Writing in Englishes: Taking Control of the Technology of Power through Literary Aesthetics: A Keynote Speech to the African Studies Association Conference, 2021

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Abstract: As language increasingly becomes uncoupled from the nation state, transnational writers, transnational African writers, and African writers are using language to serve their own purposes and creating new literary aesthetics. This essay, first given as a keynote speech to the 2021 African Studies Association Annual Conference, examines some debates about the relationship between language and power and argues that these are being upended by writers who do not fit conventional categories, including transnational African writers. These writers are exploring the range of options presented by their own multilingualism and making unapologetic aesthetic claims upon the English language.

Résumé : Alors que la langue se dissocie de plus en plus de l'État-nation, les écrivains transnationaux, les écrivains africains transnationaux et les écrivains africains utilisent

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la langue pour servir leurs propres objectifs et créer une nouvelle esthétique littéraire. Cet essai, d'abord prononcé comme discours liminaire à la conférence annuelle 2021 de l'Association des études africaines, examine certains débats sur la relation entre la langue et le pouvoir et soutient que ceux-ci sont bouleversés par des écrivains qui ne correspondent pas aux catégories conventionnelles, y compris les écrivains africains transnationaux. Ces écrivains explorent la gamme d'options présentées par leur propre multilinguisme et font des revendications esthétiques sans excuses sur la langue anglaise.

Resumo : À medida que a língua se afasta cada vez mais do Estado-nação, os escritores transnacionais, os escritores transnacionais africanos e os escritores africanos têm vindo a usar a língua em benefício dos seus próprios objetivos e a criar novas estéticas literárias. Este ensaio, apresentado pela primeira vez na Conferência Anual da African Studies Association em 2021, analisa alguns dos debates acerca da relação entre linguagem e poder, argumentando que uma e outro estão a ser subvertidos pelos escritores que não se encaixam nas categorias convencionais, incluindo os escritores transnacionais africanos. Estes escritores têm explorado as várias opções abertas pelo seu próprio multilinguismo, apresentando sem constrangimento as suas propostas estéticas sobre a língua inglesa.

Keywords: language; linguistics; aesthetics; literature; transnational; identity

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The Displacement of Place

Some years ago, I used to go dog walking near my house in southeast London with a neighbor who worked as a psychotherapist. One day he told me about a device used by psychologists to determine the way people see themselves, how they frame their own identity. He said, "I'm going to ask you ten questions and I want you to answer spontaneously, without hesitation or delay, and your answers must be different each time. Shall we begin?"

"Yes," I said.

"Who are you?"

I replied, and I will tell you what I answered shortly. Then he asked the next question.

"Who are you?"

"Who are you?"

"Who are you?"

I replied and replied again. When the point was made, he stopped rehearsing the question.

This conversation came back into my mind again some years later, by which time I had come to live in the United States. I was in Santa Fe, New Mexico, to give a talk, staying at a hotel where I fell into conversation with the bartender. He recognized my English accent and, as certain people do,

immediately began to talk football, or soccer, about which I know virtually nothing, and so I listened patiently and in silence. He told me he was a Manchester United man. As I say, I know little about soccer, but I know this much—Manchester United is a premier league club, possibly *the* Premier League club, which attracts a global following. In fact, based on a 2019 market research report from the global market research agency Kantar, produced for Manchester United investors, the club claims a fan and follower total of 1.1 billion people, comprising 467 million fans and 635 million followers. ("Fans" being people who say Manchester United is their favorite football team in the world, and "followers" are those for whom Manchester United is a football team that they proactively follow in addition to their favorite football team). These fans and followers are spread across the world, in Africa, Europe, the Middle East, the Americas, and the Asia Pacific region. Estimates are of 35 million fans and followers in India, 33 million in Nigeria, and 25 million in Mexico.

I did not know all this when I spoke to the bartender, but I was listening to something I found fascinating. Here was a young man from Mexico, an immigrant to the United States, who had never been to Britain, but was a fan of a Northern England club. I asked him why, and he answered he was a big fan of Wayne Rooney. He admitted, though, that a friend had recently been talking to him about Aston Villa and he liked what he was hearing, so he was thinking that he might switch his allegiance.

I lived in England during the 1970s. In those days, you didn't choose which team to support as if you were picking from a menu; you supported the team where you lived. You might possibly support a club in a town or city where you were born or where you had spent part of your life, but that was as far as it went. The people of my age who like soccer are all this way. They support their home team, be it Chelsea or Wigan.

