

FROM POSTCOLONIAL TO POST-POSTCOLONIAL KENYAN LIFE WRITING: A COMPARATIVE READING OF NGŪGĪ WA THIONG'O'S AND BINYAVANGA WAINAINA'S MEMOIRS

Susanne Gehrmann

Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin,

The Institute for Asian and African Studies

Abstract

The publication of three volumes of memoirs by of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o between 2010 and 2016: Dreams in a Time of War, In the House of the Interpreter and Birth of a Dream Weaver, has been a major literary event for Kenyan and Eastern African literature. In his seventies, Ngũgĩ joins other postcolonial authors of the first and second generations who have preceded him, in publishing an autobiographical serial on childhood, identity formation and the issue of becoming a writer in colonial contexts and on the verge of formal decolonization. As representative of the Kwani generation of Kenyan writers, Binyavanga Wainaina, aged only 40, offers an early autobiographical text, One Day I will write about this Place in 2011, followed by its lost chapter "I am a homosexual, mum" in 2014. His was a major literary event, too. In my paper, I propose to examine the continuities and ruptures in life writing, and how the thematic, stylistic and ideological choices of Ngũgĩ's and Wainaina, who are both widely read global authors of the present, differ. As I go along the lines of language, class and Bildung; collective trauma and individual depression, the relation to the nation, pan-Africanist and hybrid culture as well as the issue of becoming a writer, I question whether Wainaina's narrative should still be termed postcolonial life writing in the same sense as Ngũgĩ's. By observing that in many ways, Wainaina's text moves away from Ngugi's classical postcolonial stance, I argue that he inaugurates what we can – by lack of a better term for now – momentarily name a post-postcolonial autobiography.

Key Words: life writing, autobiography, memoir, subjectivity, postcolonial, post-postcolonial

From Postcolonial to Post-postcolonial Life Writing?

The publications of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's (2010, 2012 and 2016)¹ and Binyavanga Wainaina's (2011) memoirs have been major events for Kenyan writing of the last decade. At about the same

¹ In this text I will quote *Dreams in a Time of War* from the 2011 paperback edition, *In the House of the Interpreter* from the original 2012 hardback edition, and *Birth of a Dream Weaver* from the 2017 paperback edition. I will quote Binyavanga Wainaina's *One Day I Will Write About This Place* that was first published in 2011 from the 2012 Granta paperback edition.

time, the doyen of postcolonial Kenyan literature and the globally influential co-founder of the *Kwani?* magazine, Kwani festival, and Kwani publishing outlet in Kenya have settled down to look back at their lives and forge a narrative made of their personal memories, styled through the prism of their respective literary sensibilities. Born in 1938 and in 1971 respectively, they represent two different generations of writers who have lived through dramatically different historical periods and have been engaged in distinctive political struggles. Therefore, this article sets out to compare the life writing of both authors and considers the changes of paradigm in the style and scope of writing. However, this short essay will not allow me to go into all the details of these rich texts.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o grew up in a peasant family at the height of British settler colonialism in Kenya and started his career as a writer during the formal decolonization process of the late 1950s and early 1960s. Imprisoned as a political activist under the Kenyatta regime in 1977 and released by Moi in 1978, when Wainaina was still a school boy, Ngũgĩ's first autobiographical publication is in fact his prison diary *Detained*, published in Nairobi in 1981.² The author is most famous for his struggle for the promotion of African languages as literary languages.³ His plays and novels in both Gikuyu and English and his essays are canonized texts of postcolonial literature. *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (1986) contains impressive autobiographical passages on his experience as a boy in colonial school. Without doubt, due to his critical engagement with colonialism and its *longue durée* effects as well as his outstanding skills as a writer, Ngũgĩ counts – together with Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, and Sembène Ousmane, to name but a few – among the finest representatives of the now classical generation of early postcolonial writers.⁴

Binyavanga Wainaina is a child of the postcolony, to use Abdourahman Waberi's expression (1998). Born into a middle class family in 1971, eight years after Kenya's independence, he grew up comfortably and unconcerned by political struggles. As co-founder of Kwani Trust and *Kwani?* magazine in 2003, he contributed to the successful renewal of the Kenyan literary scene

² The text has recently been revised and republished under the perhaps more marketable title for the US-book market: *Wrestling with the Devil* (2018).

³ I will not retrace the well-known language debate here. Read the introduction and chapter one of Mukoma wa Ngũgĩ's seminal book *The Rise of the African Novel* (2018) for an illuminating résumé.

⁴ See Oliver Lovesey's recent monograph *The Postcolonial Intellectual. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o in Context* (2015) among other appraisals, even though some critics consider Ngũgĩ to be an atypical postcolonial writer compared to others (Adesanmi 2012).

after 2000.⁵ By criticizing the stereotyped image of Africa in Western writing and media, in his widely acclaimed satirical essay *How to write about Africa* (2005) he takes a deliberate postcolonial stance in the tradition of literary critical discourse analysis and ‘writing back’. Kangsen Feka Wakai rightly mentions: “In fact, *How to Write about Africa* was a reincarnation of a tradition of writing back rooted in a bygone era but which somehow succeeds to cast a massive shadow in the sphere of contemporary literary imagination” (168), thereby alluding to the fact that after 2000 the writing back paradigm that was crucial for the first generation of African postcolonial writers is somewhat outdated. In this essay I argue that Wainaina’s memoir transcends this paradigm, whereas Ngũgĩ’s trilogy echoes it. After his coming out in 2014, Wainaina, who passed away in 2019, was best known for his struggle for the acceptance of LGBTQ+ communities in Africa. This is an issue that goes beyond the canonized topics of postcolonialism.

