

SPECIAL SECTION

## The Global South

*In these paired essays, two writers from the Global South argue against a view of literatures – languages and cultures – as hierarchies of power based on Western paradigms. “A globalectical imagination,” writes Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, “assumes that any center is the center of the world.”*



# Breaking Out of the Prison House of Hierarchy

Mukoma Wa Ngugi

*To read a text with the eyes of the world;  
to see the world with the eyes of the text.*  
– Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o

The call for public work by literary scholars is not predicated on a vague notion of doing a public good—the very survival of our profession depends on it. Undergraduate students are abandoning our literary world for the degrees that will eventually translate into dollars. At the tail end of the pipeline, our graduate students cannot find employment. We need the support of the public if we are to stop the barbarians at the gates of our ivory towers—the politicians and university administrators who find us dispensable, and the conservatives who want a return to trade- and commodity-centered education. Our last line of defense is the public, the taxpayers.

I commute ten hours a week from Norwalk, Connecticut, to Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, where I teach. To keep myself busy, I listen to physics podcasts produced by physicists struggling to explain to people outside their field and academia altogether what it is they do, why they do it, and why it matters. It is a difficult thing to translate the specialized knowledge that comes with theories embedded in theories, with formulas and vocabulary designed to ensure that each conversation does not begin with what Newton or Einstein discovered. But their efforts are rewarding because I feel I have a very rudimentary understanding of physics as a history of ideas.

True, knowing something about the Large Hadron Collider and its discovery of the Higgs Boson particle will not put food on my table tomorrow, but I also know that understanding how the world works ensures that perhaps our

species will be around a little longer. But the more immediate lesson for us in the humanities is this: when the collider caused fear in the public that the search for the “God particle” (a term I now know physicists dislike) would lead to a second big bang, thus destroying us all, physicists did not get defensive; instead, they sought to patiently explain why that work was important, and how we would be safe, in a language the rest of us could understand.

Because the physicists are trying to communicate with me, I care. I care enough to worry about their programs getting defunded. When called upon, I care enough to defend the work of physicists to whoever will listen. Physicists know that being understood by the society at large is not only a good in itself, but that the growth of the field depends on we, the taxpayers, having a rudimentary understanding of what they do, and why it matters to them and to us.

I have a PhD in literary theory, more specifically postcolonial studies. Yet I cannot say with confidence that I fundamentally know what Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* is about. To me, Judith Butler’s *abjection* remains as amorphous as it was six years ago when I first encountered her concept. And quite frankly, I doubt that three or four scholars can agree on the essentials of Spivak’s seminal essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” If my fellow travelers and I cannot say even within the uncertainty principle what the main thinkers in our field are talking about, if their specialized language is too specialized for scholars in their own field, there is something very wrong.

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Imagine physicians in the operating room whose language is so densely individualistic that they cannot understand each other—the result would be a comedy of deadly errors!

Even though we often teach writers, who by definition are engaged with the world, we not only hide their works in impenetrable theories but also disengage their aesthetics from the material world from which they produce their contributions to culture. For example, William Wordsworth wrote the poem “To Touissant L’Ouverture” for the Haitian revolutionary, addressed the French revolution in *The Prelude*, and called for the “language of men” as an alternative to the straitjacketed, standardized English encoded in Samuel Johnson’s English dictionary. But in our classrooms, he is a poet who eschewed the hyperrationalism of the Enlightenment for the more emotive world of aesthetics and noble peasants. I would think that the historical Wordsworth concerned with the fate of the Haitian leader, the fate of language, and the excesses of the French revolution is more universal and speaks more to the student today than the Wordsworth who only writes poems recollected in tranquility. And in the hands of postcolonial scholars, Wordsworth is altogether unintelligible.

There are two issues here—one is how we teach writers who are engaged with the world—and the other one is how to make literary theory engage with the world in which we live. In a way, I am fortunate to inhabit the world of both the writer and the literary scholar. I certainly would not like to see my poetry or fiction hidden in obscure theory when my whole struggle as a writer is to reach as many people as possible. At the same time, I understand the tremendous importance of literary theory and criticism. Literary traditions grow from the laboring and sometimes bickering writers and critics. And literary theory and criticism do have fundamentally important things to say about our world and how we live in it.