Now, were I a soccer fan, I might be more like the young man than like friends of my own generation. Mine has not been a life rooted in place, for reasons to do, first of all, with the nationalities of my parents. My father was Sierra Leonian, my mother from Scotland. Then, the politics of my father's country forced us to leave for periods of time. My parents chose to educate me in England. My mother's second husband, my stepfather, was a diplomat, and the family moved from country to country. And finally, my own work has frequently taken me overseas.

For thirty years my home base was London, in a neighborhood with a markedly cosmopolitan population, from the West Indies, North Africa, Brazil, Bolivia, and West Africa, in particular Sierra Leone, Nigeria, and Ghana. Washington, D.C, where I live now, has a significant population of Sierra Leonians. So, in fact, in those places, I am both away and at home.

According to a poll conducted by GlobeScan among more than 20,000 people worldwide between December 2015 and April 2016, nearly one in two

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people (49%) surveyed across fourteen countries see themselves more as global citizens than as citizens of the country where they live.

Dr. Irene Skovgaard-Smith, a senior lecturer at the Lord Ashcroft International Business School at Anglia Ruskin University, conducted interviews with groups of professionals from fourteen different countries, including France, Britain, Italy, Mexico, the US, Azerbaijan, and Finland, who were living and working in Amsterdam. In a 2017 article published in *The Conversation*, she writes:

> Those who embrace cosmopolitan values or see themselves as "global citizens" come from a broad range of social backgrounds and from all over the world, constituting not one, but many tribes. These include working-class labour migrants, lower-class Creoles in Mauritius as well as young people who have moved to study and globally mobile, middle-class career professionals.

When I think of the rise of transnationalism from the end of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century, I like to paraphrase William Shakespeare: Some of us are born transnational, some choose to be transnational, and some have transnationalism thrust upon them. The transnational may be an immigrant or have immigrant parents or parents from two nations; they may have begun as a refugee or chosen life as an expatriate, but crucially continue maintaining links with two countries, often moving between them. This is Pico Iyer's Global Soul, self-realized, self-confident, and relatively free from anxieties about belonging.

In my replies to my friend, the psychotherapist I said, "I am my father's daughter." Then, "I am a writer." And, "I am a Londoner." So my order of identity was: family, occupation, locality. I was writing my first book about my father, who had been a political activist in Sierra Leone and to whom I owe many of my own values. Now, six books on, the order might change a little, but not much. I have since played this very same game with the students in my transnational literature class. They thought about their identities in a variety of ways. Family ranked high, as did occupation. They were students, English majors, aspiring lawyers or diplomats. Religion was important, and for the LGBTQ students, sexual orientation. One student described herself as "White" ahead of anything else. Very few mentioned their country of origin, and if they mentioned place, they were more likely to see themselves as residents of a city, be it Nairobi or New York, Luanda or London.

What do they read, those kinds of people, among whom I count myself? The early part of my childhood I spent in Sierra Leone. I read Jack London and Mark Twain. I liked dogs and I liked wolves, and so I read *White Fang* and *Call of the Wild*. I read *Huckleberry Finn*. I loved his adventures. I was what was then called a tomboy, and I saw myself in Huck. I studied French and Spanish literature. I also grew up on West African and Scottish fables and folk tales, as told to me by family members on both sides.

In my teens and twenties, I read a good deal of work by popular South American writers, including Isabel Allende, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Manuel

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Puig, and Pablo Neruda, specifically those works dealing with the experience of dictatorship and repression, an experience I discussed with Allende when I interviewed her on stage at the Brooklyn Library in November of 2017. We discussed the connections created out of shared experiences like our own, especially that of political oppression, as opposed to geographical proximity or ethnicity. For example, Allende talked about being asked by a North American reader why family life features so prominently in her books. She remarked that in South America, living under the rule of murderous or corrupt or merely inefficient regimes, family became an individual's support system. This is something which could equally be said of Sierra Leone and of my own work.

On stage once, in Germany, I was asked whether my work was influenced by a particular African author. I said no. The interviewer, smiling confidently, asked how I could say that. In his mind, our works shared certain qualities. I told him that I could say "no" because I had never read the particular author he described. I found that interesting, his assumption of exclusively regional influences upon any author's work.

We no longer, if we ever did, live in an either/or world. Our world is more nuanced, more complex than ever before. It is possible that my work has been influenced by this particular African author in some roundabout, osmotic way. It is even more possible the critic was simply remarkably short-sighted. The question of influences is one I struggle to answer, for they are so many and so varied.