Kenyan Life Writing and Postcolonialism

Postcolonial African life writing unfolds in a multitude of forms, voices, and attitudes with regard to the relationship between the textual self, the historical subject and his/her affiliations with national, diasporic, gendered, ethnic or familial communities. The eminent political function of most postcolonial autobiographical texts has been aptly described by Aurilia Mouzet as follows:

The question of identity at the core of autobiographical writing has never been as political as in postcolonial literature. Advocating one’s singularity is indeed not only a way of healing the stigma left by colonization but also stands as an attempt to start a dialogue between the fringe and the center. It thus becomes an inherently committed act. The affirmation of the postcolonial self is indeed more urgent for it stands as an answer to oppression. (Mouzet 161)

Considering postcolonial writing as a critical examination of the immediate and long-term effects of colonization on societies, communities, and individual subjects and as a literary paradigm that emerged with the first generations of colonially trained writers, the general question comes

⁵ With regard to the question of postcolonial entanglements between former colonized and former colonizers, it is important to underline that the founding of Kwani Trust was an important step for Kenyan literature to overcome the pitfalls of the postcolonial publishing industry that is still largely, though not exclusively, centered in London, New York and Paris. Krishnan underlines that “Kwani Trust’s beginnings is an attempt to think differently and to act differently, with a genealogy not based on the precepts of (post)coloniality, but rather on a trajectory and history of pan-African internationalist thought and public life which is not so easily assimilable, its range of claims towards the concept of being in the world themselves resistant to translation or transposition” (367).

up whether at some point into the 21st century, bringing forth the third or fourth generation of writers, all African literature should continue to be considered forever as postcolonial .⁶ With regard to autobiographical writing, the question then is if the construction of the self of the younger generation of writers is still primarily an answer to colonial oppression? And if not so, shouldn't we move beyond the postcolonial as an overarching reading paradigm and consider that something new is springing up in African writing, and in African life writing in particular, by a generation born after independence? It is with this overarching question in mind that I will approach Wainaina's *One Day I Will Write About This Place* in comparison with Ngũgĩ's trilogy of memoirs.

In an overview article, Jennifer Muchiri states: "Since 1963 Kenyans have written autobiographies which give insights into Kenyan postcolonial politics, public service, political economy, culture, social relations, education, and other aspects of Kenyan society over time" (Muchiri 84). Given Ngũgĩ's strong concern for- and identification with the struggle for independence which he continuously intertwines with his personal story, his autobiographical writing, though published much later, is to some extent⁷ in line with the early Kenyan postcolonial life writing of the 1960s, such as Tom Mboya's (1963), JM Kariuki's (1963), Oginga Odinga's (1967) or Charity Waciuma's (1969). At the respectable age of 72, looking back in time from the position of an established and recognized intellectual, Ngũgĩ joins other famous postcolonial writers such as Wole Soyinka from Nigeria, Assia Djebar from Algeria or J.M. Coetzee from South Africa in writing a serial of three or more autobiographical texts.

Serial or fragmented writing has often been considered a feature of postcolonial autobiography in so far as postcolonial subjects tend not to write the one teleological and closed narrative that is typical for the Western canon of the genre. Rather, their complex identity construction that affiliates with different cultural influences, knowledge systems and political struggles often triggers narratives of the self that are fragmented, either structurally in one text or by need of several approaches to write the self in a series of different texts. In Ngũgĩ's case, the narrated time of his three memoirs so far covers the years 1938-1964⁸ (birth to age 26), including

⁶ The same question could be asked for the label of the postmodern that has been applied to literatures across the globe since the second half of the 20th century. However, I cannot discuss this issue in this essay.

⁷ However, as Lovesey (143) rightly remarks, there are important stylistic and ideological differences between 'national autobiographies' of political leaders who embody the nation and the more personal and reflexive life narratives of the writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o.

⁸ It is very possible, that this series of memoirs is not yet closed.

flashbacks into his relatives' lives that take the readers into an earlier historical period of the generation before Ngũgĩ himself, thereby elaborating a collective dimension of life writing through orally transmitted memories of his relatives. Ngũgĩ strives for historical accuracy⁹ by inscribing his subjectivity into his larger family lineage and beyond these personal bonds into Kenyan history which he exposes at considerable length. Following conventions that date back to self-referential orality, both parents and other important family members to whom the autobiographer links himself are elaborately introduced with their own story and character in *Dreams in a Time of War*. In *Birth of a Dream Weaver*, this biographical pattern can also be observed with regard to his fellow students at Makerere University with whom the narrator forms a solidly united collective. As many autobiographies do, the text navigates between two narrators who represent Ngũgĩ at different stages of his life: the adult's writer's retrospective and the reconstructed perspective of the child/young adult can be distinguished as they alternate:

The constructed self in *Dreams in a Time of War* is somewhat divided. The writer is both remembering and re-remembering, or reassembling the anatomy of his past, but also simultaneously reliving this past. He shifts from narrative present tense, as if reliving events, to simple past, as if simply re-creating a past retrospectively. (Lovesey 159)

In this skilfully double layered narrative, the voice of the mature adult narrator prevails. Past tense is used most of the time, with selected passages switching to present tense when the immediacy of a particular event as lived by the narrated child/adolescent/young man is being put into focus.

