

African Literature Doesn't Exist

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The title of my talk tonight is “African Literature Doesn't Exist”—but, as you may know, I live in Rome, and so start, as we do, with confession. Confession number one: I'm a recovering academic, one decade past my Oxford days, but still prone to making provocative statements whether or not I can defend them. Confession number two: I'm sure I'll regret having given this talk once the scholars swoop in, but for now, I'm young and idealistic enough to relish the risk of defeat. So. That's confession done. On to the good part.

The blasphemy.

African Literature Doesn't Exist.

What do I mean, or *not* mean? By “African literature,” I refer not to the body of written and oral texts produced by storytellers on and from the continent—but rather, to the category. African Literature is an empty designation, as is Asian Literature, European Literature, Latin American Literature, South American Literature, North American Literature, and so forth. My very basic assertion is that the practice of categorizing literature by the continent from which its creators come is past its prime at best. Our dogged insistence upon doing so, in the case of the African continent foremost, betrays a disregard both for the complexities of African cultures and the creativity of African authors. If literature is, as its finest practitioners argue, universal—then

it deserves a taxonomy neither based on nor supportive of racial distinction, but reflective of the workings of the race-less human heart.

I am by no means the first to champion a non-national, human-centric approach to literature. In 1827 Goethe wrote, “I am more and more convinced that poetry is the universal possession of mankind...National literature is now a rather unmeaning term; the epoch of world literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach.” In 2001 Edward Said, still attempting said hastening, wrote a piece called “Globalizing Literary Study,” freely admitting that “there is something basically unworkable or at least drastically changed about the traditional frameworks in which we study literature. There is a profound insufficiency now to the notion that a Wordsworth poem can be seen as emanating from English literature of the late eighteenth century, or as the work of a solitary genius.” Speaking here, also in 2001, at the very first ILB, Charles Simic defined literature as “the defense of the individual against all generalizations that seek to enclose reality in a single conceptual system.” What these three men are pointing to, centuries apart, is the universality of art, the extent to which *all* literature—English, Ethiopian, European, African, etc.—transcends per force the geopolitical and personal borders with which we try to parse it.

If we accept, with Goethe, Said and Simic, that poetry is without nationality, “the defense of the individual against generalizations,” then we must ask why we’ve sought to nationalize it. Why do we call that Wordsworth poem an English poem, an Achebe novel a Nigerian one, worse, an African one? Where does the instinct come from? In his article “Ethnic Categorizations in Literature,” scholar Alec Hargreaves tells us that the practice dates back to the 19th century, when the state was finding its feet.

The main institutional lines of modern literary studies were laid down during the nineteenth century, which was marked by a growing tide of nationalism within Europe,

and colonial expansion overseas. . . . Just as historians constructed teleological accounts of the past leading “naturally” to the nation-states in which they lived, so literary scholars took for granted the primacy of national boundaries in demarcating literary spaces. In telling the story of French, German or English literature, literary historians confirmed the apparent naturalness of those boundaries. . . . The fact that national and linguistic frontiers did not always fully overlap was often overlooked, no doubt in part because it was assumed that the underlying logic of the nation-states which came to dominate the map of Europe [would] eventually lead to neatly isomorphic cultural and political boundaries.

Would that it had all been so simple. As we know, the 19th century logic of nation-states did not lead, neatly, to *anything*—neither in Africa, where the chaos is obvious, nor in Europe, where language can often obscure it. One need only ask what is meant by “French literature,” say, to watch nation-making at work.

France has a long history of incorporating in its national literature the works of writers born in other parts of Europe: Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco and Andreï Makine are all regarded as French writers, though they were born respectively in Ireland, Romania and Russia. By contrast, writers born in former French colonies who have migrated to France are generally classified as “francophone” rather than French even when, as [with] Léopold Senghor and Tahar Ben Jelloun, they take French citizenship. Emile Zola was the son of an Italian immigrant but is never referred to as anything other than a French writer, while Azouz Begag and Ahmed Kalouaz, born in France of Algerian immigrants, are seldom referred to simply as “French.” Beneath the linguistic surface of the “francophone” label, the political legacy of colonialism continues to play a major role in the categorization of writers.