Language Versus Place

To think of the English canon is to think not just of a language but of England. The best-known English writers are commonly associated with a place, were inspired by particular places: Thomas Hardy with the West Country, Jane Austen with the great houses of the north, Dickens with London, Wordsworth with the Lake District. It came as something of a surprise to me later in life—naively so, perhaps—but I remember I was already a writer myself when I discovered that English literature referred specifically to the literature of England and did not extend to embrace our changing world. I, though I wrote in English and my mother is British and I was born in Britain, was still not considered to be an English or even a British writer.

At Yale University, at an African literature festival held in 2016, I was asked by a member of the audience if I considered myself an "African writer." He thought he was being bold. Who is and isn't an African writer was very much the debate of the moment. I replied that my father was Sierra Leonian, therefore I was Sierra Leonian, so I was an African and therefore presumably an African writer. My father would turn in his grave, I thought, to hear that his daughter was not considered African by another African. I replied that one might look to the sensibility of the book and what the author sought to convey, in which case I must surely call myself an African writer and my books African books, including the one I set in Croatia, because they all convey an African, specifically Sierra Leonian, gaze upon the world.

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Following the nomination of Abdulrazak Gurnah to the Nobel Prize for Literature last week, Tanzanians and their president loudly claimed him as one of theirs—although he had fled Zanzibar as a young man and arrived in Britain as a refugee in the 1960s. In a 2021 interview, a journalist for Al Jazeera questioned whether Tanzania could claim Gurnah as their own, the author having spent most of his life in rural Kent. Gurnah's reply was that he considers himself Tanzanian. It is where his family members live, a country to which he travels frequently. "In my mind I live there." And his books, set in East Africa or the Zanzibari archipelago—and also the UK—have at their center the experience of his East African, often immigrant or refugee, characters.

So, which one are you? This is a question I have been asked to exhaustion. I was born of two countries. Who is anyone else to say I must choose or to choose for me? For the student at Yale, the physical location of me, as an author, living and working much of the time outside Africa, seemed to be part of the problem. That made me "not" African. My mixed heritage doubtless also acted to subtract from my African identity. However, the setting of my books in Sierra Leone worked to enhance my African identity. But these distinctions seem unnecessary to me. Now, on the shelf behind me, sit two anthologies, one called *The Contemporary British Novel* (edited by James Acheson [Edinburgh University Press, 2005]) and one called *The Rise of the African Novel* (by Mũkoma wa Ngũgĩ [University of Michigan Press, 2018]). Both contain sections on my work, which—in my view—is as it should be. In the latter work, the author, considering the rise of transnational identity and African authors, writes, "Aminatta Forna best exemplifies the difficulties that literary criticism has when it comes to naming literatures being produced by writers who are rooted in more than one place."

In 2013, during a keynote address given by Kapka Kassabova at The Edinburgh World Writers' Conference in Brussels and titled "A National Literature," the writer remarked:

> Last year at the Olympic event Poetry Parnassus, I represented Bulgaria. I accepted the invitation because it was an honour, but felt like a fraud—our family emigrated from Bulgaria twenty years ago, and I write in English. In the past, because I was living and publishing in New Zealand, I attended festivals as a New Zealand writer—and again, I felt like a fraud. Today, I am honoured to be here as a writer from Scotland, a country I love and feel at home in, and I'm still struggling with that fraudulent feeling.
> In short, the idea of National Literature gives me a headache. The headache escorts me to public events where you must appear not just with your name and your book, but with your nation too. You must be escorted, as if you can't be trusted on your own.

Categorizing literature by nation and the concept of national canons owes much to the mindset of academics, academic specialisms, and departmental empire building. Before that, however, building a national literature formed a part of the enterprise of nation building. American academics set

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out, deliberately, to conceive of an American canon, because the works of their writers had been excluded from the English canon.

In June 1962 at Makarere University in Uganda, a gathering of anglophone African writers took place with the idea of bringing together both established and promising writers with magazine editors, critics, and publishers for discussion about the future development of African literature. The Conference of African Writers of English Expression—to give it its official title—is now best remembered as the start of the debate on the status of English in postcolonial African literature. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o argued forcefully, then and thereafter, that being obliged to speak the language of your oppressor, the displacement of the mother tongue, is another form of colonization. The main objective of the conference, though, was to determine the future of a continental canon. It was an important moment in the creation of a postcolonial and pan-Africanist identity. Here were the continent's writers, putting their collective mind toward the creation of something psychologists now describe as a "narrative identity," in this case a specifically African narrative identity, to replace the warped, colonial version of their history and culture that had been thrust upon African peoples for over a century.

