

Contingent Canons

Introduction

On 24 October 1968, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, Henry Owuor-Anyumba, and Taban Lo Liyong presented a paper to the Department of English at the University of Nairobi, entitled ‘On the Abolition of the English Department’. In this piece, the three men argue for the dissolution of the Department of English and its replacement with a Department of African Literature and Languages, contending that:

This is not a change of names only. We want to establish the centrality of Africa in the department. This, we have argued, is justifiable on various grounds, the most important one being that education is a means of knowledge about ourselves. Therefore, after we have examined ourselves, we radiate outwards and discover peoples and worlds around us. With Africa at the centre of things, not existing as an appendix or a satellite of other countries and literatures, things must be seen from the African perspective.¹

The arguments presented by Ngũgĩ and his colleagues touch upon many of the central issues which drive the processes of canonisation and literary consecration: the role of institutions as gatekeepers and mediators of value; the variety of relations which shape the literary field as a whole; the perceived connections and chasms across forms, genre, and media; and more. I would like to set Ngũgĩ’s comment alongside another, seemingly

¹ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, ‘On the Abolition of the English Department’, in *The Post-colonial Studies Reader*, first edition ed. by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 438–42 (p. 441).

disparate, moment from recent history. On 9 July 2011, the Republic of South Sudan was officially declared an independent state, recognised as such by Sudan (the state with whom the new republic had spent the previous decade embroiled in a protracted civil war), the United Nations, and the international community at large. Strangely, for a relatively small, land-locked African nation, the recognition of South Sudan as an independent republic made world headlines, occupying column inches and numerous analyses. What might at first seem a somewhat strange fixation, however, becomes all the more remarkable when placed in its historical context; for the independence of South Sudan marked only the second time that an African state would be declared independent not from a European coloniser but from another African state of which it was once a constituent part (the other example being Eritrea, which gained its independence from Ethiopia in 1993). What is remarkable here is that this was ever able to happen; the African Union is committed to upholding the integrity of territorial barriers as they stood at the time of independence from European colonisers, a stance which has sometimes exacerbated protracted independence and sectarian struggles (for instance, in Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo, formerly Zaire, and Morocco). Set in this context South Sudan's declaration of independence – and the international community's recognition of that independence – marked the first time in decades in which the map of the African continent would depart from the futures decided for it in Berlin in 1884 when the competing imperial powers carved the continent up among themselves to share out its spoils.

What do these two moments have to do with publishing African literature? Quite a lot, I contend; my argument in this Element is that we cannot think about the contours of African literature as a global market category without considering its implication within the larger history through which the continent has come to function both as a physical space and a signifier

Contingent Canons

in the world. At its heart, this is a history predicated on the fight over positions, positionings, and position-takings: how Africa and its literature is located in a global topography; the tension over who gets to decide that placement; and the struggles – internal and external – that mediate these processes. In *The Field of Cultural Production*, Pierre Bourdieu writes:

The space of literary or artistic position-takings, i.e. the structured set of the manifestations of the social agents involved in the field – literary or artistic works, of course, but also political acts of pronouncements, manifestos or polemics, etc. – is inseparable from the space of literary or artistic positions defined by possession of a determinate quantity of specific capital (recognition) and, at the same time, by occupation of a determinate position in the structure of the distribution of this specific capital. The literary or artistic field is a field of forces, but it is also a field of struggles tending to transform or conserve this field of forces.²

For Bourdieu, position-takings – and indeed the delineation of artistic positions – occur through the relational interaction of a wide variety of actors and institutions who together ultimately define the contours of the literary field through a continual and iterative process of competition over the various, finite forms of capital available. With this vision of the literary field in mind, the body of work that we conceive of as being African literature, too, emerges through its relational position within an asymmetrically loaded field of cultural production and value, with correlations and crossovers with the larger discursive

² Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), p. 30.

matrices through which Africa comes into being in the world. Here, it is worth recalling James English, who observes that ‘every form of “capital” everywhere exists not only in relation to one particular field, but in varying relations to all other fields and all other types of capital’.³ In context of African literature, we might see these relations emerging in, for instance, the tendency to privilege those texts deemed to have sociological value, or the tendency to privilege certain forms and genres, particularly the novel. From early modes of reading which assimilated African literature into the larger anthropological discourse around the continent; to the overdetermined paradigm of writing back; to repeated debates about poverty porn and representation; to contemporary trends which focus on migrancy, diaspora, and the murky notion of Afropolitanism, African literature has been defined by a series of uneasy relationships with the market dynamics of the publishing industry and public perception, resulting in a mode of canonisation which is inevitably political in its consequences and which produces broader implications for the formation of the geopolitical topographies through which Africa and the world emerge.

