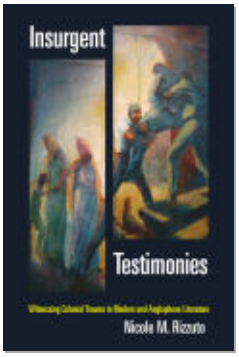
4. Testimony and the Crisis of the Juridical Order in Ngu□gi wa Thiong'o's A Grain of Wheat



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Testimony and the Crisis of the Juridical Order in Ngũgi wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat*

> African literature, even that in European languages, starts with that rejection of the master's narrative of history.
>
> — NGŨGI WA THIONG'O, *Globalectics*

The previous chapter sought to enrich a postcolonial studies dominated by the cultural problematic of migrancy and deterritorialization by analyzing writings of colonial and postcolonial authors that were not migration narratives but that instead bore witness from within the nation to law's disruption of it. This final chapter also focuses on a work that eschews a narrative of movement out of the nation for one of detention inside it. Like the Jamaicans Reid and de Lisser, the Kenyan Ngũgi wa Thiong'o elaborates how traumas of a colonial past under Emergency threaten the transition from colony to postcolony. Ngũgi's postindependence 1967 novel *A Grain of Wheat* rewrites *Under Western Eyes*, Joseph Conrad's novel from 1911, which Chapter 1 explored. Scholars once censured Ngũgi for using the work of *the* novelist of European imperialism as a template for representing African history under colonialism, but more recent studies argue that Ngũgi is critical of Conrad's modernist depiction of revolution even as he uses it to warn against the dangers of an emerging neocolonial state in Kenya.[1]

Like Conrad's novel, Ngũgi's is directed toward its protagonist's confession of betrayal. Featuring flashbacks and diversions into 150 years of Kenyan history, but focusing most prominently on the Mau Mau uprising and counterinsurgency, *A Grain of Wheat* takes place four days before Independence in 1963 and leads toward a commemorative event, the honoring of fallen freedom fighters at the Uhuru celebrations. "Let it never be said Thabai dragged to shame the names of the sons she lost in war. No. We must raise them—even from the dead—to share it with us,"[2] Warui, a village elder insists. Mugo has been called upon to make the dead speak, not least of all the heroic insurgent Kihika, whom the community does not know Mugo betrayed to the colonial authorities. Mugo's testimony on independence day is not the prosopopeia of insurgents, however, but a confession to his betrayal of the movement's leader.

Mugo's confession is always read as the textual act that most clearly expresses Ngũgi's wish to halt the compulsive repetition of betrayals the novel claims defines colonial, and newly postcolonial, Kenya. The text tells us, repeatedly, that "life was only a constant repetition of what happened yesterday and the day before" (269), from its most mundane to spectacular aspects: Mugo "liked porridge in the morning. But whenever he took it, he remembered the half-cooked porridge he ate in detention . . . everything repeats itself . . . the day ahead would be just like yesterday and the day before" (4). Betrayals reconsolidate colonial structures after eruptions of anticolonial resistance seem about to destroy them once and for all. The most recent at the time of writing occurs under Jomo Kenyatta's rule. The novel refers to it by having characters imagine what does in fact come to pass after Kenyatta is tried for insurgency in *The Queen against Kenyatta and others*. "They avoided talking about Jomo or speculating about the outcome of the case in Kapenguria," the novel relates. "Long ago, young Harry [Thuku] had also been detained, and sentenced to live alone. . . . He had come back a broken man, who promised eternal co-operation with his oppressors, denouncing the Party he had helped to build. What happened yesterday could happen today. The same thing, over and over again, through history" (122). Kenyatta betrayed the independence movement by ordering a compulsory forgetting of the Emergency and establishing the conditions for a comprador state. He described Mau Mau as "a disease that needed to be eradicated, and must never be remembered again"; as one historian notes, "Kenyatta's

use of criminal analogies and disease metaphors directly recalled the British discourse on Mau Mau."[3] Critics contend that Mugo's confession speaks directly to Kenyatta's betrayals of the community, exposing and condemning the ethos of individualism underwriting economic and political policies that organize the neocolonial state.[4] As Byron Caminero-Santangelo argues, this confession dispels irony, which in the novel perpetuates deception and trust in individuals as false heroes. Mugo shares "his true history, with the community," and his confession is "also an act of self-sacrifice for the good of that community."[5] The narrative seems to support this reading of confession as sacrificial when it relates immediately after the confession occurs that "a few other elders remained behind to complete the sacrifice before the storm" (253).

Throughout the text, however, practices of witnessing push against the dominant assessment of Mugo's confession; they also constitute a significant, unexpected, and unexplored departure from those of Conrad's novel. Whether readers criticize or commend Ngũgi's adaptation of *Under Western Eyes*, they have neglected a major formal contrast between the works: the treatment of confession. While Conrad's novel multiplies confessions endlessly, *A Grain of Wheat* withholds them. It is surprising that formal tactics would differentiate two works that share a plot of revolution and its betrayal because form is what connects these writers while perspectives toward revolution set them apart. Ngũgi explains the attraction Conrad held for him in his early career as a novelist. He admired Conrad in part because here was a colonial subject who wrote in, and thus had to negotiate with, a language that was not his first (or even second): English.[6] Also, although Ngũgi remained critical of what he calls Conrad's liberal humanist support of imperialism, he found the formal procedures of Conrad's work "tantalising" and employed them to compose what he names the Afro-European novel.[7] This "hybrid form" arises in the midst of the worldwide postwar anti-imperialist upheavals, continues after the postindependence betrayal of national liberations, and attempts to represent, address, and touch the peasantry and working classes. But this genre is still confined within European languages and can only reach the petty bourgeoisie, Ngũgi acknowledges. Because *A Grain of Wheat* is such a novel, it must therefore make all the more effort to work against its limiting condition in order to loosen itself from the colonial legacy it bears and risks perpetuating through its linguistic expression.[8] As Ngũgi famously argued

in *Decolonizing the Mind*, "the domination of a people's language by the languages of the colonizing nations was crucial to the domination of the mental universe of the colonized."[9] The tactics Ngũgi employs in *A Grain of Wheat*, however, are frequently associated with an aesthetic discourse thought to convey colonialist mindsets—European modernism. Ngũgi explained why these tactics, rather than conventions of realism and naturalism that shape so much colonial and postcolonial African literature, were useful for composing the story of Kenyan history and people. "The story-within-a-story was part and parcel of the conversational norms of the peasantry," he relates. "The linear/biographical unfolding of a story was more removed from actual social practice than the narrative of Conrad."[10] Given his admiration for Conrad's use of form, it is notable that Ngũgi modifies, even jettisons, the organizing formal strategy of the particular Conrad novel he selects to tell the story of Kenya on the brink of independence.

We should consider, then, what it is about the specific historical and literary-historical situation that encourages or even demands this formal change. Not only does *A Grain of Wheat* take as its focus a turning point in Kenyan history, the transition from colony to postcolony; it is also written in a moment of limbo. It is composed after what Ngũgi identifies as the first period of African literature, which manifests "self-assuredness, a confidence . . . optimism" in the emergent nation,[11] and before the third period, those works that were to "reveal what really had been happening in the sixties: the transition from the colonial to the neocolonial stage."[12] During the intermediary period of independence, the structural shifts in national and global forces have not yet become clear:

> The writer in this period was still limited by his inadequate grasp of the full dimension of what was really happening in the sixties: the international and national realignment of class forces and class alliances. What the writer often reacted to was the visible lack of moral fibre of the new leadership and not necessarily the structural basis of that lack of a national moral fibre . . . although the literature produced was incisive in its description, it was nevertheless characterized by a sense of despair. The writer in this period often retreated into individualism, cynicism or into empty moral appeals for a change of heart.[13]

Ngũgi is not discussing his own work here (at least not directly), but his remarks might pertain to *A Grain of Wheat*. In contrast to his later fiction's

foregrounding of the structural basis of the nation's turmoil, the effects of global capitalism and internal class struggle, this work foregrounds the psychology of betrayal—of Mugo's and of many other characters. The novel's examination of a pivotal moment in Kenya through characterological dramas of betrayal suggests that it believes that historical conflicts can be explained by individual moral shortcomings and psychological motivations. It would seem, therefore, that this work is "characterized by a sense of despair." Readers have indeed argued that this is the case.[14] Yet the text's management of silence and speech around the novel's betrayals indicates, on the contrary, that problems emerging in the new nation cannot be understood this way—that they possess a structural basis. That structure is the deployment of state power during colonial modernity, which reaches a crisis point during the Emergency: it creates an impasse of witnessing, making confessions to the past at once necessary and difficult, if not impossible.

In both demonstrating and negotiating this impasse while confronting its underlying conditions—a suspension of law under a state of exception, whose brutalities the English state only began to address legally in 2011—the novel replaces cynicism or despair, the responses of a literature unaware of structural conditions shaping the nation-state, with a modernist response that questions traditional and revised definitions of modernism. This response challenges the perceived rupture between modernism and African postcolonial literature as well as the notion that *A Grain of Wheat* is a copy of a modernist source text. Because formal elements distinct from, as well as those that overlap with, Conrad's novel are harnessed to different ends in the Kenyan work, the latter cannot be understood as a "belated" modernism. This harnessing also pressures Eurocentric tendencies in global modernist studies to approach modernism as an enlightened aesthetic discourse that exposes nationalism as a retrograde ideology of a residual political form while articulating alternative—diasporic and cosmopolitan—identities and commitments. Postcolonial scholars have highlighted the differences between Anglo-European modernism and that of African writers and have sought to reconfigure the category modernism from the perspective of the latter. Neil Lazarus maintains that African literature requires an expansion of the term modernism that also replaces the fetishization of particular aesthetic techniques with attention to the political work such techniques perform.[15] Simon Gikandi describes that work as giving symbolic form to the

nation. "While their Western counterparts sought to use the ideology of modernism to undo nationalism, African artists adopted the same ideology to imagine and to will into being new nations," Gikandi writes, and he remarks that "nationalism has become a dirty word in some circles, but for the colonized it was a redemptive project that needed an aesthetic dimension in order to fulfill its mandate."[16] Ngũgi writes *A Grain of Wheat* when confidence in the nation-state is eroding under the weight of global capitalism, with which national elites collude, yet when the nation-state also remains a form many still hope can be marshaled to resist the depredations of an expanding neoimperial world system. The novel strives to address the past in ways that would bolster the nation against a future shaped by historical amnesia imposed by a neocolonial regime complicit with contemporaneous globalization but also strives to detach a national imagination from a history of colonial thought and language that authorizes practices of exceptional violence. The orchestration of testimonial speech, and testimonial silence, is the vehicle of this striving.