And there’s the rub.

The classification of writing and writers is never as benign as it seems. If the practice began as a way to naturalize the state, it persists as a way to defend it. By calling Beckett and Zola French, but Begag and Senghor Francophone, we re-invent the boundaries of authentic French-ness, defending the borders of France. So it goes with America and the category “American novelist.” If we call Taiye Selasi an American novelist, without that handy hyphen, we threaten the very borders of an imaginary America. Witness: Wikipedia calls Pulitzer winner Junot Diaz “Dominican-American,” Edwidge Danticat “Haitian-American,” but the blond-haired

debutante Tea Obreht an “American born in Belgrade.” Just so, to call me an African novelist is first to invent some monolithic Africa, and second to restrict me—my characters, their color—from overstepping its bounds. We imply that I have something important in common with all other African authors, who, together with me, produce African literature. The question is: what might that be?

In 1963 a prominent novelist attended an academic symposium. It was called “A Conference of African Writers of English Expression.” Later he wrote:

There was [one] thing that we tried to do and failed—and that was to define ‘African literature’ satisfactorily. Was it literature produced in Africa or about Africa? Could African literature be on any subject, or must it have an African theme? Should it embrace the whole continent, or south of the Sahara, or just black Africa? [The] conference produced a tentative definition as follows: ‘Creative writing in which an African setting is authentically handled or to which experiences originating in Africa are integral.’ [We] are told specifically that Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* qualifies as African literature while Graham Greene’s *Heart of the Matter* fails because it could have been set anywhere outside Africa. I could not help being amused by the curious circumstance in which Conrad, a Pole writing in English, could produce African literature while Peter Abrahams would be ineligible should he write a novel based on his experiences in the West Indies. Those who in talking about African literature want to exclude North Africa because it belongs to a different tradition surely do not suggest that black Africa is anything like homogeneous. What does Shabaan Robert have in common with Christopher Okigbo? Or Mongo Beti of Cameroun and Paris with Nzekwu of Nigeria? What does the champagne-drinking upper-class Creole society described by Easmon of Sierra Leone have in common with the rural folk and fishermen of J. P. Clark’s plays?

Indeed, the so-called father of African literature was remarkably skeptical of his offspring. The late great Chinua Achebe, writing in 1965, concludes, “Any attempt to define African literature in terms which overlook the complexities of the African scene at the material time is doomed to failure.” Fifty years later I would argue that the *only* way to define African literature is to overlook these complexities.

Which is the problem.

In order to believe in “African literature”—to employ the term as if it possessed some cogent, knowable meaning—we must believe that the word African possesses some cogent meaning as well. But what? The African continent consists of 55 states recognized by the UN. That’s roughly the same as Europe’s 50, though I’ve never heard of anyone placing authors from, say, Switzerland, Serbia, Spain and Sweden on a panel of “European writers.” One struggles to imagine anyone attempting to group Rushdie, Murakami, Yan and Roy under the banner “Asian Writers,” as if the term shed any light whatsoever on the fine works of the four. The trouble is obvious: continents are naturally formed landmasses comprised of numerous countries. If states make suspicious categories for art, continents are closer to useless. And yet, just the other day I had a cheerful altercation with the Danish presenter Martin Krasnik, who argued—very genuinely, I should say—that I am an African writer. When I asked him why, he said that I’d written a novel about an African family, that Kweku Sai, my protagonist, for example, is an African man. I asked him whether we’d call *Anna Karenina* a book about a European woman? “No,” he laughed a bit cautiously. “Obviously, she’s Russian.” Why then, I wondered, do we call Kweku Sai an African man rather than, at the very least, West African or Ghanaian? The audience clapped, Martin conceded, and the conversation continued—but I marveled, not for the first time, at the truth behind these terms. We speak of Russian writers and characters, French writers, Spanish writers, Italian writers, German writers, *instead of* European writers—and we do so because we take seriously the differences between countries. We speak of Japanese writers, Indian writers, Chinese writers, instead of Asian writers—and we do so because we take seriously the nuances of these cultures. What is implied by our use of “African” is that the nuances of the countries and the cultures of that continent are not worthy of our notice. We suggest that there are no meaningful distinctions between a predominantly Catholic,

Portuguese-speaking country like Angola on the one hand and a predominantly Muslim, French-speaking country like Senegal on the other.

