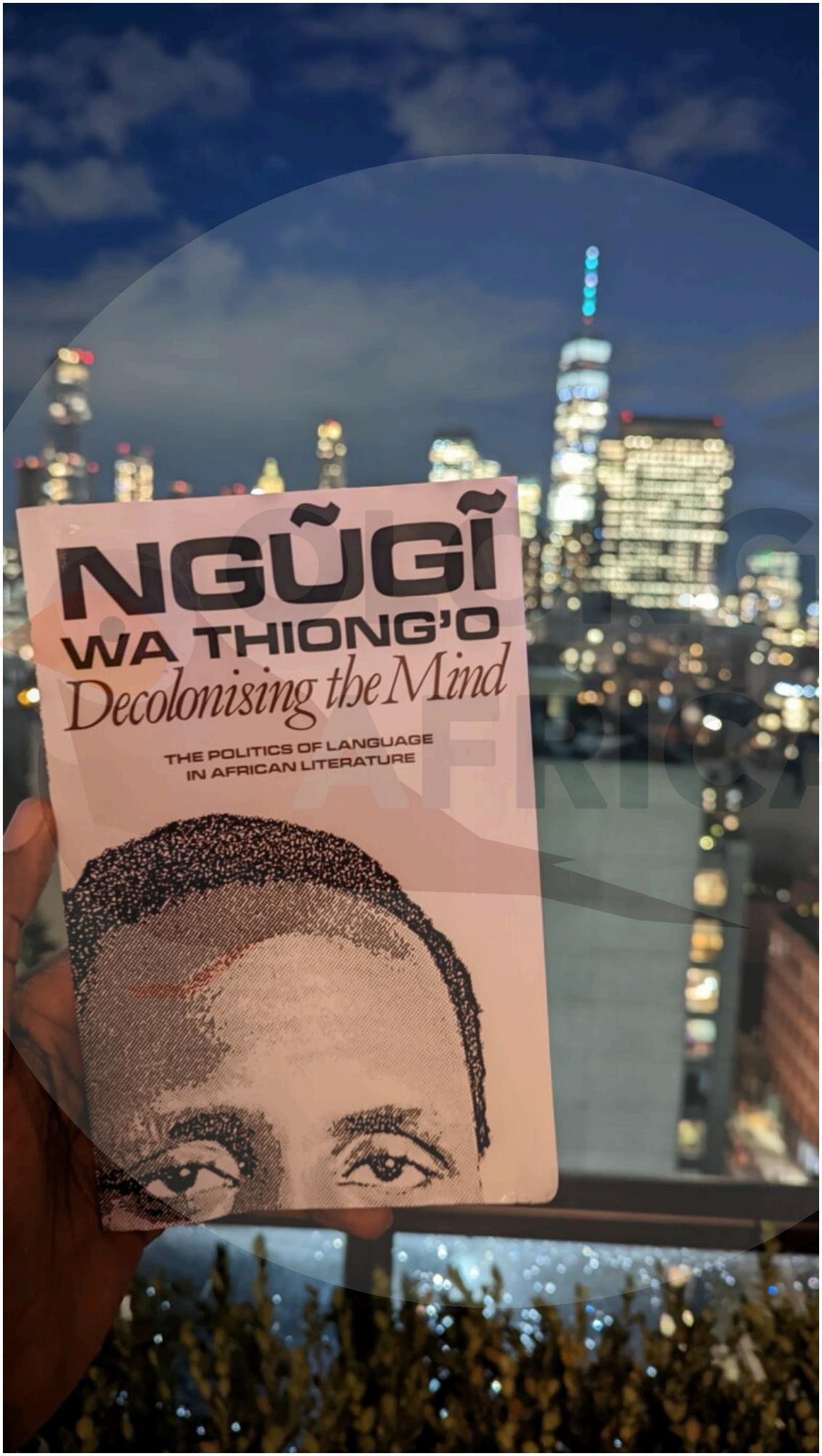


Portrait of Ngugi wa Thiong'o, From the collection of: Steve Biko Foundation

Going to the university for the first time in the harmattan semester of 1991-92, I first realised how influential Ngugi wa Thiong'o was in the Nigerian literary and dramatic spheres. *Pen Point*, the only independent student bulletin with which I would occasionally publish, had been named after a similar publication edited by Ngugi in the Makerere of the 1960s. It was a young university—we were only the second set to be admitted—and its traditions and conventions were still being established. That process, as typical, came under disproportionate influences of particular older universities. The humanities of Abuja's then new university tended to be flush with the left, considering the influence of talakawa socialism that was then pervasive in the northern Nigeria academe generally—via Zaria, no doubt—and the occasional look-in by the Ifẹ̀-Ìbàdàn school where the *Positive Review* critics had held sway from the 1970s. The result was that Ngugi's plays, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (1977) and *I Will Marry When I Want* (1980), were staples of the theatre programme. The novel *Petals of Blood* (1977) was de rigueur for class-politics literature, alongside Festus Iyayi's novels, Fẹ́mi Ọ̀ṣọ́fisan's plays, and Níyì Ọ̀ṣúndáre's poetry. That curious bracketing itself shows how much of an inflectional figure Ngugi was; whereas he was broadly classified as one of the so-called first-generation writers, alongside, say J.P. Clark and Christopher Okigbo, he was more wont to be taught alongside members of the 'second generation.'

Thinking about it now, there was something in the way Ngugi was received and transmitted in Nigeria that did not fully explore the richness of what he had to say on his themes. I find that primarily due to the particular framing of the African postcolonial condition that appealed to the Nigerian humanities at the time. One could catch on the framing of discourses by paying attention to the metaphor of their dimensions—the geometry of the discourse. Two such dimensions stand out in Ngugi's intellectual work. The first, centricity, is the more widely discussed. The title of his seminal work, *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms* (1992), makes this explicit, and plays to the broader postcolonial discussions of eurocentricity, "centres and margins," and related framings. Less examined, however, is Ngugi's use of stratal metaphors—what might be termed metaphors of the vertical dimensions. His 2003 keynote address at CODESRIA's thirtieth-anniversary conference in Dakar best captures this particular framing. There, he states:


NGŨGĨ
WA THIONG'O
Decolonising the Mind
THE POLITICS OF LANGUAGE
IN AFRICAN LITERATURE

"The classic text of the colonial process, Shakespeare's The Tempest, illustrates this. Remember that when Prospero first arrives at the Caribbean island inherited by Caliban from his mother Sycorax, he learns everything about the island from its own native, and then renames whatever Caliban shows him. The colonial explorer's journal is a record of efforts to plant memory on the landscape. Consider other examples. The east coast of America, for instance, becomes New England. The Great Lake that links Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania—and the most important source of the Nile—becomes Lake Victoria. In fact, after 1884 the African landscape becomes covered with French, British, German, Italian or Portuguese memory. It is in the naming of the landscape that we can so clearly see the layering of one memory over another, a previous native memory of place buried under another, a foreign alluvium becoming the new visible identity of a place." ('Europhone or African Memory: The Challenge of the Pan-Africanist Intellectual in the Era of Globalization').

Transitioning from the allusion of cultivation to one of geology, Ngugi uncovers the relationship between colonial acts and their long-range consequences. Whereas the centric mode presents with a feeling of marginalisation, the stratal mode presents with a feeling of total loss and interment. Through linguistic reconstitution—redenominating spaces and overwriting indigenous knowledge—the colonial imperium ensures a postdiluvian supplanting of memory. A Nigerian who listens to what Ngugi has to say in the above passage, for example, can no longer unsee the oddity in such place names as Lagos, Port Harcourt, or the even more provocatively-named Escravos, and Forcados. More importantly, however, this geological metaphor helps us understand Ngugi's lifework of cultural reclamation—an endeavour, no doubt eccentric-seeming, at times, for a mainstream writer, but that, for its cultural purpose, is best seen as the work of an archaeologist. This work comes across clearly in his linguistic debates, in the adaptation of his socialist vision to racial politics, and ultimately in his direct political interventions with its costly consequences.