In Binyavanga Wainaina's *One Day I will Write About This Place*, the narrated time covers the years 1978 - 2010 (age 7 to 39), with just one flashback on the earlier life of the writer's mother (chapter 25). Strikingly the narrator matures throughout the memoir that was published when the author was only 40 years old and already a recognized writer. Different from the position of a quasi omniscient narrator who reconstructs his life in a holistic way as Ngũgĩ does, Wainaina's autobiographical subjectivity is much more bound to the immediacy of a reconstructed childlike and adolescent-like perspective. The continuous use of the present tense and the focus on sensual perceptions contribute to the effect that the text reads as an „urgency of the now“ (Wakai 170). The narrator develops from child to adult not only at the level of content, but also in his narrative voice that shifts from child naivety via a prolonged state of self-centred desperate adolescence to

⁹ It must be underlined here that life writing does not reconstruct history in the same way as historical research strives to do. A personal memoir is not a history book, rather it is a rewriting of history from a personal standpoint based on selective memory. This notwithstanding, Ngũgĩ combines his personal life story with a lot of factual information on Kenya's colonial history.

the stance of a politically conscious writer. How the autobiographical subject matures throughout the narrative is thus reflected through the text's narrative style. Along this line, the narrative can be divided into three parts (childhood, identity crisis, becoming a writer), though structurally it is highly episodic and fragmented. Compared to Ngũgĩ's community-oriented approach, the text is also much more subject-centred and individualistic. Here, family and friends surround the protagonist, but remain flat characters, with perhaps the exception of his mother.¹⁰

In 2014, Wainaina published his coming out essay "I am a homosexual, mum" on the *Africa is a Country* online platform (reissued by *The Guardian* and *Chimurenga magazine*) as a lost chapter of his memoir, a timely piece in times when the oppression of LGBTQ+ communities in East Africa was growing. Indeed, the essay explains the blind spots on sexuality and more generally intimacy¹¹ in the former life narrative and has therefore to be considered as a follow-up to *One Day I Will Write About This Place*. Here, a sequel is needed for a very personal reason, the impossibility to come out in a society where homosexuality is tabooed, in particular while one's parents are still alive. "I am a homosexual, mum" is a chapter of Wainaina's life that has not taken place, it describes how it could have been had he dared to confess his queer identity to his dying mother and to his readers of the earlier memoir.¹²

Language, Class and *Bildung*

Ngũgĩ's memoirs are not explicitly about his later struggle for the promotion of African languages in African writing which may still be narrated in upcoming parts of the possibly unfinished serial. Interestingly, in his life narrative, the vision of the colonial schools he attends is less harsh than in his essays of the 1980s. Here, the world of *Bildung* which is a strictly English dominated world, is presented as a refuge from the harsh colonial conditions in rural Kenya: "I seek refuge in learning" (2011, 217); "Knowledge is our light" (224). Therefore, the question of language for the narrated autobiographical subject is all about the appropriation of the master's tool that allows for upward social mobility within a colonial society. Despite the

¹⁰ Both Ngũgĩ and Wainaina share a special bond with their mothers.

¹¹ I share Wakai's feelings that the personality of the autobiographical subject that unfolds in *One Day* remains to some extent unseizable for the reader, because "In his memoir, Wainaina provides a detailed map of his trajectory as a writer, but the person behind the writer is not so easily revealed. Having shared with the reader, on numerous occasions throughout the story, moments of his sadness and joy, one would think a more revelatory portrait of Wainaina—the person—would emerge, but somehow that doesn't happen. Although Wainaina is mostly honest, outside his relationships with his family members, there are hardly any glimpses into the writer's friendships and heartbreaks" (175).

¹² On the disruptive use of temporalities used in this short piece that jumps between dates and ages of the narrator see Hoad (186). Remarkably, here Wainaina dates his earliest homosexual consciousness back to age 5, while the memoir starts at age 7 only.

obvious violence of the colonial language policy in school, “[t]he witch hunt for those speaking African languages in the school compound [...], the consequence rising to bodily punishment in some cases. [...] we were proud of our English proficiency and eager to practice the new language outside the school compound” (177).

In the second part of the trilogy, *In the House of the Interpreter*, Alliance High School, attended by Ngũgĩ between 1955 and 1958, is presented as a protected space:

When I first stepped onto the grounds of Alliance High School on Thursday, January 20, 1955, I felt as if I had narrowly eluded pursuing bloodhounds in what had seemed a never-ending nightmare. Up to that moment, my life had been spent looking nervously over my shoulder. Since the declaration of the state of emergency in 1952, I lived in constant fear of falling victim to the gun-toting British forces that were everywhere, hunting down anticolonial Mau Mau guerillas, real or imagined. Now I was inside a sanctuary, but the hounds remained outside the gates, crouching, panting, waiting, biding their time. (2012, 8)¹³

Paradoxically, colonial High School – which was only accessible for a few chosen Africans – momentarily protects the future postcolonial elite from colonial violence. This does not mean that internal colonial structures of the education system are not criticized by Ngũgĩ. For instance, earlier on, when he is obliged to change primary school, the narrator reflects on the difference between the more liberal school he first attended (that had been prohibited soon after and the conservative school with its settler colony syllabus that he had to join: “In the old school, Kenya was a black man’s country. In the new school, Kenya, like South Africa, was represented as having been sparsely populated before the whites arrived, and so whites occupied the uninhabited areas” (2011, 168). This colonial representation runs counter to the experience of Ngũgĩ’s own peasant family that was cheated and chased away from their land. On the one hand, school offers the only hope to overcome the social condition of the exploited peasantry; this explains Ngũgĩ’s unconditional ambition sealed by a vow to his mother that he will always try his best. On the other hand, the colonial curriculum and unfairness due to a racist hierarchy challenge resistance and awaken the child’s political consciousness early on. The ambivalent yet outstanding figure of Carey Francis, Anglican missionary and principal of Alliance High School, a firm believer in the Empire and discipline, has “a positive impact” (Ndĩgĩrĩgĩ 107) and further

¹³ Gĩchingiri Ndĩgĩrĩgĩ rightly points out: “The courage to dream of upward mobility even in a time of war is the core message in both *Dreams in a Time of War* and *In the House of the Interpreter*. The bloodhound trope effectively concretizes the existential terror Ngũgĩ faced, while the destruction of his home explains the melancholia that characterizes the second memoir in particular” (92).

nourishes young Ngũgĩ's ambition as do the African teachers of the school who however, being part of the system, can teach resistance only in between the lines.

