The Historical and Geographical Locations of Literature

What makes Western Literature Western and Superior and Non-Western literature Non-Western and Inferior

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Abstract

African writers need to publish their own books in their own home countries. The silencing of ideas and elimination of dominant narratives from Black authors was not something that was supposed to happen. Black writers in the Diaspora and those on the African Continent want to tell a new and different story. Such an approach will allow new voices to transform negative coverage in Western media into a new form of reportage that tells a brand-new story.

People of Color should not be left at the margin. It should not matter where an author comes from. The purpose here is to unearth biases that exist in publishing houses. This kind of external validation is not necessary. African literature exists within parameters that are drawn by someone else who is somewhere else. Somehow the literature that someone might read in the West (in regards to Africa) tends to emphasize violence and corruption with an inaccurate image of inferiority.

Unfortunately, Black and brown authors are still playing catch up. Even an informal meeting or study reveals an inequity in the publishing industry that will shock even the most seasoned reader. In a recent article by James Tager and Clarisse Rosaz Shariyf (2022), PEN America leaves no room for misunderstanding when they state that the publishing industry and the books it produces are overwhelmingly white (Tager & Shariyf). Simply put, it matters where an author comes from. It shouldn't matter, but it does. It matters what an author looks like. It shouldn't, but it does. It also matters who works at a publishing firm, how large the firm is, where the firm is located, and what they have published in the past. Toni Morrison, before actually becoming an author, was the first Black woman editor at Random House in company history. To paraphrase John Keats, that is "all ye need to know."

When Morrison left Random House in 1983, she had published Angela Davis, Huey P. Newton, and Muhammad Ali. Race matters. Davis published her autobiography with Random House in 1974, seven years after Morrison's arrival. In 1971, she published *If They Come in The Morning: Voices of Resistance* with the New American Library. At approximately the same time, Huey P. Newton published *To Die for the People* at Random House. This collection of writings and speeches first appeared in 1972, but this followed *The Genius of Huey P. Newton*, published by the Black Panther Party in

1970. Only Muhammad Ali was first published at Random House. Writers of color need someone to notice them. This would be easier if there were more African-Americans in the industry.

While there are many African Americans published in journals that are edited by people of a wide variety of backgrounds, Western literature is, and has always been, historically white and surely excluded authors of color. Writers of color often needed other African Americans at publishing companies to encourage and nurture their young literary careers. As one of Africa's most prominent poets writing in English, Christopher Okigbo is a perfect example of how literature is not just the creation of the white man: it is there for anyone who wants it. But since literature is a Western construction, who will ensure that he, as a Black or brown man, will be offered a stage that is commensurate with his talent? Okigbo states, "Literature doesn't have a country" (Selasi, 2015). That may be true on a creative level, but it leaves a lot to be desired when it comes to business. It would take a very naïve writer to think that his or her text has an equal chance of publication and success regardless of where he or she is on the globe. This is a wonderful sentiment. Surely, he means well to say such a thing, but the birthplace of a book's author, who that author looks like, and the subject of his or her book can mean everything. It can be a burst of wind beneath the sails of a skillfully crafted new work, or it can be a weight from which it may never recover. To presume otherwise would be to pull the wool over one's own eyes.

Okigbo is a pioneer of African poetry. He is, first and foremost, considered to be a Nigerian poet. He is, however, shut off from some of the people he would like to reach. Considering himself someone who writes for everyone, he may not like the title, but he cannot express himself in a vacuum. No one would refer to him as simply "a poet." Such compartmentalization is the first step in

deciding where writers belong so they can be summarily dismissed by an exclusive publishing industry and slip into oblivion. Until African writers can begin their own careers and have a say in how they will develop, some of them may never reach an audience of any kind (Nwaubani, 2014). The most important decisions are made elsewhere, requiring the approval of foreign booksellers, agents, and authors

This wasn't supposed to happen. The 60's, with all of its optimism and upheaval, seemed to welcome and encourage the popularity of African American authors. Hoyt Fuller, an editor for *Negro Digest*, termed the late 60's as a time of "excitement" and rebirth in Black writing and publishing, almost like a grandparent welcoming a new grandchild (Watkins 1981). Mel Watkins, in his article "Hard Times for Black Writers," comments that an African American writer in (roughly) 1969 had the freedom to pursue a wide variety of themes, themes that others would want to read about. Unfortunately, this trend in publishing did not last. A dramatic shift involving Black writers took place and economics had something to do with it. Simply put, the ground moved beneath the feet of everyone in the literary world. George Davis, who co-wrote *Black Life in Corporate America: Swimming in the Mainstream* with Glegg Watson, stated in 1981 that it is the mass-audience book that publishers are looking for: "In recent years, the publishing industry has become as vulgar and tasteless as the movie industry. And when you consider novels by blacks, you'll find that often the numbers, the financial return, won't be as impressive as with books by whites. If that's what publishing has become, then there's some justification for not publishing black fiction" (Watkins, 1981). While I'm sure that the book publishing industry is competitive and that financial remuneration is important, this is a major step backwards. This paper aims at breaking this limiting and prejudicial framework, one that overlooks an uninterrupted flow of non-commercial ideas that

make it nearly impossible for minority fiction to appear on a major publisher's release calendar.

