

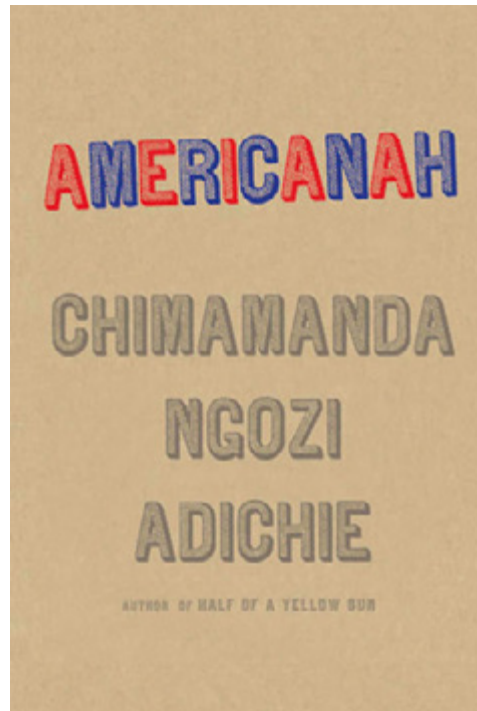
AWKWARD FORM AND WRITING THE AFRICAN PRESENT

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In her essay on new African literatures, Ashleigh Harris draws on an interrogation of form to delineate the ways in which African authors such as Chimamanda Adichie and NoViolet Bulawayo, schooled in American creative writing programmes, fail to convincingly capture the everydayness of African experience. For Harris, the positioning of these writers “in and for America”, compromises their ability to effectively engage with “African spaces”.

Of the five authors shortlisted for the 2013 Caine Prize for African Writing, three reside in the United States. Indeed, Tope Folarin is the first winner of the prize not born on the continent and his winning story, ‘A Miracle’ is based on Nigerian expatriate life in America. Only 5 of the 14 winners from the inception of the prize in 2000 are permanently residing in Africa (or at least, were at the time of winning the prize). Of course, following Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, we might agree that the Caine Prize is not “the arbiter of the best fiction in Africa”. In her somewhat tetchy dismissal of the significance of the prize in an interview with *The Boston Review*, Adichie states: “I don’t go to the Caine Prize to look for the best in African fiction.... I go to my mailbox, where my workshop people send me their stories.” Adichie is referring to the Farafina Trust writing workshop that she runs annually in Nigeria. Nevertheless, precisely because the Caine Prize attempts to bridge the gap between individual mailboxes and global



readerships, it is a useful gauge for observing trends in contemporary African writing. And, while I ultimately agree with Adichie that the prize is by no means representative of African writing, it is certainly indicative of the broader trend that I am highlighting here: a steady turn in a significant amount of African writing away from everyday life on the continent towards immigrant and diaspora experience, which is occurring (unsurprisingly) in resonance with the emigration of many of Africa’s top writers to the global north. A significant amount of recent successful African fictions evidence this trend, amongst them Chris Abani’s *The Virgin of the Flames* (2007); NoViolet Bulawayo’s *We Need New Names* (2013); Brian Chikwava’s *Harare North*

(2009); Teju Cole’s *Open City* (2011); Zakes Mda’s *Cion* (2007); Taiye Selasi’s *Ghana Must Go* (2013) and, even Adichie’s own, *Americanah* (2013), though this last does also deal with the complexities of repatriation, too.

Eileen Julien has called such novels “extroverted African novels”, those being novels that are more often than not written “by novelists who...are living beyond their countries’ borders”, and which “speak outward and represent locality to nonlocal others, be they expatriate communities abroad, other African nationals on the continent, Japanese, Europeans, Brazilians, or U.S. students.” (Julien 2006, 684). We might argue that such texts be applauded as a reversal of the expectations of autochthony in African writing, a rejection of the blunt assumption that African writing should only be about Africa. We would, indeed, do well to look at these narratives as part of Sarah Nuttall and Achille Mbembe’s prompt that we ‘revisit the frontiers of commonality’. They write:

