Terms and Conditions: Cross-Cultural Reading and the Production of Literary Value

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A dissertation

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

University of Washington

2021

Reading Committee:

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Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

English

University of Washington

Abstract

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This dissertation examines contemporary conditions of publication and reception for minoritized texts—in particular, how specific reader-markets ascribe value to race, ethnicity, and/or foreignness in literature, and how literary texts respond via scenes of reading and writing. Literary critics have long theorized the problems and politics of cross-cultural reading; however, scholars infrequently attend to the institutions that mediate race and ethnicity as terms of literary value. I argue that, increasingly, the production of literary value can only be comprehended in terms of relations among agents, including texts, readers, and authors, but also publishers, reviewers, anthologizers, and other stakeholders in the literary industry. In addition, paratexts (any text associated with a literary text's reception) are more accessible and prolific than ever before, from book club guides to online customer reviews, authors' social media presences, and so on. Though infrequently studied—and rarely taken as a *network* of value production—

contending paratexts allow the contingencies of literary value, and of ethnicity itself, to be newly understood.

This project tracks an emergent literary trend toward fictionalizing markets for specific representations of ethnicity (including works by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Mohsin Hamid, Ruth Ozeki, and many others). These widely-read texts saturate the market with self-consciousness around cross-cultural consumption and in so doing, I argue, create new legitimating terms for "ethnic" texts. My archive comprises Anglophone texts in global circulation that use metafiction to ironize, intervene in, and/or capitalize on literary markets for ethnic difference. Each chapter examines how a body of texts anticipates its own reception(s), alongside market-produced materials targeted toward particular readerships. Chapter 1 examines university common reading programs, and how selected novels are valued for their representations of "diversity" and "multiculturalism." Chapter 2 examines recent Black American novels that set themselves in ambivalent relation to academia and canon-formation, and that re-signify the value of "representation" as associated with African American literature. Chapter 3 investigates book clubs as a gendered receptive site, alongside publisher-produced guides that often construe book clubs as sentimental readers of ethnic texts. Chapter 4 turns to the growing field of Africa-based literary production and the recent boom in African literature on international markets, in order to understand how long-entrenched value terms are evolving, through the uneven balance of multiple forces, in the present day.

Acknowledgements

I would not have started or completed this project without the support of so many people.

Eva Cherniavsky has advised me throughout my entire graduate school career—and through this project—with remarkable generosity, care, expertise, and insight. I cannot imagine having completed any step along the way without her mentorship and advocacy, and I cannot fully express my gratitude or admiration in words.

Jeff Knight is one of the most supportive teachers I have encountered, and through his teaching, feedback, and in conversation, has shaped my research interests in critical and fundamental ways. I am additionally grateful to Tom Foster for stepping in to form this committee and for offering his deep and wide-ranging expertise to this project.

I credit Louis Chude-Sokei, advisor to my MA thesis, as planting the intellectual seeds of this project. His mentorship did so much to inspire, challenge, and develop my thinking and writing, for which I am deeply grateful.

The support I received from the UW Simpson Center for the Humanities to participate as a fellow in the Society of Scholars provided a rare intellectual opportunity; I am grateful to Kathy Woodward for her leadership and to all 2017-18 Society of Scholars fellows who inspired me to think and write in new, more interdisciplinary ways. I want to thank the other UW institutions and fellowships that have provided critical support to this project which include the Phyllis Dorset Fellowship, the Graduate School, and the Department of English. I want to also thank Anis Bawarshi, Candice Rai, and Laura Chrisman, as faculty in UW English from whom I have learned so much as a scholar and as a teacher.

Thanks are due to my brilliant colleagues at the UW Bothell and at South Seattle College who have modeled the type of engaged and community-driven scholar and teacher I aspire to be.

Those who have known me for years know how unlikely graduate school may once have seemed. I owe debts of gratitude to David Bryan, who made sure I finished high school, and David Tripp, who made me want to finish college. Both, additionally, helped lay the foundation for the social and intellectual investments that have led me here. Thank you Nina, Gabe, and Tim—friends who inspired me, intellectually and otherwise, at a crucial time.

Thank you so much to my LA book clubs who encouraged, supported, and inspired me, and allowed me to make up, as I went along, the most fun job ever.

I am lucky to have many factions to my supportive family; to my parents (mom, dad, Renée) and siblings (Pete, Kristen, Katie), thank you for your unwavering confidence in me. I am grateful to my partner Kyle, who has made my life better and helped create crucial space for me to finish this work. Thank you, too, to my dear grad school friends who saw me through, helped me get smarter, and kept me laughing always: Steph, Alex, AJ, Kathleen, Torp, Aaron, Jeff, Emily, Denise, Kirin, and Leonard. I love you all.

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Introduction

In the opening story of Nam Le's 2008 collection *The Boat*, the narrator—also named Nam—covets the success of a fellow writer, a Chinese immigrant whose collection of Chinese immigrant stories is selling well. "Ethnic literature's hot," explains one of Nam's instructors at the Iowa Writer's Workshop. Literary agents similarly advise him: "You have to ask yourself, what makes me stand out? ...Your *background* and *life experience*" (7-9). Le's story fictionalizes the all-too-real pressures on "ethnic" writers to tell "authentic" stories, and the impulse among readers to conflate text and author—especially when ethnic authority seems to signal literary value. The story ironizes the contradictions underlying ways in which ethnic literature is construed, read, and valued in the U.S. As Nam's work will be sellable to the extent that it is legibly "ethnic," ethnicity itself is exposed as a term of value, to be mediated and leveraged by publishers, authors, booksellers, reviewers, and other agents in the literary field. ("Just write a story about Vietnam," urges Nam's agent, fully aware that Vietnam has barely figured in the Australian character's—or author's—"life experience".)

As a reader—a white woman reader—I thought a lot about market tastes for ethnic literature long before starting this dissertation. For years before graduate school, I worked as a professional book club facilitator. That is: my job was to lead discussions of literary texts, usually contemporary fiction, in the homes of wealthy white women in Los Angeles. While literary tastes varied across readers and groups, a notable trend emerged over the years: a desire for fiction about ethnic others, particularly women.[1] Furthermore, I noticed that discussions of

[1] How literary values are gendered—by texts, institutions, and readers themselves—is discussed at length in Chapter 3, as is the mainstream publishing industry's relation to the book club market. As for my own book clubs, some of the more popular titles that I place in this category include Thrity Umrigar's *The Space Between Us*, Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007), and John Burnham Schwartz's *The Commoner* (2007).

those books—sometimes framed by publisher-produced book club materials—would turn uniquely on questions of *authority* (did the author really live this?), and readers seemed to value books to the extent they felt to have *learned* something about unfamiliar experiences which were conveyed, formally, as somehow relatable. Meanwhile, also working as a bookseller and buyer in an independent bookstore, I had another view on market trends for *versions* of literary ethnicity—as well as on publishers' marketing materials, which framed the appeal of "ethnic literature" in some remarkably consistent ways. No catalog description of a new African novel could cross my desk, for example, without reference to the then-hyper-canonical Chinua Achebe.[2] Finally, in my own reading of contemporary fiction, I began to notice a trend among writers of color who, like Le, were *fictionalizing* writers of color addressing white audiences inclined to read "ethnic" texts, or ethnic difference itself, by the same entrenched and narrow terms as readers around me; sometimes, in the unself-conscious white reader-figure, I recognized myself.

This dissertation is borne out of my interest in the fundamental relation between these forces: readers' apprehension of the value of cross-cultural reading; the mediating work of publishers and other institutions in that value; and the creative activity of literature. This project seeks to understand how literature *and* literary markets mediate race and ethnicity as terms of value in the U.S. I argue that to do so requires attention to contemporary Anglophone literature by writers marked as "ethnic" *and* to under-examined receptive contexts and mediating institutions. Further, I argue that as recent texts stage—and often satirize—the production of

[2] This dissertation—particularly Chapters 1 and 4—foregrounds African immigrant literature precisely because the drastic expansion of the market for African writers (particularly writing about experiences of migration to the U.S.) has tracked alongside the development of this project.

literary value, they call attention to the market value (economic and symbolic) associated with race and ethnicity within specific contexts, recasting those values in the process.

Literary critics have long theorized the problems of reading cross-culturally, and the variously over-determined conditions for reading racialized or culturally "other" texts. However, critics infrequently attend to the institutions involved in the mediations of race and ethnicity as terms of literary value. The literary marketplace in the twenty-first century is both newly expansive (for example, due to globalization and new media) and restrictive (for example, due to the conglomeration of the world's major international publishers). It comprises an increasingly integrative network of agents in the field of production and reception beyond text and reader—the sites on which criticism tends to focus. This project follows Pierre Bourdieu in its primary concern with the production of literary value, which can only be comprehended through analyses of relations among agents invested in the text's production and reception.[3] Understanding how race and ethnicity function *as* value-terms, signified and re-signified by texts and readers, requires attention to extra-textual forces at work in the construction of literary value.

Presently, a wealth of para-literatures, or paratexts[4]—from jacket copy to book club guides, educational materials, online customer reviews, authors' social media presences, and so on—circulate *with* literary texts like never before. New media provide new venues for reader-responses of previously inconspicuous kinds; the explicit discourses of value-production from sites such as reviews in online circulation are themselves a twenty-first century condition. New technologies, and the public discourses they support, make this a productive moment to reconsider how the racialized cultural other is figured, valued, and consumed—by institutions

[3] Primarily discussed in *The Field of Cultural Production*, Columbia University Press, 1993.
[4] "Paratext" as used throughout this dissertation follows Gerard Genette and Marie Maclean, who broadly define it as any textual "production" associated with a text's reception (261).

whose discourses, often market-oriented, are more thoroughly implicated in literary encounters than ever before. Indeed, the ways that paratexts frame the value of ethnic literature for specific reader-markets reveal the contingency of ethnicity itself. Additionally, reading texts alongside paratexts shows how modes of reading and valuation are themselves highly changeable. This project is concerned not only with the mediating roles of extra-textual agents, but with the role of fiction to disrupt those mediations.

Meanwhile, the twenty-first century has seen the rise (and arguably, already the sidelining) of sociologically-oriented approaches to literary studies. These have begun to account for what James English argues is a massive, neglected "middle zone of cultural space" which requires a more descriptive, sociological approach than is conventional to literary criticism (*The Economy of Prestige* 12). Along with English, I argue that the agents of culture "in between" author and reader—including publishers, booksellers, reviewers and other taste-makers—are crucial to understanding the collaborative construction of literary value. This project aims to combine sociological preoccupations—seeking to determine what texts and their contexts *do* at sites of reception (and what they are presumed to do)—with the literary critic's focus on how, in particular, texts engage their readers.[5]

Accordingly, I draw heavily on Bourdieu's notion of the relational field of cultural production and reception. While this dissertation cannot attend to all invested agents in the field(s), it takes that "middle zone" as an under-privileged site for analysis. Additionally, I examine specific reader-markets for their increasingly active roles in configuring ethnicity in the twenty-first century. I focus my analyses on literary texts, but always in terms of how texts position themselves *in relation to* conditioning forces in their given receptive field(s). In

[5] English's *The Economy of Prestige* and Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* are key influences on this dissertation, as foundational studies by literary scholars of actual readers and taste-makers.

considering the exchanges of value-production through a "balance of forces among social agents," this project extends Bourdieu's argument that literary analyses must consider "not only the material production but also the symbolic production of the work, i.e., the production of the value of the work or, which amounts to the same thing, of belief in the value of the work" (11).

