

BOOK FORUM

A Voice in the Crowd: *The African Novel of Ideas* Book Forum Response

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Early 2021 was an uncomfortable time to publish a book that has nothing ostensibly to do with living through a pandemic. And so the thanks that almost always begin roundtable responses like this one are especially heartfelt in this long, weary stretch: I am grateful that Cajetan Iheka, Magalí Armillas-Tiseyra, Bruce Janz, Ashleigh Harris, and Simon Van Schalkwyk took time they almost certainly did not have to craft such thoughtful replies to *The African Novel of Ideas*. It is a pleasure, too, to be able to steal glimpses of new projects that are fully of their own making. I am happy to have these colleagues and to work in this field.

The African Novel of Ideas is my recovery and building out of something that probably cannot exist and yet meaningfully wants to: a mind that coheres through dedication to querying external truths. Time and again, in my work thus far, I have found in African novels an intellect striving to break free of the social and historical vicissitudes by which it nonetheless knows itself to be formed. Equally as often, I have been frustrated by the lack of a developed critical vocabulary to describe this give and take between social attunement and individual reasoning in African contexts often marked by terms of “crisis,” “urgency,” “resistance,” and the like. This does not mean that the aggregate protagonist of *The African Novel of Ideas* is timely; on the contrary, the trajectory of my book connects philosophical types who begin as mere loners, in pre-independence contexts, and become outright pariahs in postcolonial ones. But neither does untimely mean ahistorical. The opening vignette of Simon Van Schalkwyk’s contribution to this forum, set at a University of Cape Town #FeesMustFall gathering in 2016, offers a glimpse of a real-life figure who could well be enfolded into my book. “Amid the concatenation of voices raised either in affirmation or protest” over whether the decolonization of science should take seriously the idea that one person can send lightning to strike another, Van

Schalkwyk writes, a lone audience member “can be heard saying, ‘It’s not true.’” The particular content of this showdown over science and (Zulu) belief temporarily aside, I am intrigued by the structures of reasoning that might arise from the structure of the scene. The voice recalled here is neither for nor against the proposition of a distinctly African science, but positions itself, rather, outside the starting premise of what that means. At the same time, it invokes the language of truth from within the same crowd whose options it rebuffs.

Van Schalkwyk is right, throughout his piece, that it is a fraught and even circular task to try to name the position or orientation to the world that this audience member represents. Is it “liberal” in hewing to the virtue of subdued individual reasoning within a cacophonous public sphere, or does even invoking this label overwrite its real-time assertion of a truth claim in Cape Town with a set of politically discredited forms of self-determination? What I tried to show in *The African Novel of Ideas* is that the very term *liberal*, which, in the postcolonial humanities, easily invites a sticky kind of “problematization” if not outright dismissal, is sometimes a distraction from fully working through postures and values whose contextualized significance also escapes well-intentioned *anti-liberalism*. It is also true, per Van Schalkwyk, that even to frame my own stakes in this way is to assume that there is (as he puts it) an “outside to the West.” This is a fair critique, and the point on which *The African Novel of Ideas* is most likely to disappoint scholars working within a world systems paradigm: I attend more to structural logics within African texts than I do to the material networks undergirding the existence of “Africa” as a sociopolitical or discursive entity. Here I’ll stand my ground. I do not find traction with claims to any African “authenticity” that is severable from the economic systems and cultural flows out of which the “idea of Africa,” in Valentin Mudimbe’s famous phrase, is now conjured, and I also see the risks of inadequately attending to what Van Schalkwyk calls a “tissue of conflicting linguistic, social, cultural and historical forces.” And yet the fact remains that there are, nonetheless, *degrees* within the former British Empire of places’ and peoples’ determination by imperial ideals and agendas. Although this is not a new point, it bears repeating because so much work of a globalist bent ultimately attests, again and again, to the “complex” or mutually reinforcing relation of individual and collective, or local and imperial, or what have you. This is no doubt true of African knowledge traditions as of others (though perhaps in a different balance). But many people and, for that matter, many novels don’t think in this way; they require differentiation in order to make sense. For me, then, it is most gratifying to plot a clear course for *how* a shifting balance of scales plays out at specific points of narrative and historical decision-making—for the structures of thought by which people find meaning within foregone totalities. My book, then, is about texts that strive for what is perhaps an “inaccurate” or willfully naive kind of precision in formulating emplaced philosophical engagements; it works with a qualified separability of places and elements as part of its analytic gambit.