Though the work of difference has performed important functions in the scholarly practice that sought to undercut imperial paradigms, it is clearly time, in the case of Africa, to revisit the frontiers of commonality and the potential of *sameness-as-worldliness*. This is a far cry from a proposition that would aim at rehabilitating facile assumptions about universality and particularity. After all, the unity of the world is nothing but its diversity. As Jean-Luc Nancy argues, “the world is a multiplicity of worlds, and its unity is the mutual sharing and exposition of all its worlds – within this world.” As for the “sharing of the world,” it is, fundamentally, the “law of the world.” (Mbembe & Nuttall 2004, 351; citing Nancy 2000, 185)

“African writing in the global north has not, on the whole, succeeding in finding the forms that would carry this ‘sameness-as-worldliness’.”

Yet, following Julien, who writes that this is “not simply a matter of a novelist’s intention to ‘write for’ a hegemonic or international audience but of multiple features that traverse or inhabit a text...[What] passes for the African novel is created by publishing, pedagogical, and critical practices.” (2006, 685), my assertion here is that African writing in the global north has not, on the whole, succeeding in finding the forms that would carry this ‘sameness-as-worldliness’. That is, for the most part, this body of writing is capitulating to a notion of literary form that, I hope to argue, is not in dialogue with African everyday life and as such eliminates Africa as one of the sites upon which form is (globally) contingent. As Nuttall and Mbembe remind us, ‘all knowledge is contingent on other knowledges’ and, as such, ‘we must read Africa in the same terms we read everywhere else’ (2004, 351). The inverse is also true: we must read everywhere else in the same terms we read Africa.

I am not suggesting that there is such a thing as authentic African form. Instead, prompted by this year’s Johannesburg Workshop of Theory and Criticism (JWTC) on ‘The Life of Forms’, I wish to ask a series of questions around literary form and how it is sculpted by the economic, social and material contexts in which it emerges, and what this might mean for contemporary African fiction in the context I describe above.

At this year’s session of the JWTC, architect Eyal Weizman outlined his notion of ‘forensic architecture’, which he explains elsewhere thus: “Rather than to the human agent, forensic architecture needs to be tuned to the history of materials, surfaces, structures, and

form,” and thus understand that the “...skins of buildings are complex membranes registering minute transformations in environmental conditions as much as abrupt events.” (115) Weizman uses the term ‘political plastic’ “to describe the way in which the elastic spaces of the frontier – roads, barriers, colonies, military bases – register in their layout and form the forcefield around them.” (116) I wager that we might do well to consider the form of literary texts, too, as ‘political plastic’ registering the shocks and waves of the everyday, as much as the grander historical forcefields surrounding them. Unlike the building, which is constantly in the process of being formed and deformed by these external pressures, we have traditionally read the form of the text as a completed action. I would like to rethink that commonplace here, suggesting that the form of a literary text cannot be diminished to being understood as simply the fabula or syuzhet of the Russian formalists. Rather, this approach to literary form, returns us to the material history impacting the creation of that form and, as such, is a matter (a material, if you will) that expands well beyond any individual articulation in a specific text. In this sense, the forensic approach I am investigating does not at all resemble the forensic literary approaches of the New Critics, whose dissection of the text emulated and co-constructed scientific methods of empirical research.

A concrete example of a literary approach that reads form in this sense is Mark McGurl’s *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing*, where he provides an account of “the remarkably smooth entry of the discipline of creative writing into the U.S. university over the past fifty years” (21), and considers how this reproduced “the spirit of communal endeavour and mutual influence found in the Paris and Greenwich village café scenes of an earlier era” (5).

