the changing profession

Literary Debt

ELAINE FREEDGOOD

"A writer's location may at first appear to be a more interesting story than a publisher's, but an inquiry into the latter reveals more about the relationship between knowledge and power."

—Rashmi Sadana, *English Heart, Hindi Heartland*

POSTCOLONIAL PUBLISHING AND INDIGENOUS PUBLISHING, LIKE HEGEL'S AFRICA, ARE OFTEN IMAGINED TO BE WITHOUT A HISTORY.

Indeed, in *A Companion to the History of the Book*, published by Wiley Blackwell in 2009 and heralded by Adrian Johns as particularly exemplary in that the editors "take the term *book* in a broad sense to include not only codex volumes and scrolls, but also periodicals, ephemera, and even ancient Babylonian clay tablets" (Review of *Companion* 782), no region of the global South gets a chapter to itself, and Africa gets only two entries in the index: in a one-sentence remark about Middle Eastern and North African Islamic book production before 1100 and in a parenthetical reference to slavery in a chapter on libraries that mentions colonization. Johns himself has written a huge work on "*the* book"—that is, about early modern Britain (*Nature*). In David Finkelstein and Alistair MacCleery's recently reprinted *An Introduction to Book History*, "*the* book" is unapologetically introduced as a Western form: the introduction makes it clear that the topic of the volume is overwhelmingly "Western European traditions of social communication through writing . . ." (30). The definite article is fearless in book history and occludes the history and travels of the book elsewhere, reinstalling it, time after time, in the North Atlantic regions that seem to be its natural habitat.

The 2010 *Oxford Companion to the Book* attempts to correct this situation by including chapters on nations and regions not usually considered in such compendia: China, Korea, Southeast Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa (Suarez and Woudhuysen). But introductory chapters, like "The Economics of Print," which focuses on nineteenth-century Britain, and "The Manuscript after the Coming of Print," which is entirely based in Europe, despite so many other

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Mac n, Longman's, Heinemann, and other multinational publishers and the impossibility of the sustained development of indigenous publishing has led to the idea of Africa as a continent without books—without nearly enough of its own books, although invisibly (to the outside world) awash in bibles, bilingual dictionaries, translations of Shakespeare (some by Julius Nyerere), Oxford classics, as well as fiction by African writers published in London and a thriving indigenous market literature in Nigeria, Kenya, and Malawi. The ahistorical view of African publishing is reinforced, Elizabeth LeRoux argues, by

> current studies of African publishing [that] tend overwhelmingly to focus on contemporary problems: low literacy rates, low per-capita incomes, poor infrastructure, the small reading publics and thus small audiences for indigenous publications. This focus on the present is also often linked to book development themes. There is thus little historical nuance in most studies of African publishing; title keywords that tend to recur include "current," "opportunities and challenges," the "state of publishing," "issues and trends," as well as the "challenge," the "promise," and the "future." (250)

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This focus on an as yet unrealized future ignores the moments of takeoff among apparently still unlettered peoples and in putatively printless places, even in the face of nearly unopposable competition.

In the 1960s, three major indigenous publishers and editors joined forces with Heinemann's African Writers Series (AWS) in a collaboration that produced a series of books, mostly literary, now digitized by *ProQuest*, that has been the subject of much debate. The Mbari Club, started in Ibadan in 1957, counted among its members Chinua Achebe, Ezekiel Mphehele, and Wole Soyinka. They published a journal, *Black Orpheus*, which brought the Negritude movement to anglophone West Africa; books, including J. P. Clark's *Song of a Goat* and Soyinka's *The Swamp Dwellers*; the poetry of Christopher Okigbo; and fiction by the South African writers Alex La Guma and Dennis Brutus that had been banned in their home country. Présence Africaine, started in 1949 in Paris and Dakar by Alioune Diop, published probably every major twentieth-century African francophone writer, including Ousmane Sembene and Léopold Sédar Senghor, as well as the first French translations of Achebe, Soyinka, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Kwame Nkrumah, and Nyerere. Henry Chakava sent titles from his editorial perch at Heinemann East Africa, including fiction by Ngũgĩ. But as James Currey, an editor of AWS, recently observed, "Mbari's seventeen titles were to be centrally important in the establishment of African literature, but it was only when London publishers subcontracted them from Mbari that they become widely known and easily available internationally" ("Literary Publishing" 10). None of these publishers and editors, on their own, could market African titles globally.

