Hunted Scholarship
How Fugitive Ideas Change the World

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In their beginnings, ideas which have changed the world profoundly were fugitives.[1] There is the example of the early Christians hiding in catacombs so they could voice their beliefs, or the flight of Mohammed from Mecca to Medina. Scientific ideas too. After the Roman Catholic authorities indexed Copernicus' book, *On the Revolution of the Heavenly Spheres*, and later Galileo's *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems*, the ideas in the books lived on, but as fugitives. And Giordano Bruno's books were not only indexed but he, the author, lost his life for refusing to deny the fugitive ideas they carried.

But the title of this talk concerns hunted scholars and scholarship of my title. How on earth did I come up with this hunting business? I should have said 'haunted' instead of hunted, for there is something ghostly about the numerous invisible forces that repressive authorities unleash to stalk unwanted scholars and their scholarship.

It was in my hotel in Mexico City for the Zócalo Book Festival in September (2017) that I woke up to how I may have come to the title. Sometime in June, I mentored Abigail Uribe, an English major from Berkeley, then on SURF (Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship) at UC Irvine. She wanted to work on the literature of incarceration, but, given the time, we settled on the topic of language and confinement; for a text, she came up with *How to Tame a Wild Tongue* (1987) by Gloria Anzaldúa. I was new to Anzaldúa's work, but the image of taming the wild tongue intrigued me and reminded me of Giordano Bruno, whose tongue was wild enough to respond to the sentence of death with defiance: 'You may be more afraid to bring that sentence against me than I am to accept it.' The Roman Catholic authorities responded to the defiance by stripping Giordano Bruno naked and tying his tongue before burning him at the stake. They had to physically tame the wild

1 This is the text of the keynote address given at the Scholars at Risk (SAR) conference held to celebrate the launch of the UC Irvine-SAR program at the University of California, Irvine, on 20 October 2017. A shorter version appeared as 'HUNTED SCHOLARSHIP: How Fugitive Ideas Change the World' in *Index on Censorship*, vol. 47, no. 03 (2018).

tongue of the heretic. All this may have stolen into my consciousness and gave me the title of my talk today.

We do not hunt or tame domestic animals. We hunt wild ones. With 'hunted' scholarship, I am thinking of it as that which a ruling or a conquering authority deems wild, or not domesticated by official limits and prescriptions. The authority actively hounds the scholar, seizes her work or both. Unfortunately, hunting down scholars or artists and their work is not just a metaphor. It has happened too many times in diverse societies and histories; it often begins with a given authority prohibiting, say, a song, a painting, a book, or any offending script, and then following the censure with cursing the author of the unwanted. We have the example of the Catholic *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* from 1559 to 1966, which in its early years resulted in the indexed books going up in flames and the cursed authors in prison, exiled, or dead.

Throughout the British rule in Kenya from 1895 to 1963, the colonial state regularly banned the songs and even dances it deemed defiant. The ban was not very successful because people would simply vary the dance moves or hum the melody without voicing the offending words. The state also banned books of poetry in African languages and followed this with jailing the offending parties.

Banning and burning books deemed to harbour dissent and heresy has been a constant theme in the history of ideas: from the book burnings and burial of scholars by the potentates of ancient China to the burning of Mayan books by the conquering Spaniards in the sixteenth century to the Berlin book bonfires of Nazi Germany. Hordes of zealots hunted down the offending scripts and manuscripts, ferreting them out of their hiding places in shelves at home or in public spaces, and, with triumphant cries and gestures of victory, throwing them into the flames. Leave it to Bertolt Brecht to bring out the touch of irony in the burning of books in his poem 'The Burning of the Books' (1939):

> When the Regime commanded that books with harmful knowledge
> Should be publicly burned and on all sides
> Oxen were forced to drag cartloads of books
> To the bonfires, a banished
> Writer, one of the best, scanning the list of the Burned, was shocked
> to find that his
> Books had been passed over. He rushed to his desk
> On wings of wrath, and wrote a letter to those in power,
> Burn me! he wrote with flying pen, burn me! Haven't my books
> Always reported the truth? And here you are
> Treating me like a liar! I command you!
> Burn me!