For McGurl, the institutional history of creative writing programs in US universities cannot be understated in the form, aesthetics and tendency towards self-reflexivity of postwar American fiction. Indeed, it is the key site in which American writing has formulated its distinctive postwar characteristics of what McGurl calls “technomodernism”, “high cultural pluralism” and “lower-middle-class modernism” (32). These have become the forms of a certain material, economic and institutional history, forms that now pervade, often unconsciously, postwar American fiction. McGurl’s brilliant analysis of how these major tenets in postwar writing are formulated in the pedagogical principles underlying creative writing programs is too detailed and nuanced to outline here, but of greatest importance for my own argument is his insistence that the creative writing program has consistently produced the idea of ‘creative writing’ as a dynamic triangular interplay between ‘authentic experience and observation’ (“write what you know”), ‘creativity and freedom’ (“find your voice”) and, ‘craft and tradition’ (“show, don’t tell”) (23). The formation emerging from within this triangular conception of creative writing that concerns us most here is what McGurl calls ‘high cultural pluralism’: that which “combines the routine operation of modernist autopoetics with a rhetorical performance of cultural group membership pre-eminently...marked as ethnic” (56). Importantly, “the high cultural pluralist writer is... called upon to speak from the point of view of one or another hyphenated population, synthesizing the particularity of ethnic – or analogously marked – voice with the elevated idiom of literary modernism.” (57)

McGurl’s remark carries greater force when we consider the increasing number of successful contemporary African prose writers, particularly novelists, who have sharpened their skills in MFA creative

writing programs, or as fellows at these departments, in the United States and elsewhere. This list of MFA graduates includes some of Africa's most renowned authors, including Chimamanda Adichie, NoViolet Bulawayo, Mukoma Wa Ngugi, Chris Abani, and Chinelo Okparanta; while writers who have had residencies in creative writing university departments include Binyavanga Wainaina, Brian Chikwava (in the UK), Teju Cole, Helon Habila, and Henrietta Rose-Innes. What is of particular significance here is that the African writer's presence on the creative writing program is predetermined as the sign of 'the high cultural pluralism', thereby calling that writer to write in an ethnically inflected voice of literary modernism (to paraphrase McGurl). This issue has received relatively substantial debate when it comes to the content of the African texts in American writing programs. Think, for example, of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's narrative in her TED talk 'The Danger of the Single Story' where she recalls "a professor who once told [her] that [her] novel was not authentically African," recalling McGurl's 'authentic experience and observation' ("write what you know" 23). The professor in question was clearly a creative writing instructor who, says Adichie, went on to tell her that her "characters were too much like him, an educated and middle class man." It is this scene that, perhaps, McGurl misses out in his account of the centrality of the creative writing program in American letters: the African writer, an increasingly likely presence on these programs who corroborates the program's claims to being 'highly culturally pluralist', is *not* expected to write what she knows, but rather to write to a script of Africa already determined in the minds of American readers. This is, of course, precisely Adichie's point, but the matter is far more complex when we

refract it through the lens of form in the terms I am trying to grapple with here.

If we read form in Weizmann's terms, as political plastic shaped by the infinitesimal events of the everyday, it is instructive to consider McGurl's discussion of the émigré writer, Vladimir Nabokov's literary career in America. In this approach, Nabokov's experience as an émigré, after his flight from the devastation of second-world-war Europe to the comparative haven of US university life, is as significant to the fiction that he was writing at the time as are his mundane frustrations with his work as a teacher of basic Russian at first Wellesley and then Cornell University. The irritations of the frustrated writer, making a living through teaching, becomes as significant in McGurl's reading of *Lolita* and *Pale Fire* as the broader socio-historical forces that tend to dominate criticism of Nabokov's work. McGurl's methodology has an element of Weizman's forensic in its reading of the American postwar novel as a kind of political plastic, overtly shaped by the immediate and even mundane everyday material contexts of lives of work, education, administration and bureaucracy (all of which prove to be as significant to the formation of a novel as to the daily, barely perceptible, deterioration of a building). It is important to note that the specific precarity of the émigré in immediate postwar America is precisely what necessitates Nabokov's work as a second-language teacher. The lines between the superficial and the seismic, the mundane and the epic become all the more knotted, the more precarious the life of the writer is.

So what happens to form in the African émigré experience, or when African writing is validated only by virtue of its participation in a broader form of American fiction? Another architectural intervention at the JWTC

prompts further contemplation in this regard. In a paper 'Poor Form', Joshua Comaroff and Ong-Ker Shing elaborate their notion of awkward form, which

...frequently appears at the historical interface of language and type. In such a moment, the resources of an existing vocabulary are put under pressure by changes in scale or composition, required by accelerated socio-economic development. The transitional building appears ill-formed, as its devices are maladapted to its task (20).

