

BOOK REVIEW

Olabode Ibrinke. *Remapping African Literature (African Histories and Modernities)*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. vii + 333 pp. Letters. Index. Bibliography. \$109.00. Cloth. ISBN: 978-3-31969-295-1.

In *Remapping African Literature*, Olabode Ibrinke offers a reexamination of the meaning-making process of African literature. He eschews the traditional praxis of literary criticism, proposing instead a consideration of ways in which conditions of cultural production offer a bottom-up approach to textual analysis. In the preface, the author acknowledges the significance of this approach; he draws on Abiola Irele's suggestion of the need to survey African literature within the critical parameters that recognize wholesome discourses implicit in what is described as "top end" and "bottom end." The latter provides the justification for *Remapping African Literature*, opening up discursive space for the exploration of the sociology of postcolonial literature, which manifests most practically in the structures that underwrite the institutional conditions of textual production. Ibrinke advocates reversing the view of critical experience to the processes that determine the relations of literary production. In other words, the central argument of the book engages with the need to deconstruct postcolonial textuality by understanding how institutional practices mediate and inform textual regimes and how these, in turn, impact the protocol of cultural production. It draws on Marxist dialectical materialism, subjecting the processes of literary production to relations of labor and institution from a strictly globalizing and imperialist standpoint. In specific terms, the book develops this materialist theory using the Heinemann African Writers Series (AWS) to argue that the production of African literature is a dialectical proposition of western hegemonic culture, derivable from the infrastructure and bourgeois apparatus of production. It is a culmination of the interplay of forces that underscore authorial response to the colonial provision of productive apparatus, the agency of the writer that works reflectively toward what Walter Benjamin describes as "author as producer." While AWS purportedly represents the cultural and educational project of British pedagogical interest that sanctions imperial dominance, such a project also produces hybrid and complex consequences of production and literary identity that subvert the colonial interest. It is this hybrid consequence of Africa's insertion into the imperial scheme that provides the template for reading her literature from a bottom-up perspective.

The book is divided into eight chapters including the Introduction and Conclusion. In Chapter Two, titled “The Commonwealth Impresario,” the author discusses the travails of Bernth Lindfors in the process of acquiring Amos Tutuola’s original manuscript, as well as his effort to initiate the idea of archival research as a necessary approach to literary criticism. This development triggered a revolt by first generation Nigerian writers that resonates with the imperial project of exploitation of African literature comparable to the British Expedition in 1896. This chapter joins the debate over the locationality and preservation of African cultural material in relation to colonial pilfering, using the archival resources of African writers to think through formations of power that underwrite colonial praxis of knowledge. In other words, the acquisition of African writers’ archives by the commonwealth book industry in European capitals represents the postcolonial extension of colonial interest and control of the geopolitics of cultural production. The author vigorously argues that contestation against the commonwealth approach, and the world literature that it advances, significantly undermines not only the necessity for the development of national literature, but also the affective sense of a shared community that a geographically-sanctioned literature proposes. Chapter Three, aptly titled “The Literary Scramble for Africa: Selection and the Practice of Hierarchies,” builds on the argument of the previous chapter to present an extended view of how Heinemann African Writers Series constituted the literary map of Africa, which it purportedly discovered, developed, and dominated. This recourse to histories of colonial domination and control as they are viewed in the Heinemann publishing project implicates a nascent struggle for the autonomy of the writer, which defines Africa’s mode of self-representation, selection, and consciousness against the constraining order of the commonwealth apparatus of production.

Inventing the term “auto-heteronomy,” the author in the subsequent chapters presents illustrations of how the works of Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, and Ngugi wa Thiong’o stand at the critical intersection of material history and creative production to forge implicit theoretical insights that escape the gaze of standard literary criticism. He argues that while Achebe’s work represents the pedagogic praxis that reflects the need to deconstruct colonial enlightenment, Soyinka offers a shift in his novelistic approach that highlights the trope of neurosis, in which conditions of complex social systems inform and influence the postcolonial literature of the 1970s. Ngugi’s style, on the other hand, is predominantly charged with the necessity of language as the decolonizing arbiter and the determinant of how literature responds to and resists the constraining forces of the imperial project in Africa.

In the main, *Remapping African Literature* makes a significant contribution to the decolonizing discourse in African literature, highlighting the desirable mix of autonomy and heteronomy to formulate a theory that defines alternative critical practice. The exploration of the material politics of cultural production to unpack authorial agency is novel and fresh to the

extent of stretching beyond the scope that is limited to Anglophone literature. In other words, the exclusion of francophone, lusophone, and indigenous African literature undermines the expressed scope of the project, which is a cartographic survey of African literary history in the context of cultural production. Yet, it is noteworthy that this observation of the dialectical relation of authorial decolonizing responses reproduced in the process of constraining imperial schemes remains a valid entry-point for a wide range of postcolonial literary experiences.

Henry Obi Ajumeze
University of Cape Town
Cape Town, South Africa
ajmobi001@myuct.ac.za

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For more reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

1974. *Issue: Quarterly Journal of Opinion* 4 (4) doi:10.1017/S0047160700007216.
Makombe, Rodwell. 2017. "Literature as a Medium for Social and Political Activism: The Case of Mashingaidze Gomo's *A Fine Madness*." *African Studies Review* 60 (2): 115–38. doi:10.1017/asr.2017.51.