At the age of 19, Wainaina's autobiographical narrator reads Ngũgĩ's essay *Decolonising the Mind: the Politics of Language in African Literature* (1986). The expectation is that such a reading should definitely trigger his political consciousness as a postcolonial subject. However, Wainaina's momentary revolutionary determination to follow in Ngũgĩ's footsteps as a decolonized Gikuyu writer is immediately mingled with his ordinary dreams of a young middle-class man in the hilarious, self-ironic way that is characteristic for *One Day I Will Write About This Place*:

I read *Decolonising the Mind* by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o a few week [sic!] ago. It is illegal and it was thrilling, and I had vowed to go back to my own language. English is the language of the colonizer. I will take Gikuyu classes, when I am done with diversiddy [sic!] and advertising, when I am driving a good car. I will go to the village and make plays in Gikuyu, in my good new car. I will make a very good decolonized advertisement for Coca-Cola. I will be cool and decolonized. An international guy. Like, like Youssou N'Dour. Even Ngũgĩ is in America. (Wainaina 2012, 92)

The quote shows, that the young man has difficulties to connect to Ngũgĩ's world of postcolonial struggle and that he does not have an African language at hand that he could use for writing. He would need to learn proper Gikuyu first. Middle-class aspirations for a good car and being cool in a globalized way with reference to the United States self-ironically superpose the vague plan to become a decolonial activist.

A few chapters later, when he comes back to Nairobi after a long stay as a student in South Africa, Wainaina shifts from the personal to the collective level by considering the issue of language in Nairobi's urban setting: "Urban Kenya is a split personality: authority, trajectory, international citizen in English; national brother in Kiswahili: and content villager or nostalgic urbanite in our mother tongues. [...] Kiswahili is where we meet each other with brotherhood" (125). The buzzing multilinguality of Kenya, a token of cultural diversity, is a leitmotif throughout the book. The narrator is more often than not lost in this ocean of linguistic plurality: "There are so many, I get dizzy" (26). Clearly, Wainaina does not have a traumatic relationship with English as a colonial language: in his generation of middle-class children growing up in post-independent Kenya, it has just become an everyday tool of local and global communication. Obviously, the practice of language(s) in a multilingual country is not only a personal issue, but

also a matter of social class and of generation. Addressing his middle-class peer group, the narrator, in his persona of the eleven years old boy, states:

If I visit you in your home and your mother speaks to you in your language while I am there, you will roll your eyes at me, and reply to her in English and Kiswahili, because we have agreed that parents are ridiculous that way. More than anything, we laugh at and dislike those kids who seem unable to escape their tribe. (34)

Wainaina's praise of Swahili as a pragmatic internethnic lingua franca in Kenya¹⁴ – throughout the book – is very different from Ngũgĩ's famous rejection of English followed by his adoption of Gikuyu as his literary language.¹⁵ As much as his autobiographical narrator loves Swahili, Wainaina never questions English as his language of writing. He does not even master Gikuyu and Kinyarwanda, the tongues of his parents who chose to speak English to their children. Clearly, when it comes to the issue of language, the postcolonial struggles of the generation of Ngũgĩ and today's struggles of Wainaina's *Kwani* generation are not the same anymore.

The privileged narrator-kid who takes it for granted to visit good schools, perceives the children from the disadvantaged classes as “kids who speak strange languages, who laugh if you speak English to them – they understand, but find it pretentious; kids who wear no shoes, kids who miss school a lot” (35). In Wainaina's narrative the fissures of today's Kenyan society are to be found in the internal clash of classes rather than in the confrontation with the ex-colonizer. However, with regard to placement at High School ethnicity comes in as a new factor of power relations. In spite of not having identified as Gikuyu before – “We are mixed-up people” (21) – the excellent narrator and his even more brilliant sister do not get admission into any of the elite high schools due to structural ethnic discrimination by the Moi regime. Adverse ethnicity as a result of the British divide and rule system is certainly an eminent political feature of the postcolony, yet the narration jots over this rather quickly in favour of typical boarding school anecdotes. Also, the family has a good network of relations that allows them to place their children in better places soon enough. It is only much later, in the politically more conscious third part of the memoir and under the Kibaki regime which privileges Gikuyus, that the narrator

¹⁴ “Kiswahili, the language of an old civilization, used to handling diverse people, full of rhetoric and manners [...]. In Kiswahili we feel a brotherhood and we are in the habit of it” (209).

¹⁵ Since the late 1970s, Ngũgĩ has published his fiction in Gikuyu, followed by English translations. As a scholar, he has continued to publish his academic work in English. Remarkably, the autobiographical trilogy was composed and published only in English and Ngũgĩ himself seems to consider the genre of memoir closer to his academic work than to fiction, when he states in an interview “I can tell you that since 1978, all my novels, plays, and poetry have been composed in Gikuyu. The only texts I write in English are either academic stuff or memoirs” (2020).

makes a link between ‘tribalism’ and colonialism. Listening to an old man who repeats stereotypes about different ethnic groups in Kenya, he comments: “It completely escaped him that every skill coincided nearly perfectly with the first acts of labour division introduced by the British, that he was, in fact, affirming exactly how we were defined and given roles to play in colonial Kenya. These identities were, in his mind our permanent tribal personality” (210). Wainaina escapes the postcolonial condition of being tribalized in so far as he refuses to subscribe to an imposed Gikuyu identity. The Ugandan and Rwandan heritage from his mother’s side including the name Binyavanga complicate his identity and perception by others as ‘foreign’.