Ellipses

As many have noted, *A Grain of Wheat* is replete with silences, a fact that seems strange when we consider that the novel is written to give voice to the Emergency. British colonial and postindependence Kenyan governments both attempted to foreclose the possibility of bearing witness to this period of insurgency and counterinsurgency that lasted from 1952 to 1960. The novel relates the effects of foreclosed attestation when it describes insurgents

> abandoned in a desert where not even a straying voice from the world of men could reach them. This frightened Gikonyo, for who, then, would come to rescue them? The sun would scorch them dead and they would be buried in the hot sand where the traces of their graves would be lost forever . . . that his identity even in death would be wiped from the surface of the earth was a recurring thought that often brought him into a cold sweat on cold nights.
>
> (123)

This fear of silencing in turn silences, for "at such times, words formed in prayer would not leave his throat" (123). If it is crucial that being bur-

ied without a grave, trace, or remainder, left unmourned and forgotten, not occur, then the novel's central rhetorical strategy poses a conundrum. That strategy is ellipses, the repeated imposition of silence where speech is anticipated.

Although the work's "excessive silences"[17] have been noticed, unacknowledged is that these silences are systematic: they emerge wherever confessions are anticipated, and they are created by ellipses. This device thus insists on the importance of confessions, paradoxically by preventing them. "Ellipsis" derives from the Greek *ellipsis*, "a falling short, defect, ellipse," from *elleipein*, "to fall short, leave out," from *en- in* + *leipein*, "to leave." Embedded in its etymology are two senses of leaving: leaving out and moving away from. The novel exploits both tendencies in its uses of this figure. Ellipsis calls attention to itself *as* device, not only enacting incompletion and substitution but emphasizing that it does so. Whatever the content around which, or through which, it appears, ellipsis simultaneously signifies "I point elsewhere," whether to a passage of time between thoughts, omitted words, or any number of affects it creates—anxiety, confusion, the desire to narrate, the desire not to narrate, the failure to narrate. Ellipses convey that whatever is stated is haunted by what is not stated. By frustrating confessions of virtually all the characters at some point, this strategy formally challenges oppositions between colonizers and colonized, insurgents and counterinsurgents, and public and private spheres.

The novel's elliptical style might represent Ngũgi's nod to Conrad's work in general, though not *Under Western Eyes* specifically. Conrad was famous for creating meaning through "sudden holes in space time," but while he does so in his "Russian novel" by keeping confessions behind closed doors, he nevertheless portrays characters engaged in confessional acts, however interrupted. Ngũgi, on the other hand, regularly withholds such satisfaction from readers as well as characters. Ellipses stress the connotative rather than denotative meaning of a passage and often also play upon the interactive quality of a text, its interpellation of readers. The first ellipsis in the novel is directed at readers, from whom it withholds a confession of Mugo:

> There was, for him, then, solace in the very act of breaking the soil: to bury seeds and watch the green leaves heave and thrust themselves out of the ground, to tend the plants to ripeness and then harvest, these were all part of the world

> he had created for himself and which formed the background against which his dreams soared to the sky. But then Kihika had come into his life.
>
> (11)

Although the passage ends with a single period rather than three, the former functions in the same way as the latter. The final sentence raises an expectation (the significance of Kihika's interruption of Mugo's "dreams"), but what follows it typographically is a literal gap, a blank line space and section break that does not proceed to a completion of the thought in the section that follows and that turns the final sentence into a dangling phrase that trails off into silence. This doubled utterance emphasizes that the passage's primary meaning is not what is said but rather that there is more to say and that it is being withheld. Creating the effect of a subject driven to confess but unable to do so, ellipses multiply after Mugo receives a visit from Gikonyo:

> Suppose I had told him . . . suppose I had suddenly told him . . . Everything would have been all over . . . all over . . . the knowledge . . . the burden . . . fears . . . and hopes. . . . I could have told him . . . and maybe . . . maybe . . . Or is that why he told me his own story? At this thought he abruptly stopped pacing and leaned against the bed. A man does not go to a stranger and tear his heart open . . . I see everything . . . everything . . . he pretended not to look at me . . . yet kept on stealing eyes at me . . . see if I was frightened . . . see . . . if . . .
>
> (142)

When Mugo finally approaches Kihika's sister Mumbi to confess his betrayal of her brother, an ellipsis suspends the confession. After Mumbi asks, "What is it Mugo? What is wrong?" (211), the novel jumps into the future instead of proceeding to Mugo's confession. Leapt over, it occurs in a hole in narrative space and time and is narrated belatedly: "Suddenly at her question, he had removed his hands from her body. He knelt before her, a broken, submissive penitent" (236), and confesses. The use of past tense underlines that readers cannot witness the confession when it actually occurs. Thus, in various ways, the novel censors an act to which critics impute so much critical weight.

While the prevalence of ellipses might seem unremarkable, even cliché, Ngũgi handles the device in unconventional ways that indicate its function is more than aesthetic, that its primary role is to express the need for confession so as to refuse it. Common in detective fiction, a genre Ngũgi

references in this novel and others, ellipses are typically used to generate narrative tension; although in the first appearance of ellipses, which is cited above, they are used this way, in the vast majority of instances, they are not. This is because the "secrets" ellipses hide or interrupt are always in fact disclosed, but elsewhere and outside of the confessional frame the novel erects only to have the device leave empty. The most striking proof that the ellipses are not employed to generate narrative tension is that the novel discloses its organizing secret, Mugo's betrayal of Kihika, less than a third of the way in, thus making elliptical evasions excessive to plot fomentation or suspense. But just as important is *how* that secret is disclosed—in an offhanded aside in the middle of a chapter that nearly begs readers to overlook its revelatory status: "Unless they had suspected him could General R. have asked those pointed questions? Meeting somebody after a week? Karanja? Yes, could they really have asked him to carve his place in society by singing tributes to the man he had so treacherously betrayed?" (77–78). The ways ellipses structure multiple situations involving many other characters confirms that it serves an alternative function to the production of suspense.

Through the elliptical strategy, confession is constantly proposed as a way to reveal betrayals, only for their disclosure to readers and other characters to occur otherwise, if at all. This pattern of anticipation and frustration repeats three times within one chapter that details betrayals in the domestic sphere. While engaged in an extramarital affair, the colonial administrator John Thompson's wife, Margery, felt "the impulsive desire to confess, to clean her breast, was very strong" (60), but the novel replaces confession with ellipsis. The weak rationale for such silence is a contrived missed opportunity: the sudden death of the lover allegedly makes the confession to the husband unnecessary. This is no explanation, however. Guilt rather than fear of being caught was shown to have motivated the desire to confess. This scene proposing and then thwarting the wife's confession of infidelity also includes her determination to "compel" (61) her husband to confess his feeling about the couple's imminent return to England on the eve of independence, for "Uhuru had brought their lives into a crisis and he behaved as if nothing was happening" (52):

> Yes, she would compel him to talk, tonight, she resolved, and stopped wiping the dishes, walking back to the sitting-room with determination. John was peering

> into the mass of notebooks and papers before him, occasionally scribbling something with a hand that appeared to be shaking. She bent behind him, put her arm around his neck, and lightly touched the lobe of his left ear with her lips. She was surprised at herself, since she had not done this for years. Suddenly her grim determination to force their relationship into the open crisis subsided.
>
> (61)

The desire to make Thompson confess "suddenly" subsides without explanation, and the final sentence reads as a dangling thought, ellipsis again "leaving" or moving away from confession. Margery's plan to confess is coupled with Thompson's plan to confess to Margery why they must return to England. The reason, that Kenya has betrayed him by unseating him from power, is provided to readers through free indirect discourse: "why should people wait and go through the indignity of being ejected from their beds and seats by their houseboys?" (65):

> He braced himself for the effort. His heart livened with hope and fear as he went into the bathroom to prepare himself for the great confession.
>
> He opened the door to the bedroom cautiously and stepped in. He did not put on the lights, feeling that darkness would create the right atmosphere. A man was born to die continually and start afresh. His hands were shaking, slightly, and he felt darkness creep towards him, as he reached for the bed. But Margery was already asleep. Thompson saw this and felt enormous relief and gratitude. He got into bed but for a long time he could not sleep.
>
> (65–66)

The passage elliptically leaves off again, the final sentence highlighting not only the failure but the persisting need for confession.

The struggle to confess extends beyond the home and civilian life to the military sphere, the borders between which the Emergency collapses. The specter of the Emergency chases both British and Kikuyu characters toward confessions. An episode involving Thompson, who is the former district officer at Rira camp, implies that confession alone can cure the compulsive returns of the "Rira disaster," which is based on actual events that occurred at Hola camp. Years later, on the verge of Uhuru, the specter of this disaster reemerges in civilian space. Thompson watches from his office window at Githima library as the dog belonging to his colleague Dr. Lynd prepares to attack the black Kenyan workers, who arm themselves with stones in self-

defense. Lynd appears and restrains the animal, but, Thompson muses, "what would have happened if the bull-mastif had jumped on Karanja and torn his flesh? The hostility he saw in the men's eyes as he approached them. The silence. Sudden. Like Rira" (53). We learn that "at Rira, the tragedy of his life occurred. A hunger strike, a little beating and eleven detainees died" (54). Consequently, "he was whisked off to Githima . . . But the wound had never healed. Touch it, and it brought back all the humiliation he had felt at the time" (54). Thompson attempts to confess to Lynd to heal the wound. "Everything seemed a visitation from the past: Rira and the dog" (50) and even the setting seems to evoke elements of the camp, "a big tree-nursery surrounded by a wire fence" (51). Confession is continually called upon to stop the past from reemerging: "He wanted to tell her about the dog but somehow found it difficult" (50); he "wanted to tell her the truth—but he would have to tell her about his own paralysis—how he had stood fascinated by an anticipation of blood" (51). The episode builds to a confession—"he tried to tell Dr Lynd what had happened—the difficulty lay in separating what had occurred outside his office on the grass—only tell her that—from what had gone on inside him" (51–52), but it concludes with abrupt silence: "He fidgeted on the grass, felt his ridiculous position in relation to this woman from whom he wanted to get away now that the urge to tell her about the dog had faded" (52). The novel declines to explain why the desire to confess vanishes, why the text elliptically moves away from the testimonial act the return of a spectral past seems to require. In another episode, that spectral past literally chases the character Gikonyo toward a confession:

> He seemed to hear, in the distance, steps on a pavement. The steps approached him. He walked faster and faster, away from the steps. But the faster he walked, the louder the steps became. . . . The steps on the pavement, so near now, rhymed with his pounding heart. He had to talk to someone. He must hear another human voice. Mugo. But what were mere human voices? Had he not lived with them for six years? In various detention camps? Perhaps he wanted the voice of a man who would understand. Mugo. Abruptly he stopped running. The steps on the pavement receded into a distance. They would come again, he knew they would come to plague him. I must talk to Mugo. The words Mugo had spoken at a meeting two years before had touched Gikonyo. Lord, Mugo would know.
>
> (33–34)

The next sentence frustrates expectations: "But by the time he reached Mugo's hut, the heat of his resolution had cooled" (34). This inconclusive concluding remark, yet another ellipsis, denies resolution.