If we take NoViolet Bulawayo's highly acclaimed, Man-Booker Prize shortlisted, *We Need New Names* (2013) as an example, I would claim that this novel demonstrates what emerges in the meeting point of the émigré writing on the political plastics of the American writing academy (note that Bulawayo received her MFA from Cornell University). *We Need New Names* is, indeed, an awkward book. That is not to say, 'bad'. Indeed, as Nabokov's equally awkward *Pale Fire* indicates, the awkward may be the very beginning of new and significant forms of cultural expression. Form cannot move forward without those who venture into the realm of the awkward. But the odd structural break in the text between the sections set in Zimbabwe and those set in the US, are indicative of both an awkwardness in *syuzhet*, as well as the problem of form in the sense I am trying to capture here. The book reads as two stories written for creative writing class: the first driven by the content demands of 'writing what you know' as the member of the group bringing the high cultural pluralism into the group. Here we get Africa, in all its colourful, intense, impoverished, traumatic detail through

the eyes of a young girl, Darling, whose experiences instantly evoke a sympathetic response in the reader. Then, quite suddenly, Darling is in America, trying to manage the culture shock of that shift as much as the reader is trying to make sense of the suddenness of the contextual shift. This second half reads as the cinch in the deal of making this an American fiction: in writing the immigrant experience of the protagonist Darling, Bulawayo tethers her 'Africa' ("write what we expect you to know") to the American context ("write your American everyday") in a way that leaves both sections oddly unsatisfying. The everyday of Africa, quite masterfully rendered in the first section, is reduced to a kind of backstory for the real narrative: life as an immigrant in America. As such, I would argue, African everyday life becomes subsumed into the demands of American readership. The problem of narrative form (an awkward and inadequately motivated break in the middle of the novel) becomes indicative of a greater underlying awkwardness: the positioning of the African writer in and for America.

"African everyday life becomes subsumed into the demands of American readership"

Adichie's short story 'The Shivering' from her 2009 collection *The Thing Around Your Neck* provides another example of this awkward form. This story, set in Princeton, portrays the budding friendship of Ukamaka, a young woman writing a PhD in English Literature and trying to come to terms with a recent break-up, and Chinedu, a man living (unbeknownst to Chinedu) illegally in the US, under constant threat of deportation. The story develops in the interstices of what Chinedu does not say about his situation, whilst Ukamaka prattles on about her previous boyfriend.

When the reveal comes that Chinedu is homosexual, the implied threat behind what his forced return to homophobic Nigeria might entail becomes all the more poignant. Underneath this nuanced and understated account of two young Nigerian émigré's growing friendship lies the seemingly extraneous and uni-dimensional setting of Princeton university. As Adichie occasionally tethers her narrative to street names or recognisable buildings in the university town, one begins to feel the shape of the institution itself emerging underneath the skein of the text. Yet, other than marking the class differences between the two protagonists, Princeton has little to do with the story. Indeed, one wonders whether the setting for the story emerged out of Adichie's own time in Princeton as a Hodder Fellow in 2005-6, which may give substance to a reading of the story as exemplary of the high cultural pluralism generated in these settings. But less speculatively, we might consider McGurl's observation that in the Program Era the campus novel has been "a conspicuously flourishing genre" (46) and that "the proliferation of universities as settings for novels is...what we might call a thematic symptom of a larger shift in the institutional arrangements of postwar literary production." (47) In McGurl's analysis, the university setting works to give the novel the "honorific status of literature" (47), a question that might concern us when reading Adichie's story. For not only does the story's immediate setting evoke the ivy-league, but the character Ukamaka makes casual reference to Wharton, UPenn and Bryn Mawr too. This evokes the publishing industry's obeisance to the US university as the ultimate arbitrator of literary worth evident in the inevitable inclusion of authors' MFA degrees somewhere in the paratexts of a novel: an inclusion that appears particularly important when selling texts by non-American authors. The evocation

of the academic institution in Adichie's text, I argue, has a double function of articulating Ukamaka's class assumptions (which are in part what actively silence Chinedu), but also embeds the story itself in this cultural capital, performing itself as 'good literature'. As such Ukamaka and Chinedu's story is hardly exemplary of a 'sharing of worlds' in Nancy's sense, but rather a performative of the African-in-America as a confirmation of the high cultural pluralism of the American university.