"Ethnic"[6] literature, when explicitly concerned with politics of reading and representation, is particularly good at reflecting contingencies in the construction of literary value. Recently, the landscape of literary fiction in the U.S. seems immersed in these concerns. Le's *The Boat* is one salient example of a trend in twenty-first century texts toward describing their own anticipated markets, as well as market tastes for certain representations of ethnicity (including bestsellers by Jhumpa Lahiri, Sherman Alexie, James McBride, Junot Diaz, and many others). Taken together, these texts saturate the market with self-consciousness around cross-cultural consumption and valuation. Indeed, they exemplify how texts *about* racializing encounters with majority white, liberal consumer publics are marketed *toward* those publics, and are valued in part as cathartically corrective.

The international[7] literary industry has witnessed marked trends in tastes for "ethnic" literature in various phases over the past several decades. The more notable of these include "El Boom" of the 1960/70s; the enormous popularity of South Asian writers as emergent through

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[6] While "ethnicity" and "race" are often conflated, it is important to delineate the terms in the context of studying (often transnational) cultural production and reception from my standpoint in the U.S. In a U.S. context, authors marked as "ethnic" are almost always racialized. However, "ethnicity" captures a presumed *foreignness* of experience that "race" does not necessarily. For example, Black African and Black American authors' experiences are non-commensurable (and much African immigrant metafiction is concerned with surfacing the distinction, as well as the interpellation experienced upon arrival *as* Black.) I follow Rey Chow in perceiving an ambivalence in the construct of "ethnicity" particular to the U.S.: "on the one hand, we are supposed to understand that *everyone* is ethnic and that we should tolerate ethnic differences; on the other hand, we also continue to think that *certain* people are still held captive in their own specific histories, that is, in ethnic conditions that seem foreign or alien to us" (Chow 28-9). Effectively, while celebrated as a value, ethnicity functions to serve white supremacy, since those marked as ethnic are almost always non-white.

[7] In the international circulation of texts, of course, symbolic and economic capital are unevenly exchanged to put it mildly. The achievement of "global" readerships still usually means the process by which texts produced in the Global South appeal to a small handful of major publishers in the Global North.

1980s/90s; and the wave of African literature in recent years. This project accounts for texts by both U.S.-based and "foreign" or migratory[8] writers that comprise the same present trend: of Anglophone texts in international circulation, meta-fictionally ironizing, intervening in, and/or capitalizing on markets for ethnic difference. These literary texts understand the conditions of their production and reception to be mediated by institutionalized modes of ascribing ethnic authenticity. They explicitly or implicitly figure readers who stand in for terms of value privileged by specific receptive contexts. For example, Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* does not include scenes of literal reading (texts), but is structured as a narrative *to,* and for the benefit of, an over-generalized American audience. That very generalization—the presence of an unnamed American to whom the Pakistani narrator "teaches" his own ethnicization in the U.S.—allows the text to re-signify and leverage the value associated with ethnographic pedagogy in cross-cultural readings. Some texts, like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*, ask to be read as more descriptive of literal, textual readings. Adichie's novel anticipates misapprehension to be *so* pervasive as to compel the narrator—a Black African immigrant writer—to address various readerships within the text, all prone to reading race in terms of a U.S.-specific Black/white binary. It is precisely by generalizing or parodying "American readers" that these novels work to undo systemic and racialized terms of literary value.

This trend toward metafiction should be read as symptomatic. As Evan Mwangi argues in *Africa Writes Back to Self: Metafiction, Gender, Sexuality*, the proliferation of metafiction at any given moment is over-determined by social forces[9] (10). In the U.S., the receptive field for ethnic

[8] One remarkable aspect of this trend is how many texts by authors in migration challenge the very notion of reading "cross-culturally," or of marking a wave of literature as "from" somewhere—elsewhere—in particular.
[9] For example, as Madhu Dubey has shown in *Signs and Cities: Black Literary Postmodernism*, Black American fiction of the latter twentieth century "teemed with scenes of reading and writing" in order to reflect and challenge

literature is currently in a paradoxical situation, in that "authenticity" pervades as a privileged term of value while readers (and writers) want to disavow projections of "essentialism" at any cost. Hari Kunzru, in his *New York Times* review of *The Boat*, lauds Nam Le for "assert[ing] the right to roam outside his ethnicity"—implying that such a right *needs* be asserted, toward readerships likely to value the text in terms of ethnic authority. In fact, the book club discussion questions produced by the publisher ask whether Le's stories are "convincing," given that "Le says he has never been to many of the places depicted." These paratexts suggest the premium readers will place on knowing whether the text might be "authentic," at all; the review positions itself as intervening in reductive readings *for* authenticity. In various ways, these materials must deal with the text's management of ethnicity precisely because the market-driven performance of ethnic difference is the story's primary subject. The story meta-fictionalizes this performance as part and parcel of, in Kunzru's terms, an industry in which writers of color can "collud[e] in the production of a crude, essentialized version of oneself in return for an advantage over ethnically uninteresting peers" (2). Taken together, the texts begin to sketch a field in which ethnic authenticity is managed and negotiated as a term of literary value among a network of agents. Moreover, they begin to indicate how agents *self*-legitimize in relation to one another. As much as metafiction engenders self-consciousness, it also lends itself to self-affirmation by readers who "get it"—as opposed to, presumably, those who will not (those *other* readers, figured in the texts).

These texts engage not only conditions of reception, but also the social conditions that incite challenges to reading modes in the first place, including the exchanges of culture and people facilitated by globalized markets. The conglomeration of major publishing houses has, in

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the dominant modes of reading Black literature at the time: as representative of either "uplift" or vernacular tradition (6-7).

some ways, increased pressures on potentially minoritized writers to conform to established markets—especially for those writing elsewhere than the U.S. or Western Europe but still reliant on U.S. or U.K. publishers to reach broad international audiences. These conditions are recently much discussed by writers in the public sphere. To take just one venue, at least two dozen articles or op-eds have appeared in *The New York Times* on this topic since 2013. One of these, an opinion piece by Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani ("African Books for Western Eyes"), described the ways in which an international literary industry services *and* constructs Western tastes for "savage entertainment" about Africa. African writers are thus anticipatory of non-African readers over-writing their texts with stereotypes. Many recent works of African literature, though, can be read as in dialogue with the very conditions for their production—for example, increasingly international and restrictive access to publication—as much as with anticipated readers.[10]

Another *Times* piece by Amit Majmudar ("Am I an 'Immigrant Writer?'") describes the mediating roles of reviews and prize committees, and the deployment of unsettlingly familiar value-terms. For Majmudar, the "subject matter permissible" to immigrant writers in the U.S. is that which marks ethnic specificity in predictable, categorizable ways: "You can write, not about a mother and her daughter, but about an Indian-American mother and her Indian-American daughter" (1). If writers are successful, "the book's themes...will be lauded for transcending their context. That is, the book's success will be proportional to the extent that its cultural strangeness dissolves in the reading" (1). Interestingly, Kunzru's review of *The Boat*, which dwells on how literary ethnicity is managed in precisely this way, is titled "Outside Ethnicity" (more likely

[10] An outstanding example is Adichie's short story "Jumping Monkey Hill" from her 2009 collection *The Thing Around Your Neck*, set at an African writer's workshop run by Edward, a white, British, and elderly Africanist scholar. One after the next, as the writers share their works-in-progress, Edward critiques them: for being trite ("…when one considered all the other things happening in Zimbabwe under the horrible Mugabe"); inauthentic ("…homosexual stories of this sort weren't reflective of Africa, really"); or inconceivable ("Women are never victims in that sort of crude way and certainly not in Nigeria") (108-113).

titled by the *Times* than by Kunzru). In what way, we could ask, is such a review *or* text "outside" its most explicit subject? And yet this contradiction—the way in which texts are framed as at once essentially ethnic and "transcendent" of ethnicity—underlies the operations of the globalized literary field.

In Chapter 1, I trace the trajectory of major critical approaches toward cross-cultural reading before focusing on a specific, and lucrative, market for ethnic literature: university common reading (sometimes "first-year reading") programs. These programs must explicitly frame how and why they anticipate a novel will teach students something in particular; commonly, the fiction is tasked with teaching presumed cultural *difference*. The chapter examines programs' own materials, student responses, and author commentary alongside two popular selections: Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) and Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007). These novels position themselves as correctives toward an implied, under-educated, and strategically generalized "American reader." In so doing, they capitalize on the value of *ethnography* so commonly ascribed by critics and readers in the Global North to texts produced from the Global South.

Chapter 2 also takes up the academy, but for how it has produced a foundational condition for evaluating minoritized texts in the U.S.: the very category of "American literature" as in relation to (but distinct from) "ethnic American literature," and more specifically, "African American literature." I examine twenty-first century Black American texts that set themselves in explicit and uncertain relation to academia, intellectualism, and canon-formation: *Erasure* by Percival Everett (2001), *Man Gone Down* by Michael Thomas (2007), and *Pym* by Mat Johnson (2011). These are just a few among several works of recent Black American fiction preoccupied

with how academia mediates literary production. In these novels, Black male writer-narrators are variously "fallen" academics exhausted by the systemic marginalization of non-whiteness in the academy. These texts recast the value of representative authority—specifically, of those canonical literary reference points by which Black American texts are conscripted into relation. The wealth of Black American criticism and debate around literature's "representative" function provides deep context to understand receptions for minoritized authors in the U.S.

Chapter 3 investigates book clubs as a receptive site alongside metafictional texts that feminize reader-figures inclined to universalize and sentimentalize cultural difference. Book clubs are a gendered market, overwhelmingly comprised of women, but also hailed a women's activity by publishers and other agents. They provide an ever-increasing wealth of materials to examine for the presumed values of American women readers, and for mediation of those values by the novels and their paratexts. The chapter returns to Hamid and Thomas, whose texts figure white women as liberal readers eager to "relate"; I also examine Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013), a novel centered on writings by non-white, non-American women, largely or exclusively reliant on women readers as they comprise the receptive field. I survey publisher-produced book club materials for how they construe women readers of "ethnic" texts, and the novels for how white women have come to stand in for an appropriative literary industry writ large.

Finally, Chapter 4 shifts orientation away from receptive contexts and toward the field of production: specifically, the conditions of publication for African writers now, amid the boom in African literature in "global" markets. A remarkable number of twenty-first century African texts are overtly preoccupied with the conditions of their own international publication; metafiction abounds across this field. Additionally, African writers have been a dominant force in the recent

public discourses about market pressures experienced by writers of color. To understand how metafiction presumes and engages specific readerships—and intervenes in specific conditions of production—I look at novels published at varying scales. NoViolet Bulawayo's much-hyped *We Need New Names* (2013) was, upon publication, a "big book"—a bestseller representative of the current "wave" of African literature. Through scenes of white consumption of African stories, the text effectively critiques its own market while also self-consciously centering a *type* of African immigrant story with long-established appeal for non-African readers. A. Igoni Barrett's *Blackass* (2015) is so thoroughly a site-specific (Lagosian) novel, and so thoroughly absurd, that it refuses terms of established appeal, meanwhile staging an emerging new media landscape through which writers can access readers. Finally, Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi's *Kintu* (2014) is a novel explicitly "for Ugandans"; *Kintu*'s publication history illustrates how, even while African writers remain to some degree dependent on foreign markets and international donors, the "balance of forces" in African literary production is increasingly centered *in* Africa. Alongside the novels, I account for publishers' mission statements, jacket copy, reviews, and reader-responses. This final chapter is broadest in scope: I briefly survey the history of publishing in Africa, the recent rise in local presses, and the ways in which new media contributes to value production outside the literary establishment.