How, then, to explain the consistent, inexplicable fall into silence when confession is demanded? The abrupt fading of Thompson's desire to confess, the sudden loss of Margery's desire to compel Thompson to confess, the "cooling" of Gikonyo's need to confess, the censorship of Mugo's confession to Mumbi—not one is accounted for through either character psychology or plotting. While it is tempting to read the climactic delivery of Mugo's public confession as the novel's telos, the organizing elliptical strategy pressures this reading. What also pressures the privileging of this confession are its effects in the narrative. Rather than an act of self-sacrifice that unifies the community, Mugo's confession disperses those gathered at the Uhuru celebrations: "Then they rose and started talking, moving away in different directions, as if the meeting ended with Mugo's confession" (253). Moreover, after he confesses, Mugo disappears from the novel. This might of course be a sign that the narrative no longer needs the protagonist once he has fulfilled his catalytic function by confessing; however, given the resistance to confessions peppered across the entire work, the confessant's disappearance might also be a sign of ambivalence toward his testimonial act. After all, Mugo's confession does not halt the cycle of violence that characterizes colonial and postcolonial Kenya but rather inspires yet another instance of it, if, as the novel implies, he is executed without witnesses or the consent of the village judge who tries him for his crime.

The novel guides us most clearly toward a reason for its elliptical strategy when it connects confession to a history that has only recently come to light in official British archives and is still suppressed in Kenya—that of indefinite detention under the Emergency. Detained for years at Yala camp, Gikonyo desperately confesses to having taken the Mau Mau oath. The novel elliptically censors the act that precipitates his release from the concentration camp:

> Gikonyo fixed his mind on Mumbi, fearing that strength would leave his knees under the silent stare of all the other detainees. He walked on and the sound of his feet on the pavement leading to the office where screening, interrogations, and confessions were made, seemed, in the absence of other noise, unnecessar-

> ily loud. The door closed behind him. The other detainees walked back to their rooms to wait for another journey to the quarry . . .
>
> * * *
>
> As Gikonyo left the road and took a path into the fields, he could still hear the echo of his steps on the pavement four years back. The steps had followed him all through the pipe-line, for in spite of the confession, Gikonyo was not released immediately.
>
> (130)

Examining the novel's portrayal of state power and detention under the Emergency and imperial nationalist principles guiding colonial consolidation suggests why *A Grain of Wheat* refuses to deploy confessions, even though this refusal seems only to perpetuate the silencing and amnesia Kenyatta's rule enforced.

States of Exception

A Grain of Wheat details an insurgency and counterinsurgency whose role in distinguishing its ethics and politics of witnessing from that of *Under Western Eyes* has been overlooked in criticism on the novel; this history has also been overlooked in theories of trauma, sovereignty, and biopolitics. Confronting scholarship long focused on European histories, theorists have begun to consider how colonial situations might shift analyses of trauma and even occasion what Michael Rothberg calls "multidirectional memory." A comparative approach that "draws attention to the dynamic transfers that take place between diverse places and times during the act of remembrance,"[18] such a practice would, in this case, challenge Giorgio Agamben's claim that the only situation to which indefinite detention in Guantanamo Bay after September 11, 2001, "could possibly be compared is the legal situation of the Jews in the Nazi Lager [camps], who, along with their citizenship had lost every legal identity, but at least retained their identity as Jews."[19] By confronting another world of the concentration camp, which Ngũgi reminds us were "named detention camps for the world outside Kenya,"[20] *A Grain of Wheat* invites us to "posit collective memory as *partially* disengaged from exclusive versions of cultural identity and acknowledge how remembrance both cuts across and binds together diverse spatial, temporal, and cultural

sites."[21] Multidirectional memory is "partial" in the sense that it struggles to maintain singularities while searching for points of connection; its goal is not synthesis. Placing Ngũgi's novel in conversation with studies of sovereignty and biopolitics that take other historical events as their focus elucidates how the novel relates that the Emergency was a crisis of the juridical order in which states of exception create the impasse of witnessing that the elliptical strategy manifests.

The novel's representation of the anticolonial movement's aims and the rhetoric of nationhood it deploys, however, obscures the nature and extent of this crisis and the mechanisms of imperial power it battles. Critics, historians, and Ngũgi himself at times describe the insurgency as a reaction to two specific losses at the hands of colonialism: land and freedom. Indeed, the name the resistance movement gave itself was the Kenya Land and Freedom Army (*not* Mau Mau). The many references to intimacy with the land convey that it defines Kenyan character and operates as the rhetorical base of claims for political independence.[22] "Is he a man who lets another take away his land and freedom?" (112), Kihika asks. "Whether the land was stolen from Gikuyu, Ukabi or Nandi, it does not belong to the whiteman. And even if it did, shouldn't everyone have a share in the common shamba, our Kenya?" (113). Kenya is regularly defined as fertile land from which its people are biologically descended, from Kihika's statement that "with us, Kenya is our Mother" (103), to the depiction of Mumbi as substitute for one of the founders of the Kikuyu, a mother who, according to the novel's conclusion, metaphorically gives birth to a new nation,[23] to the myth of the warrior Waiyaki, who took arms against the first European settlers because "the white man had imperceptibly acquired more land to meet the growing needs of his position" (15). Waiyaki is challenged by the white man, whose "menacing laughter remained echoing in the hearts of the people, long after Waiyaki had been arrested and taken to the coast, bound hands and feet" (15). The story of Waiyaki's resistance is elevated to myth through rumor. "Later, so it is said, Waiyaki was buried alive at Kibwezi with his head facing into the centre of the earth, a living warning to those who, in after years, might challenge the hand of the christian woman whose protecting shadow now bestrode both land and sea" (15). The next sentence transforms this rumor into an epic event that enables transgenerational memory, mediated through Kenyans' natural connection to the land: "Then nobody noticed it;

but looking back we can see that Waiyaki's blood contained within it a seed, a grain, which gave birth to a political party whose main strength thereafter sprang from a bond with the soil" (15). The foundation on which anticolonial nationalism is erected posits the autochthon as the legitimate inheritor of Kenyan earth and identifies two concrete losses that must be recovered.

The novel's portrayal of the Emergency, however, and of the image of imperialism the Emergency threatens indicates that more than land and control of the polity have been lost. This portrayal also illustrates that the terms the anticolonial movement uses to justify its aims—seeds, birth, "natural" life—are what drive colonial power in its various forms. According to the novel, a supposedly universally shared biological life becomes the contested site of, and justification for, earliest imperial rule and then, later, exceptional state violence in Kenya. *A Grain of Wheat* relates that what Giorgio Agamben calls the metaphysical "fracture" between an imputed "bare" or natural life and political life that shapes modernity leads to a situation in Kenya in which witnesses are silenced but also forced to speak in ways that will make attestation to this period a complicated affair.

The novel casts open the abyss of law[24] generated through what Agamben theorizes as the paradox of sovereignty in modernity. In *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, which is launched from Michel Foucault's and Hannah Arendt's studies of biopolitics, Agamben analyzes how "natural life begins to be included in the mechanisms and calculations of State power, and politics turns into biopolitics."[25] This process is an "inclusive exclusion" in the polis of biological or bare life, what the ancients called *zoe*, as distinct from *bios*, or good life. "The peculiar phrase 'born with regard to life, but existing essentially with regard to the good life' can be read . . . as an inclusive exclusion (an *exceptio*) of *zoe* in the *polis*, almost as if politics were the place in which life had to transform itself into good life and in which what had to be politicized were always already bare life,"[26] Agamben writes. Bare life is not only excluded but also maintained as exclusion for the production of (politicized) existence. Once located at the margins of the domain of the political, in modernity, bare life comes to coincide with the political realm in totalitarian and parliamentary democratic regimes alike—indeed, "the only real question to be decided was which form of organization would be best suited to the task of assuring the care, control, and use of bare life."[27] In modern managements of bare life, distinctions between inclusion and

exclusion and right and fact dissolve through a paradox enacted in the state of exception.

To account for what Agamben describes as the twentieth century's unprecedented orchestrations of state violence, which he claims are typified in the Nazi concentration camp, he focuses on what Foucault's studies of biopower allegedly neglected, the "hidden intersection between the juridico-institutional and the biopolitical modes of power." Arguing that "the production of a biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power,"[28] Agamben contends that that power's paradox is enacted in a state of exception that creates *homo sacer*, a subject suspended between life and death who is both inside and outside of law. The sovereign who decides on the state of exception is also inside and outside of law, but this is because he or she suspends the juridical order of which he or she is also a part. This situation institutes a threshold of indistinction

> between [right and fact]. It is not a fact, since it is only created through the suspension of the rule. But for the same reason it is not even a juridical case in point, even if it opens the possibility of the force of law. . . . What is at issue in the sovereign exception is not so much the control or neutralization of an excess as the creation and definition of the very space in which the juridico-political order can have validity. . . . The "ordering of space" that is, according to [the jurist Carl] Schmitt, constitutive of the sovereign nomos *is therefore not only a "taking of land"—the determination of a juridical and territorial ordering—but above all a "taking of the outside," an exception*.[29]

Once exceptional, the state of exception becomes normalized throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. (Although, as our discussion in the previous chapter indicates, we could counter that emergency law was increasingly invoked by the British empire throughout the nineteenth century and was also legally coded as "exceptional.") Agamben argues that the Nazi camp is the pure topological expression of the breakdown between inside and outside and right and fact under sovereign exception. There, the detainee is transformed into *homo sacer*, both outside and inside the law, deprived of law's protection yet subject to it. The camp therefore makes visible "the hidden paradigm of the political space of modernity."[30]

A Grain of Wheat suggests that the paradox of sovereignty that produces and maintains bare life finds a different manifestation in Kenya under British

rule. The novel articulates that the sovereign ordering of space under colonialism was more than a "taking of land," in the words of both Carl Schmitt and the anticolonial movement; it was also a "taking of the outside." The inclusive exclusion of bare life is presented as central to imperial aims across history in Kenya. It shapes the discourse of rehabilitation that initiates conquest and colonial consolidation under the mantle of imperial nationalism as well as the discourse of contamination and elimination that defined the totalitarian Emergency state.

The text relates that as a civilizing mission, British imperialism creates a fracture between bare life and good life that it unsuccessfully attempts to repair through the process of "rehabilitation." This drama of metaphysical fracture and attempted reparation is scripted in a treatise attributed to Thompson, whose political trajectory in some ways parallels that of Conrad's Kurtz and who will later lose faith in the civilizing mission he articulates in *Prospero in Africa*. This manuscript presents the colonial project as the inclusive exclusion of the bare life of the African in the polis of the British empire-as-one-nation. Imperial nationalism's goal of "stretching the short, tight, skin of the nation over the gigantic body of the empire"[31] finds expression in the novel through Thompson's treatise. The treatise maintains that although the African is atavistic and animalistic, these aspects can be excluded so she (or he, more exactly; the African woman's capacity for rehabilitation would be less visible to the imperial focalizer here) can be included as a British subject, a member of the far-flung "British nation" (62). What must be politicized is bare life. Upon discovering "two Africans who in dress, speech, and in intellectual power were no different from the British," and in which "the irrationality, inconsistency, and superstition so characteristic of the African and Oriental races" has been replaced by "the three principles basic to the Western mind: ie, the principle of Reason, of Order, and of Measure" (62), Thompson has an epiphany. "In a flash I was convinced that the growth of the British Empire was the development of a great moral idea: it means, it must surely lead to the creation of one British nation, embracing peoples of all colours and creeds, based on the just proposition that all men were created equal" (62). The great equivalent of all peoples is life as such, which can be transformed into the good life, here British subjecthood. *Prospero in Africa* argues "to be English was basically an attitude of mind: it was a way of looking at life, at human relationship, at

the just ordering of human society. Was it not possible to reorientate people into this way of life by altering their social and cultural environment" (63)? That the posited bare life of an entire people must be separated from and opposed to it is clear from the way Thompson distinguishes British from French imperialism:

> He was influenced by the French policy of Assimilation, but was critical of the French as he was of what he called Lugard's retrograde concept of Indirect Rule. "We must avoid the French mistake of assimilating only the educated few. The peasant in Asia and Africa must be included in this moral scheme for rehabilitation. In Great Britain we have had our peasant, and now our worker, and they are no less an integral part of our society."
>
> (63)

By disagreeing with Lugard, Thompson declares a continuity between African and British peoples based on the capacity to be transformed from bare life through "rehabilitation," by which Africans will be administered souls, be given that certain British "attitude toward life." One sentence summarizes concisely the biopolitical project: "his faith in British Imperialism had once made him declare: To administer a people is to administer a soul" (63).