Collective Trauma, Personal Depression, and Being an Outsider

Ngũgĩ’s memoirs are deeply affected by the melancholia¹⁶ of the narrating subject as he recalls the lost world of an economically self-sustaining and culturally closely knitted oral community that is progressively destroyed by the invasion of colonialism. In *Dreams in a Time of War*, collective colonial traumata are exposed through the hardships of relatives who are activists in the resistance struggle of the Land and Freedom Army (vulgarised as Mau-Mau), his brother Good Wallace in particular. Muchiri rightly points out: “In this way, the stories of freedom fighters who did not get a chance to tell their stories find their way into Kenyan history” (88). Add to this the description of the many daily humiliations of the colonized in a segregated settler colony, such as different classes on trains and the young Ngũgĩ’s arbitrary arrests. A climax of colonial violence occurs right at the beginning of *In the House of the Interpreter*, when the narrator returns to his home during school holidays only to find that the village has been erased and his family displaced. This shocking experience, a collective trauma for his community, is caught in the mode of present tense immediacy:

[O]ur homestead is a rubble of burnt dry mud, splinters of wood, and grass. My mother’s hut and my brother’s on stilts have been razed to the ground. My home, from where I set out for Alliance only three months ago, is no more. Our pear tree is still standing, but like

¹⁶ Gĩchingiri Ndĩgĩrĩgĩ’s 2016 article offers an insightful reading of the memoirs informed by trauma theory and psychoanalysis. He identifies melancholia as a major feature of the memoirs and convincingly shows that they cannot be read as clinical trauma narratives with features of fragmentation or ellipsis: “A close reading of the memoirs clearly shows that the young Ngũgĩ was subjected to disorienting experience that he captures through vivid imagery of ruin, terror, and dislocation. But Ngũgĩ is not so affected that the experience resists narrativization. Indeed, the two memoirs develop fairly coherently and show little evidence that the memories are dissociated and resist voluntary control. There is a very strong tendency to emphasize causality, sequence, place, time, and the connection of events to a larger village community/national frame” (100).

the ashy hedge, it's a silent witness. Casting my eyes beyond, I suddenly realize the whole village of homesteads has disappeared. The paths that crisscrossed the landscape, linking the scattered dwellings into a community, now lead from one mound of rubble to another, tombs of what has been. There is not a soul in sight. Even the birds flying above or chirping in the hedges emphasize the emptiness. Bewildered, I sit on my box under the pear tree, as if hoping it will share with me what it knows. The tree, at least, has defied the desolation, and I pick up a few ripe pears to eat in baffled silence. How could a whole village, its people, history, everything, vanish, just like that?" (Ngũgĩ 2012, 5).

Due to his status as an intern in the above mentioned 'sanctuary' of High School, Ngũgĩ himself does not live through the traumatizing events of destruction and displacement his family has faced. "Ngũgĩ's memoirs narrate frightening experiences during the wartime years that confirm his relative insulation from the really traumatic events" (Ndĩgĩrĩgĩ 92). Rather, by writing on the collective trauma, he acts as a secondary witness, breaking the silence of the symbolic pear tree, the silent direct witness. In *Dreams in a Time of War* the pear tree has been introduced as a symbol for the shelter of home, its fruits have been emergency food in times of hardship. Therefore, the gesture to pick up and eat those fruits in the state of shock symbolically binds the postcolonial outsider subject back to his community and their collective trauma. The tree is also associated with motherly caring for shelter and food, and significantly Ngũgĩ's mother was imprisoned for three months and could not speak out about this traumatic experience. "To his credit, Ngũgĩ does not pretend to understand that trauma or appropriate it as his own" (Ndĩgĩrĩgĩ 99), and yet through his literary witnessing he inscribes it into history.

By contrast, Wainaina, who as an adolescent and young man feels like an outsider who doesn't fit in anywhere, is all in all much more concerned with his complicated identity construction than with a critical evaluation of collective experience and social structures. Though he lives in South Africa during the transition from Apartheid to Post-Apartheid, he touches on politics only very superficially. Personal estrangement is the favored topic: "Something is wrong with me" (Wainaina 2011, 7); „I try hard to fit in“ (64); „I am different, I am different“ (76); are among the many remarks which construct an outsider's position of the subject who hardly identifies with collectives and who is "often uncomfortable in his body" (Lucas 306). The difficulty of identity construction turns into a clinical case of depression during his studies in South Africa, accompanied by heavy drinking. "I fell away from everything and everybody [...]. I do not know what happened. All of a sudden, I was moving slower, attending class less, and now I am not leaving my room at all" (Wainaina 2012, 104). The deeper reason for his depression remains a riddle in *One Day I Will Write About This Place*, as the underlying psychological conflict is not

revealed. It is only the follow-up publication of the lost chapter by Wainaina that allows us as readers to get a sense of the state of suppressed queer sexuality and identity that might have led to the depression described in the memoir. Hence, critics have found the memoir to be “replete with cues and allusions to the ambivalent direction of his sexual desires and the volatility of his gender identifications” (Osinubi X). Yet in spite of the early scene of crossdressing in chapter two and the presence of homosexuality in the boarding school Wainaina attends in chapter eight¹⁷, in my opinion, it was difficult to read queerness in between the lines before the coming out chapter was released. The narrator’s own sexuality is explicit in terms of masturbation only. Thus, in *One Day I Will Write About This Place* an individual psychological instability that has to do with the unspoken sexual identity and its oppression haunts the narrative. This individual story cannot be identified as specifically postcolonial.¹⁸