A premium on well-defined structures of thought is also a large part of the reason that *The African Novel of Ideas* leans heaviest on African philosophical interlocutors who are trained in the so-called “analytic” tradition, usually characterized by its emphasis on sharpness of argument and structuration in contrast to the lyricism and liminality of its “continental” counterpart. It is not a book, in other words, that equates intellectual difficulty or, for that matter,

creativity with opacity or even poeticness. Bruce Janz grasps this powerfully in his discussion of “becoming-world,” or “the non-representational moment of creation.” Attempts to apprehend abstraction, in Janz’s reading of my book within the framework of African philosophy, is not a departure from reality but instead an essential part of what it means to live fully within one. This deceptively simple contention—that a quest for philosophical “transcendence” and attention to one’s locational enmeshment sustain each other—also guides Janz’s scholarship on African philosophy as it informs parts of *The African Novel of Ideas*. “What is it to do philosophy in this (African) place?,” he asks. My book is in some sense a prolonged answer to this question, moving from one novelist’s narrative refraction of his or her African setting to another in order to demonstrate the different ways that individualism, in one of Janz’s most memorable formulations, can be “earned, not presumed.”

This aptly named notion of “earned” individualism is worth lingering on because it could understandably be confused with the idea that *personhood* or individuality must be earned. Although this *is*, in fact, a possibility that the Akan philosophers Kwasi Wiredu and Kwame Gyekye have debated, it is not the crux of my own book’s argument. *The African Novel of Ideas* casts individualism, rather, as an intentional claim to intellectual self-possession as a tool for getting outside the self, as well as that claim’s corresponding narrative delineation: one part of a personhood to which anyone who wants it should be entitled without having their “Africanness” or political bona fides called into question. Not all African writers need to concern themselves with (or be) solitary philosophical figures, but nor should it be implied that that disposition is somehow at odds with having more worldly commitments. It is true, however, that overt “philosophizing” would appear to be historically more available to some African writers and characters than it has been to others. This shines through in Janz’s concern that I may overemphasize concepts as “mental representations” to be knowingly wielded (rather than, for example, as abstractions that overtake the would-be wielder), which he not coincidentally derives from my chapter on the early-twentieth-century Gold Coast writer and statesman J. E. Casely Hayford. There is no getting around the fact that Casely Hayford was a patriarch, at least to some degree, and one of substantial means and education at that.

As Cajetan Iheka suggests relatedly in his forum response, this in turn may mean that there is a “cost” to my focus on individual intellection. This is no doubt true, in the sense that all claims clear enough to be tenable necessarily forfeit others. He means cost both to the characters who exhibit it (who, in the more recent African texts my book covers, tend to have significant mental health struggles), and in terms of the characters on whom my book does *not* dwell. But in response to Iheka’s specific question of whether it is possible to “recuperate Naana [the protagonist’s grandmother in Ayi Kwei Armah’s *Fragments*] for a philosophical individualism or a proto version at the least,” I answer with a resounding *yes*. Iheka gravitates to this figure, in particular, I suspect because she ruminates in the text on Akan temporal cyclicity and serves as a kind of portal into the collective cultural selfhood that her grandson has lost, partly through his Western-focused education. In this way, Naana might seem like an *anti*-individualist philosopher—almost a foil to the concerns of my book—in the brief stretches where we see her mind at work. But this is, I think, too easy. I see no in-

built contradiction between philosophical individualism, as a narrative strategy and a lived African reality, and arriving at a collectivist school of thought. Part of what I hope *The African Novel of Ideas* does is continue the work that some African philosophers have done (Kwasi Wiredu, in particular) to untangle the salient individual components of what gets passed down as a shared set of ideas: How do people think apart as a condition of thinking together?