Thompson uses the African soldier during World War II as an example to distinguish British imperial nationalism also from Hitler's German nationalism: "Transform the British Empire into one nation: didn't this explain so many things, why, for instance, so many Africans had offered themselves up to die in the war against Hitler?" (63). The world of detention under the Emergency that the novel constructs, however, creates parallels between British and Nazi power over bare life. The terms with which *Prospero in Africa* sets an agenda for managing bare life, "assimilation" and "rehabilitation," appear to belong to civil and cultural orders, but during the Emergency they belong to the order of the state. These words are hinges connecting Britain's civilizing mission to the colonial totalitarian regime created through a state of exception that compromises the empire's self-image as a benevolent liberal democracy.

In recent years, historians have exposed the violence underpinning the British "counterinsurgency myth," the myth that British policy in the colonies was guided by the goal of winning hearts and minds.[32] In her extensive study of the period, the historian Caroline Elkins argues that lacunae in

the official archives enabled the British to maintain the myth of the Emergency, a myth that continues into the twenty-first century. That myth is that Britain carried out a liberal democratic mission of rehabilitation of civilian Kikuyu society allegedly torn apart by the military wing, Mau Mau. Elkins reveals that this announced aim of rescue or rehabilitation was a justification and cover for wide-scale eliminationist policies, which were expunged from Britain's historical records—it was only in 2011, in fact, that Britain began to release the documents to the High Court under pressure from the Kenyan government. By reconstructing these years from the other side of official history through interviews, archival fragments, and fieldwork, Elkins establishes that eliminationist policies were executed through the capricious screening of hundreds of thousands of civilians and indefinite detention without trial of tens of thousands of suspects in concentration camps, where torture and other breaches of human rights regularly occurred. Screened civilians moved through transit camps, then were sent to detention villages enclosed by barbed-wire fences overseen by homeguards; these were populated mostly by women and children. An extralegal act under General Lieutenant Baring, what we can call (though Elkins does not) the implementation of a state of exception, institutes all this. "Before Baring and his government were prepared to embark on the campaign for Kikuyu hearts and minds, they needed first to contain and control the entire oath-taking population," Elkins explains. "To this end, the government armed itself with a series of wide-ranging Emergency regulations. Between January and April 1953, Nairobi transformed itself into a totalitarian state."[33]

Although they were certainly sites of torture, and although, as scholars from Hannah Arendt to Enzo Traverso to Achille Mbembe have argued, imperial techniques in Africa and throughout the world predated and provided templates for Nazi orchestrations of power,[34] the camps in Kenya were not deployed in the same ways as the camps in Nazi Germany. The latter were implemented to constitute a pure, uncontaminated German national body through the liquidation of part of that body, the systematic exterminating of peoples who were first systematically stripped of citizenship and all rights. Yet *A Grain of Wheat* suggests that a fear of contamination that drives biopolitics to the center of state politics and transforms the detainee into bare life also inhabits British policy in Kenya. The colonial government attempted to eliminate what it posited as animal, biological life contained

within human beings, which was figured by the Mau Mau. "Mau Mau adherents were *scarcely part* of humanity's continuum . . . had to be gotten rid of, regardless of how it was done," Elkins asserts.[35] Thompson's notes on the insurgency and chants of "eliminate the vermin" (a translation of Kurtz's "exterminate all the brutes!") reflect these sentiments while expressing fear that the imperial-national body will be contaminated by the African insurgent:

> *One must use a stick. No government can tolerate anarchy, no civilization can be built on this violence and savagery. Mau Mau is evil: a movement which if not checked will mean complete destruction of all the values on which our civilization has thriven.*
>
> *"Every whiteman is continually in danger of gradual moral ruin in this daily and hourly contest with the African." Dr. Albert Schweitzer.*
>
> (64–65)

Thompson plans to "incorporate" these notes so as to produce a "coherent philosophy in *Prospero in Africa*" (64). By having them contend that the African as "savage" threatens the "white man's" regression from politicized life ("civilization") into bare life after having shown that *Prospero in Africa* also articulates the colonial mission as the inclusive inclusion of bare life through assimilation and rehabilitation, the novel suggests that Thompson's two seemingly oppositional positions can be synthesized into a single colonial treatise because between democratic and totalitarian regimes, "the only real question to be decided was which form of organization would be best suited to the task of assuring the care, control, and use of bare life."[36] Because they illuminated the precarious boundary between civilization and violence, the effects of anticolonial struggle also provoked a fear of contamination in England, where many worried that clashes with Mau Mau were compromising the empire's (mythic) image. Some English newspapers portrayed the counterinsurgency as a manifestation of regressive savagery; others projected these images back onto the insurgents.[37]

Ngũgi writes against the colonialist claims that bare life is the de facto defining feature of the African by exposing that it is a de jure result of the state of exception. The text depicts the detention camp as the place where law and fact enter into a zone of indistinction, creating *homo sacer*, a detainee neither living nor existing as a political animal, nor dead and therefore outside the law. In the camp, "the possibility of deciding on which founds sovereign

power . . . is realized normally"[38] because the sovereign no longer refers back to legal codes in order to apply them to a fact. The colonial authorities, however, disavow that they suspend law and fact by invoking the language of law: "They took us to the roads and to the quarries even those who had never done anything," Mugo comments. "They called us criminals. But not because we had stolen anything or killed anyone" (76). Referencing breaches of human rights under the Geneva Convention such as Article 5, which prohibits detention without trial,[39] Gikonyo asks, "Do you know what it was like to live in detention? It was easier, perhaps, with those of us not labeled hardcore, but Mugo was. So he was beaten, and yet would not confess the oath. It was not like prison. . . . In prison, you know your crime. You know your terms. So many years, one, ten, thirty—after that you get out" (32–33). A scene focalized on Gikonyo at Yala camp dramatizes the emergence of *homo sacer*, a subject suspended between life and death:

> He blankly stared into the wire one evening. . . . Slowly and deliberately (he stood outside himself and watched his actions as if from a distance) he pushed his right hand into the wire and pressed his flesh into the sharp metallic thorns. Gikonyo felt the prick into the flesh, but not the pain. He withdrew the hand and watched the blood ooze. . . . In his cell, Gikonyo found that everything—the barbed wire, Yala camp, Thabai—was dissolved into a colourless mist. He struggled to recall the outline of Mumbi's face without success. Was he dead? He put his hand on his chest, felt the heart-beat and knew he was alive. Why, then, couldn't he fix a permanent outline of Mumbi in his mind? . . . He tried to relive the scene in the wood and was surprised to see he could not experience anything; the desire, the full manhood, the haunting voice of Mumbi, the explosion, no feeling came even as a thing of the past. And all this time, Gikonyo watched himself act—his every gesture, his flow of thought. He was both inside and outside himself.
>
> (128–129)

The dissolution of boundaries between inside and outside that the camps spatialize and engender are elucidated as the passage narrativizes the progressive fragmentation of the detainee, the splitting of biological life from social/political life. "Hands" and "blood" are minimally integrated with the subject through use of the possessive pronoun "his" in the first sentence; by the third sentence, the replacement of the pronoun with the article "the" stages a subject separated from his body, to which he relates as detached

objects. His failure to recall his wife and their first sexual encounter shows his disconnections from history, desire, and social existence. The interrogative "was he dead?" indexes this social death. By detailing the splitting and suspension between social life and death as a process that unfolds in time in the camp, the passage undermines the colonialist axiom that the detainee is always first bare life, a "fact" that justifies either her forced entry into politicized life through rehabilitation or her exclusion from it. The transformation of the traitor-homeguard Karanja displays the mirror image of this process that occurs in the camp, demonstrating that the constitution of politicized life relies upon the simultaneous positing of bare, or animal, life: "When he shot them ['the many men, terrorists'] they seemed less like human beings and more like animals" (260), an experience that "thrilled Karanja and made him feel a new man, a part of an invisible might whose symbol was the whiteman" (260). Violently creating bare life while trying to eliminate it enables the Kikuyu collaborators to transcend what is portrayed here as the materiality of the animal or biological lifeworld—they accede to British politicized life, "invisible might."

The novel's depiction of the administration of this "invisible might," however, also marks the limits of Agamben's theory of sovereignty for understanding how power operates in the colonial state. *A Grain of Wheat* does portray imperial power as sovereign and exceptional, often by highlighting its mysticism in ways that also echo Conrad's descriptions of the mystical character of Russian autocracy in *Under Western Eyes*. The Mahee police station, for example, is "a symbol of that might which dominated Kenya to the door of every hut" (111); in the camps, "some detainees were beaten, all of them were rigorously questioned by the government agents whose might lay in the very mystery of their title—Special Branch" (121). But the novel also demonstrates that sovereign power is actually entangled with its apparent other: a Kafkaesque bureaucracy. The relationship between sovereignty, power centered and localized in the One, and bureaucracy, power diffused and decentered, is not addressed by Agamben in *Homo Sacer*, but it is by Judith Butler.