Ngugi was a young participant at the 1962 Makerere Conference, noted in Esk'ia Mphahlele meeting records as a student of the host college who had authored a few works. While most of the debates of that conference have survived only as anecdotes scattered in media reports and memoirs, one that has endured through time was that on language and the authenticity of African literature. Ngugi's exact position at the time remains unclear—legend mainly recalls him presenting the manuscript of *Weep Not, Child* to Chinua Achebe, whose own novel was then opening up a new path in Anglophone Africa. Over time, however, Ngugi's position has become the looming shadow in the terrain of the language debate, eclipsing the vigorous arguments provocatively kicked off by Obi Wali in the wake of Makerere.

Since that time, the debate has presented with diverse strains that may be roughly bookend as follows: at one end is a realist strain that entails accepting English, and by extension all languages originally of colonial expressions, as an entrenched phenomenon, and at the other end is the radical strain, which insists that authentic and, in any case, meaningful African literature can only be produced in indigenous African languages. Between these two, or loosely aligned with either, are other strains. For example, there are those that suggest the possibility of domesticating English (in linguistics, demonstrating the possibility of developing African national 'englishes', and, in literature, the duty of African writers to make English tell peculiar African stories, in peculiar African styles. There is yet a political strain that envisions a single, adopted African language for pan-African literary practices (Swahili being the most commonly accepted candidate).

Ngugi was of the radical strain, but he out-radicalised them all. He considered African writing in languages of colonial expressions as merely contributing to a tradition of Europhone literature. Unlike the fait accompli conveyed in the tone of a writer like Achebe—"I have been given this language and I intend to use it"—Ngugi entertained no ifs and buts about the linguistic agency of African writers. Dismissing resorts to coping strategies—"to do unheard of things" as, again, Achebe vowed, for example—Ngugi remarked "the lengths to which we were prepared to go in our mission

of enriching foreign languages by injecting Senghorian 'black blood' into their rusty joints" ('The Language of African Literature'). If any energy was to be spared, it should be in excavating the colonial strata to restore African linguistic agency. And this was to be a root-and-branch reform, considering his co-authoring, with Taban Lo Liyong and Henry Owuor-Anyumba, the 1968 manifesto to replace Nairobi University's English Department with one of African Literature and Languages ('On the Abolition of the English Department').

This linguistic politics was to play a crucial role in Ngugi's class politics. Marxist readings had been predominant in the early study of his work. In the foreword to *Homecoming: Essays in African and Caribbean Literature, Culture and Politics* (1972), Ngugi's earliest key exponent, Ime Ikiddeh identified "Marxism" and "black consciousness" as the twin pillars of Ngugi's vision. The former, rooted in his experience of Mau Mau peasant uprising, found clarity during Ngugi's studies at Leeds (where he had been contemporary with Ikiddeh). The latter, on the other hand, emerged from his refinement of Marxist class analysis with racial subalternity as he engaged with Caribbean literature. In an analysis which helped to ordain the governing thematic of Ngugi scholarship, Ikiddeh missed the signal in the inclusion of an appendix carrying that famous 1968 manifesto.

By the time of publishing *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (1981), Ngugi had made his own linguistic politics hard to ignore. Still, in this writer's experience in the early 1990s, Marxist readings continued to dominate the scholarship of Ngugi's work. The era's academic vanguard championed literature with mass orientation—in light of which they obviously found comradeship in Ngugi's critique of Soyinka's "liberal humanism". In *Homecoming*, he had noted:

"Soyinka's good man is the uncorrupted individual: his liberal humanism leads him to admire an individual's lone act of courage, and, thus often he ignores the creative struggle of the masses. The ordinary people, workers and peasants, in his plays remain passive watchers on the shore or pitiful comedians on the road." ('Wole Soyinka, T.M. Aluko and the Satiric Voice')

For the same reason as Ngugi expressed above, the Marxist critics had spurned Soyinka's inaccessible language. Yet they and Ngugi might not have been speaking exactly the same language on the issue. *I Will Marry When I Want* was written originally in Gikuyu as *Ngaahika Ndeenda* (1977). In Nigeria, the play was taught and performed in English, untranslated into, say Hausa, Yorùbá, or Izon. Yet, for Ngugi, its ban—alongside Ngugi's imprisonment—represented a proof of concept for the potency of indigenous languages for mobilising the peasantry.