As a whole, this dissertation takes twenty-first century metafiction to be creative of new legitimating terms for texts marked (and marketed) as ethnic. Throughout my work on this project, I have seen the trend toward metafiction *about* those terms continue to expand in the U.S. Self-consciousness about racializing, essentializing, and/or fetishizing approaches to cultural work by authors of color has become a legitimating trope, itself. One "hot" new novel—

The Other Black Girl by Zakiya Dalila Harris—takes the publishing industry as its setting and describes how major houses marginalize their few non-white staff; reviews, author interviews, and discussion materials, then, provoke and extend necessary conversations about the industry's whiteness.[11] Scenes of racialized culture-market transactions seem newly prevalent in other genres, too. Recently, I watched the excellent film by Black American playwright Radha Blank, *The Forty-Year Old Version*, in which the main character (a Black American playwright named Radha) turns her creative talents to hip hop at a point of exhaustion with the white-dominated theater industry that wants only "poverty porn" from Black writers. ("Women of color playwrights are very hot right now," Radha's agent tells her encouragingly.) When Radha meets with a powerful gatekeeper—in the form of an old, white, male producer—about her new play, he tells her: "It rang a little...*inauthentic*…I ask myself, 'Did a Black person really write this?'" (14:15-16:31).

Under capitalism, institutional shifts within white-dominated industries turn on demonstrable market appeal. Currently in the U.S., we are in a moment when cultural work by authors of color is, to some extent, valued for how it hails a version of a white audience whom no liberal white reader wants to be. Whether this reinforces un-self-consciousness or forces a reckoning, the texts continue to do their creative work, and readers will always, in relation, do theirs. But culture is produced and accessed through an interplay of forces to which critics must attend if we are to understand how, fundamentally, literature relays with lived experience. This

[11] Harris's manuscript saw an intense bidding war and was ultimately bought by an imprint of Simon & Schuster, who printed a whopping 100,000 copies for the U.S. first run. One of Harris's agents told the *New York Times* that "We even got the film and television executives to read it overnight, and…that's when you know you have something hot." Harris, meanwhile, has said that she "had Black readers in mind, particularly Black women," even while she anticipates specific responses from white readers in publishing: "I didn't want them to be like, 'Oh that's definitely that person, and I never would do anything like that…Having them all [white publishing staff figured in the novel] be representative of the industry itself was really important to me, because the accountability feels that much more pressing" (Harris).

project, in attempting to account for that interplay, looks to where our landscape for literary analysis may be increasingly opened up.

Chapter 1

Common Reading Programs and Cross-Cultural Literacy: Reading "Others" in a Globalized Field

In 2013, conservative group The National Association of Scholars released a study of common reading programs at colleges across the U.S.—those programs that select (and aggressively market) a common text for, usually, incoming first-year students to read before they arrive to campus. The study is one of several conducted over the past decade, as programs grow in number nationwide[12] (Wood). As programs abound, so do discussions of their *value*, especially as they tend to be costly for colleges. In addition to being the most exhaustive study to date, the NAS report is notable for its oppositional stance—not toward programs themselves, per se, but toward the books commonly selected as valuable reading for college students. "Something is wrong," said NAS president Peter Wood, "when *Frankenstein* is the best book on the list...and books on Africa outnumber books on Europe 6 to 1" (Thorne).

Of course, this critique echoes an attitude toward higher education more broadly held by some conservative Americans: that colleges are sites of indoctrination, where left-leaning professors peddle liberal ideology to vulnerable students.[13] But the NAS study was correct that overwhelmingly, common reading selections skew toward the contemporary: of the 290 schools the NAS analyzed, all but six chose books written after 1990. More tellingly, the study tracked

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[12]The number of programs in the U.S. grew from fewer than one hundred in 2004 to over three hundred 2014 (Thorne). Primarily, studies of programs have been data-driven—produced by schools with common reading programs, geared toward administrators wanting to implement or improve similar programs elsewhere.

[13] In an article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Wood writes that Rebecca Skloot's *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*—by far the most popular selection across common reads programs in 2011 and 2012—"commands the heights of the college common-reading programs because it fits with the political narrative that most of our colleges prefer: America is an unjust nation that has an endless amount of atoning ahead for the ways it has exploited the weak, the poor, and minorities" (Wood).

book selections by theme—the most prevalent theme being "multiculturalism, immigration or racism" (distantly seconded by "environmental issues") (Thorne). Meanwhile, common reading programs tend to articulate their own values via marketing and communications materials in similar terms: namely, as diversity, tolerance, understanding, and community. Additionally, most programs seek books that are at once "accessible" (or for the NAS, "unchallenging")—to "inspire a love of reading," in Macalester College's terms—and "topical." Indeed, the topics themselves, across the over 30 common reads programs I have examined, are primarily: immigration, multiculturalism, race, and poverty. As for what colleges hope students will gain from reading about such topics, the MIT Reads Program's statement of values is highly, if vaguely, representative of many others: "to build community and foster understanding across difference" (Fay).

These are the broad and fraught terms that articulate *what* colleges expect students to learn from books about minoritized and/or culturally other experiences. The question is rather: *how*—by what means—do colleges, and the student readers themselves, perceive literary texts as teaching these values? When it comes to reading fiction in order to learn about "other" cultures, taking texts as authorities or teachers—as "native informants"—has long been framed by literary and cultural critics as problematic: essentializing, if not outright condescending, fetishizing, and/or racist. (This approach has been so thoroughly critiqued over the past several decades precisely because, for scholars and everyday readers alike, the value of "authority" has so long been privileged—that is, in cases of Western readers and non-Western texts.) What happens, then, when this pedagogical value is framed and mediated by pedagogical institutions? What is at stake for this market readership in taking seriously the native informant's authority—that is, in taking the texts' assertions of ethnographic difference as "true" and pedagogically valuable?

Moreover, given that many of these books are written by authors in migration (many at least partly residing in the U.S.), not to mention the large and growing numbers of international students on American college campuses, to what does cultural "difference" exactly refer? (For example, is *Frankenstein* more "ours"—more somehow relevant—than *Things Fall Apart*?)

This chapter examines how culturally "other" texts are taken up as pedagogy within universities, and are conditioned (in both production and reception) by the massive market that comprises common reading programs. But it also explores how certain types of literary texts, in turn, condition the market. In line with the recent trend toward metafiction among Anglophone authors of color, some novels position themselves as correctives—toward an implied under-educated American reader, in need of lessons in ethnography. These lessons are especially salient when delivered by writers from nations whose socio-political conditions have been over-written by stereotypes, or omitted from U.S. historical narratives altogether, as texts can explicitly hail the reader as "learner." (Think, for example, of the footnoted admonishments from Junot Diaz's narrator in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*: "For those of you [Americans] who missed your mandatory two seconds of Dominican history…") (2). In this sense, the implied American audience *in* the texts can stand in for American universities as sites of reading. The narrators in these novels warn audiences (within and outside the text) against taking any representation of national, racial, or ethnic "otherness" as singularly representative—at the same time that the texts position themselves as highly teachable. In this way, authors and texts capitalize on the very value terms they seek to disrupt, offering new, more nuanced ways to approach literary texts as teachers.

For several decades, literary and reception studies have thoroughly challenged approaches to texts that presume an ethnographic lens—that take texts as transparent windows for knowing a cultural other. The problems with reading literature for cultural authority or information have been so exhaustively theorized that, as Shameem Black puts it, *suspicion* of such approaches now "constitutes a new set of theoretical givens" (7). Presumably—and as evidenced by recent metafiction—authors, too, are hyper-aware that readers often presume or privilege "authenticity" in ethnic fiction. In addition, in an increasingly international literary market, authors with access to that market are aware of their likely transnational receptions. (Or put another way, authors understand that accommodating an international market may be a condition of publication.) Of course, in cases of historically marginalized literatures—so often hailed as "representative" or "informant"—that awareness is amplified.

Lately, a trend has developed among works on cross-cultural reception toward critiquing notions of unrestricted readerly agency. Rather than viewing the text as, in Michel de Certeau's terms, a "private hunting reserve" in which readers semi-freely "poach" meanings, recent critics have been interested in how texts assert their own agency and set interpretive limits (de Certeau 166-7). Critics including Lesley Larkin, Doris Sommer, and Kathryn Hume explicitly refer to texts as "teaching" ways of reading; for Larkin, Black texts in particular are "performative subjects" that can effectively "interrupt, manage, and manipulate the ways readers read in an effort to teach new ways of reading and enable the emergence of anti-racist reading subjects"[14] (5). These turns to the text's (if not the author's) *intent* are almost always applied toward

[14] I read this trend as not unrelated to reading practices prescribed by Heather Love, Sharon Best and Stephen Marcus, among others—that urge critics to "stay close to our objects of study," as opposed to approaching texts already motivated to "unmask" hidden, non-obvious ideological underpinnings (Best 1, 16). In the latter (and still prevalent) "symptomatic" approaches, the critic is the purported agent of meaning; in contrast, "descriptive" or "surface" approaches take texts for how they can deliver, on their own surfaces and more democratically to all readers, "exteriorizing and objective accounts of social life" (Love 375).

marginalized literatures, whose subjection to appropriative readings has been theorized to death, and whose particularities should indeed be "listened to" rather than "poached."

A problem arises, though, when critics want to insist on the text's ultimate agency or authority—often framed as "resistance"—and at the same time refute the text's/author's authentic (i.e. representative) function. Furthermore, in an increasingly globalized field of literary production, the question of geography—representative of *where*—becomes tricky as well. As Amal Amireh and Lisa Suhair Majaj have noted, the critical commonplace within transnational reception studies has been to focus on consumption of "third" world cultural artifacts by the "first"; but this often overlooks how flows of people, culture, and various forms of capital are messy and multidirectional (xii-xiii). Since the mid- to late-twentieth century, the global financial restructuring due to the growth of multinational corporations (including new publishing conglomerations) has, in Paul Stoller's terms, "imploded notions of space and time" (17-18). Globalized markets have helped to polarize economic distribution, but also made some relations between those poles more immediate, in part via waves of transnational migrants (including to U.S. universities).

In light of these conditions, it is worth considering the modes of reading opened up and/or foreclosed by the immediacies *and* polarizations produced via globalization—especially in regards to texts explicitly anticipatory of their own migrations from the "third world" to a receptive context in the U.S. Indeed, these texts resist the reader's appropriative gaze, forcing us to "listen" to cultural particularity. But they also complicate the positioning of a here/there, or foreign/familiar, binary. As Black writes, twenty-first-century authors are working in an era characterized by a "fundamental paradox in the role of social borders": by which forces of migration and globalized mass media have created "new conditions of visibility that make distant

parts of the world seem much more entwined…while the markedly uneven effects of globalization have also provoked renewed interest in the value of social barriers" (6). At the same time, it's an era characterized by self-consciousness on the parts of minoritized writers about their own conditional, cross-cultural receptions.

The novels discussed here—Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013)—surface these concerns. Each has been selected by multiple colleges for common reading programs (and in fact, by whole U.S. cities for increasingly popular "city reads" programs). These are, also, two among several contemporary novels chosen as common reads that exemplify the current trend toward metafiction in Anglophone immigrant texts. Among these, Hamid's and Adichie's works stand out for their uses of direct address. Through strategic uses of dialogue, second-person narration, and texts-within-text, they deliver imperatives to specifically U.S. audiences (in modes described by some readers as pedantic). At the same time, through narrators who shift cultural, national, and racial affiliations, they alternately assert and undermine their own radical difference from presumed readers. In part, they do so by figuring the speakers in the texts as negotiating academic/intellectual spaces in the U.S., and the value and limits of taking literary texts as ethnographic teachers.

The Reluctant Fundamentalist **and uses of authority**

The Reluctant Fundamentalist is a novel about the international havoc wreaked by U.S. economic imperialism, viewed through the lens of one migrant's competing national and cultural identities. The narration takes place in Lahore, but most of the novel is set in the U.S., told as the recent life story of its Pakistani narrator Changez. This story takes the form of a second-person

narration to an unnamed American listener—who from the opening line is figured as face-to-face with someone "unfamiliar and therefore frightening":

"Excuse me, sir, but may I be of assistance? Ah, I see I have alarmed you. Do not be frightened by my beard; I am a lover of America" (1).

