theories and methodologies

Native Books and the "English Book"

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THOSE OF US WORKING IN THE AMERICAN ACADEMY HAVE SO INTERNALIZED THE GRAMMAR OF POSTCOLONIAL THEORY THAT WE NOW take for granted *interstices*, *hybridity*, *slippage*, and *liminality*, among other terms commonplace in the discourse of postcolonialism. Beyond the terms themselves, we have taken to heart, absorbed, and extended the lessons from Homi K. Bhabha's *The Location of Culture*. Those lessons furnished a stimulative template for analyzing particular power asymmetries. Nevertheless, scholars have not referred as widely as we might expect to Bhabha's work in general and *The Location of Culture* in particular, especially in some fields for which postcolonial theory was supposed to be a natural fit, such as African literary studies. The index of *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*, a 764-page compendium assembling many of the most important interventions in African literature from the 1970s to the early twenty-first century, is an instructive example: it lists only three entries for Bhabha (Olaniyan and Quayson). Given that postcolonial theory and African literary studies share an interest and a language (the aftermath of British colonialism and English) in their research agendas, we might also ponder the frequency with which postcolonial theory in the vein of Bhabha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Edward Said has elicited critique from scholars working with African literary texts and in African studies writ large.[1] Individual persuasion is at work in these critiques but so also undoubtedly are positionality and location. We should read the critiques, then, not for their universal resonance, but for an understanding of debates unfolding in specific locations around the world, as well as in relation to the subject positions of individual scholars and their ideological proclivities.[2]

The scholars in African literary studies and African studies writ large who shared some of Bhabha's sensibilities in the *Location of Culture* were more likely to look to Achille Mbembe's *On the Postcolony*, Ato Quayson's *Postcolonialism: Theory, Practice or Process?*, or even V. Y. Mudimbe's *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy,*

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and the Order of Knowledge, for inspiration and for a mode of theorizing informed in part by poststructuralism, psychoanalysis, and postmodernism. At the very least, the writers of these books focused as much attention on cultural trends animated by postcolonial subjects in Africa as on the gaps in the colonial library and its canon. The project of decentering the colonial library in Bhabha's work and in much of postcolonial high theory eventually outwore its welcome for some of us, since it often came at the expense of sustained engagement with an expanding postcolonial expressive culture. Inasmuch as Bhabha acknowledged the postcolonial subject's agency, he and other critics given to theorizing postcoloniality did not appear quite as invested in the idea of studying the larger spectrum of works associated with this agency, especially when the output was not in dialogue with either the Western canon or the literary reserve of colonial rule.

If postcolonial theory contributed to institutionalizing opportunities for studying works by non-Western authors in the English-speaking academy of the global North, it also tended to limit the scope of study to a relatively slender selection of works and to perspectives most suited for this narrow selection. Given the small corpus of texts under consideration, a reader of *The Location of Culture* is hardly surprised that Bhabha's concern with unhomeliness overrides his reflections on the implications of postcoloniality for location.[3] Thus, Bhabha acknowledges the peripheral character of the locations from which postcolonial émigrés make their claims to theory but then quickly proceeds "to take [his] stand on the shifting sands of cultural displacement" (21). Along with Simon Gikandi, I would query Bhabha's reading of location for imaginative works that do not share the postmodern and unhomely inclinations often seen in the writing of authors like Toni Morrison, Salman Rushdie, or Derek Walcott (141–42). Perhaps *The Location of Culture* is infrequently cited in studies of African literature and popular culture because its critical insights have limited applicability to other kinds of texts.

At its core, postcolonial theory is about the cultural effects of power asymmetries, and colonialism is the key illustration. Unhomeliness as an attribute in the positioning of creative writers and critics is a significant though singular dimension of the range of possible effects on culture embedded in such power asymmetries. A mode of theorizing that cannot account for and accommodate the varied eventualities linked to the problem under consideration fails in its mission. To retain relevance, a comprehensive analytic framework focused on the dynamics of power must address more than one strand in the continuum of cultural effects produced from a variety of perspectives and subject positions. In particular, it cannot ignore without consequence those strands from the continuum that do not involve direct dialogue with the canon of a dominant culture.