Why do we do this? Of all the earth's landmasses, Africa may well be the most culturally, religiously, ethnically and linguistically diverse. There are over two thousand languages spoken on the continent, over 400 in Nigeria alone; South Africa, everyone's favorite exception, has eleven official tongues. Of course, we tend to dismiss this linguistic complexity as a symptom of primitive clannishness, as if these two thousand languages were spoken by one hundred people apiece. In fact, Amharic, Swahili, Hausa and my own Yoruba, for example, are spoken by tens of millions of human beings—and soon to join Google Translate. Of all the continents, Africa is the least eligible for generalization. Still, not a week goes by that I don't hear someone use the adjective "African" and wonder: where exactly, in your mind, is this Africa of which you speak? What language do they speak in this Africa? What is the weather like? What are we thinking for food, clothing, music, worship, topography? Are we imagining the snow-capped mountains of Cape Town or the grasslands of Nairobi or the urban sprawl of Cairo or the cacophonous chaos of Lagos? Or are we rather imagining an animated scene from Disney's *The Lion King*, a yellow-orange vista just before twilight with drums playing softly in the distance?

Enter Wainaina. In 2005 the brilliant Binyavanga Wainaina gave us "How to Write About Africa." If you haven't read it, do. Amongst his truly priceless set of satirical instructions:

In your text, treat Africa as if it were one country. It is hot and dusty with rolling grasslands and huge herds of animals and tall, thin people who are starving. Or it is hot and steamy with very short people who eat primates. Don't get bogged down with precise descriptions. Africa is big: 900 million people who are too busy starving and dying and warring and emigrating to read your book. The continent is full of deserts, jungles, highlands, savannahs and many other things, but your reader doesn't care about all that, so keep your descriptions romantic and evocative and unparticular.

Wainaina is telling us not how to write about Africa, but how to invent it. This singular Africa to which we allude with “African literature” doesn’t exist: it must be imagined and insisted upon, like Beckett and Zola’s France. If we were even to *begin* to attend to the particulars of those 55 African states, to allow that the differences between Angola and Senegal are as material as the differences between Austria and Spain, we would find the label “African writer” as empty as “European writer.” But we don’t. We insist that there is some knowable space implied by the adjective “African,” a monochromatic entity that exists in our minds alone.

This is the entity Wainaina is considering, and the one we keep creating when we refuse to specify the country—at the very least, the region—a text takes on. This is why my undoubtedly well-meaning hosts in Hamburg, this April, chose for my talk a safari-themed room in the Tierpark Hagenbeck, a zoo. I opened that talk by remarking upon the lovely East African artwork, noting that there’s no such art in West Africa—nor safaris in Ghana—where my novel takes place. Indeed, this is why my very wonderful German publisher Fischer was wary of using the novel’s English title “Ghana Must Go.” They, like my Italian publishers (who chose the title *La Bellezza delle Cose Fragili*), feared that readers would see the word Ghana and immediately assume that the novel was about Africa. Not about a continent, nor a country, nor the human beings who live therein, but the imagined Africa, the single Africa from which African novels come. This is a book about a family, they told me, not about poverty or hunger. Indeed. I love my German title but hate the reasons that we need it. At the end of Part 1 of *Ghana Must Go*, Dr. Kweku Sai, who has been dying for the better part of one hundred pages, finally gets on with it. In the very last moment of his very short life, he comes to a realization: of what he was seeking in leaving home, in going from Ghanaian to immigrant:

To be ‘free,’ if one wants swelling strings, to be ‘human.’ Beyond being ‘citizen,’ beyond being ‘poor.’ It was all he was after in the end, a human story, a way to be Kweku beyond

being poor. To have somehow unhooked his little story from the larger ones, the stories of Country and of Poverty and of War that had swallowed up the stories of the people around him and spat them up faceless, nameless Villagers, cogs; to have fled, thus unhooked, on the small SS Sai for the vastness and smallness of life free of want: the petty triumphs and defeats of the Self (profession, family) versus those of the State (grinding work, civil war)—yes, this would have been quite enough, Kweku thinks.