Actually, hunting down the producers, eliminating them altogether à la Giordano Bruno, may be deemed the more effective approach because, if successful, it would end the source of those dangerous ideas altogether. Nearly every country has cases of writers and intellectuals who have met just such an end or who have had to flee their own countries to seek refuge elsewhere to avoid a similar fate. Being hunted down by one's own state is an experience bitter to swallow. But as long as one is not finally run down by knife, bullet, or poison, the fighting spirit of the hunted can generate creative outputs that thwart the intentions of the hunter. Some of these creations may come to impact the world in big and small ways. So, any efforts which help in the survival of the script, the book, and the producer, can and do contribute to the collective good. To come to the aid of a fleeing scholar, to shelter a fugitive idea, is to help possibilities that add to our being. It is to give home to hope.

I want to illustrate the crucial role of the helping hand in the survival of hunted scholarship with a short chronicle of my own experience as the hunted. In 1968, a group of us at the University of Nairobi called for a change and the re-organization of the teaching of literature, advocating the centring of African, Caribbean, African-American, Asian, and Latin American literatures with European literatures, including English, in that order. This would turn out to be the earliest major challenge to the dominance and assumed centrality of English national literature in the post-colony and one of the earliest steps towards what would now bear the name of post-colonial theory and studies. Admittedly our title, 'On the Abolition of the English Department', was provocative, but it was certainly not a call for the abolition of English or English literature. But this did not deter the then Attorney General, who, from the premises of Parliament, accused us of wanting to abolish Shakespeare. Actually, Shakespeare was quite safe.

A year later (1969), I resigned from the University of Nairobi in protest against government infringement upon academic freedom, which I then defined as free circulation of ideas.[2] I did not think it was the task of the state to decide who of the guests invited by the student body could or could not speak at the university. I was without a job. My old university, Makerere, then extended a helping hand and offered me a one-year writing fellowship. Another helping hand was Northwestern University, which offered me a position as Visiting Associate Professor of English and African Studies. So, from Makerere, Uganda, I went to Evanston, Illinois. The period between 1969 and 1972 became my first experience of exile. But it was self-imposed, and I did not feel any hounds of the state behind me.

It was a productive mini-exile. I published *Homecoming* (1972), which would turn out to be the first major work of literary and cultural criticism published in East Africa. I then returned to Nairobi in 1972 and rejoined the department, now reorganized and renamed Department of Literature. I became chair. One of my

2 'On the carpet' interview with Peter Darling, in *Sunday Nation*, 16 March 1969.

concerns was always how to make literature and scholarship actively relate to the general society in some way. I did not want to see the literature that I loved being confined to a gated community, or what we called the ivory tower. I wanted the department and the university to be an integral part of the living social organism. In my memoir, *Dreams in a Time of War* (2010), I have celebrated the moment I discovered that written words could also sing. I dream of the university as a market place of clashing ideas, but of ideas that sing, dance, and move. In my letter of resignation, I had argued that that 'a young developing country in fact needs this conflict of ideas much more than an older country with a tradition of conservative ideas'.[3] Now I was back to the same university of a young country.

We tried many innovations, among them, public lectures open to all and traveling theatre, which meant our students taking theatre to the people, performing in villages and towns during the long vacations, and eventually, some of us relocating to Kamĩrĩthũ village to work in community theatre directly. But there were consequences.

At midnight on December 1977, armed police raided my house in Limuru, Kenya, confiscated copies of the playscript of *Ngaahika Ndeenda/I will marry when I want*, whose performance the government had earlier stopped. So, on January 1, 1978, I found myself in a maximum security prison, no longer the chair and Professor of Literature at the University of Nairobi, but a man without a name, a number. For the first three weeks or so, I was under internal segregation, which meant that the other political prisoners in the same block could not talk to me or sit by me. I remember distinctly the moment when a sympathetic warder whispered to me about the formation of a Ngũgĩ Defence Committee in London. That fact alone – that there were people out there doing something about my fate – was a shot of good hope from the bow of international solidarity.