Bhabha's discussion of the "English book" in *The Location of Culture* exemplifies attention to the forms of subjectification arising from engagement with the colonial canon. Bhabha aligns the spread of the "English book" in the colonies with England's desire for cultural authority and discipline, which either exceeds or fails its mandate when the book is "repeated, translated, misread, [and] displaced" (102). He further discerns the outcome of encounters between the "English book" and the natives in the formation of colonial hybrids, interstitial passages and spaces that are "double but less than one," confounding both colonizers and nationalists (120). I agree; however, and with respect to my own research, I confess greater curiosity for a shelf of texts undoubtedly inflected by the experience of postcoloniality or globalization or neoliberalism but aiming nonetheless for an imprint of locality, a "native book" of sorts, where native identity

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is understood as constructed and contingent. My desire to understand the locations of postcolonial culture stems from a concern for the spatial dimensions of cultural life in the postcolonies and for postcolonial subjects, given that these subjects' agency was diminished at one time by colonialism and now by economic and political arrangements to which we give other names.

A theory of postcoloniality that sidelines such native books in addressing the problem of locations for postcolonial cultural production perpetuates minor subjects' inaudibility. To understand the workings of power, we will need to pay as much attention to the diversity of native books that reveal what Bhabha calls contingent agency as we do to the deconstruction of the dominant culture's canon (188). From this perspective, by studying the locations of cultural production, we can investigate the changing dynamics of power. Although such dynamics pertained to colonialism a few decades ago, they are now more frequently invoked in relation to neoliberalism.

To illustrate how we might explore the interface between postcoloniality and the locations of cultural production as a context in which unequal power relations and contingent agency are activated, I offer three cultural productions from Nigeria with unique scales and geographies of circulation that speak to the postcolonial experience in specific ways. In each instance, I outline the factors impinging on the production's materiality, its radius of circulation, and the language selections in the production as a way of reading power dynamics in and beyond several sites of production and reception.

The first cultural production appeared at the end of the 1920s in the British colony of Nigeria. Generally considered the first novel in the Yoruba language, *Itan Igbesi-Aiye Emi "Ṣegilọla Ẹlẹyinju Ẹgẹ," Ẹlẹgbẹrun Ọkọ L'Aiye* ("The Life-Story of Me, 'Segilola of the Fascinating Eyes,' Who Had a Thousand Lovers in Life" [Barber 3]) was initially published as a series of letters in *Akede Eko*, a predominantly Yoruba-language newspaper based in colonial Lagos, from 1929 to 1930. After the newspaper series concluded, the letters were reissued as a ninety-page book. First and second editions of the book were published in 1930, and a third edition was published in 1957. An audiobook version was released as an app for download on Apple devices in May 2009. In 2012 the scholar Karin Barber edited a bilingual Yoruba-English version of the story with an extensive introduction accompanied by ancillary texts.

In this moralizing tale, an elderly prostitute recounts her past as she approaches the end of her life—destitute, ill, and filled with regrets. I. B. Thomas, a Lagos-born Yoruba man and the proprietor of the newspaper in which the story appeared, is the presumed author of the story. During its run, the series elicited lively reaction and condemnation, in English and Yoruba, from readers of *Akede Eko* and other Lagos newspapers, for what was viewed as its salacious details. Regarding the problem of postcolonial location and contingent agency, a number of observations about the first Yoruba-language novel are pertinent. First, and though it is the only one of the three examples I offer here that was published during the colonial period and during a time of gradually rising anticolonial ferment among westernized Lagosians, the colonial presence is by and large absent from the story (Barber 25). To convene a locally based public, this text evidently did not require a familiarity with, or response to, either colonialism or the colonial library. Beginning six decades after *Emi "Ṣegilọla"* was first published, films emanating from Nollywood (the Nigerian film industry), the largest producer of films in Africa, also convened local and transnational publics while only minimally acknowledging the literary and cinematic canon connected to colonialism, globalization, and neoliberalism.