How much the American actually "knows"—of Changez or of Pakistan—remains one of the unresolved ambiguities of the novel. Changez leaves him no option of preferring *not* to know, as he holds his listener captive throughout a long meal in a café. Quickly, it becomes clear that "lover of America" has ironic overtones; for his part, Changez knows the U.S. well after years as a Princeton undergrad and then a New York financial analyst, hired by an elite firm after a recruiter recognizes "something different" about him (8).

The problem of *authority* is first addressed when Changez meets the family of his white American love interest, Erica. Over an anxious dinner, the father attempts to connect with Changez by demonstrating his "insider" knowledge about Pakistan: "'Economy's falling apart though, no?...Solid people, don't get me wrong. I like Pakistanis. But the elite has raped that place well and good, right? And fundamentalism. You guys have got some serious problems with fundamentalism'" (54-5). Changez acknowledges that his interlocutor is not wrong, exactly: "His was a summary of some knowledge, much like the short news items on the front page of *The Wall Street Journal*...but his tone—with, if you will forgive me, its particularly *American* undercurrent of condescension—struck a negative chord..." (55). Here, as throughout the novel, "you" conveniently addresses his listener and American readers *of* the novel, perhaps prone to take newspaper headlines (if not novels) as comprehensive "knowledge of Pakistan" or elsewhere—if not also prone to "condescension" toward foreign geographies about which they may know little.

But 9/11, when it occurs in the world of the text, brings with it a reversal—complicating easy empathetic identification with Changez as "other" (or self-reflexive critique of "American" approaches to reading others). Suddenly, watching the towers fall on tv, Changez finds *himself* reading in self-consciously, unapologetically broad strokes:

> …despicable as it may sound, my initial reaction was to be remarkably pleased. Your disgust is evident…But at that moment, my thoughts were not with the *victims*. No, I was caught up in the *symbolism* of it all, the fact that someone had so visibly brought America to her knees. Ah, I see I am only compounding your displeasure. I understand, of course...But surely you cannot be so innocent of such feelings yourself. Do you feel no joy at the video clips—so prevalent these days—of American munitions laying waste to the structures of your enemies?
>
> But you are at war, you say? Yes, you have a point. I was not at war with America. Far from it: I was the product of an American university; I was earning a lucrative American salary. I was infatuated with an American woman. So why did part of me desire to see America harmed? (72-3).

Changez immediately taps into a critical distance that allows him to read the "symbolism of it all," to override—for him, productively—intersubjective "understanding" and instead read the event only in its political dimension. Of course, as he points out, de-personalization is the means by which such violences are justified. His position as "metacultural"[15]—as intimately familiar with, and informed by, the U.S. and Pakistan both—implicitly authorizes him to speak on behalf of both "sides." In fact, it is this position that allows him to be heard by his audience, at all. To deliver a critique of the U.S. that may be received as legitimate, his narration benefits from its dual "authority." Thus, while *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* critiques essentializing readings—figuring Changez as over-written by others as "representative"—its critique still rests on Changez presenting himself as, after all, representative. In this way, the text may be read as deploying a sort of "strategic essentialism" in Gayatri Spivak's terms: acknowledging that

[15] For more on the "metaculturalism" as a privileged term of literary value, see Yiorgos D. Kalogeras, "Historical Representation and the Cultural Legitimation the Subject in Ethnic Personal Narratives," *College Literature*, Oct., 1991.

essentialisms (or perhaps, fundamentalisms) may be valid and useful "not as descriptions of the way things are, but as something that one must adopt to produce a critique of anything" (51). Such a strategy may produce self-reflexive critique of reductive cross-cultural readings—more resonant, though, for not coming *exactly* from the "outside." Here, it is essentialisms, plural.

The text's perhaps less strategic essentialism begs to be deconstructed, though, at the level of its implied reader(s). Changez's non-identification, non-understanding, is rendered as discomfiting (if not "disgusting") to his American audience within the text. Yet Changez's reaction likely registers for that implied American reader *of* the text, given how ploddingly he has "taught" that reader how to read him:

> in the stories we tell of ourselves we were not the crazed and destitute radicals you see on your television channels but rather saints and poets and—yes—conquering kings…when your country was still a collection of thirteen small colonies, gnawing away at the edge of a continent. But once more I am raising my voice, and making you rather uncomfortable besides. I apologize…(102).

While these frequent mini-diatribes can be read as the text imposing its interpretive limits, through intervening in potential stereotypes, they also render the text reductively transparent—or put another way, descriptive. The only available reading is *for* its authority (in essence, its pedagogy), as interpretation becomes beside the point. In this context, the consequences of not-hearing—of presuming the text's radical difference—are simply too high. The reduction of all readers to "outside" receptors of "insider" critique may be as essential as it is irrational. The text is, after all, a monologue: while Changez refers to his listener as occasionally speaking, that voice never registers on the surface of the text. In this way, the text prompts readers to "unlearn" their privilege so that, in Spivak's terms, "…not only does one become able to listen to that other constituency, but one learns to speak in such a way that one will be taken seriously by that other constituency" (Spivak 42). For Hamid, American readers

learning to listen means evacuating their speaking-by-proxy from the text altogether. At the same time, "other" as Spivak uses it here is situated as geographically specific—and neither Changez nor the novel itself is exclusively Pakistani. The novel suggests that unlearning—or undoing the "epistemological crippling" that Fredric Jameson has argued is a condition of "first world" readers—might require Hamid's style of direct address, even while that narrative strategy obscures the heterogeneity, and multi-locality, of actual readers and authors.

Common reading programs and markets for ethnic difference

Some literary critics have been noting the curious trend in Anglophone fiction toward explicitly describing their own conditions of production and potential receptions. Works by Black, Larkin, and Rebecca Walkowitz among others have, by various formulations, examined how these texts are commonly hailing their "cross-cultural" audiences and describing politics of representation. In general, the trend has been useful for critics because it allows them to make claims about how minoritized texts "refuse" or "write back to" appropriative readings by a presumed (cultural, racial, national) majority audience. Black terms "border-crossing fictions" as those that "call attention to their own representational dilemmas"—specifically, in cases where there is "dramatic dissonance between subject and object of representation" (for example, J.M. Coetzee's male protagonist struggling to understand his daughter's brutal rape in *Disgrace*) (5, 86). By representing the *in*accessibility of experience across bounds of gender and power, the text reminds readers to check presumptions about what experiences *are* accessible. Walkowitz helpfully complicates the problem of "borders," in the geographic sense, in her work on the same archive (more or less). The prevalence of multilingualism among English-speaking audiences, let alone audiences accessed via translations, upsets the notion of books produced "there" being read

"here" for readers and authors alike. Writers in any language must imagine and anticipate audiences across multiple languages and geographies. For Walkowitz, those that *describe* that anticipation are "born translated": they "suggest that there is something limiting, perhaps even pernicious, about the idea that language offers direct access to culture…This focus on the relationship between books and audiences reflects a shift in what fiction is trying to achieve: instead of articulating distinctive cultures, [they] are articulating geopolitical systems, including the systems in which their novels are produced" (200-201).

To extend Walkowitz's framework, I read the most blatantly metafictional of these texts as articulating a geopolitical system in particular: the market conditions under which these texts are produced and received. Meanwhile, specific markets construe and anchor literary value in the very same terms that these texts seek to destabilize. It's a feedback loop—and critics have begun attending to how literary fictions anticipate, respond to, and in so doing co-construct their own terms of value. For my purposes—to better understand how literary value is construed collaboratively and unevenly among agents—it's crucial to look at how markets describe the texts, and ascribe value to their "difference." As a site of large-scale textual consumption and marketing *for* cultural difference (i.e., "diversity"), the common reading market evidences how those differences are to some extent strategically produced by markets, texts, and readers alike.

More than a site, the common reading market might be better described as a *force*—and an increasingly visible and influential one for writers and publishers both. Selection for one of these programs can mean sales of 10,000 copies or more practically overnight; sometimes, it prompts an additional special print run (Goldstein, Thorne). Most commonly, institutions purchase and ship the books to incoming students, which often costs around $20,000 at bulk wholesale rates (Bram, Thorne). But those aren't the only, or the greatest, potential costs for

colleges. In the selection process, many institutions weigh whether authors can make live appearances on campus; fees for these visits can run into the six figures, though they generally range between $10,000 and $20,000 (Bram, Wood). There are also costs accrued by way of time and effort: the selection process can be arduous, and almost always involves multiple committees of faculty and administrators, narrowing from dozens of candidates to one text (Thorne). (Not uncommonly, campus diversity committees are brought into the selection process.) In the case of Penn State Reads, the book selection process takes a full year and involves 25 faculty and staff choosing one selection out of 400 initial contenders (Hottle). The process can also involve social media marketing campaigns, new affiliated courses, syllabi and/or orientations, and efforts toward promoting the text and any related events to the entire campus (Dunlap, Thorne). These costs have led some colleges to discontinue their programs almost as quickly as they began; for example, despite coordinated protest by faculty, Purdue University recently shut down its program citing undue expense[16] (Thorne).

For their part, publishers have swiftly adapted to demand—and of course, devised ways to grow the market. In so doing, the major U.S. publishing houses (or the "Big Five") have helped delineate the market itself. Each of the Big Five now produces a yearly catalog specifically for the common reads market. Penguin Random House's tends to be the broadest in scope, offering buyers not only the texts (new and backlist) but supplementary materials to make selections more attractive—for example, advertisements for author availability, discussion guides, and sometimes even customized editions of the books (Thompson, Thorne). The catalog also includes materials to guide buyers' choices for their school—for example, a list of questions

[16] In March 2018, Penn State decided to discontinue Penn State Reads. The university was spending $70,000-$80,000 on the program each year, including the cost of nearly 9,000 books mailed to all incoming first-year students; other than the year they selected Adichie's *Americanah* (which prompted "high levels of engagement across campus"), the percentage of students actually reading the books was estimated at around 20 percent (Bram).

to consider. These include: “Does it feature a protagonist students can relate to?”; “Does the book touch on teachable theme, such as inclusiveness/diversity, global engagement, etc?”; and “Do the themes of the book correspond to your university’s strategic mission? Campus engagement and resources will be easier to secure if you make this relationship clear” (Thorne).

I’ll return to the question of securing “engagement and resources” shortly. Certainly, the question relating to “teachable theme” touches on a growing trend toward pairing common reads with themed events. As the NAS report disapprovingly notes, “In the wake of the Ferguson, Missouri unrest, chosen themes for 2015-16 shifted significantly toward topics relating to race and justice” (Thorne). For the NAS, common reads programs are a good thing—*when* “they are, in their inception, an attempt to make up for some of the misshapenness of American secondary education—especially its lack of consistent focus…on books that define our cultural heritage” (Thorne). But their problem with common reads lies in how the programs take “our” students dangerously further afield (even when engaging issues of race and justice *in* the U.S.). In its comprehensive study, the NAS determined a “top five” characteristics of the 290 programs examined—one of which is “A Homogenous Market”:

> A profitable common reading genre has emerged, in which publishers and authors market a homogenized product to a highly predictable market of college selection committees. Students are the captive readership of this market (6-7).

(Two of the other top five are, “Dominated by Mediocre, New Books” and “Predominately Progressive.”) The study also came up with a “top five” characteristics of the book selections themselves: the first (followed by “No Classics”), is “Civically Engaged”:

> Common readings are overwhelmingly chosen to foster civic engagement; they scarcely mention the complementary and equally valuable virtues of the disengaged life of the mind (7-8).