Prison was meant to silence me. But it was during my one-year confinement that I wrote a novel in Gĩkũyũ. I wrote *Caitaani Mũtharabainĩ* (translated into English as *Devil on the Cross*) on toilet paper, which was the only writing material available to me. This would turn out to be the first modern novel in the Gĩkũyũ language. But even then, its publication in 1982 led to the publisher losing his finger to a machete attack following months of telephone threats to deter him from publishing the work. I may also add that it was during the same year of incarceration that I thought more intensely about the politics of language, especially the unequal power relationship between English and African languages and about the psychological bonds that language had on the intellectuals and intellectual production of the for-

3 'It would be a pity if in a young developing country, ideas are not allowed to collide. A young developing country, in fact, needs this conflict of ideas much more than an older country with a tradition of conservative ideas.' From 'Interview', *Sunday Nation*, 16 March 1969.

merly colonized. These thoughts would years later lead to my book, *Decolonizing the Mind* (1986).

When, in December 1978, I was released from prison following the death of the first president, Jomo Kenyatta, his successor, Daniel arap Moi, would not allow me to resume my old job at the university or take up another position in any of the colleges in the country. My work in community theatre was stopped, with the televised destruction of Kamĩrĩthũ by armed police. The relentless hunting had started. In 1982, I was in London for the launch of *Devil on the Cross*, the novel on toilet paper, and *Detained* (1981), my memoir of prison, when I got information about a very 'red carpet' welcome waiting for me on my return home. I found myself in exile, this time real forced exile, living mainly in London.

This was the period when I experienced the real life of a scholar without a home. I did not have a residency permit, I was on a visiting visa, and so every time I left the country of my exile, I always dreaded the moment of return. Always being detained at Heathrow airport. Questions. Explanations. The dread of going out; the dread of coming back. And yet my work with the London-based Committee for the Release of Political Prisoners in Kenya demanded that I move in and out of the country of my exile.

It became worse when my passport expired. Now I had no papers at all. Ghana gave me a helping hand and for many years I traveled on a Ghanaian passport. But this did not end the questionings at Heathrow. Eventually Britain did give me a residency permit. Yale University extended another helping hand in 1989 with an offer of a regular Visiting Professorship of English and Comparative Literature.

One day during my first term at Yale, I went to the library to look at Kenyan newspapers. I read some headlines: The Moi government was accusing me of being in Sudan organizing a communist party. It's only recently via declassified documents that I learned the extent to which the Moi government was obsessed with me. In an article carried in the *Sunday Nation* of Kenya, April 23, 2017, the author, Odhiambo Opiyo, who read the declassified material of the period, recounts the details of this obsession. Looking back, I can see the hunting was more intense than I had sensed at the time. I could see the sequence. I got the 'red carpet' warning in June 1982. That was why I did not return to my home land. On November 12, 1984, the Kenyan High Commissioner to London, Benjamin Kipkulei, called on the British Secretary of State to complain that I was receiving 'more attention than I deserved'. The government also complained to the British High Commission/Embassy in Kenya about my being employed by the Islington Council in London. Actually, it was not really employment. It was a one-year writer's residency. Opiyo cites another letter from the British Embassy/High Commissioner in Kenya to J.R. Johnson, a senior official at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in London, in which he claimed he was being told by the government 'that the only thing on the President's mind that hurts our image is the presence and activities of Ngugi'.

Opiyo also tells of a two-hour meeting in January 1985 between President Daniel arap Moi and Sir Geoffrey Howe, the British Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs in Margaret Thatcher's government, to discuss trade and diplomatic matters between the two countries. According to the writer, 'it was the President's concern over the activities of Kenyan academic and writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o, who was living in exile in London, that dominated the meeting'.

In another dispatch, Moi accused me of conducting propaganda among Kenyan students in the UK and planning to start a communist party, and demanded that Britain 'reject any visa extension application by the Kenyan academic and force him to relocate to another country'. The accusations I was reading about in Yale Library in 1989 thus had their basis in a web of fabrications designed to make Britain deny me sanctuary. I was really grateful that the UK did not accede to Moi's demands.