Despite of the relational quality of his memoirs, the topic of being an outsider in one’s community is also not absent from Ngũgĩ’s texts. During childhood, the separation of his mother and father is followed by a momentarily rupture with his paternal relatives. Later, his experience as a colonial subject who has been the first in his family to go through higher British style *Bildung* conveys a particular position as privileged outsider to him. Thanks to his earlier education through orality, passed on mainly by Mzee Ngandi (an expert in history) and his father’s first wife (a gifted storyteller), he is knowledgeable about local Gikuyu culture, values and collective memory. Meanwhile, the new knowledge acquired through the British educational system sets him apart from his family even as a child, leading into a feeling of estrangement early on (cf. Lovesey 158). In the last part of *In the House of the Interpreter* entitled “1959. A Tale of the Hounds at the Gate” (2012, 179-240) Ngũgĩ narrates, at length, his arbitrary arrest, imprisonment and trail for tax issues, when he was travelling home from his first post as an auxiliary teacher. Ndĩgĩrĩgĩ asserts: “Ngũgĩ was minimally involved in the major events in larger society and might have suffered survivor guilt, hence the amplification of his own heroic act with bloodhounds at the end of *In the House*” (94). With regard to sexuality, intimate personal

¹⁷ The assertion “I try hard to stay close to the line, keep myself inside myself, and be some public person who fits in” (64) just after the forced outing and social exclusion of an older student comes closest to hinting at the narrator’s non-verbalized fear to be outed as queer.

¹⁸ I am aware of the discourse that convincingly positions today’s homophobic political discourse and juridical status in many African countries not as a consequence of homosexuality as a ‘decadent import’ from the global North as conservative voices like to put it, but rather as a follow-up to a colonial homophobic and juridical legacy (Muiga 2019) as well as Christian and Islamic imports of homophobia and binary gender systems into previously more diversified cultures (Epprecht/Nyeck 2013). In this sense, there is a postcolonial dimension to queer struggles in Africa. However, in my view, this is less important for the reading of Wainaina’s memoir and ‘lost chapter’ as the author does not elaborate on this political dimension and presents his unease with his body and identity as well as his coming out confession strictly in terms of a personal trajectory.

relationships and emotions, there are also blank spaces in Ngũgĩ's texts, but in a way of discretion that is rather common sense in most African life writing of his generation.

From Nation-Building to Post-Nation

Ngũgĩ's memoirs are closely interconnected with the political project of post-colonial nation-building. There is no doubt about the necessity of an engagement of intellectuals for building the independent nations in the 1950 and 1960s as explicated in chapter 12 "Working for the Nation" of *Birth of a Dream Weaver*. Therefore, the subject inscribes itself into history, yet the narrator's individual story is always closely connected to the concern of nation-building. However, most political autobiographies do not have a focus on childhood which is considered a politically unconscious time (Muchiri 2014: 87). While this holds certainly true for Wainaina's post-independence childhood, in the first part of his memoir, Ngũgĩ reconstructs a colonial childhood in which the political dimension cannot be overlooked:

The 'dreams' Ngugi alludes to in the title of the autobiography refer to the hope that the colonial subjects lived with at the individual, community and national levels. [...] The war he refers to denotes the different conflicts that existed at this time at individual, national and international levels. (Wachiri 2014, 87).

In the case of Wainaina's memoir, political aspirations in the postcolonial sense of conscious resistance to structures inherited from colonialism, political activism and explicit contribution to nation-building play a minor role. Rather it is striking, that the given existence of a post-colonial nation state – Kenya – whose passport the narrator is entitled to hold from childhood on, is put into question. When the childlike narrator comments on political leaders and regimes, clearly distinguishing a 'progressive' Kenya from dictatorial Uganda where his mother comes from, the naivety often reads as irony. Doubts about what Kenya actually is and means affect the perception of the nation. In the 1970s, the child repeats slogans such as: "Kenyatta is the father of our nation" (Wainaina 2012,13; 14) and "Kenya is a peace-loving nation (13)," only to naively "wonder whether Kenya was named after Kenyatta, or Kenyatta was named after Kenya" (14). The new president Daniel arap Moi is introduced as a TV star "clean, tall and sharp" (28). Looking back at the 1980s, under the Moi regime, the narrator reflects on Kenya as a place that is not yet a consolidated nation, rather it remains: "the home of the future, a not yet place called Kenya" (51). Although the narrator cherishes Kenya as a home and is affected by a severe case

of nostalgia during his time in South Africa, Kenya as a state is presented as a post-nation¹⁹, a failed state even that loses its common ground during the 1990s: “We are children of the cold war. We came of age when it ended; we watched our countries crumple like paper” (106). At the end of the Moi era, he concurs: “Now that the state is failing, we are held together by small grace, by interpersonal relationships, by trusting body language” (195), while in the very last chapter of the book Kenya drowns in the post-2007-elections violence. The uncertainty of nationality as an identity marker is aptly caught in the image of the washed passport that almost impedes his travel back from Johannesburg to Nairobi: “My passport has a problem. It has swollen and his now a lumpy accordion – full of watermarks, corrugated pages, and slurring visa stamps. It spent a whole circle in a washing machine” (119). I argue that the state of the passport is not only a metaphor for the troubled identity of the autobiographical narrator, but as it is the official document of nationality, it also functions as a metonymy for the eventually failed postcolonial state that poses as a fragile post-nation, “that place still waiting impatiently to find its voice and tell its story as it struggles along the rocky terrain towards true nationhood” (Wakai 170/71).

Moreover, with regard to his musical choices, preferring contemporary American and African pop, from childhood on the autobiographical narrator explicitly dislikes the national Kenyan broadcast whose music he judges as retrograde, “undefined past sounds, and shapes and ideas, and it is inconvenient, if only because the Anglo-Kenyan garden does not look like this music sounds” (247). Thus, as Savannah Lucas points out, symbolically “Wainaina rejects the sounds that bind him to a solely national identity grounded in Kenya’s history” (Lucas 308), favoring instead transcultural musical choices such as Black American and Congolese music. By contrast to Ngũgĩ’s firm grounding in orality, here “traditional performance is presented as alienating, only appearing on television or at school” (Brinkman 127).²⁰ In the above quoted garden

¹⁹ I should mention that in his 1998 essay *Penpoints, Gunpoints, and Dreams: Towards a Critical Theory of the Arts and the State in Africa*, from his position as a writer in political exile Ngũgĩ advocates for the post-nation as a productive concept at this particular time in history (cf. Lovesey 187-189). However, this stance has nothing to do with the narrated time in his memoirs and does not interfere with the importance of nation-building in the years of formal decolonization.