It is important at the outset to move through a few cautions and caveats which guide what follows. First and foremost, the idea that African literature is only produced by the major publishing houses of the global North, and that it is primarily produced and disseminated for Euro-American consumption, is by no means an immutable fact. Numerous publishers, writers’ collectives, and literary activist organisations continue to proliferate on the African continent, defying the normative vision of a continent under a protracted book famine, with a dearth of reading publics. While Section 3 will contend with some of this material in more depth, it is important to recognise from the outset that the expectation that African literature is, as a matter of course, a product of the

³ James English, *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 10.

Contingent Canons

American, first and foremost, and then European publishing industries is itself a product of a set of intertwined ideological, discursive, and material interests. Indeed, so, too, is the notion that the paradigmatic reader of African literature is its American or British (perhaps sometimes French) consumer; official statistics on readerships on the African continent are difficult to find, given the ways in which continental economies of reading often function through informal channels; yet, my own field work and that of other scholars committed to working coproductively with continental partners shows that rich, vital, and engaged reading cultures exist across its geographies.

For the sake of simplicity, and to minimise the number of scare quotes used in this Element, I therefore use the term ‘African literature’ to refer to that body of work consecrated and canonised by the global literary market. My use of ‘African literary production’, by contrast, is intended to capture the larger fullness and diversity of literary activity emanating from the continent and its diasporas. Even a simple discussion of Africa, the physical space, seems doomed to fall into similar forms of confusion from the outset. Africa, the continent, encompasses fifty-five sovereign states and is the second largest continent after Asia; across its totality, it features unparalleled environmental, geographical, linguistic, and cultural diversity. Yet, in its quotidian usage, Africa is often used as an all-encompassing shorthand for sub-Saharan Africa, perpetuating a racialised distinction between the Maghreb and the rest of the continent. Two decades into the twenty-first century, there remains a perception in popular discussions that the continent is little more than an undifferentiated mass, where the Sahel could just as easily be swapped in for the tropical forests of the Equatorial region, or the mountains of the Western Cape for the savannahs of the Great Rift Valley.

In this Element, I mostly discuss English language texts, though each section also contains some discussion of other linguistic contexts. This is largely because, in its current form, the canonical idea of African literature, at least as

exists in the academy and the global North, is itself predominantly Anglophone. Sections 1 and 2 of this study focus almost exclusively on the novel form. Again, this is largely due to the ascendancy of the novel as the de facto form associated with African literature today. Despite the historical and critical importance of poetry, drama, and short-form fiction on the continent (the latter being of an increasing relevance since the inception in 2000 of the Caine Prize for African Writing, a prize which exclusively considers short stories written or translated into English), the novel has overwhelmingly ascended to become *the* form in which African literature appears. Often ascribed to the success of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* – a phenomenon which I will discuss in Section 1 – the rise of the novel has served to nearly eclipse other forms. Even the Caine Prize, ostensibly for short stories, is often awarded to a short story conceived of as a chapter of a novel. In Section 3 of this study, I consider in more detail the formal experimentations and shifts which characterise literary production on the continent.

This study is structured in three short sections. The first of these, 'Publishing Africa on a Global Scale', considers the early processes of consecration and canonisation through which African literature emerged into the global literary marketplace. Organised around the two case studies of *Things Fall Apart* and the African Writers Series, it traces the contours of visibility and representation which have consequently shaped perceptions of African writing. The section considers the larger landscape within which these ostensibly foundational moments of African literature occurred and offers alternative stories or narratives through which we might wish to imagine its instantiation. Section 2, 'Contemporary Canons', jumps from the founding moments of African literature to the present day. The 1970s and 1980s marked a period of decline in the African book trade, based on a variety of factors including a global downturn in the production of books, the Nigerian oil crisis, an increase in the price of paper and the withdrawal of state sponsorship for publishing bureaux. Situating the so-called African literary renaissance of the

Contingent Canons

contemporary period against the larger landscape of the neoliberal turn, this section contends with the long-term legacies of what has come to be known as the African book famine in the present day. Here, I draw on close readings of texts by Teju Cole and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie to think about the thematics and aesthetics which drive the consecration of texts as representative of African literature more broadly, and examine the role of the writer-celebrity-spokesperson. In the third and final section of this study, 'Alternative Landscapes', I begin with a consideration of the place of African literature within world literatures more broadly, and then devote the bulk of the section to an exploration of the larger dynamism of African literary production based on the continent. My argument here is that while the range of this work is often rendered illegible and invisible in the institutions and publics of the global North, its excavation in critical and popular study is essential to determining a more robust concept of the literary, as a whole, and the mechanisms of literary activity, production, dissemination, and consecration in Africa and its diasporas.