Such delicate kinds of calibration are also relevant to Iheka's query as to whether there is a place, in my book's set of critical claims, for a "middle ground" of "the indissoluble individual philosophizing in the irrefutable space of the social." The example he uses to illustrate this kind of space is the Nsukka university campus in Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, which is not covered in my book, and to which I might add Gilbert's Golema Mmidi farm in Bessie Head's 1968 novel, *When Rain Clouds Gather*. Although such sites of collective intellection are not in the foreground of *The African Novel of Ideas*, this is exactly the sort of related topic that I had hoped, in writing it, the book might point the way toward. The choice to focus its discussion on how philosophical individuals are configured, and on the connective and critical work they then perform, stemmed from my desire to subvert the tensile character of African (and to some degree, Anglophone postcolonial) literary studies; in other words, I tried to correct decades of understandable overcorrection. What kinds of intellectual freedom do people craft even when they are self-consciously tethered to social and political causes, and how does this freedom enhance and diminish their sense of agency in the world as the twentieth century grinds on? The Yoruba proverb with which Iheka begins his contribution—translated there as "The sky is wide enough for all to fly without colliding"—might well have been my book's epigraph.

It also offers a fitting segue to addressing Ashleigh Harris and Magalí Armillas-Tiseyra's contributions, both of which focus on the place of the novel, specifically, in my book and in African intellectual history. The field, in this case, is wide enough to demand considerably more and more serious work at both ends of *The African Novel of Ideas's* historical spectrum (there is wonderfully much public-facing discussion, but less by way of slower scholarship). Harris focuses on an early-twentieth-century Xhosa counterpart to J. E. Casely Hayford, S. E. K. Mqhayi, whereas Armillas-Tiseyra looks to contemporary genre fiction, and especially the Nigerian Sylva Nze Ifedigbo's 2017 novel *My Mind Is No Longer Here*. In different ways, they each offer a lens through which to view the so-called literary novel's limitations in capturing African dynamism, with their respective texts and settings serving as further evidence for my own claim that African literature occupies a vanguard position in thinking through the relation of form and globality. Let African social dynamism, then, stand here for the vexed challenge of narrativizing dynamism as such, a term often synonymous in global literary scholarship with *flux*, *flows*, or *liquidity*. The traditional tools of the pre- or non-modernist novel—the accretive, sequential construction of meaning via setting and character, over time, or even the tectonic function of a "systems" text—are not well suited to the art of representing a phenomenological blur.

This is easy to accept if one is willing to dispense with things like setting and character at all, but harder for those of us who, rightly or wrongly, remain

committed to such perennially moribund effects as places and selves. At the same time as the literary novel from Africa has reached new heights of world visibility, it also seems plainly evident that it does not represent any place, any better than plenty of other forms or, more likely, platforms. To be blunt, I am a theorist and historian of the novel who begrudgingly admits that Twitter is now probably a better way to gauge our collective habits of mind. So what, then, do we do as scholars of African literature? *The African Novel of Ideas* cursorily suggests two possible directions that I am gratified to see represented here. One, undertaken by Harris, is to dig into the novel in its African emergence at a site-specific and more contingent cross-section of forms. Theorizing the novel must entail theorizing these other forms as well, which she does admirably in her discussion of praise poetry's "dislocation" amid South African orthographic developments that speak to a broader enforcement of singular reading over communal listening. The second, which Armillas-Tiseyra attempts, is to turn to how prose genres other than the novel of ideas "function ... vis-a-vis the protocols of the global novel," such as multiple, geographically far-flung plotlines and formal parataxis. As she rightly notes, crime and speculative fiction use the easily dismissed transparency of their elements to opt out of flat ways of narrating present epistemological frictions (for instance, between "local" and "global").

To conclude, let me briefly revisit Van Schalkwyk's voice in the University of Cape Town crowd, caught up in the whirlwind of dramatic political and institutional change and its attendant pressures on individual comportment and reasoning. This voice is fully immersed in and yet unsubsumed by its surroundings, showing up, after all, for this most timely conversation at the same time as it attempts to "change the subject" (the title of a book by the philosopher Raymond Geuss). At early points of *The African Novel of Ideas*, it is possible to imagine this position as the locus of intellectual and political leadership. At later points, it is merely one more display of "truth's" enfeebled protest against more powerful forces. The novel, if nothing else, in its protean form and scalar versatility can register this shift across formal, philosophical, and historiographical registers. If my own book does not provide a satisfying answer as to the question of why philosophical individualism so diminishes across a century of African literary life, it tries, at least, to walk readers through the rich junctures at which it has been posed.

Author biography. Jeanne-Marie Jackson is an associate professor of English at Johns Hopkins University and a current Andrew Carnegie Fellow. She is the author of *The African Novel of Ideas: Philosophy and Individualism in the Age of Global Writing* and *South African Literature's Russian Soul: Narrative Forms of Global Isolation*. (Email: jjacks98@jhu.edu)

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