Second, the story was written and initially disseminated in Yoruba at a time when British

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colonial rule had already consolidated its hold over Nigeria. For a number of reasons discussed elsewhere, in African societies under colonial rule that had no writing traditions or limited exposure to writing systems until the British arrived, creative writing in indigenous languages often emerged well ahead of creative writing in colonial languages (Adejunmobi). However, Thomas began serializing an English-language translation of his novel almost as soon as *Emi "Ṣẹgilọla"* had completed its run, to cater to those who could not read Yoruba (Barber 70). Already in the 1930s, then, it was clear that to reach several publics, even in the same city, texts had to be routinely translated or composed in languages shared by multilingual readers.

Third, serializing *Emi "Ṣẹgilọla"* was one of many strategies adopted by Thomas for ensuring his success as editor, publisher, and proprietor of newspapers. Print culture in colonial Lagos expanded as literacy gradually increased. It provided a forum for intellectual disagreement among the local elite and guided the common people, while directing complaints at the colonial authorities. But publishing newspapers and pamphlets was also a commercial enterprise and, as such, had to be financially sustainable. Thomas serialized *Emi "Ṣẹgilọla"* in *Akede Eko* as a way to cultivate subscriptions. Proprietor-editors like Thomas also republished books as serials and serials as books to ensure financial viability for their businesses (Barber 42). In colonial Lagos, precarious ownership of the communications media that could be used to disseminate fiction often depended on participation in small-scale commerce.

A second instance of cultural production in postcolonial Nigeria that speaks to the postcolonial experience is the film adaptation of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's acclaimed novel *Half of a Yellow Sun*. After the novel was published in the United States by Random House in 2006, an independent publisher in Lagos, Farafina Books, an imprint of Kachifo, acquired the rights to publish the work in Nigeria. On its Web site, Kachifo uses the tag line "telling our own stories" (*Kachifo Limited*). Like Thomas, Muhtar Bakare, founder of Kachifo, is a Lagos-based entrepreneur but one committed to advancing the interests of literary culture and reading in Nigeria. In addition to being a member of Kachifo's board of directors, Bakare is managing director of the Nigerian office of the multinational textbook publisher Pearson.

Kachifo has released Nigerian editions of works by Nigerian authors who were initially published in the United Kingdom and the United States. These works include novels by Helon Habila, Tanure Ojaide, Nnedi Okorafor, and Adichie. But it also publishes authors who are less well known in world-literature circles and may have been published mainly in Nigeria, like A. Igoni Barrett, Yejide Kilanko, and Eghosa Imasuen. For Kachifo, acquiring the rights to publish Nigerian authors whose works first appeared outside Nigeria does not contradict the guiding principle of "telling our own stories." The global circulation of literary works, in other words, does not necessarily negate the perception that a nation is telling its own stories, nor does it preclude, as we shall see, the creation of narratives directly implicated in national debates.

Together with his wife, Yewande Sadiku, a prominent banker in Nigeria's financial sector, Bakare raised the funding for the film adaptation of *Half of a Yellow Sun* entirely in Nigeria. In film festivals around the world, the adaptation received tepid reviews. By contrast, it was greeted with considerable enthusiasm in Nigeria when it was eventually released in local theaters, despite delays caused by the Nigerian Censors Board.[4] Indeed, so successful was the film locally that the Nigerian edition of the novel now features scenes from the movie on its cover, and a similar cover is on some editions sold elsewhere in the world. For those tempted to dismiss local identification with a novel published outside

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Nigeria, the maneuvers of the Censors Board in forcefully reinserting the novel into the space of national political debate undermine such dismissals. Dialogue in the film adaptation is overwhelmingly in English, as is the case in the novel and in virtually all the works published by Kachifo. That this company operates nationally, across the continent, and in the new African diaspora is undoubtedly critical here. Having opted to distribute books by Nigerian and African authors throughout these intersecting compasses, the company understood what commitment to disparate spatial rationalities might entail for publication of fairly lengthy texts in one or more languages simultaneously.[5]