Surprisingly, the AWS writers would come to represent a somewhat bizarre commodity called "African literature" to the world, and very profitably for Heinemann. Currey admits that

> AWS became, partly accidentally, an exploitative part of Heinemann's strategy in Africa. Again and again it gave Heinemann a presence which seemed far greater than the real size and strength of the firm. It was a key factor in enabling Heinemann to seize educational contracts from under the noses of established companies with a far larger presence than upstart Heinemann. (qtd. in Bejjit 234)

African literature, which Currey claims to have launched through the AWS—the somewhat immodest subtitle of his book about the series, *Africa Writes Back*, is "The African Writers Series and the Launch of African Literature"—can be understood only through regional oral literatures, out of rich popular print cultures, and through the history of thousands of years of the Muslim book. Bernth Lindfors points out that although

> modern African literature first became known to the outside world through the works of elite, university-educated writers published in Europe and America . . . there had existed prior to their efflorescence a profuse undergrowth of literary vitality expressing itself in humbler but nonetheless significant forms. . . . (171–72)

Lindfors describes a pamphlet literature in Kikuyu, a "large religious literature in Kiswahili," and children's books in several Bantu languages (172). There were successful popular presses run by author-publisher-entrepreneurs, like David Maillou's Comb Press in Kenya and Aubrey Kalitera's Power Pen Press in Malawi, both of which flourished in the 1970s and 1980s. Maillou and Kalitera published pulp fiction in a slangy, highly readable form about ordinary middle-class African characters, often civil servants, losing their focus and their money because of women and booze in various combinations. Kalitera typed his novels on stencils, mimeographed them, and peddled them himself around cities in Malawi. His "enormous writing and entrepreneurial energy" meant that in three years he produced nine novels and two

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magazines, "selling more than a thousand copies of each" (Roscoe 54). Chakava followed Maillou's lead and established Spear Books, a class of fiction that was not highbrow enough for AWS but that Chakava thought would have wide popular appeal. He published romances, mysteries, and other works that appealed to a young urban population and could be printed at the rate of 2,500 copies per title; in comparison, a school title, a status that many titles in the AWS could claim, would have a press run of 15,000–25,000.

The Oxford University Press had a huge presence in Africa but no commitment to African writers. The Three Crowns series, an effort to publish African writers, was a short-lived and less robust effort than that of AWS but was intended to remake Oxford University Press's image in Africa, at least a little bit. Curiously, although the press had started publishing in Nigeria, they managed the Three Crowns series out of London, leaving the educational books for its press in Nigeria (Nell 742). At a time when decolonized African nations were increasingly realizing the necessity of indigenous publishing, the press knew that it had to do more than supply a huge portion of the anglophone textbook market. Rex Collings, the founding editor of Three Crowns, wrote to his manager, David Neale:

> I am convinced also there is still a place for us in African publishing if we can plainly show that we are not in fact only interested in selling enormous quantities of primary school books by expatriate authors. That is quite commonly felt and believed although it is not altogether true in fact. Politically, therefore, it is also important that we should publish [original African] literature. (qtd. in Davis 227)

In the 1960s and 1970s the Oxford University Press depended economically on its publishing program in Africa. Three Crowns provided modest cover for their other activities on that continent, although at a price to the writers it published:

> Acquisitions policy was stringent and deeply conservative. After the 1966 review [by OUP], prospective manuscripts were measured against four criteria: educational demand, quality, financial return, and publicity value. Each had to demonstrate its suitability for the schools market and secure guarantee of a high market by the branch manager in the country of the author's origin, and the manuscripts frequently had to be approved by British "experts" in African literature. This slow and cautious publishing strategy meant that OUP lost the chance to publish many authors [who] were recommended by the branches. (Davis 236)

It is not difficult to imagine that many great works of literature would never have seen publication if held to these standards. Indeed, these criteria militate against most modernist and New Critical ideas of greatness—a rarefied readership, lack of commercial success, and slow inclusion within the curriculum, all of which would testify to the startling newness.