The most interesting aspects of the NAS study—leaving aside the proposition that college students pursue a "disengaged life of the mind"—are where it notices trends to which we should actually attend. While the common reads market is hardly homogeneous by most standards (other than era of publication), it certainly privileges books that are presumed valuable for "teaching inclusivity/diversity, global engagement, etc." The NAS authors lament the "dominance of books that emphasize personal perspectives over efforts to know the world as it really is. Literature is not entirely neglected but is overshadowed by what are now called…'informational texts'" (Wood). Here, they refer to the prevalence of easily digestible nonfiction about contemporary American social issues (such as Rebecca Skloot's *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*). But for programs, the premium placed on "information" (for the NAS, in opposition to "literature") extends to selections of fiction, which by definition does not purport to deliver "the world as it really is," and benefits from mediation—by those invested in such a reading—in order to be read that way. The study is also useful in identifying how terms of value are produced by multiple sources including the texts, publishers, campus administrators, and sometimes authors' self-promotional materials—often, all invested in promoting specific, if not consistent, modes of reading and valuing "foreign" texts.

It's notable, too, how the actual *readers* of the texts are differentiated from the *market*; rather than agents, students are the "captive readership." Publishers seem likewise preoccupied with presumed values of the colleges (who are, after all, the consumers)—and also of the authors themselves, who are being marketed as much as, if not more than, their books. If this particular market relies on "securing campus engagement and resources" rather than readers' buy-in, the readers themselves, in terms of pre-existing tastes and values, become somewhat beside the point. At the same time, of course, it is for the ostensible benefit of these readers that the

programs operate. And, in the loftiest possible sense, the programs offer benefits to the larger "community" (the term appears very frequently in programs' lists of benefits): the values students learn from these texts will presumably extend into their lives and their interactions with others. Meanwhile, authors come to anticipate this market and position themselves accordingly. Recent metafictional novels reappropriate their own receptions by capitalizing on the values of the common reads market—specifically, "diversity" (i.e. legible difference)—to the extent it may be taught via literary texts.

Mohsin Hamid's exotic register

The Reluctant Fundamentalist has been selected by at least eight universities since its publication in 2007, and Mohsin Hamid has delivered paid lectures at many dozens more (Gross). While not one of the more common selections across the board—the books occupying those top spots are primarily those nonfiction "informational texts"—some of these schools have produced more than the usual amount of available paratexts associated with book selections and author visits. (This is probably because the novel tends to be selected as part of year-long "diversity" themes, during which students may write and publish reflective essays for college websites.) One of these is Bucknell University, a liberal arts college in central Pennsylvania whose incoming class was asked to read *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* in 2014. Like most schools, Bucknell does not mandate its students read the common text—but it is "highly recommended," and students are expected to write a short response essay about the novel as part of orientation. Hamid's novel was the first work of fiction chosen by Bucknell's First-Year Common Reading program. In an interview with the student paper *The Bucknellian*, Director of Student Leadership Programs Beth Bouchard discussed the selection process: "The [First-Year

Common Reading] committee felt strongly that the book selected for the Class of 2018 should require our newest community members to consider the world from the vantage point of someone whose worldview may differ distinctly from their own" (Minard).

Unsurprisingly, Hamid's talk at Bucknell—according to coverage in the *Bucknellian* and in university marketing and communications—seems to have focused on questions of "diversity" and the uses of literature to "teach" the lives of others. "I think that a community like Bucknell isn't lacking in diversity," Hamid told assembled students at the college with an eighty percent white student body, and a nearly ninety percent white faculty (collegefactual). "Beneath the surface there is a lot of diversity. But the danger is, when that diversity is hidden, or when you think it is hidden, you feel less comfortable expressing your own diversity." Prompted to discuss the ambiguous ending of the novel, Hamid said that he'd wanted to "make the reader fill in the blanks…in order to force realizations about perspective and preconceived notions" (Minard). Bouchard attested that response to the book was "overwhelmingly positive" because students, faculty and staff were "challenged by both the conclusions and ambiguity presented…The lack of a clear conclusion was a very positive challenge to all of us" (Minard).

On the one hand, the college gets exactly what they paid Hamid for: a "distinctly different vantage point" from which to reassure the university that it already *is* fulfilling its values of "diversity." Hamid delivers on the promise of fiction to develop student understanding of cultural others; he tells his audience that "fiction allows you to embrace that experience of being someone other than yourself" (Minard). He elegantly traverses the line—what Graham Huggan refers to as the "exotic register"—between offering up himself/his text as representative of particular difference and as universally generalizable. (It seems Hamid even invites the conflation of himself with his fictional character, though the two have very little in common by

way of background.) And, he grants readers the agency to "fill in the blanks," de-emphasizing the degree to which the text directs its own interpretations.

At the same time, Hamid *is* directing readings—in both the novel and his comments—using the means by which he will most palatably be received. If this reader-market is to digest the intimacies *and* inequities produced by globalization, he suggests, it will happen through the approach to fiction as teaching both alterity and interrelation. In a 2015 talk at Lehigh University, he described the novel as "a conversation between two people…never hearing the American speak back. And the American is you." He repeated: "It's about you. You have to fill in the blanks" (Gross). *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is quite superficially about the irreducibility of populations to national, religious, or cultural affiliations (and Hamid is surely aware of the large international student populations at many U.S. universities—having been one himself). But paradoxically, readers come to understand that irreducibility through Hamid's essentialization of his audience—within and outside the text.[17] In so doing, both author and text position themselves to be highly consumable by this particular, growing market.

Apart from common reads programs, Hamid's novel is frequently taught in college classes, showing up on syllabi for courses on religion and political science in addition to literature. Gabrielle Bellot, a professor at Florida State University, wrote the following in a piece for the popular website LitHub entitled "Why Every American Should Read the Reluctant Fundamentalist":

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[17] This reader/other construct is central to how the University of Maine selected *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* in 2017 for their Honors Read program, in which upperclass students take a full seminar around reading, discussing, and ultimately choosing books for all first-year honors students to read. In a letter to nominate Hamid's book to the program on behalf of her students, the seminar professor wrote that the book "will inspire you to reach across the [national, religious, cultural] divide, and make friends with someone from the other side of it." One of her students, in her own letter, noted that "[Hamid] presents the polite and refined Changez as proof that you don't have to be a crazed ISIS fighter to have serious concerns and reservations about—and even disdain for—the American system." The delineation—"outsider" critiquing the "American system"—may itself be a condition for understanding that the "outsider" position is not, in fact, a homogenous one.

> I've always opened my undergraduate course, Intro to Global Literature, with Hamid's novel…Many of the American students confess to me they came into the class with a negative image of Muslims. Yet the novel showed them something new. Instead of "the West" talking about "the East," which is most often the kind of narrative they know, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* flips the script by having a Pakistani man narrate the entire tale. A few of my American students say that this feels uncomfortable; some even initially accuse Changez of being "anti-American." This, of course, is the point—to show how it feels to be in a one-sided narrative (Bellot).

The text can effectively "flip the script" *because* it continuously insists that "the American is you"—an uncomfortable prospect, given the many unflattering portraits of Americans painted by the novel. A crucial aspect of this reversal is that the narrator delivers the "native informant" not to inform readers about Pakistan, but rather about the *U.S.* (attitudes, customs, and reading practices). As Walkowitz notes, works like *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* "make the American reader into an object of global attention. They spotlight American readers…to suggest that there is something American about native reading" (that is, that they "expect to be at home with their books") (171). This recent trend toward metafiction among immigrant writers situates U.S. audiences within the texts as stand-ins for appropriative attitudes, or what Changez refers to as the stereotypical American "condescension" toward other cultures. But these texts also point to the systems that help construct valuations of "others" to begin with. These include, as Walkowitz describes, the present "unprecedented commodification and 'global networking' of intellectual spaces such as universities, and the consolidation of publishing into a smaller number of international units" (170). These are primary conditions under which texts enter into a global marketplace; and those conditions are, in effect, what we can approach these literary texts as having to "teach."

African literature, U.S. campuses, and the age of *Americanah*

Since its publication in 2013, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* has been celebrated by readers, reviewers, and prize committees alike, winning the National Book Critics Circle Award and spending 34 weeks on *The New York Times* bestseller list. The novel was both lauded and critiqued by early reviewers for its preachiness; one *New York Times* review praised *Americanah* for how it "eviscerates the pretensions of Westerners," while the *Wall Street Journal* review derided its "thoroughgoing sense that Ms. Adichie believes the world requires a good lecturing and that she is the person to deliver it" (Sacks). Perhaps unsurprisingly, *Americanah* has also been extremely popular with common reads programs; a selection of 17 universities, the novel has been one of the most popular fiction selections nationwide.

Adichie, a Nigerian-born writer who for several years has lived in both Lagos and the U.S., is one of several twenty-first century African writers who metafictionally engage the entrenched terms of value historically ascribed to African texts. These writers, including Okey Ndibe, Helen Oyeyemi, NoViolet Bulawayo, and others, describe how African literature confronts uniquely overdetermined receptive frameworks—that have everything to do with pedagogical function—upon its import to, or production in, the Global North. As Harry Garuba has argued, critical legitimation of African fiction has "turned overwhelmingly on the question of 'Africanness'" (243)—or in A.O. Amoko's terms, ascriptions of value have largely depended on "the extent to which the writing is thought instrumentally to convey cognitive information about African history, economics, politics, anthropology…and above all, subjectivity" (20). Through scenes of reading and writing, Adichie and others at once challenge and capitalize on the longstanding market for "authentic" African fiction that conveys ethnographic "information"—in other words, for texts that teach. They write African characters who are hyperaware of their compulsory self-representations (especially immigrant characters, upon arrival to the U.S.), and

narratives that refer to their own fabrication in relation to prevalent ways of (mis)understanding Africa in other parts of the world.

Whether reading for what texts "teach" about Africa is necessarily problematic has been debated, particularly within postcolonial studies, for decades. Christopher Miller, for one, argues that any fair reading of African literature is an anthropological one—that readers *must* contextualize African texts within some understanding of the social/political situations out of which texts emerge (446)—while others argue that anthropological approaches assume textual transparency and "accuracy" (Huggan 38). Fredric Jameson, in "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," argued that Western readers *should* read "third world" texts for what they teach—precisely because the cultures they reflect are to some extent unknowably *different* and therefore non-transparent. For Jameson, these texts "necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory" because the cultures that produce them are "in various ways locked in a life-and-death struggle with first-world cultural imperialism" (68-69). Readings, then, must keep in mind the radical differences specific to the geographic locales where those struggles take place. Jameson directed his argument at North American readers, whose "view from the top is epistemologically crippling," and who should attempt to set aside those psychologizing modes of reading by which we assume the "realities" novels project are subjective and personal. Reading instead for the political dimension may demonstrate the fundamental split—along fragmented rather than binary lines—engendered by a system of global capital. Such a reading also turns attention to the ways in which the U.S. is implicated in that global system; in this way, "a study of third-world culture necessarily entails a view of ourselves, from the outside" (68, 85-6).

Interesting for our present-day readings of Adichie and her contemporaries is how media of exchange between African writers and non-African readers have changed significantly since Jameson's writing in 1986. But markets for African literature—and to some extent, strategically, the texts themselves—behave as though they haven't. *Americanah* seems to warn against reading as Jameson prescribed, insofar as it directs readers *not* to read for "social reality"—about Africa, about Blackness, about otherness writ large. However, if read as about a market for a pre-imagined, romanticized radical difference, then it mirrors back precisely that—being, in that way, "about us" (consumers of the text). Adichie's novel engages a binary implicit to Jameson's argument, as told to an "outside" reader who should recognize their readerly outsider-ness. That binary presumes a readership facing an unknown quantity, encountering in the literary text "an existence and a situation unfamiliar and therefore frightening—one that we do not know and prefer not to know" (Jameson 66).