Butler argues that in specific situations of counterinsurgency, sovereign power operates through what Foucault calls tactics of governmentality. Foucault asserted that an episteme of governmentality, "understood as the way in which political power manages and regulates populations and goods,"[40]

historically replaces that of sovereignty. Agamben, by contrast, locates a renewal of sovereignty in modernity. Revising both positions in her analysis of indefinite detention at Guantanamo Bay after September 11, 2001, Butler proposes that sovereignty and governmentality coexist and reinforce each other: sovereignty reemerges within governmentality to manage bare life. "The suspension of the life of a political animal, the suspension of standing before the law, is itself a tactical exercise, and must be understood in terms of the larger aims of power," she contends. "Governmentality operates through state and non-state institutions and discourses that are legitimated neither by direct elections nor through established authority. . . . Governmentality gains its meaning and purpose from no single source, no unified sovereign subject . . . the tactics operate diffusely . . . in relation to specific policy aims."[41] In the case of the U.S. counterinsurgency, sovereignty reemerges within governmentality under a state of exception primarily in the exercise of prerogative power. Prerogative power is reserved either for the executive branch of government or given to managerial officials with no clear claim to legitimacy, and the policy codeword that often defines this kind of power is "deeming." Deeming refers to discretionary judgments, which take the place of legal protocols requiring the burden of proof. These "procedures of governmentality, which are irreducible to law, are invoked to extend and fortify forms of sovereignty that are equally irreducible to law."[42]

The novel's staging of the British response to resistance during the Kenyan Emergency elaborates how sovereignty and governmentality reinforce each other. Policing and law enforcement in Africa in general was decentralized. This governing model was shorthanded as "always trust the man on the spot." During the Emergency, this model afforded enormous prerogative power to diffuse functionaries.[43] The novel's handling of the imperial response to the detainees' hunger strike at Rira conveys the diffusion of sovereign power. It clarifies that it is not the sovereign Lieutenant Baring whose decides on life and death, and it indicates that it might not even be the ersatz sovereign, Thompson, who decides. At Rira, the detainees "came together and wrote a collective letter listing complaints. . . . They wanted to be treated as political prisoners not criminals. Food rations should be raised. Unless these things were done, they would go on hunger-strike. And indeed on the third day, all the detainees, to a man, sat down on strike" (152). Colonial authorities confront the detainees' use of legal language and demands

to occupy the space of law by suspending international law, creating the "Rira disaster." Textual ambiguities make locating the precise source of this suspension challenging if not impossible, however. Although we know that Thompson "set the white officers and warders on the men" (152) in response to the strike, we don't know exactly what this means. What makes things more confusing is that the novel implies this initial response was not the same as the response to the "riot," which causes the deaths:

> Thompson was on the edge of madness. Eliminate the vermin, he would grind his teeth at night. He set the white officers and warders on the men. Yes—eliminate the vermin. But the thing that sparked off the now famous deaths, was a near-riot act that took place on the third day of the strike. As some of the warders brought food to the detainees, a stone was hurled at them and struck one of them on the head. They let go the food and ran away howling murder! Riot! The detainees laughed and let fly more stones. What occurred next is now known to the world. The men were rounded up and locked in their cells. The now famous beating went on day and night. Eleven men died.
>
> (152)

Here and previously, the text suggests that when "the fact leaked out" (46) this bureaucrat might have been scapegoated for force he did not authorize: "*Because he was the officer in charge*, Thompson's name was bandied about in the House of Commons and the world press. . . . He was whisked off to Githima, an exile from the public administration he loved" (54, my emphasis). The orchestration of the event through the use of passive constructions when the novel first mentions it—"a hunger strike, a little beating, and eleven detainees died" (54)—and again in the later scene cited above further allows for the possibility that the warders and white officers acted as sovereigns. The novel also relates elsewhere that power in Kenya is defined by discretionary judgments that consolidate sovereign exception: "What's power? A judge is powerful: he can send a man to death, without anyone questioning his authority, judgment, or harming his body in return. Yes—to be great you must stand in such a place that you can dispense pain and death to others without anyone asking questions. Like a headmaster, a judge, a Governor" (224). During the Emergency, the most widely used practice of prerogative power was the process of screening. This process was a quintessential act of "deeming" as Butler describes it.

The novel's representation of screening leads to an explanation for why the text employs the elliptical strategy. The work relates that not only was the Emergency a crisis of the juridical order, the norming of sovereign exception and management of bare life through tactics of governmentality, but that it was impelled by, and in turn generated, a crisis of testimonial language. Though *A Grain of Wheat* has inspired many debates about its fictional renderings of history, its rendering of the historical deployment of testimony has not been a focus of any.[44] Yet this deployment was a driving force of both the insurgency and the counterinsurgency. The Gikuyu oath founded, bound, and sustained the anticolonial movement; confession to having taken that oath was what the British used to break the insurgency. Screening was the theater in which the conflict between these testimonial modes was dramatized. "Screening" is an English abscess in Gikuyu, an inassimilable term; the Kikuyu never attempt to translate the word.[45] The absence of accountability to rule of law and normative procedures that characterizes prerogative power is strikingly figured in the novel's choreography of screening, where a hidden subject deems whether or not one is an insurgent under no burden of proof: Karanja's "first job was in a hood. The hood—a white sack—covered all his body except the eyes. During the screening operations, people would pass in queues in front of the hooded man. By a nod of the head, the hooded man picked out those involved in Mau Mau" (261). Once screened, the Kikuyu were directed to confess to having taken the Mau Mau oath. Their willingness to do so often determined whether they went to detention villages or to camps and to which type of camp they would be sent. Confessing determined whether they were candidates for rehabilitation or elimination. As Elkins points out, confession was the main technique through which the fate of insurgents was decided. Because the extracting of confession is a central tactic of the counterinsurgency, the elliptical strategy, which asks us to notice that the novel refuses to allow information to be framed this way, can be read as a textual and political act of resistance.

In *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary*, Ngũgi analyzes the history of detention in Kenya while reflecting on his own detention during the 1970s. He comments on the mysticism the scene of Karanja's hooded screening evokes, arguing that detention shared much in common with Christian ritual, specifically, its use of confession as a pathway to salvation. "It was precisely to deal a blow to the infectious role of those patriotic Kenyans who had re-

jected a slave consciousness that detention without trial was first introduced in Kenya by the colonial authorities,"[46] he maintains, and he notes that it persists after colonial rule ends. "Unfortunately it is the repressive features of colonial culture . . . that seem to have most attracted the unqualified admiration of the compradors," he writes. "How else can it be explained that the 1966 laws of detention, sedition, and treason, reproduce, almost word for word, those in practice between 1951 and 1961 during the high noon of colonial culture."[47] The "high noon of colonial culture" includes the Emergency, of course. "Detention without trial is not only a punitive act of physical and mental torture of a few patriotic individuals, but it is also a calculated act of psychological terror against the struggling of millions," Ngũgi explains. "It is a terrorist programme for the psychological siege of the whole nation. That is why the practice of detention from the time of arrest to the time of release is deliberately invested with mystifying ritualism."[48] Throughout, *A Grain of Wheat* comments upon this mysticism to criticize confession, which, in *Detained*, Ngũgi confirms was crucial to breaking the anticolonial movement:

> Political detention, not disregarding its punitive aspects, serves a deeper, exemplary ritual symbolism. If they can break such a patriot, if they can make him come out of detention crying, "I am sorry for all my sins," such an unprincipled about-turn would confirm the wisdom of the ruling clique in its division of the populace into the passive innocent millions and the disgruntled subversive few. The "confession" and its corollary, "Father, forgive us for our sins," becomes a cleaning ritual for all the past and current repressive deeds of such a neocolonial regime. . . . such an ex-detainee might even happily play the role of a conscientious messenger from purgatory sent back to earth by a father figure more benevolent than Lazarus's Abraham, "that he may testify unto them (them that dare to struggle), lest they also come into this place of torment."[49]

The depiction of detention under the state of exception is one way the novel accounts for its elliptical strategy. There are two other ways it does so. It relates that not only does confession fail to save one from, or redeem, the past, but that it is also incapable of translating into meaningful terms what the counterinsurgency demands it provide. How the novel makes these points illustrates that confession does not dispel irony in the narrative, as critics maintain it does, but rather is the object of irony.

The Irony of Salvation and the Case of the Differend

A Grain of Wheat emphasizes that confession is wedded to a discourse of salvation that operates not only in secular but religious domains to crush anticolonial resistance throughout Kenyan history. The text is ambivalent toward Christianity; for example, it endorses the language of Christian sacrifice because it forms an alternative to individualism: "In Kenya we want a death which will change things . . . we want a true sacrifice. But first we have to be ready to carry the cross. . . . I die for you, you die for me, we become a sacrifice for one another. . . . Everybody who takes the Oath of Unity to change things in Kenya is a Christ" (110), Kihika claims. Yet the Christian logic of confession comes under attack in various ways. The goal of the revivalist movement, "the only organization allowed to flourish in Kenya by the government during the Emergency" (99) is conversion through confession; "by publically confessing their sins, they became the saved ones" (98). The transformation of its leader in the novel, Reverend Jackson Kigondu, from respected to reviled after he "confessed how he used to minister unto the devil: by eating, drinking and laughing with sinners; by being too soft with the village elders and those who had rejected Christ" (98) suggests that not only is it impossible to separate confession from politics but that attempting to do so only serves imperialism's ends. The insurgents kill this "Christian soldier, marching as to war," who solicits them to confess and see "the light"—that "politics was dirty, worldly wealth a sin" (98). In *Detained*, Ngũgi comments on the legacy of Christianity in Kenya, asserting, "all these eruptions of brutality between the introduction of colonial culture in 1895 and its flowering with blood in the 1950s were not aberrations of an otherwise humane Christian culture," but rather, "they were its very essence, its law, its logic, and the Kenyan settler with his sjambok, his dog, his horse, his rickshaw, his sword, his bullet, was the true embodiment of British imperialism."[50] The novel ironizes the proposition that confession saves in a series of passages that lead to Mugo's revelation of Kihika's whereabouts to Thompson:

> In bed that night, he dreamed that he was back in Rira. A group of detainees were lined up against the wall, naked to the waist. Githua and Gikonyo were among them. From another corner, John Thompson came holding a machine-

> gun at the unfortunate men against the wall. He was going to shoot them—unless they told what they knew about Kihika. All at once, Githua shouted: Mugo save us. The cry was taken by the others: Mugo save us. The suppliant voices rose to a chanting thunder: Mugo save us. And John Thompson had joined the condemned men and he was crying louder than all the others: Mugo save us. How could he refuse, that agonized cry. Here I am, Lord. I am coming, coming, coming, and riding in a cloud of thunder. And the men with one voice wept and cried: Amen.
>
> (146)

While the dream projects that confessing to Thompson will save others, later we learn that Mugo actually believes it will save him from the "burden" of Kihika. In the instant following his confession to Thompson, Mugo feels freed: "This confession was his first contact with another man. He felt deep gratitude to the whiteman, a patient listener, who had lifted his burden from Mugo's heart, who had extricated him from the nightmare" (199). The results are not what Mugo expected, however. Thompson is not a patient listener who can extricate Mugo from this nightmare; he responds to Mugo's confession by spitting in Mugo's face, slapping him, and accusing him of giving false information. The scene concludes with a fearful Mugo regretting having confessed to knowing Kihika's location, for "he did not want to know what he had done" (227). The "burden" of Kihika not only remains but becomes heavier as a consequence of Mugo's confession to Thompson. This is evinced by the fact that Mugo is compelled to confess his betrayal to Mumbi and the village.

The novel also ironizes Mugo's supposedly sacrificial act of confession at the Uhuru celebrations that it claims "saves" Karanja, whom many suspect as Kihika's betrayer. After "the traitor" is called upon to reveal himself, fear prevents Karanja from publicly denying his guilt. He is about to be killed for keeping silent, when suddenly Mugo "had appeared with a confession which relieved Karanja. Mwaura turned to Karanja with eyes tense with malice. 'He has saved you,' Mwaura said" (260). But the salvation Mugo's confession provides is more curse than gift, for Karanja no longer holds the power he held during the Emergency, possesses no family, nor the love of Mumbi. "For what, then, had Mugo saved Karanja? . . . Life was empty and dark like the mist that enclosed the earth" (261). The salvation it promises Mugo is equally deceptive: "as soon as the first words were out, Mugo felt light. A

load of many years was lifted from his shoulders. He was free, sure, confident. Only for a minute" (267). Afterward, the novel implies, Mugo is killed by General R. and Lieutenant Koinandu, but even if he is not, he disappears from the community and social existence following his confession.