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I do not know if anyone outside of academia cares to know what Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak?” is all about, or what Derrida meant by hospitality. But assuming three or four of us can agree that Spivak’s essay is about who speaks for whom, that in fact she is taking a swipe at the deconstructionists who in their eagerness to understand the world claimed agency for the oppressed where there was none, then she is raising an important question—Who speaks for whom? The same goes for Derrida’s questions in *Of Hospitality*, especially in an age when the U.S. debate surrounding immigration rages on, and countries like Kenya boast internally displaced refugees and refugees proper. Is a hospitality that does not differentiate in terms of nationality, ethnicity, race, or even familial lines possible?

These are important questions—as important as those raised by Stephen Hawking about the nature of our universe in *A Brief History of Time*—written for people like me, people outside his field. We do have important and useful things to say about the world. But we need to find two languages: “specialist speak” to use in the privacy of our conferences and the other, “worldspeak,” to use when we are out in the world. Having demolished the bridges between these inside the ivory tower and those outside the fort, we must rebuild them.

Take the divide between the campus and the town it inhabits; think about the tension and the amount of energy and money it takes to keep the “philistine townies” out. Think of what it means when we teach our students about service in the community and, in the same breath, remind them to close the gates behind them. It is not just a question of the “trickle-out-and-in” economics of knowledge; we need engagement that sees the community as one of the many but equal partners in the production of knowledge. It is not enough to reserve a few seats for the community when we invite Angela Davis, Toni

Morrison, or Sonia Sanchez to campus. The reason we keep inviting them to our campuses in the first place is because of their service to the community—to ask them what it is they have learned from that interaction. The events and conferences that bring together today’s great living thinkers and writers should be held, at least in part, out in the community centers. Why not?

If we do that, the next time the state thinks about gutting area studies for political capital, those same members of the community can say, “We know the work of these literary scholars, even though it did not put food on my table last night.” Now I do feel that I can go out into the world and be, in the words of Firdaus in *Woman Below Point Zero* (1983), “harder than life.”

This past December, at the invitation of Joseph Ngunjiri and Mwenda Micheni of the Nation Media Group, I conducted a workshop in Nairobi with journalists who cover arts and culture. The goal was simple enough: to see how journalists can apply literary theory to the coverage and criticism of culture and the arts. The workshop had around fifteen participants, including bloggers, cartoonists, youth-page writers, and feature writers. Under the concept of “contradiction,” we used a short story by Chimamanda Adichie, “You in America,” to explore feminism, classism, globalization, transnationalism, and world citizenry. I did not expect to see direct application of Marxian dialectics, but if contradiction will translate into finding the limitations and usefulness of a novel or film and its relationship to the material society, then that should be good enough. My real hope, though, is that the next time a Kenyan politician takes a swipe at the humanities, there will be one or two journalists who will argue in opposition.

But we can also get these ideas out there in the form of debate instead of already-closed theories. At Cornell University, with Satya Mohanty and other scholars, we have initiated the Global

South Project ([www.globalsouthproject.cornell.edu](http://www.globalsouthproject.cornell.edu)) with the understanding that there is no single center, or that the center is everywhere. Often, scholars from the Global South relate to each other through ideological constructs from the West. Thus, we triangulate theory, whether political or literary, through the West. Even liberationist concepts and theories such as deconstruction or hybridity end up trapped in the same dialectic from which they are trying to break free. In both, the primary relationships are between the colonizer/colonized, the subaltern South and the West. Our project has the immediate goal of breaking this linkage in order to generate debates that have no built-in hierarchies. We want these discussions to take place as publicly and widely as possible and in as many different centers as possible.

Through astrophysics, I can see that as far as the universe goes, there is no single center or, rather, the center is everywhere. I can grasp the uncertainty principle, according to which measurements for things that are both waves and particles can never be exact. It should not be easier for me to extract knowledge from physics than from my own field. These two principles are at the heart of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s *Globalectics* (2012), where the challenge is for us to break out of the “prison houses” of language, the ivory tower, and the imaginary centers. In this way, globalectics offers us one way to organize “knowledges” coming from the Global South.

For Ngũgĩ, “poor theory and its practice imply maximizing the possibilities inherent in the minimum.” If we are going to be seen as legitimate producers of knowledge worthy of public respect, debate, and ultimately defense, we need not only poor theory but also humble theorists who are willing to break out of the ivory tower and into the world.

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