When the publishing trade in the United States was taking off, American publishers simply refused to honor international copyright, which they saw as an infringement on "free trade," and the British publishers and authors whose works they were printing and profiting from saw this refusal as piracy. The United States did not fully come into compliance with international copyright law until 1952 (Altbach 91). British publishers had the Commonwealth Agreement to assist them through 1972: anything copyrighted in Britain was copyrighted throughout the commonwealth automatically. But they too engaged in expensive criminal behavior: in 2010 Macmillan Limited was fined £11.2 million by the United Kingdom's Serious Fraud Office for bribing officials for educational book orders in South Sudan. OUP East Africa and OUP Tanzania (wholly owned by the Oxford University Press) "were debarred for three years from World Bank-funded orders" because of "improper payments made to government officials" (Bgoya and Jay 22). Chakava points out

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that "there is no country in the world that has developed its own literature and its own publishing industry without 'borrowing'" (15). Indeed piracy has been famously acknowledged by Johns to be a motor of change and innovation—from "Gutenberg to Gates" (*Piracy*).

Newly independent nations in the twentieth century had no spare money to bribe, to create barriers or protections, and to pirate in a successful way.[1] There was a moment when UNESCO tried to address this problem, as Sarah Brouillette's "UNESCO and the Book in the Developing World" demonstrates: in the 1960s and 1970s, not only did UNESCO back indigenous publishing but also publishing was in its charter as a human right. Many early book historians, like Philip G. Altbach, worked on the idea of decolonizing knowledge. UNESCO

> sought . . . exemptions from international copyright agreements that would have allowed [developing nations] to publish foreign works in less expensive editions, pointing out that the United States had done the same for the many years in which it studiously avoided adherence to the Berne Convention on International Copyright and thereby built its publishing infrastructure via piracy.
>
> (Brouillette, "UNESCO and the Book" 37)

Indeed, this initiative by UNESCO threw multinational publishers into a tailspin. In a formulation worthy of John Le Carré, the chapter on Africa in the official *History of Oxford University Press* reports that in 1966

> Euan Henderson, OUP's man in Lusaka, began reporting that the Zambian government's Publishing House was on the verge of monopolizing local educational publishing. [And this was] in a context in which the UNESCO-sponsored revisions to the Berne Convention were threatening to wreak havoc on copyright protection in the developing countries . . . (Nell 748)

Crucially, UNESCO in this brief period was adamant about questioning the value of growth: "what is at stake is people's ability to influence their own destiny, to build a significant life and future and to establish creative relationships with each other" (UNESCO Medium Term Plan [Paris 1976] xxv, qtd. in Brouillette, "UNESCO and the Book" 40). But under pressure from the United States, which funds twenty-five percent of UNESCO activities, the liberationist model of the 1960s and early 1970s was replaced by a growth model, in which culture was valued for its profitability, expediency at soothing conflicts, and ability to influence and control through dissemination of market ideas: in the 2000 United Nations Millennium Declaration, "culture is a strategic element" ("UNESCO and the World-Literary System" 10). Brouillette has argued that "the minimized reading class on one hand, and the maximized perception of literature's value on the other . . . relate to the restructuring of global capitalist production since the early 1970s" ("UNESCO and the World-Literary System" 1). Fewer people are reading fewer books; giant publishers and government agencies decide on which authors can be successfully branded and marketed in this new century. Brouillette writes:

> It is characteristic of the current media landscape that the divide between consumer cultural production and the literary sphere is exceedingly thin, and the name of the writer as the source of the original creativity protected by copyright both asserts the commodity's distinction from regular goods and helps to generate demand for further goods. (16)

