

BOOK REVIEW

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. *Secure the Base: Making Africa Visible in the Globe*.
New York: Seagull Books, 2016. 130 pp. Bibliography. \$25.00. ISBN: 9780857423139.

Secure the Base: Making Africa Visible in the Globe consists of nearly thirty years of reflection by one of the most influential African writers of our time. It is a short but dense collection of seven essays, based on some of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's most thought-provoking lectures. The book tackles a wide range of issues, such as the continued importance of looking into slavery, colonialism, and neocolonialism by tying them to economic dependence and global inequality. The author denounces the devastating policies of international organizations such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Bank. Other topics include nuclear weapons, the African middle class, and most importantly, the moral responsibility of the global community to protect humanity.

Wa Thiong'o offers a series of indictments and prescriptions. On the one hand, he demonstrates the impact of the crimes perpetrated against the African continent and its people, with a special focus on Africa's relationship with the West. On the other hand, he does not fail to expose the crimes committed by Africans themselves against their own continent, formulating recommendations on how Africa can "lift itself into being a respected player in the world" (xvi).

Wa Thiong'o first tackles the power of representation, focusing on the negative impact of the word "tribe" and its derivatives that have long been used as templates for the description of any African conflict. For wa Thiong'o, using a biological argument and ignoring the historical roots of the problem—such as the colonial division of communal identity and uneven development among regions and within members of the same community—makes these conflicts seem hopeless and unsolvable. And yet, similar conflicts are experienced in other parts of the world without being saddled with the limiting term that is "tribalism."

In the second essay, wa Thiong'o provides a brief historical overview of capitalism in Africa and a detailed assessment of the nationalist middle class. He laments that Africa's historical relationship with capital has been and still is one of marginality, from the commodification of the African body under slavery to the unpaid labor provided by Africans under the

slave plantation system. Under colonialism, he recounts, Africa served as supplier of raw material. After World War II, a wave of hope swept the continent as decolonization was under way. However, Cold War rivalries and the emergence of the Bretton Woods institutions curbed the hopes and dreams engendered by the African independence movements. Independence was then soon replaced by the cycle of debt and dependence following the arrival of neoliberal ideology.

The fifth essay expands on this argument by drawing the historical interconnectedness between slavery and debt slavery. Wa Thiong'o emphasizes that "The most developed countries in the West are largely those whose modernity is rooted in transatlantic slave trade and plantation slavery" (89–90). In addition to the economic consequences of slavery, he contends that the moral consequences are also often disregarded. For wa Thiong'o, without acknowledgement of the damages done and the trauma of slavery by the perpetrators, there can be no closure. He captures the moral and material dimension of neoliberal ideology by choosing to employ the phrase "capitalist fundamentalism" in place of the word "neoliberalism." He uses Margaret Thatcher's "TINA," which derives from her famous slogan "There Is No Alternative," to explain that "capitalist fundamentalism" implies that there is no alternative to neoliberalism; in short, there is only one way to successfully organize the economy. Wa Thiong'o speaks of the "worship of the market," explaining that the consequences are disastrous for postcolonial states which emerged in a context of intense globalization characterized by unequal distribution of resources.

The author dreams of an Africa that reclaims its own agency. He offers his vision in which he demands social justice and the West's rectification of historical injustices, and he dreams of African leaders who will "stop the business of making Africa an eternal donor (of resources) to the West" (xvi). Drawing from Fanon's writings about the national bourgeoisie in *The Wretched of the Earth*, wa Thiong'o critiques the nationalist middle class and its ambivalent role. On the one hand, the middle class became a continuation of the imperialist bourgeoisie following independence, and on the other hand, it produced a strong intellectual community that put its knowledge at the service of the anticolonial struggle, rallying support from the people to fight for their freedom.

The third essay continues this line of thought; for the author of *Decolonizing the Mind*, one way to reconnect with the people is through African languages. While he agrees that international visibility of Africa was made possible through European languages such as French and English, he deplores the fact that African memory is filtered by these languages, arguing that this international visibility has contributed to the uprooting of African intellectuals.

Wa Thiong'o argues that intellectuals should resist alienation by returning to the use of African languages. Firstly, he advocates the use of translation among African languages as a tool for creating a cultural basis for an African collective memory. Secondly, he supports the use of African

languages to encourage the formation of “border communities,” namely, people of the same language, history, and culture who are divided by arbitrarily drawn colonial borders. The book therefore challenges the sanctity of the colonially derived nation-state and imagines a borderless Africa. Reflecting on the power of knowledge, wa Thiong’o bestows upon African intellectuals a moral responsibility to fight for a cause, this time for peace.

The remaining essays expand on the question of moral responsibility from different perspectives. The fourth essay discusses economic inequalities inside and outside national boundaries, where a minority enriches itself at the expense of a struggling majority, while the sixth essay focuses on nuclear disarmament. Arguing that “belief in stability built on mutual assured destruction is pure madness” (106), wa Thiong’o draws our attention to the fact that only African countries (Libya and South Africa) have responded to the call to protect humanity by destroying their weapons.

The book ends with wa Thiong’o’s beginnings and his longstanding relationship with questions of war and peace. His argument that the intellectual’s role is to defend human life echoes Chinua Achebe who, drawing from ancient Nri philosophy in *There Was a Country* (2012), explains how writers and intellectuals can turn into “warriors of peace” (109). Wa Thiong’o emphasizes the power of words and calls for the responsibility to rise against injustices (106). Uniting global voices in the service of humanity, wa Thiong’o’s book draws from past and contemporary world-renowned thinkers such as Tolstoy, Soyinka, Brecht, Fanon, Shakespeare, Sembène, Descartes, Dante, and Césaire.

Secure the Base does not feed into the feel-good narrative of the “Africa rising” discourse, which tends to focus on the growth records across a variety of African countries, the boom in commodity prices, and Africa’s rising consumer class—nor does it discuss the trope of Africa as the “last frontier of global capitalism.” And yet, the continent is indeed increasingly of interest to foreign investment and international trade. As Kingsley Moghalu, author of *Emerging Africa*, cautiously asks: “Africa as the last frontier of capitalism, yes but for whom?” What is needed, wa Thiong’o would argue, is a united African leadership that will work for more equitable global exchanges.

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For more reading on this subject, see:

- Okunoye, Oyeniyi. 2001. “Dramatizing Postcoloniality: Nationalism and the Rewriting of History in Ngugi and Mugo’s *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*.” *History in Africa* 28: 225–37. doi:10.2307/3172216
- Wilson, James. 2006. “Political Songs, Collective Memories and Kikuyu Indi Schools.” *History in Africa* 33: 363–88. doi:10.1353/hia.2006.0025