Before we continue further, I would like to discuss some of the publishing issues that exist in Africa. Olivia Snaije, in the May 14th, 2020 edition of *The Guardian*, comments that Francophone African authors rarely find their works published by African presses and, I would add, their works are far less likely to reach a widespread audience if they do (n.p.). The commercial or economic term for this equation is that such fiction cannot cross over. This is a free choice in which only one thing is actually offered. It is an illusion that the world is an orderly place, and many people chase after (and hope for) that illusion all their lives. Publishers in France, England, or the United States are not magnanimous. They are not necessarily interested in an uninterrupted flow of ideas. The implications of this are far reaching and by delving into the mechanics and structure of the publishing industry we will see deglobalization and how it seeks to harm rather than inform.

African writers, one would think, exist to please themselves and their reading public. Salvation comes from within. No one needs or should need external validation. But "Success for an African writer still depends on the west," and this is a West that still likes to portray Africa as a dark continent that desperately needs civilizing (Nwaubani, 2014). The big question is why, after so many nations in Africa received independence in the 1960's, does this misconception persist? According to Amy Biney (1997) in "The Western Media and Africa: Issues of Information and Images," misinformation about Africa has become a growth industry in the West. That is how negative things have always been, and this imagery has spilled over into the publishing industry. Biney comments that

> ...there is a particular image of Africa in the Western mind. When one is asked to think of Western images that come to mind when thinking of Africa, the overall mental images are of primeval irrationality, tribal anarchy, hunger/famine, civil war, managerial ineptitude, political instability, flagrant corruption and incompetent leadership." (para. 6)

When novels written by Africans contradict this politically and technically backward point of view, they are likely not going to find their way into print. There are some exceptions, such as Thomas Jing's *Tale of an African Woman* and Wole Soyinka's *Of Africa*. Such works show positive threads and upbeat possibilities. However, these are not the mental images of Africa that publishers want out there because they contradict the preconceived notions of their target audience.

Ideas were never meant to move in one direction only. To ignore the racial implications of such an equation would be naïve. African literature exists, but I would argue it is not unchained. It certainly doesn't exist, for the most part, as something accurate that reaches many readers. It exists within parameters that are drawn by someone else who is somewhere else. Somehow the literature that someone might read in the West (in regards to Africa) tends to emphasize violence and corruption. Violence is widely employed in African fiction. Westerners seem to like books about Africa if they are showing a breakdown of social order. Africa is the outsider, excluded from the West, and its stories are rarely told on its own terms. It loses its substance and its authenticity. It is looked upon almost like a famous cover of the *New Yorker* magazine, entitled *A Parochial New Yorker's View of the World*, where the viewer looks westward from the metropolis and can't understand, due to a distorted self-importance, why someone would actively choose to live there.

Africans want to tell a different story—one which does not necessarily reference limitations that involve the amount of pigment in one's skin. Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani (2014) remarks, "It appears that publishers have allotted Africa the slot for supplying the West with savage entertainment (stories about ethnic cleansing, child soldiers, human trafficking, dictatorships, rights abuses and so on)" (para. 7). Tearing down Africa in some sick or twisted way is titillating to those who do not live there. This has something to do with control and dependence and perversely playing to the very worst of people's instincts. People seem to like negative portrayals by the Western media. This is a post-colonial narrative and it rings "true" even if the facts do not support it. Patrick Gathara (2019) in *Aljazeera* shows this attraction to negative reportage:

> The complaints about negative coverage in Western media are not new. Media negativity and its consequences have been bemoaned the world over, but perhaps nowhere more than in Africa – where the prevailing perception is that foreign media, and Western correspondents in particular, have gone out of their way to portray the continent as the nadir of human civilisation. (n.p.)

While there may be a bias towards negativity in general, I am saying there is a bias towards Africa in particular. Words like "darkness" and "tribalism" keep coming up, but nobody would describe people in Minnesota or Nebraska that way. On May 13th, 2000 *The Economist*, one of the best news magazines in the world, showed a cover, replete with a map of Africa and a young man holding a bazooka, titled "The Hopeless Continent" (Solomon, 2014). Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani's revelation, after years and even decades, lays bare the need for not just a brand-new name, but a brand-new story as well.