Value becomes "double-jointed": books are especially vulnerable to a hypnotically hybrid status as commodity and cultural values. When the aesthetic and ethical qualities of particular works are the primary issues in literary debates, the issues of production and profit slip away.[2]

The demand by dominant economies since the late 1970s for growth everywhere in the world has created debt crises again and

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again. In the development narrative, industries of the global South and the otherwise colonized world are often imagined as having failed to develop, just as some literary scholars imagine that literary form, print culture, and publishing have failed to develop among the many people they see as either permanently peripheral or resolutely aliterate. Instead, the fate of many indigenous and postcolonial publishers is one of the kinds of induced debt relation that Kaushik Sunder Rajan, in *Biocapital*, describes in his discussion of what was the highly functional pharmaceutical industry in India, which produced inexpensive generic drugs using indigenous methods: in 1995, "India became a signatory to the World Trade Organization–imposed patent regimes, which required the industry there to be completely WTO compliant by 2005. The change in patent regimes toward a WTO-imposed one has meant that . . . Indian companies will now have to focus on novel discoveries . . ." (25–26). A highly successful and globally beneficial drug industry may effectively be destroyed by its forced entry into a growth model of production. Indeed the Indian economy in general was forced, in the early 1990s, into indebtedness for its refusal to adopt a speculative market rationality as its economic mode. Debt, of course, can be very profitable: the EU makes twenty-five dollars in debt servicing on every dollar it loans. The growth model obviously serves the growth of the already grown.

Although there was no giant publisher in the postcolonial or indigenous world analogous to the Indian pharmaceutical industry, there were publishers who used indigenous means with great success—especially considering how unlikely a successful publishing business on a mimeograph machine seems—who were continually undone by growth models from all directions: the growth model of major publishers who took the profits from the colony and post colony back to the metropolis, the growth model that meant that UNESCO lost interest or faith in the idea of publishing as a human right, the growth models that now make indigenous and postcolonial publishing "depressingly charitable ventures" (Bgoya and Jay 26) instead of the vibrant enterprises they could be. The Heinemann African Writers Series was profitable, the Three Crowns series was a public relations coup, and the growth of postcolonial studies meant that certain authors from the global South and its diaspora could make tidy profits for the publishers of their work. What we can easily access and read is, as Brouillette argues in "UNESCO and the World-Literary System in Crisis," an increasingly branded affair—selected for qualities that may have more to do with Penguin and Vintage than with postcoloniality in a cultural, political, or even literary sense. Of course literature has never been free from the market: but we are perhaps at the moment less than clear, in literary scholarship, about how our current markets work and how much we collaborate with them in terms of our scholarship and curricular choices.

Debt is a complicated relation; it involves, as Sunder Rajan points out in his chapter "Life and Debt," from *Biocapital*, valuing, devaluing, lending, gifting, and responding to the demand that all economies emulate those of the global North. Postcolonial nations export a few natural resources and import everything else, including knowledge, Altbach argued before the flowering of postcolonial, African American, indigenous, and other fields of literary study. Now colonized and postcolonial writers are making massive major contributions to enliven the doldrums of the English curriculum, and we are assuming, through literature mostly published by presses in the global North, that we are reading something like a sample of the works of writers from these places or of these peoples. But scholars have argued, some for a very long time, that the ownership of the means of publication matters deeply, because ownership determines what can get published, what will be circulated on the global market, and

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who will speak for various peoples and places. That such judgments remain in the hands of a very few giant publishers may help give us the sense that things like the novel are essentially Western—even though, for example, the printing press arrived in Poland at the same time that it arrived in India.

In 1969, James Forman, a leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, demanded reparations from the United States "in the form of a southern land bank, publishing houses, television networks, universities, and skills training centers. Forman envisioned reparations as an opportunity to reverse the consequences of racial capitalism and promote thoroughgoing social and economic development in black America" (Biondi 7). As we know all too well, none of these reparations have been made—not to African Americans, not to Native Americans, and not to colonized people who are still studying from textbooks produced in the United States, Britain, and France. We need to think about who publishes our books and through what processes of review and compliance with various norms our literatures come to us. It is easy to imagine, when we read contemporary literature from the global South or the still colonized North, that we are communing with individual geniuses from Bombay, Ibadan, the Twin Cities, or Port-au-Prince; it is not so easy to conjure the duress of readability or worldliness under which many of these writers must produce and the advice, revision, and oppression they must undergo in order to enter the global marketplace.