The question of language, though, was not settled at Makarere, and the debate continues. Today, to think about the linguistic migration made by the English language is to consider something remarkable. If you showed a map of the world to a visitor from another planet, illustrating the language spoken in each part, that visitor might assume that English had originated somewhere on the African continent, home to seven hundred million speakers. Or they might think it had arisen in North America, with three hundred million speakers. If they even noticed one small Northern European, English-speaking island, they might wonder at its relevance.

English, as it flows through Africa, is like a river, changing as it goes. The same is true of the English spoken in America from one end of the continent to the other, and of course between America and the UK, which are, as the joke goes, two countries divided by the same language. English today is the language of commerce, academia, and culture. Increasingly, writers of African heritage are writing at the nexus of nationality, residence, language, and culture. So how are we negotiating this?

The hint of the idea that would transform into my first novel, *Ancestor Stones*, came as I interviewed my eldest aunt about our family's antecedents. She spoke only Temne, while I spoke—at that time—only English. I have an excellent understanding of Sierra Leonian Krio, but my spoken Krio is not good, for the reason that my family was forced into exile when I was six and I lost the ability to speak it. (Passive or receptive bilingualism is very common among people who are displaced from the country where their original language is spoken). I have never been able to speak Temne, but the cadence of the language, which I have heard spoken around me since childhood, is deeply familiar. Thus it was that my cousin acted as interpreter, and through my cousin's exacting translation, I was able to follow my aunt's narrative

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sentence by sentence. I thought, "I've never heard this voice," meaning "voice" in literary terms. What does that mean? The "voice" of a novel is the over-layering of what is being said—namely the thematic content of the work—along with how it is being said, the form of the words, rhythm of the sentences, word choice, syntax, plus the author's subjectivity or sensibility.

How to capture this voice in print when I did not speak Temne? Even if I could speak it fluently, to write in it, as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o would wish, was effectively impossible, as the language did not have a complete orthography; linguists at the University of Fourah Bay College in Freetown were in the process of compiling one when the civil war in Sierra Leone put a stop to their work. During that summer of 2004, my stepmother was staying with me in London. With her help and on long walks, I analyzed and then set about constructing the grammar of the language, based on the answers she gave to my questions. I used the template of a Romance language, which was the only one I had, having learned French and Spanish. I started with pronouns, then conjugated simple verbs and added vocabulary for the names of things we encountered on those walks. I recorded the terms as best I could, using a Roman alphabet.

On her return to Sierra Leone, my stepmother sought out the linguists at Fourah Bay, by then back at work two years after the close of war, and obtained some grammar books. The orthography they had devised used a number of phonetic symbols to express certain vowel sounds, but nothing I could not figure out. Gradually I was able to put together short sentences, but even better, I could understand a lot of what my mother said. One day I stood with two nurses who were originally from Sierra Leone, in an elevator in a London hospital on my way to visit my sister who had just given birth, and I understood them as they conversed in Temne.

In Sierra Leone, conducting interviews with older women about what life had been like forty, fifty, sixty years before, I still needed the help of a translator, but now I could follow better what was being said. The speech inflections were notably similar from one woman to the next. So, too, was they way they repeated certain words and phrases. I recorded all the sessions and listened back to them in my study in England, not for the words, but for the rhythms, listening for the pattern, the tempo of their speech. (I would later employ the same method in a subsequent book but with Croatian instead of Temne speakers.)

Gradually, I began to render the sound of those voices into English and onto paper. Some experiments worked and some did not. Too many repetitions, for example, made for wearisome prose. I favored words with consonants rather than vowels and independent sentences over subclauses, for the way they helped render the staccato sound of Temne. I read aloud, as most authors I know do. A musicologist would later tell me that she had tapped out the rhythm of certain sections and noted a pattern. Of course, there were variations in tempo, for a writer works as a composer does, slower to evoke certain moods, faster for others. Most writers will use similar sorts of methods, regardless of the language they are writing in. What I am describing here

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specifically is the process of trying to render the sounds of an African language into a European one.