There were other incidents, including one in 1990, when Zimbabwe Intelligence detained Moi's armed agents outside the door of my hotel in Harare during a UNICEF-sponsored conference on solidarity with Mozambique children, victims of the then horrendous war between the government and rebel groups. Moi demanded I be expelled from Zimbabwe, and when the government refused, he recalled the official Kenyan delegation. These actions were haunting and hunting and trying to hound me out of any sanctuary.

It was during my years of exile in London between 1982 and '89 that I wrote and published my second novel in Gĩkũyũ: *Matigari* (1986). Matigari, a fictional character, is an ex-freedom fighter who goes about the country, asking questions only about Truth and Justice. Readers oralized the literary and so talked about the figure and his questions about truth and justice. The Moi regime thought the character a real living person and issued a warrant for his arrest. Realizing that he was a fiction, they banned the novel instead and for many years, Matigari, both the novel and the character, existed only in English translation, abroad. I was in exile, and my book was in exile too.

It was during the same years that I published *Decolonizing the Mind* (1986), a development of those thoughts about unequal power relationships between languages that I had conceived in prison. The book was based on lectures I gave at Auckland University, New Zealand. The passion some readers sense behind the polemics had its roots in the circumstances under which I first worked out the ideas that I then coded into formal lectures and then, finally, into a book.

Last May (2017) in Johannesburg, South Africa, over two thousand people, faculty, students, lawyers, and members of Parliament, came to hear me talk on the topic 'Secure the Base: Decolonize the Mind'. In Cape Town and the Eastern Cape, I was met with similar crowds. A few months later, I was back and talked in Pretoria and the northern part of the country to similarly enthusiastic but attentive listeners. This is because the idea of decolonizing institutions is currently at the

centre of political debate in the country. Elsewhere, decolonial studies and decolonial aesthetics seem to be an emerging field.

I was in the middle of writing this paper in my hotel room in Mexico City when I got an email from my publisher telling me that the *Observer* of London had chosen *Decolonizing the Mind* as one of '100 Political Classics' that shaped the modern world. I felt a little teary, for, despite the years in between, I could not help but go back to my prison cell in 1978.

The story of my life as the hunted would not be complete without mentioning the parallel pressure on my family – the raids on my house in Kenya at rumours of my secret return. When, for the first time in 23 years of exile, in 2004, I returned to the country for the launch of *Mũrogi wa Kagogo/Wizard of the Crow* (2006), in Gĩkũyũ, a novel that I wrote during my years in the USA, mostly at UC Irvine, my wife and I were brutally attacked in our Nairobi hotel and we barely escaped with our lives. This happened eleven days before the book's publication and the launch. The publisher, the same one who once lost his finger to a machete attack for my prison novel, still went ahead with the launch as scheduled. The English version later won the 2006 California Gold Medal, putting it in the company of Steinbeck's novels *Tortilla Flat* and *In Dubious Battle*, which won it in 1933 and 1937, respectively.

My case is not unique in Kenya, Africa, and the world. Hunted scholarship and art are realities in history yesterday and today, as we have seen. In my book, *Penpoints, Gunpoints, and Dreams* (1998), I have argued that 'authority' and 'author' share the author part. But one authors laws and the other ideas. Both use words to do so. The difference is that a scholar uses words to ask questions; authority uses words to issue answers. Scholars don't confuse fact with fiction. They separate fiction from fact to arrive at truth. Authority infuses truth with falsehood to turn its own fiction into fact. The scholar uses the pen to win arguments. Authority uses the sword to force a win. Haunt, hunt, and hound. Jail, kill, or force the scholar to flee. Wherever scholars are deemed defiant to the prevailing authority, they are at risk, and they face the three alternatives of prison, death, or exile. Obviously the third is the better option. But even then, the hounds of hunting authority are after them, and when they fail, they take out it on the ideas. Ban their ideas; burn their books.

By the very nature of their trade, using words to force a different look at whatever seems obvious, given, and settled, scholars and artists will always find themselves haunted by fear or hunted by the hounds of an intolerant authority. The question is then one of refuge and sanctuary for their lives and ideas. Living, they can always tell the tale. This is where a helping hand can mean so much for the scholar at risk. A hand that enables the scholar to live is truly a friend in both need and deed.