I couldn't agree with him more. The challenge of the African writer—or the writer with relatives from sub-Saharan Africa—is Kweku's challenge: to be treated as “artist” first, “citizen” second.

I sat once on a panel with the gentle novelist Shubnum Khan, a self-described South African Indian Muslim woman. The first question posed to her was, “What do you think of Zuma's foreign policy priorities?” She was politely attempting to answer when I impolitely cut in. I asked the moderator whether he would ask a German novelist who'd recently published a thoughtful meditation on contemporary love to comment on Ms. Merkel? Again, the audience clapped, the moderator laughed, and we proceeded to talk about books. But the moment illuminated a common assumption: that African novelists are sociologists in creative writers' clothing. To be sure, there are writers (tiresome ones) who like to pen polemics, others who write political satire and elegant social critique. But to presume that *every* African writer is a closeted social scientist betrays a fundamental disrespect for those writers' artistry. Even where an African novelist has attended to autobiographical material—that is, setting a story in his or her country, observing its social dynamics—we are mistaken in engaging the politics to the exclusion of the poetry. In the words of the marvelous Seamus Heaney, whom we've so recently lost, “The autobiographical content per se is not the point of the writing. What matters is the shape-making impulse, the emergence and convergence of an excitement into a wholeness.” Denuded, the assumption is that African novelists write only about the condition of African-ness, and that we do so not on a “shape-making impulse” but on a self-explanatory one. Never we mind the family dynamics, romantic catastrophes, intellectual musings—all of this humanity is

secondary to the African-ness at hand. What offends me most about the question posed to Shubnum—and the questions posed to me, however well-intentioned the questioners—is the implicit suggestion that African writers’ thoughts about their writing are less interesting, less valuable, than their thoughts about Africa. The problem isn’t that we’re so often asked to speak about politics, identity, immigration—but that we’re so much less often asked to speak about our art.

I’d be more patient with this trend in criticism and journalism if it applied to all writers, irrespective of color, but it does not. In the United States, when a writer is white, and especially when he is male, we speak of him as “artist,” focusing our contemplations on his art. We concern ourselves with his singular voice, the particulars of his writing style, the inner lives of his characters, and ask him about the same. When the writer is brown—be he Ghanaian, Indian, Dominican, or better yet, an Immigrant—we speak of him as “citizen,” as a representative of his kind. We concern ourselves with his country’s politics, the outcome of its latest war, making him an exemplar not of an artistic approach but an Experience. In May of this year Amit Majmudar published an opinion piece in the *New York Times* called “Am I an ‘Immigrant Writer?’” It opens, “I learned recently, to my surprise, that I had written a novel about the immigrant experience. The novel I thought I’d written was simply about a mother and daughter, but the inside flap of the book jacket made it clear I had ‘written anew the immigrant experience.’” I laughed aloud. *The Abundance* is a glorious novel about cooking, mothers, death, and TV—but to those who would seek to market the book, it is about immigration. Yes, Majmudar’s characters are Indian immigrants to the United States, as Bulawayo’s are Zimbabwean, Adichie’s Nigerian, Waclawiak’s Polish. But in classifying these works as immigrant novels, we do what Kweku Sai most fears: we let the larger story swallow the smaller ones, the human ones—in err.