²⁰ In her comparative 2018 article Inge Brinkman analyzes the representation and functions of oral performance, music and dance in Ngũgĩ’s and Wainaina’s memoirs in detail. In particular, she stresses the moments of resistance to colonialism through orality (mainly songs) in Ngũgĩ’s writing. A further intermedial reading of *In the House of the Interpreter* and *Birth of a Dream Weaver* should consider the extensive use of photography in these volumes that, I suggest, goes beyond a simple “documentary quality” (Lovesey 161). I cannot elaborate on that in the context of this article.

metaphor followed by the tongue-in-cheek statement “Maybe I am a little Anglo-Kenyan unable to appreciate *benga*” (251), the identity category of ‘Anglo-Kenyan’ does not refer to colonial complicity, but to contemporary cultural hybridity as further explicated in my next sub-section.

Pan-Africanism(s), Cultural Hybridity

Both autobiographical narrators can be considered as pan-Africanists, but in different ways. Ngũgĩ’s pan-Africanism has its roots in the common struggle for independence of the African nations. He maps the anti-colonial resistance in Kenya in detail in part one and two of his memoirs and, as a logical follow-up, in the third volume *Birth of a Dream Weaver* he turns to pan-African alliances at Makerere University Uganda. Here, he studies among the African colonial elite who is about to venture towards independence and is going through a mental decolonization process. Ngũgĩ’s political stance finds its expression in cultural practice. In a move of postcolonial appropriation, he adopts Shakespeare, for the very first time in African costumes, to the Makerere University theatre stage before becoming himself a successful playwright. Furthermore, the narrator memorizes his readings through the colonial archive and British canon in long essayistic passages, thereby elaborating classical ‘writing back’ chapters, followed by his display of unconditional admiration for the first postcolonial African writers. In this vein, chapter two “A Wounded Land” juxtaposes the lived colonial hardships with colonial discourse in English literature and chapter 7 “Black Dolls and Black Masks” reconsiders the reception of the Négritude poets in Eastern Africa. Ngũgĩ’s cultural universe is first of all thoroughly Gikuyu, then Kenyan and African, but at the same time also British. As a postcolonial subject he knows and masters British culture as crammed into him by school, consequently through his writing he appropriates its expressive forms as a means of pan-African decolonization. Not least, English is important as a tool of transnational communication among (East)Africans of his generation.

Wainaina’s post-nationalist pan-Africanism is less political and largely based on culture: music and dance in particular, but also celebrating football and sharing food as a means of transnational African solidarity: “This is how to become an African” (Wainaina 2012, 170). From childhood on, Wainaina’s cultural references often stem from the globalised Anglo-American world; they include Michael Jackson as a pop-icon and popular TV formats imported from the UK and the US. He indulges in canonised and popular world literature from different parts of the globe alike.

His is an existence of the Kenyan African middle class [...] ; it is a rhapsody of discarded ideals, the skeletons of stripped down cars, Americanized accents, disco, rolling hills,

ancient African beliefs and values, English and American novels, Levi jeans, two-car garages, golf balls, superstition, and bourgeois aspirations. It is a universe where mundane discoveries are made. (Wakai 169)

It's a cultural universe that is hybrid and globalized. His identification with Africa at large is mostly stimulated by music, less by politics. Wainaina writes about musical styles and musicians from different parts of the continent as being decisive for his personal development. For instance, his quasi physical reactions to Congolese music, "the sound of our times" (77), becomes a leitmotif, and Brenda Fassie's musical trajectory that pervades the text as a "haunting narrative" (Lucas 305) stands as an allegory for the ups and downs not only of South Africa, but the whole continent.²¹ The narrator further embraces the African diaspora by appreciating Lionel Richie, Boney M., Jazz and Gospel; music of the Black Atlantic (Gilroy 1993) that has travelled back to Africa. In the third part of the memoir, the narrator has become a travel writer who visits Sudan, Nigeria, Ghana and Togo where he indulges in food, fête and transcultural African solidarities, using the verb "Pan-Africaning" (202) in a non-political way. Lucas suitably underlines that the "fragmented history of influences" (307) brought across by these multiple references contributes to his portrait as "a person continually in search of himself," (307) and who "resist[s] the risk of creating absolute identities for himself" (307).

By contrast, Ngũgĩ's early childhood memories feature a culture that is strictly local, in a space that will be progressively invaded by British power. The formation of postcolonial hybridity of the narrated subject through local, oral knowledge systems and cultural skills as superposed by colonial *Bildung* is at the heart of the narrative. The challenge of living in a colonial system that initiates a hierarchical contact zone between two cultures is exemplified in two consecutive chapters of *Dreams in a Time of War*. Whereas chapter 25 narrates the traditional circumcision rite Ngũgĩ underwent in 1953, the follow-up chapter 26 shows how closely this was followed by admission exams for high school recalled as „educational rites of passage“ (Ngũgĩ 2011, 204). In *Birth of a Dream Weaver*, Makerere University College symbolises the shift from colonial oppression to post-colonial structures, as an institution on the verge of becoming progressively decolonized. And yet consciously Ngũgĩ, the Makerere graduate, identifies as "a man who has been brought up in an educational system wholly colonial, with all its prejudices and intellectual

²¹ Savannah Lucas (315-317) convincingly points out how Wainaina's Brenda Fassie's narrative, the story of a feminist and queer African musician with her ups and down in recognition, connects to the post-national, pan-African and hidden queer agenda of the memoir.

slant from the West” (Ngũgĩ 2017, 214). His memoir thus closes on the declaration of his own need of decolonization as a postcolonial subject deeply affected by colonially imposed thinking.