Ngugi and Osundare in Accra (2006). Photo from *Niyi Osundare: A Literary Biography* by Sule E. Egya

Ngugi's work of excavation also required him to take direct political actions. He ranks among Africa's foremost writers whose ordeals shaped Africa's post-independence prison literature—perhaps top-three alongside Soyinka and Malawi's Jack Mapanje in the circumstances of the early 1990s. This is not to erase the Apartheid-era experiences of South African writers like Dennis Brutus and James Matthews; their ordeal could, in some sense, be seen as belonging to the class of resistance to the originary acts of colonial repression in Africa. Post-independence struggles, by contrast, grapple with colonialism's hysteresis. And that is where the point lies. Extending the geological metaphor, it is usually after the event that the real work begins, in understanding what the flood has wrought, and in possible reclamation. Yet Africa's post-independence situations complicate this work. The old enemy might have retreated—or not. New regimes postured as national saviours, if not the very embodiment of the national spirit. All the while, overwhelmed populations fracture along ethnic and linguistic lines. In such climates, the cry against "the oppressive boot and the irrelevance of the colour of the foot that wears it", to borrow from Soyinka, rang more as an oddball's soliloquy than a rallying call.

It is therefore no mean feat that he put his body on the line. Following his 1977 arrest and yearlong detention—prompted by peasant literacy projects of which the staging of *Ngaahika Ndeenda* was only a part—he would spend more spells in detention in the 1980s before going on exile. Ngugi interpreted his experience as evidence of the postcolonial state's carryover of colonial hostility to popular participation in development. As he wrote in his memoir, *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary* (1978), these governments, like their predecessors, feared "the slightest manifestations of [the] people's culture of patriotic heroism and outspoken indomitable courage." In such a bleak circumstance, Ngugi believed that the writers task was cut out for them. Writers, he declared, were modern Cassandras, "condemned to cry the truth against neo-colonialist and imperialist cultures and

then be ready to pay for it with incarceration, exile, and even death."

The above outline is to merely highlight the daunting nature of the practical dimensions of Ngugi's work without much engaging the intellectual contentions that it generated. Whatever may be the kink in the practicality of his arguments, what is not lacking was the courage to put them forward, or the integrity to put himself to work trying to prove them. The 1968 manifesto which he co-wrote have become a staple of postcolonial collections, contributing to initiating canon and curriculum reform in the field. This, and his far-reaching language arguments, make him a pioneer of decolonisation and perhaps Africa's nonpareil postcolonial thinker.

In a conversation with the writer Charles Cantalupo a few years ago, Ngugi regretted the failure of institutions responsible for African literature, and those intervening in its propagation, to follow his lead on the language question (he singled out Tanzania as a paragon of linguistic reclamation). The limits of his power of example is demonstrated in the continuing diffusion of the strains of the language debate. In the end, he might have come across as quixotic—like Soyinka's 'lone hero', perhaps—driven by the conviction of the original decision, rather than a sunk-cost reflex. The language debate itself has now retreated into occasional academic episodes. The current generation of creative writers in Africa have other pressing issues to argue about—the privilege of modern diaspora experiences in the imagination and practice of contemporary African literature, for example. Yet, if the upsurge in the use of the tools of technology to promote local language contents by young Africans is a correct observation, then the hope is, that debate is only in abeyance. Whenever the entrepreneurial energies driving these initiatives look for intellectual heft, Ngugi's thoughts will certainly be there, waiting. Equally, as new creatives and journalists across Africa, like Uganda's Bobi Wine, Nigeria's Ọmọ́yẹlé Ṣòwòrẹ́ and Kenya's Boniface Mwangi, continue to face harassment for their direct political actions, Ngugi's personal examples should be a guide.

Tóyè is currently writing a book on the potentially revitalising contributions of the poetry and the thoughts of Niyi Osundare to ecocritical theory through examination of the geometry of discourse.