While other confessions do not result in actual death, they iterate the fracturing experiences of social death in detention. Rather than saving detainees from this past under the Emergency, these "confessions"—never represented in uninterrupted form—make it reemerge. The interrupted and censored treatment of these speech acts, and the figurations of the confessors, emphasize their coercive dimensions and traumatic effects. By eliciting Mugo's confession when she asks "what is wrong?", Mumbi, to whom Mugo confesses as "a submissive penitent," becomes one with the world of detention: "That night he hardly closed his eyes. The picture of Mumbi merged with that of the village and the detention camps" (266). Gikonyo's confession to Mugo that he confessed the oath in the camp also summons the scene it should save him from having to relive: "Gikonyo searched Mugo's face. He could not discern anything. The silence made him uncomfortable. It seemed as if the whole thing was a repetition of a familiar scene" (141). The shame caused by confessing the oath is reactivated and strengthened when Gikonyo confesses to having confessed:

> The weight had been lifted. But guilt of another kind was creeping in. He had laid himself bare, naked, before Mugo. Mugo must be judging him. Gikonyo felt the discomfort of a man standing before a puritan priest. Suddenly he wanted to go, get away from Mugo, and cry his shame in the dark. . . . Mugo's purity, Mumbi's unfaithfulness, everything had conspired to undermine his manhood, his faith in himself, and accentuate his shame at being the first to confess the oath in Yala camp.
>
> (141)

That the passages figure the confessor Mugo alternately as colonial officer and priest insinuates that Christian discourse parallels, and is even complicit with, the Emergency state that harnesses confession to break the insurgency. Moreover, when quasi-confessions are claimed to have occurred, whether Dr. Lynd's recounting of assault and rape to Thompson, Gikonyo's recounting of his anger at the betrayals of Karanja and Mumbi to Mugo, or Mugo's recounting of betraying Kihika to Mumbi, the reaction each time

is identical. A single word is used to describe it: a "recoiling" (53, 141, 236, 266) from the confessant, which makes Mugo cave in on himself in turn, "coil with dread" (266).

Confession does not only make the past return rather than unburden one from it while repelling others instead of drawing them closer. It also fails to render the specific experience it must bring forth in order for the confessant to achieve salvation, in the form of release from—and "rehabilitation" by—the colonial state. That experience is embodied in the Mau Mau oath. The demand to confess the oath produces an instance of what Jean-François Lyotard calls the differend, a "case where the plaintiff is divested of the means to argue and for that reason becomes a victim."[51] Lyotard elaborates: "A case of the differend between two parties takes place when the 'regulation' of the conflict that opposes them is done in the idiom of one of the parties while the wrong suffered by the other is not signified in that idiom."[52] *A Grain of Wheat* articulates that a differend is generated in the juridico-legal spaces of Emergency, its screening centers, camps, and detention villages. This is because there the conflict opposing the colonial government and the Kikuyu is regulated in the idiom of the former, who demand testimony to colonial experience in the form of confession, while for the Kikuyu, the wrongs suffered under colonialism are expressed in another, insurgent idiom incompatible with confession.

By eliciting confessions, the state aims to capture and translate into supposedly rational discourse the supposedly irrational behavior of the Kikuyu and enable them to be saved from Mau Mau and themselves, "rehabilitated." The irrationality of the Kikuyu was thought to be crystallized in the Mau Mau oath, derided by the British as "barbaric mumbo jumbo."[53] But while the state claimed the oath was more evidence of "backwardness and savagery of the Kikuyu, the practice had logic and purpose," Elkins explains. "It was the rational response of a rural people seeking to understand the enormous socio-economic and political changes taking place around them while attempting to respond collectively to new and unjust realities."[54] Yet the oath remains shrouded in mystery, in part because what is pledged went beyond the stated goals of the movement: "For those Kikuyu who pledged themselves to Mau Mau, the meanings of land and freedom were less defined and much more complex than merely tossing off the British yoke and reclaiming the land of their ancestors."[55] Indeed, "it was as much the ambiguity as the

specificity of Mau Mau's demand for land and freedom that made it so appealing to the Kikuyu masses and such a powerful and difficult movement for the British to suppress."[56] The oath is mysterious also because, although it is not "barbaric," its force defies logic, or, more precisely, it defies the logic underlying the colonial deployment of testimony, which assumes that witnesses control their speech and not vice versa. Many who underwent the oathing ritual and thereby swore allegiance to the insurgency in fact were perjuring themselves: they felt and intended no commitment to the movement. Yet they were still bound by the oath. Oathing was often not chosen but forced, and even brutally so, but "forced oathing did not make the pledge less binding, and in fact the bind of the oath often prevented them—even under torture or threat of death—from betraying the movement."[57] Testimonial discourse here does not obey the laws that the colonial state assumes it does. Committing witnesses beyond and even against their will, the oath relates that this testimony is uncontainable by conscious intention.

The novel demonstrates that the oath cannot be translated into the idiom of colonial regulation of the conflict. Its complexity makes it exceed the frame of confession the state insists it must appear within: "The detainees had agreed not to confess the oath, or give any details about Mau Mau: how could anybody reveal the binding force of the Agikuyu in their call for African freedom?" (121). Delivering this point as a question suggests that it might very well be impossible to reveal this force, that the oath remains outside of the control of anyone who might try to do so. *A Grain of Wheat* not only describes the differend, however. Because it does not offer a single scene in which a confession of oath taking to colonial authorities is represented in narrative time or space, the novel critically enacts the effects of the differend—the impossibility of translating wrongs suffered under colonialism into the terms in which the conflict was regulated.

Together, the elliptical strategy, the exposure of sovereign exception and tactics of governmentality, the ironization of salvation, and the illustration and enactment of the differend challenge received ideas about the novel. Considered in the context of these textual features, ellipsis is not, as some argue, an unmediated reflection of the world of the concentration camp and its silencing of witnesses. But nor is it true that "it is one of the unconscious ironies of *A Grain of Wheat* that its vision of Kenyan national identity relies upon the same confessional logic as that of the colonial torture chamber in

the detention camps."[58] The silences that ellipses produce should not be understood exclusively as repressive.[59] By replacing confession, these silences constitute an active critique of imperial law and discourse under the Emergency. This same discourse recurs postindependence when the neocolonial state creates "laws of detention, sedition, and treason [that] reproduce, almost word for word, those in practice between 1951 and 1961"[60] and equally invests detention with "mystifying ritualism" of which confession is a crucial part.[61]

Because the experiences of colonial struggle cannot fit within the discursive frame the dominant establishes and through which it regulates the conflict, it would seem that these experiences are destined to be left unrepresented. The novel, however, passes through the impasse of witnessing it stages. It rejects confession for other formal tactics that it levers against the repressions that create collective amnesia, foment endless cycles of betrayal, and prevent the nation from learning from the past. These tactics attempt to "give the differend its due," as Lyotard puts it. Lyotard asserts that "what is at stake in a literature, in a philosophy, in a politics perhaps . . . is to bear witness to differends by finding idioms for them."[62] Through this alternative, insurgent idiom, the textured and uneven experience of Emergency breaks through the structural containments that organize confessional discourse.

Uncanny Rhetoric and Orature

Writing against the neocolonial policy of national amnesia and the colonial and Christian deployments of confessions, *A Grain of Wheat* illustrates why the Emergency cannot be accessed through the main formal tactic Conrad uses in *Under Western Eyes*. Ngũgi does, however, employ other strategies he attributes to Conrad to address and coax it into narrative. These strategies include "shifting points of view in time and space; the multiplicity of narrative voices; the narrative-within-a-narration; the delayed information that helps the revision of previous judgments so that only at the end with the full assemblage of evidence, information and points of view can the reader make a full judgment."[63] The replacement of a single, unified narrative perspective with multiple perspectives has stood out to readers,[64] but another, less obvious strategy does a different kind of work. What distinguishes this strategy

from the well-documented polylogic structure of the novel is that it maps a criticism of violence, both colonial and anticolonial, onto an elaboration of uneven gendering under colonialism and decolonization. This strategy, which I will call uncanny rhetoric, also exposes the limits of confessional discourse for addressing the Emergency.

This textual strategy launches the novel. The opening scene indicates that the history the novel addresses will not lend itself easily to confessional discourse. The events the first paragraph relates resist temporal distinctions between past, present, and future and displace boundaries between fiction and reality and between figural and literal speech—all determinations confession requires if it is to function according to the ends to which Christianity and the colonial state put it.

> Mugo felt nervous. He was lying on his back and looking at the roof. Sooty locks hung from the fern and grass thatch and all pointed at his heart, a clear drop of water was delicately suspended above him. A drop fattened and grew dirtier as it absorbed grains of soot. Then it started drawing towards him. He tried to shut his eyes. They would not close. He tried to move his head: it was firmly chained to the bed-frame. The drop grew larger and larger as it drew closer and closer to his eyes. He wanted to cover his eyes with his palms; but his hands, his feet, everything refused to obey his will. In despair, Mugo gathered himself for a final heave and woke up.
>
> (3)

This passage trembles between past and present, dream and reality, literal and figural dimensions of language, even after the final sentence seems to clear things up. The use of the preterite without additional framing suggests that the events described occur in the narrative present, which the imagery indicates is the time of the Emergency and the space of the detention camp: The drop of water and the chains that fasten Mugo to his bed evoke a cell or even torture chamber, his paralysis the aftereffects of a beating by camp guards. When the passage eventually relates that we are witnessing sleep rather than waking life, it raises more questions. First, are these "literal" dream references to a cell in which Mugo was detained in the past or figurations of the hut while he is sleeping—is sleep what "chains" him to the bed and "paralyzes" him as he semiconsciously registers water dropping from the ceiling before the "final heave" that pulls him out of the last vestiges of

sleep? Second, did the violent scene the literal reading of chains, paralysis, and water evokes actually occur in the past, or is it a figure created by dreamwork, a condensation or displacement of a moment that never was? Finally, should we jettison this either/or logic altogether and read the episode as a double staging in which past and present and literal and figural and dream and reality coincide: sleep (figuratively) chains him to the bed because chains once also (literally) chained him to the bed, and he fears the drop of water in his semiconscious state because it mimics the waterboarding he experienced in a cell? That "he remained unsettled fearing, as in the dream, that a drop of cold water would suddenly pierce his eyes" (3) and that "he knew that it was only a dream: yet he kept on chilling at the thought of a cold drop falling into his eyes" (4) does not resolve the uncertainty. It does not tell us what to read as literal and what as figural because we do not know quite what "it," the dream, encompasses, beyond the drop of water. Because this passage vacillates between literal and figural, reality and fiction, and various temporalities while settling into none, its referent overflows grammatical and logical constraints imposed by confession as it is deployed in governmental and Christian contexts.