Later in the same article, Majmudar echoes Simic: “Fiction strives to attain the universal through the particular; readers want to relate to characters, to see themselves.” In the small stories, in the particular stories, the reader finds one’s truest self; for, tucked away amid the foreign details is humanity, ever familiar. Finally, what so frustrates me about the designation “African literature” is the suggestion that African experience stands outside the realm of the Universal. If we took African characters—or immigrant characters—to be as universally relatable as, say, middle class suburban white characters, we wouldn’t speak of African novels. Having allowed African characters and African stories into the Human Familiar, we’d have little to cling to in defining the Foreign that is African literature. How? ‘Literature with African characters’ would become literature with human characters. No good. ‘Literature set in Africa’ would fail on the Josef Conrad grounds. ‘Literature written in African languages’ would satisfy wa Thiong’o, but would preclude the global engagement to which novels, I think, aspire. ‘Literature written by African people’ would be the next best bet, but things get sticky quickly here: Who is an African person? Someone born in Africa and raised elsewhere? Somewhere born elsewhere and raised in Africa? Egyptians? White South Africans? White South Africans living elsewhere? And what if these African people write novels that don’t have African characters, such as Helen Oyeyemi’s rather brilliant *Mr. Fox*? Helen was born in Nigeria (good), but raised in London (tricky); does this make *Mr. Fox* an African novel or an English one? Teju Cole was born in America (tricky), but raised in Nigeria (good); Julius, his protagonist, is half-Nigerian and never steps foot on African soil. Is *Open City* African writing? Teju an African writer? William Boyd was born in Accra and raised between Ghana and Nigeria (tricky); *A Good Man in Africa* is set where you’d think, but Mr. Boyd is white. Is he an African novelist? *A Good Man in Africa* an African novel? I was born in London (tricky) and raised in Boston (bad); my Nigerian

mother was born in London, my father, like Boyd, in Gold Coast. I speak no African language and hold no African passport. But the protagonists of my novel were born in Ghana and Nigeria respectively. Does this make *Ghana Must Go* an African novel, me an African novelist? Or could it be the case—with me, as with Helen, Topé and Teju—that all this clumsy background checking rather misses the point?

Why does it matter where a writer comes from? Does it change the way he writes? I'm not speaking of the material conditions under which he works; certainly, I type more quickly in Accra and Delhi, where I'm afraid that the electricity may at any moment cut out. I'm speaking of the magical conditions under which a writer *receives*, and of the universal human condition illumined by his so doing. To write fiction, one must remove oneself—one's consciousness, one's experiences, one's biases, one's doubts and fears—as completely as one can. To write powerful fiction, one disappears altogether. All writers know this moment. One minute you're there, banging away at the keyboard, and the next, you're coming back from somewhere; seconds, minutes, hours have passed for which you cannot account for. The only record you have that time has passed are the words you have typed and the proof of the clock. You read these words with an acute awareness that they've come from somewhere beyond you. These are the moments we live for, as writers, these portals into truth and out of ourselves. It is this magic act that allows a 33-year-old woman to write a novel about a dying 57-year-old man. I have never been a father. I have never been a parent. I have never been male. I have never been dead. What madness allows me—*encourages* me!—to write in the voice of Kweku Sai? We call this madness “art,” and those afflicted by it “artists.” It is this madness that allows a woman like Louise Erdrich to write a boy like Joe Coutts, a man like William Boyd to write a woman like Hope Clearwater, a human like Yann Martel to write a tiger like Richard Parker. It is this

madness that allows a single human being to access the truths of all human beings, to write of the love, lost, longing, fear and folly that distinguish the condition. To suggest that this madness affects one differently based on where in the world one was born—or, in the immigrant’s case, where in the world one’s grandparents were born—is absurd. This madness knows no national bounds. There is nothing about my Ghanaian-ness—or, say, Kiran Desai’s Indian-ness (or is it American-ness?) or Priya Basil’s British-ness (or is it Kenyan-ness?)—that mitigates this madness.

Ask them. Ask any writer how his nationality affects his writing—not the finished product but the process itself—and I suspect you’ll get an answer akin to Ben Okri’s. In January 2012 we were at the marvelous Jaipur Literature Festival, sharing a stage with Teju, on a panel of “Afropolitan writers.” I suppose I have myself to blame for the existence of this panel. In 2005 I wrote an article about Afropolitan identity. Of course, I was writing about personal identity, about the challenge faced by a certain demographic of Africans, both in and outside of Africa, in declaring their own identities. For example, if I say “I’m British,” because I was born in London, I get questioned about my accent. If I say “I’m American,” because I hold the passport, I get questioned about my manners. If I say “I’m Ghanaian,” because my father is from Ghana, I get questioned about my upbringing. How much time have I spent in Ghana? Have I ever actually lived there? And if I say “I’m Nigerian,” because my mother is from Nigeria, I get teased about my Yoruba. I’d come to feel that I was standing in some anteroom between four doors—British, American, Ghanaian, Nigerian—locked out of all four rooms. At a particular moment, eight year ago, it occurred to me that there must be others standing in this liminal space, at this crossroads, with me. I called these compatriots “Afropolitans,” as my task was to write about Africa, but swiftly discovered that our hybrid kind exists all over the world.