However, texts that self-consciously engage politics of representation in the twenty-first century commonly do so from a position of neither "here" nor "there," exactly or exclusively. Indeed, these texts describe and respond to the ways in which readers "prefer not to know"—at the same time functioning as part of a known or knowable quantity, that is, a local cultural and economic situation familiar to many North American readers. *Americanah* generalizes its specifically U.S. audiences who "require a good lecturing," while at the same time describing how, within the U.S., white readers and readers of color tend to receive Africanness *differently*; meanwhile, speakers and audiences within the text traverse national boundaries and affiliations, so that the novel is hardly "about" U.S. readers after all. What, then, are the uses and the limitations of reading for radical difference in an increasingly globalized literary system—and to

what extent do texts that describe that system affect terms of reception for culturally "other" literature?

To even describe Adichie's *Americanah* necessitates some description of how race and racialization function uniquely in the U.S. Its central character is Ifemelu, a Nigerian immigrant who has lived in the U.S. for thirteen years and, at the start of the novel, has decided to return "home." In preparation, she has shut down her popular blog, "Raceteenth or Various Observations about American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black." Her life in America has begun to give her a sense of "bleakness and borderlessness," despite her surface successes (her Princeton fellowship, her blog, and her relationship with a worshipful Black American professor); perhaps returning to the bounds of singular national identification will allow her to "sink her roots in," Ifemelu muses at the novel's start (6). Her time in the U.S. comprises the bulk of the novel, during which she consistently confronts the prejudices of both white and Black Americans, as well as the attempts of other African immigrants to claim her under a rubric of sentimental pan-Africanism; countless scenes throughout the novel turn on Ifemelu's ferocious resistance to interpellation. Her decision to return to Nigeria confuses everyone in her life, including her family, who worry that she will be "unable to cope" in Lagos now that she has been "irrevocably altered by America" (17). And of course, she has been. By the novel's end, she has become "Americanah": an affectionately derogatory term for a fellow Nigerian who spends time in the U.S. and returns hyper-critical (and a little pretentious). In other words, in stages throughout the novel, the character becomes sufficiently both detached and imbued with authority to evenly critique multiple cultures (including multiple U.S. cultures)—as her effectiveness as cultural critic turns on her remaining always "outside" *and* always authoritative.

Americanah intervenes in its receptions to the extent, perhaps, that any novel can. The text indeed "lectures" readers—in the form of second-person diatribes, i.e. the blog, on race and racialization. Black African and American characters, through the written and spoken dialogues that comprise so much of the text, describe the modes of literal and figurative (mis)reading that they continuously confront. The novel dramatizes forms of predetermined (perhaps "symptomatic") reading—of texts and people—in order to insist that the workings of ideology (in this case, race and racism) are in fact *obvious*. In one lengthy scene, Ifemelu and her boyfriend attend a dinner party with a group of academics; the conversation turns, as always, to race when a character insists on reading one of Ifemelu's blog posts aloud (entitled "Friendly Tips for the American Non-Black: How to React to an American Black Talking About Blackness"). The post begins: "Dear American Non-Black, if an American Black person is telling you about an experience about being black, please do not eagerly bring up examples from your own life…Don't say it's just like antisemitism. It's not." Three pages later, the post concludes: "Hear what is being said. And remember that it's not about you. American Blacks…are just telling you what is" (326-8).

In its metafiction, *Americanah* argues that interpretive possibilities are indeed constrained, whether by the approaches or biases of particular reading communities or by the market forces mediating textual production and reception. Ifemelu's boyfriend repeatedly insists that she consider her political "responsibility" as a popular blogger to *inform* her audience: "Remember people are not reading you as entertainment, they're reading you as cultural commentary." The argument reminds us that approaches to texts, themselves mediated, mediate readings—and that reading has consequences. In her own defense, Ifemelu responds: "I don't want to explain, I want to observe" (313). Directing the novel's readers to take the text as

"observation," the dialogue meanwhile describes reading as a motivated and fraught activity, no matter how much Ifemelu hopes to control her work's interpretations. Of course, within the world of the text, Ifemelu's blog *is* cultural commentary (that is, opposed to fiction); whether her observations are supplemented by explications does not interfere with their presumed delivery of the author's (Ifemelu's) reality. This is a productive tension at the core of *Americanah*'s metafiction: that scenes of reading, including directions to readers on how (not) to "read" others, are encountered by readers *of* the novel as fiction, and by audiences *in* the text as "truth." (Those directions may be summed up as, "hear what is being said.") By hailing readers—of a text by an African writer speaking to U.S. audiences—the directions resonate with U.S. readers, while at the same time, the novel continues to question the extent to which "hearing" is possible. In other words, it asks what mediations occur in readings—including genre expectations, which for "African literature," have been historically powerful forces.

Meanwhile, Ifemelu begins receiving invitations to give public talks and corporate workshops on "diversity" on the authority of her blogosphere fame. After an "honest" talk to a small company in Ohio, she receives an email accusing her of being "racist":

> The point of diversity workshops, or multicultural talks, was not to inspire any real change but to leave people feeling good about themselves. They did not want the content of her ideas; they merely wanted the gesture of her presence…And so, in the following weeks…she began to say what they wanted to hear, none of which she would ever write on her blog, because she knew that the people who read her blog were not the same people who attended her workshops. During her talks, she said: "America has made great progress for which we should be very proud." In her blog she wrote: *Racism should never have happened and so you don't get a cookie for reducing it* (307).

The inclusion of multiple readerships *and* multiple authors, throughout the novel, challenges the presumption that text and reader engage one another in an isolated relationship (and by extension, projections of an essentialized author-figure or reader-figure). By including and juxtaposing both statements, just as Ifemelu "writes" them for distinct audiences, the text

directs attention toward the *production* of texts and discourses as opposed to the ways in which discourses offer transparency to information or authority—even Ifemelu's own. The varying use of pronouns—"*we* should be very proud" versus "*you* don't get a cookie"—reflects her ability to strategically traverse and inhabit varying positions of narrative authority. At the same time, readers register this strategy precisely because the character is so valued, symbolically and economically, *for* her representation of ethnic authority (and so in a position to have an audience, to begin with)—"representation" being key, because readers within and outside the text now understand there is no there, necessarily, there.

Constantly, the text reminds readers of the relative positioning of the various agents involved in the production of literature. A minor character offers the self-reflexive "lesson" that "You can't write an honest novel about race in this country. If you write about how people are really affected by race, it'll be too *obvious*…If you're going to write about race, you have to make sure it's so lyrical and subtle that the reader who doesn't read between the lines won't even know it's about race." *Americanah*'s audience is precluded from making such a mistake, and rather is provoked to reflect upon the very subject position of "reader" (and in particular, "reader" of a novel "about race"). Another character responds: "We are very ideological about fiction in this country…You can't even read American fiction to get a sense of how actual life is lived these days" (336-7). The text de-problematizes narrative authority in its flattening of each secondary character to undifferentiated observer-status. Describing *itself* as "too obvious," the texts absolves readers of the responsibility to "read between the lines." Rather, they should attempt to simply "hear what is being said." When read as documentation in this way, *Americanah* not only describes U.S.-specific modes of racialization, but also reading itself as a

potentially dehumanizing activity. The novel accounts for the inevitably interpretive reading practices of everyday life—many of which may be overdetermined by structural racisms.

"The perfect selection"

For university common reading programs, the stated values of multiculturalism, diversity, et cetera, require selected texts to be legibly representative of (cultural, ethnic, racial, national) *difference*. African writers are prominent in the significant sub-market for texts with "immigrant" themes, including Adichie—*Americanah* and her other texts—as well as Imbolo Mbue and Yaa Gyasi, though not *nearly* in a "6 to 1" ratio to non-African texts as Peter Wood claimed in the 2013 NAS study. The common reading market, then, illustrates how texts that metafictionally respond to receptive conditions—that "teach" or "retrain" approaches to reading cultural others—do so through various modes of performance of those very conditions, including the value placed on ethnic authority. However, *Americanah* differs from *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* in its insistence on the diversity inherent to both audiences *and* informants, in or from the U.S., Africa, or elsewhere. In this way it embodies, as Huggan puts it, the type of "anthropology in African writing that is…*about* a cultural politics of reading in which the desire for 'information' itself becomes deeply suspect" (emphasis mine) (57). Given the cynicism in Adichie's novel toward narrative authority—especially from ethnic informants—how are we to understand the text's value as mobilized by the common reads market? The text delivers "information" with a heavy hand through so many blog posts, and at the same time, it asks readers to be wary of ethnographic or otherwise reductive readings. How, then, do common reading programs encourage and mediate ways of reading *Americanah,* and how do readers (including student readers) understand the text's value? Huggan goes on to claim that in these

African texts, "deployment of strategically exotic modes of representation…has a destabalizing effect on the readers in addresses, because it reminds these readers of their interpretive limits" (56). Common reading programs, and the virtual piles of mediating paratexts produced by administrators, faculty, and students, allow us to assess how and whether the destabilization of receptive conditions for African literature actually takes place.

Americanah seems to occupy a unique space in the hearts and minds of common reading program administrators—bestowing confidence in its own effectiveness to convey the most primary program values. Multiple programs have reported that the selection process for *Americanah* was the easiest of any text in program history. According to a student blog at Mount Holyoke College, the novel was "overwhelmingly voted for by over 900 faculty, students, and staff in the first ever campus community selected Common Read" in 2015 (previous selections having been chosen through a more conventional faculty and staff committee system) (Mount). When Pomona College chose *Americanah*, the program for the first time purchased and mailed 500 copies of the book to students, faculty, and staff *in addition to* the entire incoming first year class (Gordon). And at Penn State, where engagement with the Penn State Reads program has diminished to the point of its recent dismantling, PSR Committee Co-Chair Barry Bram says that "selection of *Americanah* was pretty easy. It dealt with race, class, international issues, women's issues…It was the exception. It generated engagement and excitement across campus, where other books had excitement by discipline but not across the board" (Bram). Or as his Co-Chair Jacqueline Edmondson put it, the novel was selected "because it tells the story of *one woman's* understanding of ethnicity and race in today's globalized world. It explores the *universal human experience* through people who… struggle to adjust to different norms" (emphasis mine) (Hottle).

Other reasons for the unparalleled attraction of *Americanah* to administrators seem to include its dovetailing with campus diversity initiatives—or rather, the ways in which it can be construed as supporting those initiatives. While the same could be said of any "diverse" text, in discussing the relevance of initiatives to common reads programs, some universities hold *Americanah* as a benchmark example. That the text may be mobilized as a novel about "diversity"—or rather, "difference"—in a wholly generalized sense and at the same time hailed as representing particular identity "themes" (race, class, gender) is the tension at the core of its success on this market. In 2016, Dartmouth College released a new Diversity Initiative which involved "recalibrating" Freshman orientation activities, including the common reading program; the program chose *Americanah* that year because, according to the Dean of Student Life, it "resonate[s] with different experiences" writ large (Dartmouth). The same year, Kingsborough Community College in New York—one of just a few community colleges with common reads programs—chose *Americanah* for its KCC Reads. Interestingly, on its remarkably thorough website (which includes extensive resources for reading, teaching, and contextualizing the novel for students and faculty), a KCC Reads administrator explicitly discusses *Americanah*'s value in both more broad and more specific terms than most other schools:

> Adichie's novel is, in a word, perfect for our student body. It deals in a sustained and smart way with issues important on campus: immigration, first and foremost, as well as gender, race and class. It is appropriate for courses looking at immigration and globalization, class and class cultures, American Studies, and race and Africana Studies, among others. *Americanah* is also a highly (indeed easily) readable text, an engrossing "page-turner"…The text therefore works as well in developmental English…as it does in core content courses; and, though rather long, it can be parsed into sub-sections without difficulty, and taught in part or full…A teaching text works best when it is interesting, understandable, addresses important topical concerns, and when students can identify personally with character, story, theme. That all of this is true of *Americanah* may explain why it won the committee vote in an unprecedented landslide—for the first time in my experience, nearly every voting member—including students, alumni, staff and faculty—chose this book.