My final example comes from Ankara Press, a division of another fairly new and independent publisher in Nigeria, Cassava Republic Press. The press specializes in popular romance novels that are initially sold internationally as e-books before being released for sale as print works in Nigeria. Although most of its novelists are Nigerian, Ankara Press also publishes the South African authors Amina Thula and Aziza Eden Walker. The novels are relatively short, making for easy download to mobile phones. The prices are affordable, even when compared with those of local video films. That prices for download are given in Nigerian currency as well as the United States dollar and the British pound indicates that the press, in adopting a strategy of initial sales through e-books, has not ruled out Nigerian readers. Indeed, and according to the publishing director, Emma Shercliff, the e-books have been downloaded across Africa (especially in Nigeria, Kenya, and South Africa) and beyond.[6] Initial publication in e-book format allows the press to avoid the usual challenges associated with production, distribution, and piracy in Nigeria, while building enough reserve capital to cushion eventual print distribution in Nigeria. The decision to concentrate on genre fiction represents a move to expand reading culture in Nigeria beyond that of imaginative texts linked in the literate public's mind to schooling and obligation rather than leisure.

On 14 February 2015, Ankara Press released *Valentine's Day Anthology, 2015*, an e-book available for free download comprising romance-themed short stories by fourteen African writers from Nigeria, Kenya, Ivory Coast, and Liberia (Shercliff and Bakare-Yusuf). Most contributors to this anthology do not have a history of writing genre fiction, and the stories only loosely correspond with romance fiction. For the most part, the stories depict potentially or formerly romantic relationships, as well as sexual encounters. Each short story was written in English and then translated into either an African language, like Yoruba, Kiswahili, or Hausa, or another formerly imperial language, like French. The written texts in two languages were accompanied by audio versions in each language. Significantly, the reader of the story that was translated into French spoke in a West African French accent. This version was a story for West African speakers of French rather than for metropolitan speakers of French. Taken together, the strategies of releasing the stories in print and audio versions, in bilingual print and audiobook versions, and for free download as an e-book indicate the layering of additional ranges and geographies of circulation. Whether a similar strategy of multimedia bilingual editions is sustainable for lengthier texts released only or mainly in print and distributed in any one African country remains to be seen.

In each of the three instances I have recounted, writers, publishers, translators, and entrepreneurs wrestled within the constraints of postcolonial subjectification to redefine a basis for self-expression and a scope of action. The shifting scales of location and circulation of the works produced—ethnic group, African nation, continent, region, and foreign country—occasionally reveal a preoccupation with unhomeliness but not consistently and

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only under certain conditions. The spatial rationalities at work in each instance point to several sets of power dynamics, through which particular subjectivities are realized, notwithstanding the authority and reach of locally and globally dominant institutions.

After more than two decades, there is still much to be said for Bhabha's insistence in *The Location of Culture* on taking apart the cultural agendas of colonialism and his disinclination for positivist interpretations of history. No matter the structural inequalities at play, we should be careful about inferring the powerlessness of the subjugated and muteness at the margins. Slippage and liminality will always be relevant, since few instruments of governance are so consistently true to their own logic as to ensure perfect implementation of elaborated projects or unwavering conformity from subject populations. If the apparatus of power is never powerful enough to deprive human subjects of the capacity to examine themselves, respond to deprivation, and unleash the imagination, then we cannot claim to understand the reach and limitations of power, particularly colonial power, without attending to the exercise of contingent agency under multiply imbricated and implicated systems of subordination. The suggestive title of Bhabha's book will always have resonance for our understanding of power, especially since it helped to consolidate the need for continued reflection on the work of contingent agency and the problem of location in any analysis of culture and the strategies of domination.

Notes

1. McClintock; Olaniyan, "Postmodernity"; Lazarus; Yaeger; among many others.

2. Consider, for example, the public disagreement that broke out between Omofolabo Ajayi-Soyinka and Spivak at a conference held at Cornell University in 1989. Olaniyan, "African Cultural Studies," and Ajayi-Soyinka provide details.

3. *Unhomeliness* is a term that Bhabha used for analyzing the works of authors who problematized ideas about home and location. He writes, "To be unhomed is not to be homeless, nor can the 'unhomely' be easily accommodated in that familiar division of social life into private and public spheres" (9).

4. The Nigerian Censors Board delayed certification for four months in 2014, supposedly fearing that the film, which, like the novel, covers the Biafran War—a subject of continuing contention and contested interpretations among Nigerians—would trigger violence. For more on the delay, see Bandele.

5. I borrow *spatial rationalities* from Liu, who discusses the spatial rationality of imperial conquest.

6. For more on e-book downloads, see "New Kind."

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