At the Jaipur Festival I was touched by the number of Indian audience members who felt that the essay embodied their experience. “Indopolitans,” I jokingly called them. So there we were in India—Ben Okri, Teju Cole, and I, Afropolitan writers and an Indopolitan audience—when someone asked Ben the question. *Do you consider yourself an African writer?* I’ll never forget his answer. “There are only two kinds of writers,” he said. “Good writers and bad ones.”

I consider myself West African, among other cultural identities, and a writer, among other creative ones. But I am not an African writer. At no point in my writing process—in the act of actually *being* a writer: seated at the laptop, wherever I may be—do I experience a nationality. Nor am I an Afropolitan writer, disappointing as the news may be. Afropolitan is a personal identity. Fiction has no need for such things.

Then how should we classify literature? you ask. We can’t very well expect bookstores to have two sections only: Good Writing and Bad Writing (though it would help). No. I would submit that, if needs must, we should classify literature as we do music, allowing that the identity of consequence is the writing’s, not the writer’s. We no longer speak of “contemporary Asian music,” “contemporary American music,” without specifying a type of sound. For instance, the singer Berry and the rapper Diam’s are both young, female, French, but nothing about their music is illumined by those facts. We know this. We speak of jazz, pop, rock, alternative, electronic, chamber music—irrespective of the demographic profile of the musician. It would be an insult to insist that Louis Stewart is an *Irish* jazz musician: a great jazz guitarist would be more to the point. If you were listen to the reggae of Tilmann Otto without seeing his photo, you’d think he was Jamaican; that Gentleman is German has nothing to do with his sound. And so on: Adele sings soul music, as does Aretha Franklin; Bob Marley was half-white, his reggae

wholly his own; as Saul Williams says, “When Jimi Hendrix was making rock music, he didn't make black rock. He made rock.”

Wouldn't it be wonderful if we classified literature not by country but by content: the love story, the city novel, the novel of the nation-state, the war novel, the bildungsroman? Then, we might find Cole's brilliant meditation on New York with *Graceland*, Abani's on Lagos, but also with McNerney's *Bright Lights, Big City* and Selby's *Last Exit to Brooklyn*. Under “Civil War,” we might find Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* with Drakulic's *S*, but Adichie's *Americanah* with Lahiri's *The Namesake* and Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* under “Immigration.” Under “Novels about the Novel,” we might find Jansma's *The Unchangeable Spots of Leopards* with Oyeyemi's *Mr. Fox*, but her *Icarus Girl* under “Magical Realism,” with Marquez, where it belongs. My own *Ghana Must Go*—despite having the name of an African country in its title—might sit alongside Franzen's *The Corrections*, Heller's *Something Happened*, and Mann's *Buddenbrooks* in the Seriously Dysfunctional Family section. Classifying texts in this way would restore our attention to the intention of authors, drawing connections between the human experiences that come to life in their words. We would, of course, watch the borders of French-ness and American-ness and mythical African-ness weaken—but surely, this is the long-term effect of literature anyhow?

Every time we pick up a book, we erase our personal borders. We trespass the boundaries of the self and enter the wilds of the Other. After those initial moments of disorientation, we find that we are home. As Scott Fitzgerald has it, “That is part of the beauty of all literature. You discover that your longings are universal longings, that you're not lonely and isolated from anyone. You belong.” Recently, a friend, apprised of my talk, said, “You live in a fantasy world, Taiye: a world without nations, without color, without borders. Not all of us are artists.” But all

of us can be readers, I said. All of us can belong. And if it sounds like a utopia—a world without African literature, or need of it, a world with human literature—I would say: yes, it is. As Mr. Simic said of literature those twelve short years ago, “Its utopian hope is that one will recognize oneself in some stranger’s words. For a moment, one steps out of one’s cramped self and lives other unfamiliar lives. If literature is not utopia, then I don’t know what is.”