Ancestor Stones was my first novel. Quite possibly, I was trying too hard. I like to think that, overlaid with metaphor and description, I managed to create a specific sense of the original language. In this I am not alone. As the Nigerian British writer Chris Abani told the *Nigerian Sun* newspaper in a 2016 interview:

> The thing that defines us as Nigerians is language. Think about any indigenous language—Igbo, Yoruba or Hausa—there is no conversation that is straightforward or simple; it is always layered with proverbs, allusions, and philosophy. Even when I write in English, because I am from Nigeria, it has a kind of linguistic richness that all Nigerian languages have. Even, I would argue, pidgin is one of the most linguistically mature languages in the world. Even when Nigerians invent something, they invent something with beauty and depth. So, I can't claim the language; I am merely emulating my countrymen.

In 2018, I published a novel called *Happiness*, in which a Ghanaian man arrives in London where he meets an American woman and a host of characters from Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and his own Ghana. I wrote not only the dialogue but the prose in each of the relevant versions of English, as the perspective switched between the American and the West African main characters. It turned out to be more complicated than even I had imagined, not least because I also had an occasional omniscient narrator for whom I had to create a distinctive expression. Apart from constantly matching the vocabulary, syntax, and rhythms to the viewpoint, I also discovered that my British and American editors did not always agree about what was British and what was American English. Once or twice the Americans didn't even agree between themselves—my editor is from the east coast, my publisher a southerner. Having spent two years in the United States by then, but also having read innumerable books by American writers, I sometimes became confused myself. What was becoming obvious, if it hadn't been before, is that the waters where one English flows into another are very opaque.

Writers have been employing various modes and tactics to bend the English language to their own artistic will for many years. Dohra Ahmed's anthology *Rotten English* contains several dozen examples of writers writing in nonstandard vernacular forms of English. The writers cover a range of nationalities and forms of English, from the Nigerian writer Ken Saro Wiwa's *Soza Boy* to Ireland's Roddy Doyle and the Scottish writer Irvine Welsh. I would also add the more recent examples of Marlon James's hybrid Jamaican patois in *Seven Killings* and Brian Chikwava's Zimbabwean-inflected south London slang. The anthology also contains at least one example of code-switching, in the form of Junot Diaz's *The Brief Life of Oscar Wao*, a mix of English words and Spanish, which he calls "radical bilingualism."

There are vernacular writers and code-switching writers and now, increasingly, writers writing in English by choice or circumstance, not as a

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direct result of colonization, but as a reflection of an increasingly cosmopolitan world with its blurring of boundaries, both geographical and linguistic. These layering complexities result in writing in English that is increasingly inventive.

The Writer's Gaze

"Voice" has risen above place in the way that we writers frame our work. Here I mean voice in the widest possible sense, not just the way language is used but also the internal sensibility of the writer, the worldview, if you like, recreated upon the page in form and theme. Another word I have sometimes relied upon is "gaze," the writer's "gaze." From where is the writer gazing, and upon whom and what? What is the impact of that subjective gaze?

"Why Croatia?" is a question I was asked by every journalist who interviewed me about my third novel, *The Hired Man*. There were many similarities between Croatia and Sierra Leone, where I had thus far set all my books, examining the prelude and aftermath of the civil conflict. The countries are roughly the same in size—Sierra Leone is 22,000 square miles, while Croatia is 28,000 square miles. With a population of 6 million, Sierra Leone is slightly more densely populated than Croatia's 4.25 million. They are coastal countries, of great natural beauty, whose economies have at times relied on tourism. Both countries have a strong peasant culture, too. Then, of course, there is the key similarity, the one that drew me to Croatia in the first place—both nations have endured decades of dictatorship, curtailed freedoms, economic hardship, and finally civil wars which were contemporaneous one to the other. Those were the similarities, and then there were the differences, which it is beyond the scope of this essay to enumerate, but which led me to ask: Why did some things unfold in the same way and some unfold differently?

My Sierra Leonian and Croatian books are set in places, but while the setting influences characters, place is not the main point of the book. The point of the book, of all my books, is civil conflict. My background provided me with a particular vantage point. Thus, I consider *The Hired Man*, if I were to locate it within pre-existing canons, as an African book, despite its being set in the Balkans without a single African character, for the reason that I was deliberating a European conflict from the perspective of an African one. This is the "gaze."

In 2017, at Lannan Center at Georgetown University, during a conference titled "The Global Soul," I convened a panel called "Writing in Englishes," from which the title of this essay derives. The writers who took part that day were Kapka Kasabova, Xialou Guo, and Aleksander Hemon.