This scene does not merely indicate that confession is inadequate to the task of portraying the history *A Grain of Wheat* addresses; it establishes an idiom through which obscured events will erupt throughout. This idiom is an uncanny rhetoric, a double staging of repression under colonialism and a textual insurgency that breaks through it. I take the definition of rhetoric here from Paul de Man, who defines it as expression that produces an irreducible undecidability between literal and figural dimensions of language and therefore preserves what is said from any single or exhaustive interpretation, any logic that opposes truth with falsity.[65] I take the definition of the uncanny from Freud, who asserts that "this uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression."[66] This novel's opening scene is uncanny not only because it might describe the return of a repressed in Mugo's mind but, more importantly, because, when the novel rhetorically disarticulates limits between the figural and literal, it both indexes an act of repression under colonialism and translates such events *as* the defamiliarized familiar. By maintaining events' resistance to chronological time even as it places them into the narrative, formally locat-

ing them between past, present, and future and as displacing the limits separating these, uncanny rhetoric preserves the alterity of these unexperienced or not fully experienced moments as it texts them. Rather than "recovering" the "true history," therefore, uncanny rhetoric shows that this history defies the logic of truth recovery and portrays it instead as disrupting dominant processes such as confession, which would claim to recover it but instead reduces its complexity and its alterity.

The uncanny also functions as a *theme*, however, and one that is regularly associated with women in the novel, who operate as portals to a past discontinuous with reason. By thematizing women as objects that mediate compulsive returns of the repressed, the text enforces colonialist, patriarchal narratives of modernity and the psyche even while it motivates uncanny rhetoric toward a critique of the cultural logic of imperial modernity.[67] The *Unheimlich*, as Freud describes it, is a feeling that overtakes reason by which the familiar or homey becomes unhomey, defamiliarized. This happens when a past never experienced in the strict sense "reemerges." In Freud's narrative, the privileged example of the theater of the uncanny is the mother's vagina, "the entrance to the former *Heim* of all human beings." While in Freud's case, as in Conrad's and others, the uncanny is aligned with woman-as-mother, Gayatri Spivak has demonstrated that the uncanny's morphology as an othering of the familiar exceeds normative, and norming, narratives that embed it. It can be lifted from such narratives to function as a critical tool that delinks it from patriarchal and colonial axiomatics.[68] The novel both expresses these colonialist and patriarchal narratives of the uncanny and, through rhetoric, delinks its morphology of the defamiliarized familiar from them, providing a countermode to colonial forms of attestation that allows repressed, unauthorized histories to fulminate as narrative ruptures.

The uncanny as a thematic (rather than as an enactment of rhetoric) subjects characters to a compulsive return of a history outside of their control. This is especially true of Mugo, who "allowed himself to drift into things or be pushed into them by an uncanny demon; he rode on the wave of circumstance and lay against the crest, fearing but fascinated by fate" (24). By making women the vehicles of these returns, as well as "uncanny demons" themselves, the novel, as Brendon Nicholls asserts, "articulates Mau Mau at the expense of female articulation and gender-political agency."[69] As sites and midwives of the uncanny, women activate and perpetuate charac-

terological trauma. The old woman of Thabai, Gitogo's mother, occasions Mugo's first encounter with the uncanny. She is at once outside of time yet familiar: "Nobody knew her age: she had always been there, a familiar part of the old and the new village" (6). The text dramatizes the defamiliarization of the familiar by positioning her as mother/not mother to Mugo, whom she mistakes for the ghost of her son, a young man shot when he is misrecognized as an insurgent. Her portrayal invokes the Freudian narrative of the maternal become frightening, *Unheimlich*, "'the name for everything that which ought to have remained secret and hidden . . . but has come to light' (Schelling)."[70] Freud-via-Schelling's sentiment is paraphrased by a proverb voiced through Warui after the alleged return of the old woman's dead son: "those buried in the earth should remain in the earth. Things of yesterday should remain with yesterday" (198). It is the mother, however, not the son, who is the catalyst for disinterment of Mugo's past, for "it was her eyes that most disturbed Mugo. He always felt naked, seen. . . . Mugo felt the woman fix him with her eyes, which glinted with recognition. Suddenly he shivered at the thought that the woman might touch him. He ran out, revolted" (8). Condensing this particularly Freudian formulation of the uncanny as revulsion inspired by contact with the maternal genitals, here metonymized as the eyes, is the equally Freudian formulation of it as confusion of repression for fate: "Perhaps there was something fateful in his contact with the old woman" (8). This "fateful" contact disturbs Mugo "in a way he could not explain. He wandered through the streets thinking about the old woman and that thrilling bond he felt existed between them. Then he tried to dismiss the incident. But as he went on, he found himself starting at the thought of meeting a dead apparition" (198). When Mugo seeks out the old woman for shelter after he confesses to the community, she "claims him" (269) as her own but then transforms into another woman, his dead aunt, also a mother surrogate from Mugo's past: "Suddenly her face had changed. Mugo looked straight into the eyes of his aunt. A new rage moved him. Life was only a constant repetition of what happened yesterday and the day before" (269). The buried past raised through Mugo's encounter with the old woman, along with a past Mumbi raises by recounting it to Mugo, results in madness. "Mugo saw thick blood dripping from the mud walls of his hut . . . he walked to his hut, resolved to find out if the blood was really there" and discovers that "he saw nothing on the walls. . . . Was

he cracking in the head? He started at the thought and again looked at the walls" (199).

The novel thematizes women as the return of the repressed in wider, historical terms, to castigate political arrangements in precolonial Kenya as anachronistic instances of British imperialism. Queen Elizabeth is the uncanny repetition of Kikuyu precolonial matriarchs. In both cases, the Law of the Mother is castrating. The earliest missionaries tell of "another country beyond the sea where a powerful woman sat on the throne," whose "shadow of . . . authority and benevolence" (13–14) will soon cover the Agikuyu. The words of the missionary "echoed something in the heart, deep down in their history. It was many, many years ago. The women ruled the land of the Agikuyu. Men had no property, they were only there to serve the whims and needs of the women" (14). The novel places a narrative of female sexual dominance over men onto a narrative of colonial dominance over Africa in order to justify biopolitical domination through the phallus as a form of political resistance. "They waited for women to go to war, they plotted a revolt, taking an oath of secrecy to keep them bound to each in the common pursuit of freedom. They would sleep with all the women at once, for didn't they know the heroines would return hungry for love and relaxation" (14)? The reference to oath-taking in the name of freedom also figures the matriarchy not merely as precursor to, but earlier versions of, imperialism. The plan works, for "Fate did the rest; women were pregnant; the takeover met with little resistance" (14). That matriarchy is traumatic and thus returns is articulated in the next sentence, when it is revealed that "that was not the end of a woman as a power in the land" nor the end of a threatening power. "Years later a woman became a leader and ruled over a large section in Muranga. She was beautiful" (14) and uses her beauty to maintain power. In the first bid for "freedom," men dethrone women by deploying sex toward reproductive ends, and in the second bid, a woman is dethroned for deploying sex toward nonpatriarchal ends—to seduce, rather than reproduce, her male subjects. At one of the dances, the leader disrobes; "for a moment, men were moved by the power of a woman's naked body. The moon played on her: an ecstasy, a mixture of agony and joy hovered on the woman's face . . . a woman never walked or danced naked in public. Wangu Makeri, the last of the great Gikuyu women, was removed from the throne" (14–15). The next manifestation of this ruler will be Queen Elizabeth, who will also castrate

her male (colonial) subjects. The Emergency "was all because of a woman—a new Wangu—in England—had been crowned: what good ever came from a woman's rule?" (160), the men ask. When the women retort that, after all, "Governor Baring, who rules Kenya, has a penis" (161), the men have the last word. Colonial domination is once again rewritten as perverse sexuality, an unholy marriage that subverts the Law of the Father by putting the wife in control. "Ah, it's still the woman's shauri. See how all you women have sent the men to detention for their penises to rot there, unwilling husbands to Queen Elizabeth?" (161). The women capitulate to the masculinist interpretation of history: "'And to the forests, too,' the women would burst out, the raillery turning into bitterness" (161). Critics' commendation of the novel's positive depiction of women based on strong female characters[71] must therefore be measured against this thematization of the uncanny, through which women re-present historical trauma and characterological trauma, both coded as the castrating of the African man.

In counterpoint to this repressive thematization of women and the uncanny is uncanny rhetoric, a mode through which women become subjects of attestation and historical change rather than objects of compulsive repetitions that create silences. In a crucial episode, the novel transforms Mumbi from a would-be confessant into a disruptive force whose testimony generates what confessing cannot. The story that interrupts Mumbi's long quasi-confession to Mugo of her marital infidelity—a disclosure that replaces declarations of responsibility with questions and uses a passive verb to displace agency ("I let Karanja make love to me" [171])—forces the impossible to occur. Mumbi relates to Mugo what happens after he is arrested for attempting to save the villager Wambuku from being beaten to death by homeguards as the villagers build a trench. "Mumbi had stopped her narrative to hum the tunes for Mugo" (164), songs the villagers sang defiantly at the trench to reject conditions under the Emergency. The songs inspire the homeguards to beat the Kikuyu with more force. The songs are not only an interruption in Mumbi's process of "confessing" without confessing but produce an interruption in homogenous temporality: "Mugo was rooted to his seat, painfully reliving a scene he never saw, for by that time he had been detained" (164). The oxymoron of the final sentence states precisely the need for what the novel relates confession cannot give: the capacity to "re-live" a past never lived the first time as a future yet to come.

Mumbi's attestation crystallizes what Ngũgi theorizes elsewhere as orature. It performs a collective past as living in self-differentiation rather than frozen into a moment in a linear historical trajectory. The novel's treatment of Gikuyu song does not imply, however, that only "traditional" Gikuyu orality can translate the trauma of the Emergency. Rather than fetishizing custom as culture and divorcing precolonial discursive practices from their endless reworkings throughout time—gestures of the colonized intellectual Fanon famously criticized in *The Wretched of the Earth*[72]—orature performs culture as what attacks constructed barriers between aesthetics and politics as well as between tradition and modernity. In *Globalectics*, Ngũgi explains,

> Performance is the central feature of orature. . . . Performance involves the performer and audience, and in orature, the performer and audience interact. . . . Anywhere from the fireside, village square, and market place to the shrine can serve as the performance space and mise-en-scène. . . .
>
> Orature is not pure metaphysics or a zombie that comes alive only when inhabiting the body of the written and other recorded forms. It is a dynamic living presence in all cultures. In the case of Africa, the authors of the "On the Abolition of the English Department" stressed the fact that "the art did not end yesterday; it is a living tradition," is a presence in religious functions, births, funerals. . . . In the anti-colonial resistance, song and dance played a pivotal role in recruiting, rallying, and coding the social vision. The colonial authorities feared orature more than they did literature.[73]

As orature, Mumbi's performance bears witness to the impossible time of a trauma whose force erupts into an already disrupted quasi "confession" to Mugo. Because it has Mumbi occupy the role of a witness that makes the Emergency signify in a way that interrupts the compulsive returns that victimize Mugo and others, the novel's deployment of orature intercepts the thematic staging of the uncanny that denies both women and men agency to create a future nation that can reverse the social, political, and economic stratifications that structured its past.