1 Publishing Africa on a Global Scale

In many accounts, the institution of African literature is intertwined with two particular historical moments: the publication, in 1958, of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and the founding, in 1962, of the Heinemann African Writers Series, of which Achebe's novel served as first title. Both of these events have undeniable significance for the ways in which the canon of African literature has subsequently been formed, particularly with respect to the patterns and politics of visibility which have mediated its constitution over time; yet, as is inevitably the case with origin stories,⁴

⁴ Robert Fraser, *Book History Through Postcolonial Eyes: Rewriting the Script* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), p. 88.

both function less as absolute historical starting points and more as potential sites through which the ideological processes of canon formation and literary valuation might be explored. In Section 1, I focus on these two moments for precisely these reasons, tracing the contours of the normative story of African literature and then offering alternative landscapes through which to consider its demarcations. Across these arguments, my aim is to foreground the dynamics of visibility which have accompanied the dominant narrative of African literature's creation and constitution, and which continue to bear upon the ways in which it is positioned in the global literary field.

In 1957 Chinua Achebe, then a young broadcaster on a training course in London, approached Gilbert Phelps with a manuscript detailing a multigenerational saga of Igbo life from the first moments of contact with European colonisers to the era of anticolonial independence struggles. Heavily revised and overhauled, this manuscript would transform into the author's first three novels, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), *No Longer at Ease* (1960), and *Arrow of God* (1964). With two novels tracing the life and fall of Okonkwo, a strongman famed across the nine villages of Umuofia, located in the southeast of present-day Nigeria, and the subsequent corruption of his grandson, Obi Okonkwo, a 'been-to' caught between conflicting ideologies during the period immediately around self-rule and independence, and the third telling the story of Ezeulu, the embattled spiritual leader of his tribe in the intervening years of high colonisation, the trilogy has collectively been positioned as the foundation upon which African literature has been built, with its first instalment credited variously with its establishment as a category operating within the global literary field. As James Currey, reflecting on its publication in the African Writers Series, notes, 'If people have read one novel from Africa it is most likely that it will have been *Things Fall Apart*. Sales in English may well have passed 10 million. There

Contingent Canons

have been translations into almost fifty other languages. It now appears in Penguin Modern Classics'.⁵ Unparalleled in its visibility as a representative of African literature, writ large, the novel is notable for several features: its integration of Igbo language and terminology and cultural and religious customs, including descriptions of ritual practice, religious rites, family ceremonies, folk-tales, and collective governance; its depiction of a humanised African personality, something which might be read as a rebuff to the European vision of the continent in which, as Achebe himself once lamented, Africa functions as mere 'setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as human factor';⁶ its use of proverbs and idioms derived from – and sometimes reproduced in – the Igbo language; its adaptation of modernist forms and conventions, including, of course, its very title, a quotation from Yeats's poem 'The Second Coming', which serves as an epigraph to the novel; and more. Despite the novel's relatively modest length, moreover, set over three parts following Okonkwo from Umuofia to his exile in Mbanta and eventual return, the text features a densely populated world far removed from the alien land devoid of humanity once described in the works of Conrad and his contemporaries.

It is not my intention here to dwell upon the relative worth of Achebe's text as a literary work; there exists a broad body of scholarship which does precisely this.⁷ Rather, my interest in this discussion is to consider the ways in

⁵ James Currey, *Africa Writes Back: The African Writers Series and the Launch of African Literature* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2008), p. 28.

⁶ Chinua Achebe, *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays* (New York: Anchor, 1988), p. 12.

⁷ See, for instance, Simon Gikandi, 'Chinua Achebe and the Invention of African Culture', *Research in African Literatures*, 32.3 (2001): 3–8; Stephanie Newell, *West African Literature: Ways of Reading* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); James Olney, 'The African Novel in Transition: Chinua Achebe', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 70 (1971): 299–316; Dan Izevbaye, 'Chinua Achebe and the African Novel',

which the text has been positioned – seemingly intractably – as the founding text of African literature and the implications which so arise for how we think about African literature as a category. In many ways, the publication of *Things Fall Apart* has become something of a myth in itself. In an essay which appears in the author's last published volume, Achebe describes at length the process which led to his drafting of the novel:

I worked on my writing mostly at night. I was seized by the story and I found myself totally ensconced in it. It was almost like living in a parallel realm, a dual existence not in any negative sense but in the way a hand has two surfaces, united in purpose but very different in tone, appearance, character, and structure.⁸

In these comments, Achebe invokes the aura now so often attributed to *Things Fall Apart*, describing the process of writing the novel as an experience of the sublime, another existence running in parallel with his daily life as a young broadcaster at the Nigerian Broadcasting Company. Recounting how he nearly lost the manuscript after sending it to be typed out by an unscrupulous London agency eager to take advantage of the young Nigerian, only rescued from the dustbin of history by the interventions of one of Achebe's colleagues, a former BBC Talks producer, Achebe's recollections continue to trace the unlikely trajectory through which the novel would eventually travel. In many ways, *Things Fall Apart's* origin story is remarkable: a young Nigerian broadcaster,

in *The Cambridge Companion to the African Novel*, ed. by F. Abiola Irele (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 31–50.

⁸ Chinua Achebe, *There Was A Country: A Personal History of Biafra* (London: Allen Lane, 2012), p. 35.