Kapka Kassabova learned English as a teenager, having already mastered Russian, French, and Bulgarian. Her mastery of Russian allowed her to read Onegin in the original. Similarly French, for she was for a period of time schooled in France, allowed her to absorb French literature without relying upon translation. She and we can only speculate on exactly how that has

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affected her writing; cultural waters once mingled are hard, if not impossible, to separate. One aspect of her writer's voice she has been able to clearly identify is the introduction of irony and self parody into her writing, something, she has said "to which English is particularly well-suited" and which is not part of a Bulgarian sensibility. She was able to identify this shift only when the work was translated, by a professional translator and not Kassabova herself, back into Bulgarian.

Xiaolou Guo left China at the age of twenty-nine to travel to the UK on an artists' program. She was obliged to learn English from scratch. In China, English was considered "the enemy language," but writing in English freed her, not just from state censorship, but also from the self-censorship that people in China impose upon themselves almost from birth.

Guo elaborated on being introduced to the idea of gender for the first time, as well as tenses, including a range of past tenses, which gave her the ability to "freeze time" in her construction of narrative and to reconsider the possibilities of plot. In Chinese, she explains, "time and space are one word," or perhaps one construct, but in English they are separate, so a story must be differently located. As a film director and artist as well as a writer, she has also contemplated how moving from a visual, pictorial, written form, namely the Chinese character, to the purely phonetic Roman alphabet, in her words, "the transformation from the picture to the letter," might have affected her imaginative world. What might these transformations mean for the "psychic language" of the writer? she asked.

The Bosnian-American writer Aleksander Hemon is considered one of the preeminent stylists writing in the English language today. Hemon spoke only what he has called "tourist English" before becoming stranded in Chicago after he arrived in the US on a writing fellowship on the eve of the siege of Sarajevo. He made an early decision to write in English once it became evident that the US would become his home for the foreseeable future. This necessitated his improving his English to bring it up to a literary standard. In conversation with Guo and Kassabova, he talked about the perspective shift writing in English produced in him as a writer, from being the outsider outside a society to the outsider within. He also spoke of his own precision with words whose meaning and use he has had to learn, or divine, and then to apply, and which has produced an especially concise and exacting prose, Maupassant's *mot juste* but with a cosmopolitan twist. Or indeed, when he chooses to make a creative decision to deviate from such exactitude, examining the multiple possibilities in meaning, of the significance of describing wine as "black" as it would be in direct translation from Bosnian, as opposed to "red" as it is in English.

Asked whether he sometimes felt frustrated writing in English and knowing that a concept or phrase might be more effectively conveyed in Bosnian, Hemon answered that he used those opportunities to change the language. "Writers both create and transform language. It pre-exists us but at the same time we have agency within that. I never thought I was outside of the language. My presence inside the language gives me agency. It belongs to no-one."

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If language should be viewed as a "war zone," as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o has remarked more than once, then the rules of engagement are changing. Chinua Achebe, who disagreed with Ngũgĩ on the matter of language, in 1965 wrote: "I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings." Fifty-six years later, Abdulrazak Gurnah has been quoted as saying of his English prose that he wanted it to sound like it had been translated from Swahili, which was his first language and the language he spoke before he arrived in England as a refugee in the 1960s.

My Sierra Leonian family originally spoke Temne and then learned Krio from the formerly enslaved Africans arriving from the Americas, and then English from their colonial rulers. Now they speak all three languages and often move seamlessly between them in any given conversation—code-switching in real time—precisely where the literary aesthetic began.

There are ideas and questions I have raised here that I foresee writers, linguists, and students of literature grappling with into the future. I will leave that for them to do. What I am testifying to is a challenge delivered specifically through literary aesthetics, to the ways in which we think about the ownership of language, which has changed and is changing still. On stage that day at Georgetown University, Aleksander Hemon told a story. A friend read the manuscript of his novel and, commenting on a line, remarked: "We don't say it like that." To which Hemon answered: "Well now *we* do."

Forty years ago, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o argued that there should be, within universities, a single department with a single word on the door, and that word should be "LITERATURE." In 2020, Cornell University announced that the English Literature Department would henceforth be called the "Department of Literatures in English," helping to eliminate the "conflation of English as a language and English as a nationality." Perhaps it is no coincidence that Ngũgĩ's son Mũkoma, a writer as well as a university professor, teaches there.

Franz Fanon once described language as a technology of power. I wonder, though, if he could have foreseen a time when that very technology would be upended by writers exploring the range of options presented by their own multilingualism and making unapologetic claims upon the English language, fashioning it into images of our own making.

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