Becoming a (Post-)Postcolonial Writer

Literary autobiographies typically deal with the dispositions and aspirations of becoming a writer and the texts that I have compared in this article are no exceptions. The *topos* of the early vocation so current in the genre is written into both texts. Ngũgĩ and Wainaina share their fascination for books and voracious appetite for reading from childhood on. Using hyperbole in his memoir, Wainaina declares that at the age of 9, he was “reading a new book every day” (2012, 27); at 11, he decided: “One day I will write books” (51), at 13, he “gobble[s] them like candy” (79). In his early twenties becoming an author is his only career option: “I am afraid. If I write, and fail at it, I cannot see what else I can do” (143).

Ngũgĩ is an avid reader early on, too, but with limited access to reading material and therefore less precocious. His access to literature via colonial school and its library (see chapter 50 and 51 of *In the House of the Interpreter* in particular) – where knowledge was generally abstracted from local reality (cf. 2012, 63) and literature strictly British – led to mixed feelings: “I could not escape the magic of literature, its endless ability to elicit laughter, tears, a whole range of emotions, but the fact that these emotions were exclusively rooted in the English experience of time and place could only add to my sense of dislocation” (66). Ngũgĩ is 16 years old when he first seriously plans to become a writer. The third memoir *Birth of a Dream Weaver: A Writer’s Awakening* is primarily devoted to this existential becoming. Ngũgĩ chronicles his beginnings as a journalist, playwright, short story writer and novelist in detail, underlining his determination to write on collective colonial trauma and resistance right from the beginning. Here, in his Makerere student’s immediate present tense voice, he declares: “My Limuru and Kenya remain a land from which I have escaped, but I want to write about it; want to make sense of it” (Ngũgĩ 2017, 85). While asserting his desire to testify on this “landscape of fear” (86), he underlines the resistance through *Bildung* that was triggered in his generation: “the dedication, the collective will. That’s what I want to write about. The collective mania for education” (88).

Once again, the difference between Ngũgĩ’s collective and Wainaina’s more individualistic approach becomes visible. Wainaina grows up in Nakuru, in the same Rift Valley landscapes that were once forcedly taken by the British settlers, but their re-appropriation by Kenyans is albeit taken for granted, as the laconic by the way utterance “here, where we live, used to be

Europeans-only Nakuru,” shows. (67). The upcoming writer in Wainaina’s memoir writes less against social postcolonial structures at large, but above all against the anguish and void of not fitting into the scheme of a bourgeois career life as expected by his family. In his childhood, reading is a refuge from an often-overwhelming world for the unconfident boy. In his young adulthood, writing becomes a survival strategy in a personal crisis. Writing is an individual, even lonely endeavour: “I am on my own a lot. I am writing every day now. Sometimes I write through the night [...] there must be some secret mission, something mystical” (Wainaina 2012, 165/166). Even later on, Wainaina does not pretend to be a political writer or to speak on behalf of a community. He openly aspires for the British based Caine Prize of African writing for the money, “fame and lots of commissioned work. [...] I mine every sexy African theme I can think of” (184). Even at a politically more conscious state, when he distances himself from the British legacy of toxic ethnicity in Kenya that was further fostered by postcolonial leaders, his reaction is flight – “I can’t wait to leave” (212) – into his travels and reportage writing instead of deeper analysis. Curiously, the making of his *How to Write About Africa* is not mentioned in the memoir, though chapter 27 in which his writing on South Sudan is censored by European donors clearly indicates how it was triggered. The founding of *Kwani?* is also only mentioned very briefly.

Wainaina’s memoir as well as Ngũgĩ’s third volume both close on the achievement of their intellectual aspiration: both have become recognised writers, a position that is at the same time a seminal marker for their identity formation. Ngũgĩ clearly frames this within the larger decolonization process: “I entered Makerere in the 1959 academic year, a colonial subject, and left in 1964, a citizen of independent Kenya. In those few years a writer was born” (Ngũgĩ 2017, 219).

Conclusion

If postcolonial life writing is meant to favour narrations about identity formation under the conditions of a social, political and economic situation affected by the consequences of colonialism, we may say that both memoirs that I have compared in this article can be considered as ‘postcolonial’ in a broad sense. However, the differences pointed out are obvious and allow me to put a sole postcolonial paradigm into question in the case of Wainaina. Here’s a case that points to the post-postcolonial – an ugly term that I use in a transitional sense, by lack of a clear-cut new concept for now, “at a time when the postcolonial imaginary progresses past its own

“post” and rumors of its own demise, and as the task of the decolonization of the intellectual continues” (Lovesey 193).

The function of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s memoirs as a conscious inscription of the African subject into history and his testimony on resistance to colonialism make them a classic of postcolonial life writing. The autobiographical narrator poses as a postcolonial hybrid subject nourished by his local culture and colonial *Bildung* alike and with whose reconciliation as a writer who appropriates the master’s tools he has to grapple. The same cannot be upheld in the case of Binyavanga Wainaina’s memoir that traces above all his troubled personal identity formation, but also his success story as an African writer who uses as a matter of course English as a global language. His assertion right in the middle of his book “If I am not certain about anything else, I am certain that the world of my family is as solid as fiction” (2012, 127) reminds us about fictionality’s impact on all life writing that coincides with the text’s playfulness. The individualistic and often ironic perceptions of events, the focus on global culture rather than on politics and not least the self-centeredness of a queer subject who does not yet dare to speak its name, position Wainaina’s memoir outside the realms of classical postcolonial critique.

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