In the eighth edition of the *Norton Anthology of American Literature*, volume A, published in 2012, Native American literature in early America is described as oral, and two transcribed legends are provided for students to read, despite the existence of scholarly work on indigenous print culture from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century (Baym and Levine 9). Yet Philip H. Round, in the all too aptly titled *Removable Type*, has documented the history of print culture in American "Indian Country" from the early seventeenth century, including the establishment of the Cherokee press in the early nineteenth century:

> Unique among indigenous nations, the Cherokee developed in 1821 a syllabic written form of the Cherokee spoken language not derived from the Roman alphabet. Not long after, the Cherokee tribal government mandated the establishment of a Cherokee national printing press, to be operated at the nation's center in New Echota, Georgia. It would produce works in both the new syllabary and English. (134)

This press provided a forum for Cherokees to communicate with one another and with a broader white American public, however briefly. Round argues that the press's publication of the newspaper the *Cherokee Phoenix*, the very existence of which supported Cherokee sovereignty, helped stave off removal for a time. Tellingly, the press was seized first:

> The Cherokee press was seized by the State of Georgia in 1835, and in 1838 the Cherokee Nation was forcibly removed by federal troops to the Indian Territory. Nevertheless, the press had a lasting impact on Cherokee society. According to the Cherokee census of 1835, 18 percent of tribal members could read English, while 43 percent could read Cherokee. . . . (140)

The printing press may have been removed, but print culture made its mark, although not perhaps in the larger national imagination, including the book historical one. The *Cherokee Phoenix*, "true to its original name, was reborn in Oklahoma as the *Cherokee Advocate*" (Gross 319).

The literary debt owed by the global North to the global South and the still colonized North is manifold: it accrues in the pressure to be legible to a tiny minority of affluent book buyers in a small part of the world; in the styles and substances that have

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not been written or published; in the schools and arguments that never developed; in the diminution of the languages of the globe, because many fall into disuse when so much literature, knowledge, and know-how is circulated in three or four dominant languages. It accrues in our ideas of form and of the literal content and container that we call the book: these hallowed elements have not traveled lightly or alone but through the offices of publishers who have turned a profit at every stage of empire and decolonization. We have wondered about the political economy of printing in the past: we have written and read about Grub Street and coterie publishing, about small modernist magazines and the global circulation of Shakespeare. The empire of print, although admitted amply and readily in the three volumes of the official *History of Oxford University Press* and although it is a major issue in several recent studies of English in the colonized world, needs more of our attention. Graham Huggan can only be writing metaphorically when he contends that "postcolonial studies . . . has capitalized on its perceived marginality while helping turn marginality itself into a valuable intellectual commodity" (2). It is not postcolonial studies but multinational publishing companies that have capitalized, as some of the least visible scholars of the book have long been informing us. Let us follow the lead of many of the critics mentioned in this essay and think more critically about the global distribution of literature and our own participation in it. The very organization of book history, like literary study in general, which keeps most of the world in subfields and peripheries, in waiting rooms of development and literariness, keeps invisible the ongoing empire of print.

Notes

1. A difficulty caused by piracy in the digital age is the extent to which "constant copying erodes data storage . . . overwhelming the signal of media content with the noise produced by the means of reproduction" (Larkin 184).

2. I owe this description to Kaushik Sunder Rajan: "*Value* is one of those nice double-jointed words that always already imply two different things. On the one hand, 'value' implies the market value that gets realized through processes of exchange. On the other, it implies the nonmarket values that might be called, in [a] shorthand that has led to the term's own black-boxing as it has been used by the science community, *ethics*" (41).

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