Mumbi's performance spurs the staging of uncanny rhetoric, forcing into the narrative what has been repressed—an irreducible bond to others, attachments to the socius of the present and past, which confession fails to illuminate or create. The effects of Mumbi's performance rejects the atomistic and individualist ethos of neocolonial Kenya, for "before Mumbi told her story" Mugo had "seen these huts as objects that had nothing to do with

him. . . . Now they were different: the huts, the dust, the trench, Wambuku, Kihika, Karanja, detention-camps, the white fence" (195). Although Mugo "wanted to resume that state, a limbo, in which he was before he heard Mumbi's story and looked into her eyes" (197), orature refuses Mugo's, and Kenyatta's, desires to suppress that past and those connections. The novel relates that "Mumbi's story had cracked open his dulled inside and released imprisoned thought and feelings. . . . Previously, he liked to see events in his life as isolated. Things had been fated to happen at different moments. One had no choice in anything as surely as one had no choice in one's birth. . . . Numbed, he ran without thinking of the road, its origin or its end" (195). This episode and another that follows enact the comingling of past and present, literal and figural dimensions of language shaping the novel's opening scene. Here, it is unclear whether the "road" is literal or a figure for time and history. This turning of time into space and vice versa continues as a topography of mixed temporalities makes it increasingly difficult to determine literal descriptions of the external landscape in the present from figural stagings of mental theaters and the past.

> Mugo abruptly stopped in the middle of the main village street, surprised that he had been walking deeper and deeper into the village. Incidents tumbled on him. He stirred himself with difficulty, to cut a path through the heap. He was again drawn to the trench and seemed impotent to resist this return to yesterday. The walls of the trench were now battered: soil had fallen to the bottom. . . . The whole scene again became alive and vivid. He worked a few yards from the woman. He had worked in the same place for three days. Now a homeguard jumped into the trench and lashed the woman with a whip. Mugo felt the whip eat into his flesh, and her pained whimper was like a cry from his own heart. Yet he did not know her, had for three days refused to recognize those around him as fellow sufferers. Now he only saw the woman, the whip, and the homeguard. Most people continued digging, pretending not to hear the woman's screams, and fearing to meet a similar fate. . . . In terror, Mugo pushed forward and held the whip before the homeguard could hit the woman a fifth time.
>
> (196)

Mumbi's performance coaxes the repressed event to light, which a compelled confession to the colonial officers immediately following the episode in the ditch fails to accomplish: "To Mugo the scene remained a nightmare whose broken and blurred edges he could not pick or reconstruct during the

secret screening that later followed" (196). Just as important is how orature summons this event. Neither fully past nor present, it emerges a struggle between two times. Although the passage is delivered in the past tense, the regular interruption of "nows" demonstrates the past fighting to erupt into the present.

Women figure as potentiates of historical change not only because they force a confrontation with history in crisis while answering the demands of the insurgency in various ways but also because they expose and disrupt the repetition of colonial violence haunting anticolonial struggle. The novel departs from ways that Ngũgi claims Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* has been misread and misappropriated.[74] "The violence which governed the ordering of the colonial world, which tirelessly punctuated the destruction of the indigenous social fabric, and demolished unchecked the systems of reference of the country's economy, lifestyles, and modes of dress," Fanon writes, "this same violence will be vindicated and appropriated when taking history into their own hands, the colonized swarm into the forbidden cities."[75] Both the plotting of women and their figuration through uncanny rhetoric insinuate that retributive violence connects the anticolonial movement too closely to the orders it opposes and reject violence as a method with which to manage betrayals.

By demanding one speak in the idioms of law, confessions, and trials, the Mau Mau justify retributive violence by attaching its orchestration to the legal process, thereby raising the specter of British deployments of law and violence under the Emergency. Women highlight, question, and interrupt acts of retributive violence in response to betrayal. Mumbi, for example, warns her enemy Karanja to stay away from the Uhuru celebration where his life will be threatened unless he confesses (and if he confesses), and she also declines to publicize Mugo's confession in an attempt to stop the cycle of violence: "I did not want anything to happen. I never knew that he would later come to the meeting" (275). Mugo's trial at the end of the novel also functions as means of retribution, and as such, it invokes the trial of Jomo Kenyatta.[76] Like confessions throughout the work, the trial is replaced by an ellipsis. After General R. and Lieutenant Koinandu announce the "trial will be held tonight" and assure Mugo, "your deeds alone will condemn you" (270), as they lead him out of the hut, the next we hear of the trial is after Mugo has gone missing. Only General R. and Lieutenant Koinandu are

said to have been present at the trial over which the elder woman Wambui presides. This judge, whose "fighting spirit" (204) is legendary for maintaining that "women had to act. Women had to force the issue" (204), and for unifying the workers at the party meeting for the worker's strike in 1950, questions whether the trial should have taken place at all, in light of Mugo's subsequent disappearance and probable execution. Wambui was "lost in a solid consciousness of a terrible anti-climax to her activities in the fight for freedom. Perhaps we should not have tried him, she muttered" (275–276). By suggesting that the protocols of law provide a cover or even justification for killing, Wambui's statement connects the violence of the anticolonial movement to that of the Emergency state.

While the original version of the novel warns against the repetition of colonial violence in the future in various ways, the revised version makes heavy changes to two successive passages, which suggests that Ngũgi responded to criticism of his initial portrayal of Mau Mau while maintaining and highlighting a critique of violence against women the original version delivers. These changes make these passages reflect on each other, and in so doing, they hold colonialism as well as anticolonial movements accountable for violence and indicate that the new nation must interrupt this cycle of violence to cast off a colonial legacy. In the 1967 text, General R., whose real name is Muhoya, defended his mother from beatings by his father, "a petty tyrant" (241), but his mother "took a stick and fought on her husband's side" (241), insisting that patriarchal order must be maintained: "He is your father, and my husband" (241). Changes to three sentences connect African patriarchal violence to colonial violence against an entire people. In the revised edition of the novel, Muyoha's father "graduated from an ordinary colonial messenger into petty assistant chief" (211), and when they are locked in battle, he is described not as a "petty tyrant" but "a petty colonial tyrant" (212). The final sentence Ngũgi adds to this paragraph picks up on the reconfigured descriptions of the father, conveying that that instance of submission to patriarchy, depicted as pathological, becomes an allegory of colonial submission: "It was only later when he saw how so many Kenyans could proudly defend their slavery that he understood his mother's reaction."[77] Read as a response to criticisms of Ngũgi's exaggeration of excessive Mau Mau violence, these amendments indicate that there is a structural nature to it, and its source is colonialism. Turning violence toward women into the privileged metaphor

through which to represent both colonial violence and the stymieing of the anticolonial spirit insinuates an ironic critique of the episode that follows. That episode justifies anticolonial violence expressed specifically in terms of violence against women and imagines the postcolony's new order as African patriarchy.

Here, the uncanny operates not within the patriarchal and colonial narrative but as a rhetorical defamiliarization of the familiar that indicates that anticolonial violence reinstates colonialism as patriarchy. Lieutenant Koinandu reflects with satisfaction on his assaults on his former employer Dr. Lynd, the white woman he rapes and whose beloved dog he hacks to death after leading insurgents into her house to steal her guns. The revised version of the novel suggests again that Ngũgi responds to critics by rewriting the scene in a way that leaves unclear whether a rape occurs, although most read this rape as entirely absent.[78] But both versions' treatments of this episode suggest that Mau Mau violence reflects Kikuyu patriarchal violence against women, itself a reflection of colonial power, as the preceding episode cited above relates. The revised version adds a staging of uncanny rhetoric that substitutes for the rape scene in the original. After adding into the text Koinandu's claim that "Independence, when finally won, would right all the wrongs, would drive the likes of Dr. Lynd and her dogs from the country. Kenya after all was a black man's country . . . he was going to enter the forest in triumph over Dr. Lynd" (213), in order to substitute for the rape, the revised version also troubles this vision of a patriarchal future by establishing that it conditions the compulsive repetition of the past.

> In the years of hardships and deaths on the battlefield he had almost forgotten the incident, until the other day when he went to Githima to see Mawaura about plans to lure Karanja into attending Uhuru celebrations. And there in front of him was Dr. Lynd and her dog. She stood there as if mocking him: See me, I have still got the big house, and my property has even multiplied. Githima had not in fact changed much. The exclusive white settlement seemed to have grown bigger instead. . . . Why were all these whites still in Kenya despite the ringing of the Uhuru bells? Would Uhuru really change things for the likes of him and General R? . . . Dr. Lynd's unyielding presence became an obsession. It filled him with fear, a kind of premonition. He had tried to share those thoughts with General R. but he could not find the words. . . . Even now, as he ran, the

> thought of the unexpected encounter made him shudder. The ghost had come to eat into his life.
>
> (214)

This scene, like the others, oscillates between literal and figural, past and present, memory and delusion. We cannot determine if Lynd's "unyielding presence" is literal or figural and whether Lynd literally appeared before Koinandu with her dog in Githima or figuratively appears in his mind as a "ghost." For it is disclosed earlier in the revised version of the novel that Koinandu killed the dog and that Lynd has a new pet. Mau Mau violence against Lynd, and the colonizer generally, seems only to have strengthened the latter's control and increased their domains. Uncanny rhetoric, the spectral return of Dr. Lynd, enables these fears to be represented, which confession to General R., the passage implies—again by invoking ellipsis—cannot. That the specter of Lynd appears when another act of retributive violence is planned, the killing of Karanja, underscores the role of women through, and as, uncanny rhetoric in disrupting the compulsive repetitions of violence. Ngũgi's rewriting of this scene and the one cited above demonstrates his desire to link anticolonial violence to the oppression of women as well as elucidates that it repeats and strengthens a colonial legacy.

By finding a new idiom for the Emergency through uncanny rhetoric, *A Grain of Wheat* does not only pass through the impasse generated by the differend by bearing witness to the Emergency; it also elaborates that in order for a postcolonial Kenya to emerge, the cycles of patriarchy and violence must be disrupted. Moreover, by detaching the uncanny from the colonial and heteronormative narratives of psychoanalysis the work references in its presentation of character, the text's formal tactics bestow ethical and political value on a discourse of the unverifiable. Form highlights the value of testimony as an act discontinuous with proof. Uncanny rhetoric cannot capture the event in itself, a project the novel's polylogic structure rejects from the outset, just as it suggests that the past attains value and meaning through its multiple retellings.[79] Instead, this spectral orchestration that suspends temporal, spatial, external, and internal indices instructs us that there is no event "in itself" that fits into a chronology. It preserves the unexperienced experience of the trauma in its alterity. But most important, the novel procures the hazy, secluded, secretive scenes of this era without either

retreating from bearing witness and lapsing into silence, which the elisions of confession suggest it will, or capitulating to, even negotiating with, the colonial language of confession. The novel "institute[s] new addresses, new addressors, new significations, and new referents in order for the wrong to find an expression and for the plaintiff to cease being a victim."[80] Through formal tactics motivated toward restoring agency for those denied it under colonialism, insurgency, and counterinsurgency, *A Grain of Wheat* finds a way to give the differend its due.