> For KCC Reads, then, this year's focus is immigration, immigrant life and the residency, legal, social and other structural concerns facing this population. This means our work for the coming academic naturally "plugs in" to other campus initiatives, such as Diversity Week…as well as to our Equity initiative and other priority projects (Kingsborough).

While many students presumably do not encounter these materials before reading the novel (if ever), I take the selection process and associated paratexts as points of mediation in readings of *Americanah,* including in terms of the novel's representative "diversity." The values expressed in the KCC Reads' statement not only articulate the program's investments, but how the text will be framed for student readers in various contexts as a "teaching text": first and foremost, as "identifiable." The program makes clear how it will "match" the more prevalent concerns of its students to uses of the novel in teaching contexts. In this way, while making no bones about approaching the literary text as "information," the statement does not presume the text's inherent "authority," and rather presumes that *how* it's read for authority matters—and that the subject of authority is flexible. For this program, the novel's use-value is explicitly context-specific. It also takes *Americanah* as reflective of so many identity categories—so that conveniently, any student identified in common with the novel's subjects in terms of gender or race or class or national identity will have means of "identification" with the text itself, perhaps inscribing those categories as more fixed than fluid or overlapping. But the program does not take the text as "teaching" its *own* difference (according to a "from elsewhere" framing of the text's value), and instead takes it as able to "speak to" students in various positions, in a somewhat more democratic relationship. The common reads market is, after all, as heterogeneous as the schools themselves; as a New York City community college, the immigrant or first-generation student population at Kingsborough is presumably far higher than at, for example, Mount Holyoke or Pomona Colleges. While these works of metafiction are generally

valued across common reads programs for how they are explicitly teacherly, the student-readers themselves are inconsistent. KCC Reads' framing of *Americanah* gestures to how a student body comprised of students not *only* of U.S. backgrounds will interact with the text in non-uniform ways, precisely because all readers will interact with texts in non-uniform ways. Here, the value term "identification"—still implying access to cultural knowledge through reading—is not implying that identification must take place *across* ethnic difference. The program's values seem to "hear," or least coincide with, the argument about multiplicity and malleability of audiences within the text itself.

Of course, all of this runs somewhat contrary to the idea that a novel's value turns on some form of "literariness" inherent to the text. As the NAS has noted, literariness is utterly beside the point for many common reading programs—and if anything, "teaching text" ostensibly precludes literary complexity or integrity. *Americanah* was chosen for its formal qualities only to the extent that "it can be parsed into subsections without difficulty, and taught in part or in full." Meanwhile, it is the same text appreciated for its "complexity" by prize committees, reviewers, and other taste-makers and readers. Indeed, while common reads programs and their institutions vary greatly, the market itself is the sum of all programs, taken together by publishers invested in a homogenous group to which marketing materials can be pitched. And while programs are largely representative of, and partly substantive of, the broader U.S. consumer market, they are also distinct from it. A crucial aspect of this distinction is the relative positioning of texts, by publishers, universities, and other mediating agents between text and readers, as *either* "literary" or "informational." For common reads programs, which more often than not consume works of nonfiction, novels are valuable for prompting an ostensibly different, more accessible, or more compelling mode of engagement for students (Bram).

Otherwise, discussions of content far outweigh discussions of form in common reads discourses (itself a distinction of this market, in that the two are perceived as separable). Likewise, students approach and value the texts as informative. A Penn State student, in an online reflection, registered her frustration that the book was not only "about race," and dealt with other themes and indeed, characters other than the "teacher" herself, Ifemelu:

> The more-or-less obvious goal in writing this book was to talk about race in a blunt, straightforward way, and Adichie certainly minces no words when she talks about race…But so much of the book is dedicated to detailing every moment Ifemelu and Obinze spent as kids and…other issues Ifemelu/Chimamanda faced as an immigrant that it takes away from not being roundabout at the actual race-centered parts.

Responses to *Americanah* and other texts illustrate how students, contrary to the NAS' report, are hardly a "captive readership"—in fact, as often as not, student-produced materials are tellingly critical. This student does not desire "complexity," and seems to prefer the text come to her "parsed into subsections" rather than as a novel to be "appreciated" as a cultural/aesthetic product.

The student, in line with values fundamental to common reads programs, as well as reading habits conventional to U.S. consumers of "foreign" texts, takes the text as "information" in another way: through conflating author and narrator. Indeed, a strategy common to *Americanah*, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, and so much other metafiction is the deployment of a first-person narrator whose biography tauntingly resembles, but is not the same as, the author's. The "you" addressed by narrators may be slippery, and readers are more than capable—as is evidenced in so many responses, by reviewers, institutions and students alike—of slipping out from under direct address, and instead taking the address as directed toward those *other* potentially racist readers. (The appeal of these texts lies partly in the capital with which readers

can bestow themselves, for "getting it.") But the "I" within the text appears fixed, by varying degrees, from all sides.

The author/text conflation by markets, especially the common reads market, pervades students' approaches to the texts. A high premium, economic and symbolic, is placed on author visits to inflate the (symbolic) value of common reads—and "relatability" is all the more potent when it has a living figure attached. A crucial mediating force in the valuation of *Americanah* on the common reads market—especially in valuations by its actual readers, students—is Adichie herself. At Pomona College, a student blogger wrote that Adichie's visit "generated a social media mania. Students excitedly posted selfies with Adichie, and many changed their profile pictures to their photos with Adichie on the same night" (*pomona*). It makes sense that Adichie—young, fashionable, and a charming public speaker—holds such appeal for students, and in turn, she as a public figure has everything to do with her text's receptions on this market (and in establishing such a market for her novel, to begin with). As with Ifemelu, the "gesture of her presence" is worth quite a lot—for her visit to Penn State, around $15,000—at least as much as the "content of her ideas," which seem related to her on-campus lectures, interviews, and other events (i.e. *not* the content of the novel) (Bram). For Penn State, the contents of Adichie's text *or* campus talks were secondary to how program administrators perceived the value of her visit; the mere gesture of her presence was well worth her fee. "She's such a role model for young, African American and African women," said Bram. "We are a predominantly white institution in the middle of central Pennsylvania, so especially for some of our women of color, seeing that the university chose and valued a book by a woman of color like Adichie helped them to see the university as as diverse and inclusive as possible" (Bram). After all, one implicit aim of any common reads program is to sell its own university to its own students (and by extension, future

students, alums, and donors). This does not preclude the value of representation—of historically under-represented authors—for readers and students. The common reads market simply makes explicit how "authority" is a primary term by which "diverse" authors are valued and, by extension, how the institutions that legitimate the "diverse" author/text, also legitimate themselves.

Evidencing the field

Common reading programs allow us to account for contingencies in literary receptions, but also how institutions of higher education amplify U.S. liberal ideals—primarily "diversity" and "multiculturalism"—*through* literature (including through canon formation, to be taken up in Chapter 2). These are the very value terms, as Rey Chow has argued, that effectively obscure the U.S.-specific tension between inclusionist ideals and exclusionary practices: a tension which itself produces ethnic difference (i.e., produces ethnicity itself), since difference must be categorized and marked, hierarchically, in order to be "tolerated" (28-9). Rhetorically, the terms "democratize" racial and ethnic margins but of course, the margins benefit some and disenfranchise others. Historically, such ideals have been at the heart of the mission of the humanities in particular; at a moment, now, when the humanities are being systemically decommissioned, common reading programs show us the cultural capital still associated, in some contexts, with *reading*. The programs are supported and marketed in part because colleges presume that humanities *values* hold symbolic capital for students (and donors). While students are encouraged to read and thus better "understand" cultural difference, the opportunities for undergraduates to actually engage in cultural studies (within academia) are shrinking.

Precisely because colleges are invested in their own performances of liberalism, they can reflect how terms of literary value shift in response to the work of literature—it would seem, in a trend toward ever more performative self-consciousness. "You can't write an honest novel about race in this country," says the character in *Americanah*, but that is precisely what literary markets are clamoring for— that is, authors of color who will deliver "authenticity" of experience and indictments of racism—and indeed how *Americanah* itself has been successfully marketed. The liberal white readers hailed in these texts may be those who, in actuality, are most likely to *dis*-identify, i.e., to self-congratulate for "getting it." Meanwhile, texts continue to do their work, where responding to the market also means opportunities to be even more direct about, or formally descriptive of, institutionalized racism.

For the 2019-2020 academic year, the most commonly selected work of fiction was Tommy Orange's 2018 *There There*, a novel about the value of "native informancy" if ever there was one. In a prologue, Cheyenne and Arapaho author Orange speaks to readers in order to be sure we understand—before we encounter the fiction—just how disenfranchised indigenous American stories have been, specifically. In a few pages, Orange offers a brief print history of indigenous fiction, corrects the myth of the origins of Thanksgiving, describes a few indigenous massacres in brutal detail, then surveys common indigenous stereotypes:

> We've been defined by everyone else and continue to be slandered despite easy-to-look-up-on-the-internet facts about the realities of our histories and current state as a people. We have the sad, defeated Indian silhouette, and the heads rolling down temple stairs, we have it in our heads, Kevin Costner saving us, John Wayne's six-shooter saving us…All the way from the top of Canada, the top of Alaska, down to the bottom of South America, Indians were removed, then reduced to a feathered image[18] (7).

[18] The novel is properly metafictional aside from the Prologue; for example, one chapter is mostly monologue by a filmmaker character who is pleading for a grant: "I want to bring something new to the vision of the Native experience as it's seen on screen. We haven't seen the Urban Indian story. What we've seen is full of the kinds of stereotypes that are the reason no one is interested in the Native story in general…" (40).

The book was selected by at least a dozen colleges and universities for that academic year alone,[19] the publisher (Penguin Random House) presumably selling thousands of copies directly to common reading programs. Indigenous American writers have been so under-represented in the landscape of literary fiction that, productively, the market has arrived at a moment when that fact makes the text highly marketable.

The common reading market also exhibits notable trends in the broader literary market, such as the drastically increased representation of African (or first generation African American) writers on common reading lists, alongside bestseller lists. The ways in which *Americanah* positions itself/is positioned as the "perfect selection" may have effectively expanded the market for other African texts. Authors represented on common reading lists and/or marketed by publishers directly *to* the common reading market for 2019-2020 include Yaa Gyasi, Imbolo Mbue, Ishmael Beah, Abi Daré, Kamel Daoud, Rajia Hassib, Candice Iloh—and that's just the fiction. What common reading programs can teach *critics*, then, is about a market for ethnic difference that conditions, but is also conditioned by, literary production.

[19] *There There* remains a highly popular selection for the 2020-2021 academic year, according to Penguin Random House's robust *commonreads.com*.

Chapter 2

The New (Anti-)Campus Novel: Revisiting Representation in Black American Fiction

As a site of value production, the university makes the contentions involved in literary valuations more explicit, perhaps, than any other site. Leading up to and since the canon wars of the 1990s, questions about the value and situation of "ethnic literature" in relation to an ostensibly broader or more primary "American literature" have been persistent—as have questions of *how* those values come to be produced, sustained, and/or disrupted. In his influential 1993 *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*, John Guillory described the problem as one of competing imaginaries: the "imaginary totality of works" that constitutes any canon or counter-canon—the body of works' unity to itself, constructed via syllabi and anthologies—and the imaginary homogeneity of any given culture, as (mis)represented through the body of works (36-37). In order to restructure terms of value, though—where the value of studying and teaching canonical (mostly white) literature is given, while "ethnic" literature must be legitimized in specific ways—a legible list, or counter-canon, must be organized. For Guillory, it is crucial that we understand these lists for what they are: highly mediated, homogenizing, and necessary. Ultimately, though, the politics of list-making are somewhat beside the point, as canon debates tend to elide how higher education restricts access to the cultural capital that, if more evenly distributed across lines of race and class, might make debates over how and whom to "represent" both less abstracted and less necessary (36-39).