My first book, after I learnt to read, was the Bible, the *Old Testament*, mostly. Among many of its magical stories was one I found truly imbued with wonder.

According to the Book, a Hebrew mother, Jochebed, fearing that her male child might be slaughtered, puts him in a basket and hides it among the reeds in the Nile. A baby fugitive. Bithis, Pharaoh's daughter, finds him, rescues him, and brings him up in the palace as her own. I am talking about Moses, the future author of the Ten Commandments, and the father of the three Mosaic religions of the book – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – which have changed the world and continue to impact our lives today.

Thus, Egypt was among the first of the ancient civilizations to host fugitive lives. The same book also tells of the flight of infant Jesus for sanctuary in Egypt. Ethiopia has also played the role of rescuer of holders of what others then saw as dangerous ideas: King Negash gave sanctuary to the family or followers of Mohammed, who arrived at Aksum, in flight from their persecutors.

Whether these stories are rooted in fact, in myth, or in exaggeration, they do talk of workers in ideas who find a helping hand, which enables ideas that later impact the world. We do have examples within more recent centuries. Karl Marx was forced out of Germany and emigrated to Paris in 1820. At the end of 1848, he was expelled from France and sought refuge in Brussels. Later he moved back to Paris and was expelled in 1849 and sought refuge in London, where he turned the British Library into his second home. Thus, Britain and the British Library have joined Egypt and Ethiopia in giving a home to hunted scholars and their fugitive ideas.

Whatever position one may take on Marxism, there is no doubt about the impact of Marxist ideas on political, economic, social, and literary theories. New York gave sanctuary to the Frankfurt School of Social Research and the scholars associated with it, Adorno among them. They and their scholarship have had an immense impact on critical theory. Joseph Conrad was not personally hunted down by the Tsarist empire that controlled Poland in the nineteenth century, but he was a product of hunted scholars, his father and mother. His poet father was jailed, and Conrad's childhood was spent with his parents in forced exile from their beloved Poland. Though it was France which first gave the French-speaking Conrad refuge, eventually the country denied him permission to continue his stay. Britain gave him sanctuary. Conrad had to learn English at the age of nineteen. But look at the impact of his work on English literature and even on writing from the postcolonial worlds of Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

We can tell from these cases the loss it would have been had these scholars not have found a helping hand and a sanctuary. I am sure the world has lost thousands who, given the chance to live and breathe, would have given equally to the world. We should be grateful to all those who enabled these producers of ideas to survive. We must also be grateful to those who have helped rescue intellectual products at risk from the fires of willful destruction waged by political and religious zealots.

Imagine all the history, poetry, inventions, mathematics, astronomy lost to the world through the burning of the library at Alexandria. Alas, we have only names and titles to tease us about the loss: Berossus' *Babylonaica* (circa 281 BCE), the major work of Sappho (circa 612-570 BCE), Hero of Alexandria (circa 10-70 CE), Hypatia (circa 370-415 CE), and Aristarchus of Samos (circa 310-230 BCE). There are similar losses of the pre-Columbian history of Mesoamerica through the zealotry of the Spanish missionaries in the sixteenth century who incinerated the Mayan texts. We can be thankful for the rescued *Popol Vuh* of the Quiche Maya, and also of fragments of Sappho's poetry:

> Although they are
> only breath, words
> which I command
> are immortal.

The call to rescue is a call to give shelter to those who might contribute to this immortality. We are called upon to follow in the footsteps of those countries, institutions, and individuals who rescued hunted scholars from death and hunted scripts from destruction and hence contributed to the wealth of our cultures. Saviours of scholars at risk will then be in the tradition of the Pharaoh's daughter who once rescued the child Moses from drowning among the reeds. In the process, she also rescued a big idea.

As a writer and scholar who owes so much of his life and work to helping hands, known and numerous unknowns, I am so glad that UC Irvine has become part of the world-wide network Scholars at Risk in support of hunted scholars and scholarship.