What this amounts to might indeed be excellent African-immigrant writing, but as this literature seeks validity within a notion of creative writing and the novel produced in the global north, what happens to the writing of the spaces of Africa? Teju Cole's highly acclaimed *Open City* (2011) might be a case in point. Though I do not have time to discuss it here, it suffices to note that this book, which is being hailed as a great African novel, almost entirely circumvents the everyday reality of Lagos.

My concern here has to do with yet another material factor: over and above the problem of resources that mobilizes so many people with the means to leave Africa to do so in search of better life circumstances, is the problem of publishing resources across the continent. With little access to local publishers, African writers are increasingly turning their attention to where the money is: overseas prizes, fellowships, publishing and distribution. But these mechanisms are distinctly not a machinery for Nancy's sharing-the-world. On the contrary, they demand both content and formal reshaping; one, I argue, that is no longer fully conversant with everyday life in Africa. This observation returns me to Comaroff and Shing's argument about awkward or poor form whereby, "form becomes awkward or fails to suspend its contents in a kind of anodyne or harmonious

expression – what architects call ‘resolution’” (18) and in which the “the transitional building appears ill-formed, as its devices are maladapted to its task” (20). In order to truly unpick the significance of such architectural observations for the realm of literature, we must first ask what the ‘task’ of the literary might be in our present moment? After the revolutionary politics of the avant-garde to undo the violence of subjectivity itself; after the literatures of witness and collective memory that have been so present across postcolonial literatures, as well as in postmodernism; what do we see as the task of literature today? The question is too large to be adequately addressed here, but the forensic methodology that I am promoting would enable a view of the literary as the potential for sharing-of-the-world, in Nancy’s sense, open. That is to say, literature need not tell a story of nationhood, or location as an index to identity or nation, or even continent, but it should be the site from which vernacular cosmopolitanisms are produced.

These ideas clearly resonate with Kelly Gillespie’s recent account of CODESRIA’s ‘Africa N’ko: Africa in the World: Debating the Colonial library’ conference held in Dakar 2013. As Gillespie notes the common theme across the conference that “even as we take the signs of Africa seriously, we must not be trapped by a parochial Africanness,” and that Africa’s “place is in the world, and...despite an ongoing structural condition of African structural marginalisation, [Africans] must proceed as if the world is [theirs].” (46) For Gillespie, the key problem though, is how to go about the writing of African cosmopolitanism, which should be “a thick archival stream for our experimental use”. I wish to refract this question through the issue of the contemporary African novel, here, paying particular attention to the economic and historical forces that are shaping

its form. In this sense, I am in agreement with what Gillespie describes as the “most provocative suggestion that emerged from the conference”, that being that the best way to go about “this audacious work of writing African cosmopolitanism, was to take inspiration from contemporary African artists” (47). We might add that producing vernacular cosmopolitanisms (see Bhabha and Pollack) can become the task of literature only if we see the act of literary writing as a kind of opening of the text (as in Weizman’s political plastic, or membrane of the everyday life) to the impact of the everyday.

This is not to say, however, that by simply being in the everyday of African life, means that the forms of the literature somehow automatically fall into place. Indeed, the debate about the South African publishing industry that occurred in 2007, prompted by literary academic Michael Titlestad’s review of Kgebetli Moele’s *Room 207* and Gerald Kraak’s *Ice in the Lungs*, is a case in point. In his sharp criticism of Moele’s book as ‘unfinished work’, Titlestad points to the awkwardness of the entire assemblage of the novel, which he describes as a “shapeless textual pastiche” that “traffics rather tediously in the aura of authenticity as it meanders from one seemingly unmotivated encounter to the next”. Part of Titlestad’s point is that the publishing industry is overproducing this type of awkward, poorly formed, literature because “in the wake of the truth commission, we know that many individuals’ stories have been excluded from the public domain and publishers are, like other South Africans, concerned to redress this exclusion”. Titlestad ultimately claims that “publishers are prefiguring our literary history” by “deciding in advance what the national literary scene should resemble: a representative demographic of creativity.” While I agree with Titlestad’s critical assessment of Moele’s book, I would argue that the book may