As we shift back to the United States, there are analogies and comparisons that are similar to those in other parts of the world. We can change the location, but we can't seem to remove biases from the equation. It is not very often that we see a Hulu series that bucks, opposes, or resists this trend. In *The Other Black Girl* an African American woman finds herself in the employ of a New York publishing firm. Not only must she deal with a terrifying work environment where she is manipulated, easily overlooked, and relegated to being a black symbol of inclusion, she also gets to see that people who look like her almost never get to make important literary decisions. This television show is an adaptation of Zakiya Dalila Harris's novel *The Other Black Girl* (2022), a psychological thriller set at the center of a very sanitized corporate world. Harris, who worked as an editorial assistant, surely sees that people who look like her may occasionally get into building but they rarely have any clout. They have no influence. They have no power. Nella, the protagonist, cleans glass tables. Nella gets coffee. Nella schedules meetings in which she does not participate. *The Other Black Girl* is sinister and, while the screen version may not be a direct one to one analogy with the exclusion of black and brown writers, the novel that produced it is. The book does not shy away from systematic racism. Derived from Harris' experience at Alfred A. Knopf, it is a bestseller because people can relate to it. They have seen examples and recognized behavior that really is not very appropriate and have heard under the breath remarks that happen without consequence. It sheds light not only on authors of color, but also on editorial assistants who almost never look like her. Toni Morrison was both. *The Other Black Girl* is an honest, revealing, an emotional story about betrayal.

This is an example of how African-American people can sometimes be erased, unvalued or easily dismissed, but it is not the only one. Black women are just not encouraged to be part of this industry.

The issue is about more than entertainment. It is about feeling safe while amongst people that do not want you. An exposé by James Ledbetter in *The Village Voice* in 1995 stated that nearly 93 % of New Yorkers who call themselves writers are white (n.p.). The publishing industry has a race problem. While I would not necessarily call Wagner Books (the fictional publisher in *The Other Black Girl*) a place with a work environment that goes out of its way to actively prevent Black progress, it is nevertheless clearly one of many least likely to mourn the limitation of the enforcement of civil rights legislation. The success of an HBCU would not be its top priority if its employees were even aware that these schools existed and where they were. Hazel-May McCall (Ashleigh Murray), an actual *second* African-American employee at the company, notices this immediately. Such a circumstance reaches back to the worst time of our collective history. The Hulu television series, and I am sure this is intentional, stirs up ghosts. "There's a correlation between the number of people of color who work in publishing and the number of books that are published by authors of color," said Tracy Sherrod, the editorial director of Amistad, an imprint of HarperCollins that is focused on Black literature (So & Wezerek, 2020). The real-world examples about Black and brown publishing are so prominent that they do not have to be viewed on a flat screen. One of my favorite articles is Elaine Castello's (2020) "We Need to Reckon with the Rot at the Core of Publishing". Castello lays it on the line by saying, "Writers of color often find themselves doing the second, unspoken and unsalaried job of not just being a professional writer but a Professional Person of Color, in the most performative sense—handy to have on hand for panels or journal issues about race or power or revolution, so the festival or literary journal doesn't appear totally racist…" (n.p.). HarperCollins Publishers has been entertaining people in the United States for decades, if not centuries. It has a print and digital catalog of more

than 200,000 titles. It claims to embrace "a diversity of voices". How many of its employees reflect this admirable goal?

The themes explored by publishing houses in the United States and Europe and by authors in Africa are not dissimilar. Cameroonian authors Francis B. Nyamnjoh and Piet Konings (2003), in *Negotiating an Anglophone Identity: A Study of the Politics of Recognition and Representation in Cameroon*, write about the politics of belonging, but I am not sure that the powers that be really want to belong or think of themselves in such a manner. They may not be losing any sleep over other people's systematic removal. I realize that this is a terrible indictment, condemnation, and impeachment, but the facts bear this out. The topic at hand is more about exclusion. Leaving people on the margin. Passing them by with scarcely a glance. I would like to focus the reader's gaze upon those who struggle to belong, those who suffer psychologically by not belonging, and those who see no clear path or connection with others in front of them. Dr. Jeanne-Marie Jackson (2022), the author of *The African Novel of Ideas*, argues forcefully that African political narratives often get overlooked because they do not fit neatly into the narrative of Western imperialism: "For too long, the major Western awards have ignored the sure-footed, endlessly inventive work coming out of the continent [Africa], and even award winners encounter a publishing world skewed against them" (n.p.). Dr Jackson's website uses the term "under-studied" to talk about the present juncture of African intellectual life. The big question is why such a wealth of information is not being embraced with the attention, respect, and understanding it so well deserves.

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