not be ‘unfinished’ in and of itself, so much as awkward in the ways I am trying to outline above. Moele’s book is part of a wave of African city writing that emerged in the mid-2000s: we might argue that this was a writing not yet fully formed in the sense that the experience of African city life had not yet adequately found a suitable literary form for its expression. What is important about Moele’s book is precisely this awkwardness: if the fiction is seeking to articulate a new form, perhaps it fails because, like Comaroff and Shing’s awkward building it is “a new typology that occupies (problematically) the skin of its forbear” (21), in this sense, the fragmented, flânerie of the modern European novel. Indeed, this does not mean that Moele’s book is the poorer for failing to achieve a European form of city writing, but rather because it relies too heavily on those forms that are not in dialogue with his content: life in the African city today.

I am making an argument for the contingency of form (as political plastic) and content in the making of African cosmopolitanism and in our interpretation of African literature. And, I am arguing that if African writing becomes dominated by texts formulated in spaces no longer conversant with everyday life in Africa, the capacity of that writing to be the reservoir of African cosmopolitanism will be severely attenuated.

The good news is that these nascent forms (because the pace with which everyday life across the globe is altering demands ever new forms) of the African city are being successfully and artfully developed on the continent. I leave this paper with two brief examples of publishing sites that are resisting a situation in which the global publishing industry is ‘prefiguring our literary history’. *Chimurenga* and *Kwani?* are two literary journals, based in Cape Town and Nairobi respectively, both of which include trans-national African writing

across multiple genres and which use both technology and print to open up new formal possibilities. For the most part, scholars have seen these literary papers as a site in which up-and-coming African writers can prove their art before entering the global publishing arena. I would like to suggest that these sites are exemplary of African cosmopolitanism, that their very materiality is conversant with African everyday life and as such are the key sites in which we are seeing African writing shed the skins of its forbears (both European and African).

These sites of literary production are self-consciously bringing form to their surface; making overt the political plastic underlying their conception and distribution. As such, literary journals like *Chimurenga* and *Kwani?* might be best approached through what David Fieni, a scholar of graffiti and tagging, calls 'nomad grammatology'. In 'What a Wall Wants, or How Graffiti thinks' Fieni describes this approach thus:

[Nomad grammatology is] not a theory of walls, graffiti, mobility, illegality, or sovereignty; instead, it is a practice of reading and a form of experimental cooperation between different kinds of writing. Nomad grammatology does not claim to speak for the subaltern; rather, it sees the positioning of subalternity and attempts to think in relation to this positioning (75-6).

Like Weizman's building, which comes alive to the possibilities of different kinds of reading and writing (over) in the forensic approach, Fieni's wall comes alive to a new realm of affect under the (re)inscriptions it undergoes in becoming a surface for graffiti and tagging. Thus, for Fieni,

[g]raffiti decodes the performance walls enact as a theatrical disavowal of the porousness of sovereignty – by deforming, inflating, playing with letters, making them something you can see but cannot necessarily read. Graffiti would have the letter of the law succumb to a liquefaction of its own material ontological guarantee as public writing, at least at the moment of the encounter with graffiti, at the moment of inscription or viewing (75)

This attention to the moment of writing reemphasises the significance of the everyday in all acts of signification. But more than that, it draws attention to the ways the deforming of the letters actively reforms the wall. If we read the literary text with this re-emphasis on these three factors: the moment of writing, the need to deform old forms so as to break the awkwardness that they impose, and how this leads to the reforming of the structures of capital that the publishing and book industries are shaped by, we may get to something like the approach I feel is required in the reading of contemporary African writing.

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