Further, as Roderick Ferguson argues in *The Order of Things: The University and Its Pedagogies of Minority Difference*, alternative and revisionist canons, while crucial for advancing reader access to marginalized texts (and vice versa), preempt redistributions of power in other ways. Rhetorics of multiculturalism that arose in the 1970s and 80s, alongside and in

tension with newly prominent fields of literary/cultural studies such as American Ethnic studies, offered means to obfuscate the exclusionary politics of the academy. "Selective affirmation," or an emphasis on inclusivity and diversity in *texts*, could be regarded as a conciliatory (if not subjugating) move—for Ferguson, in response to the demands of anti-racist student movements (180-9). The selective affirmation of certain *kinds* of ethnic literatures, then, continues to symbolically address what Guillory has explained as a tension between "a politics of representation in the canon" and "a democratic representational politics" in US universities (30). As Ferguson writes, the lived heterogeneities of US minority groups would "stretch the academy and the state's capacities for identification"; minorities must be organized into already legible groups which texts may then be said to authentically represent (189).

While Ferguson and Guillory are right to point out the limits of marginalized texts to de-marginalize people, they under-emphasize the roles of not only texts, but also their readers and other mediating agents, in how ethnicity itself is made legible and legitimized. The academy as an institutional site of racialization might be best understood through those cultural products that position themselves as conversant with traditional techniques of legitimation and with their own potential receptions. We can look to literary texts—particularly, those that describe the racializing operations of the academy—to investigate: what are the real and perceived roles of academia in broader schemas of literary and racial value-production? What are the present relationships between academic politics of representation, and the authors *and* readers selectively "represented"?

The case of "African American literature" as an imaginary totality—and as arguably the first American literature to bear the burden of legitimizing itself as such—is foundational to the production of literary ethnicity in the US. And as Kenneth Warren argues in *What Was African*

American Literature?, critics "cannot treat African American literature as a literature apart from the necessary conditions that made it a literature"—namely, "white suspicions of black inferiority" (28). In other words, we cannot treat "African American literature" *except* as an imaginary, a flattening fiction both responsive to American racism and largely constructed, for better and worse, within academic institutions. At the same time, the question of representing Black Americanness through literature becomes more fraught as the fiction of any homogenous American "Black experience" becomes harder to ignore in the twenty-first century—and harder to articulate.

In his 2013 "Loosening the Straightjacket: Rethinking Racial Representation in African American Anthologies," Gene Andrew Jarrett recalls Henry Louis Gates' introduction to the 1997 Norton Anthology of African American literature—specifically Gates' claim that African American literary scholars (including anthologizers) have "needed to *construct* a canon before it could be deconstructed" (161). Gates also cites the fact that the previous edition of the Norton anthology sold widely to non-academic readers as evidence that those readers desire and value self-representation in literary canons. But as Jarrett notes, these points presume a readership for whom a representative list, even as a purported imaginary, is not only necessary but appealing. A primary if implicit rationale for anthologization is that of readers' "overarching desire for literary self-portraiture"—a rationale that, in the twenty-first century, "runs counter to the increasing diversity of the African Diaspora in the US as well as to the increasing ambivalence, if not contestation, of the nation's readers over the dominance of race in categorizing this group." So while audiences want and deserve some form of "self-portraiture," they may also be "awaiting their own disarticulation from the straightjacket of racial authenticity and representation" (162-3). Jarrett, himself an anthologizer, understands that anthologies are key sites for understanding

and critiquing how literary ideologies of race are organized (162). But these organizations—as indeed expressed, concretely or imaginatively, in the forms of lists—are increasingly described and critiqued by literary texts themselves. This chapter takes "African American literature" as a condition under which contemporary Black texts are produced and received in the US. It also takes an emergent genre of fiction *about* "African American literature" as its own mediating agent, revealing and re-ordering the term's significations—its persistent influence and increasingly evident arbitrariness—for its readers within and beyond academia.

Several recent works of Black American fiction make very explicit the desire of writers and their readers for "disarticulation" precisely *through* rendering the academy as a powerful, if abstracted, "straightjacket." These texts are asserting themselves, their readers, and academic institutions as relational agents in the field of literary value production, in ways that are specific to our present moment. Ironically enough, it is the academy—where, in the work of theorizing politics of representation, readers are ostensibly most self-conscious—that these novels describe as deploying the most unself-conscious forms of liberal racism. But the literary texts are hyper-self-conscious about their own receptions in terms of *other*, already established as valuable, Black American texts. These novels describe fundamental inequities around questions of access in academia: the very conditional terms by which representations of Blackness are valued in both texts and people and by which associated forms of cultural/educational capital are bestowed. And they make clear the role of the university itself in broader constructions of taste and value. The disillusionment with academia by Black academics is set in relation to broader disillusionment—specifically, with how Black American and otherwise "ethnic" texts continue to be taken up, tokenized, canonized, and restricted within the academic literary field.

These texts comprise a new genre: a sort of anti-campus novel, including fiction by Black American and international writers such as Paul Beatty, Percival Everett, Colson Whitehead, Mat Johnson, Michael Thomas, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Teju Cole, and Okey Ndibe. Many of these feature main characters who are "fallen," fired, or disgraced academics; many blatantly disparage what Guillory refers to as the "political fantasy" of literary scholarship (i.e., that the work of scholarly reading is de facto political) ("The Ethical Practice" 4). These are explicit narrative critiques of universities as sites of marginalization; their scenes of academia set texts in critical, if not outright oppositional, relation toward "scholarly" modes of reading and classifying both texts and people.

At the same time, these texts often explicitly mark themselves as fluent in discipline-specific discourses of literary/critical scholarship—leveraging "insider" status and rhetoric as platforms for critique, but also to demonstrate what these fluencies otherwise allow. In every instance, the relation between characters and the academy is itself deeply ambivalent. On the one hand, these novels construe the academy as highly consequential—setting conditional terms of value (as written into canons) for literary production, and for racial formation. On the other hand, many of these are not remotely realistic depictions (as many readers will doubtless recognize). As a body, these texts create a phantasm—the Liberal/Racist University—exaggerated via satire, estranged via fantasy, and/or regressed to modes of reading that many academics would recognize as out of date, or out of touch. Given that so many of these writers are academics themselves (or presumably familiar with trends in scholarship), the non-realism can only be deliberate—and serves up a ridiculous, discriminatory, non-progressive and yet determining effigy, ripe for critique. Meanwhile, the campus as a setting is often evacuated from the text.

These books are not about what the university *is* but what it signifies, and how its schemas of value infiltrate other reading contexts and conditions of production.

The meta-fictionality of these texts—all of which are in some way about Black writers and academics, confronting receptions of their own and their works' "Blackness"—prompts readers to appreciate how race-as-value is mediated by ever-evolving, and also remarkably stagnant, institutional forces. This chapter examines three twenty-first century texts that exemplify, in very different ways, this new metafictional genre. Michael Thomas' *Man Gone Down*, Mat Johnson's *Pym*, and Percival Everett's *Erasure* all feature disillusioned and deeply ambivalent Black academics, preoccupied with conditions of literary production (their own and/or writ large) and the consequences to racial formation. These are narrators who have been marginalized by, if not excluded from, the academic realm and/or the literary market for their insufficient performances of "Blackness"; each confronts common, pre-established terms of value for writers and academics of color. At the same time, they deploy metafiction to both describe and amplify the function of academia as mediating institution: overblowing its influence to undermine it altogether for various reading publics. Scholarly readers are both satirized and "in on the joke," and readers outside academia get the institution at its racializing worst. (Additionally, the texts productively trouble the distinction between "scholarly" and "everyday" ways of reading.) As is common to the genre, these novels use a heavy hand to narrate scenes of reading and writing to leverage their critiques.

Man Gone Down is about the imaginary itself: the role of the list, or a "representative" lineage of African American literary tradition, in determining the Black writer's reception and legibility (even to himself). Centering on a writer steeped in the paralyzing specter of literary tradition, the novel also evidences the role of reading in undoing race-based classifications of

literature. *Pym* explores the very production of the imaginary, or how racial logics are produced through literary traditions, to begin with. Taking on the early American canon for its role in US racial formation, the novel turns toward the absurd—to mirror and magnify the evolutions of American racism over the past two centuries. *Erasure* describes the broader market for literary "Blackness," of which academia is one part. It broadens the scope to other agents and institutions (reviewers, publishers, prize committees, the media) to show the diffuseness of power, and the relational ways in which the burden of representation continues to mediate Black American literary production and reception.

Like all the texts in this genre, these three anticipate audiences for whom the primary value in a work of Black literature is its "authentic" representation of both American Blackness *and* some lineage of Black American literary/intellectual tradition. At the same time, they are responsive to and anticipatory of the "ambivalence of readers" toward race as organizing metric. In this way, they reflect the current receptive field: inhabited by readers who recognize racial "authenticity" as absurd, and tradition as arbitrary, but also undergirded by the same terms of value at the level of discourse. This slew of twenty-first century texts shows us how canons *and* markets are products of, and productive of, these values. Moreover, they illustrate the role of fiction to estrange readers from institutionalized ways of imagining Blackness and Black American literature.

The problem of the list

The unnamed narrator of Michael Thomas's 2007 novel *Man Gone Down* is a Harvard graduate school dropout and father of three young children in New York, under a deadline to scrape together several thousand dollars over the course of a long summer weekend so that he

and his wife can afford to send their children back to private school. A struggling writer, at the outset of the novel he has been working construction to make ends meet—and meeting the financial deadline seems unlikely. His white wife, Clair, has taken the kids to her parents' for the weekend so that he is left alone with the weight of his family's expectations and with his own despairing thoughts. The semi-stream-of-consciousness narrative reflects an almost hapless intellectualism and self-reflexivity; the drama, as it unfolds over a four-day period, is all internal. His most recurrent reflections are on the subject of race: how he feels himself to be seen, read, and overwritten *in terms of* his Blackness by strangers, friends, and his family.

His reception as a (Black) writer is much on his mind early in the novel: "My last agent," he recalls, "told me that I needed to do some serious editing, that it didn't seem *urban* enough, but that mostly, somewhere in the philosophy, I'd lost the story and, therefore, the emotional core…Perhaps I have no narrative" (41). At the root of the narrator's existential despair is his sense of having failed: as a scholar, a poet, a novelist, and, most discomfortingly (to echo another famously unnamed narrator), a "credit to his race." He reflects constantly on his childhood in late 1970s Boston, abandoned by an abusive (white) father and raised by his (Black) alcoholic mother; he recalls his mother's desperate hope that he take his place within a very specific narrative, around which a sense of loss runs through the entire novel:

> It's a strange thing to go through life as a social experiment—bused, tested, and bused elsewhere, groomed for leadership. When I was a boy, my room was full of great men's images—posters of King, Malcolm X… Frederick Douglass, Du Bois, and a Booker T. Washington mural… (77).

This is the first time readers encounter the refrain of that first phrase—as well as a recurrent *listing* (which goes on and on): of the names of the great, dead, Black American writers and thinkers that loom large in the historical record and cultural imagination. Already, the narrator's very conditions of "success" are in terms of those of images (i.e. an imaginary) that are

not only falsely unifying, but are also passed, in the past. "It's a strange thing to go through life as a social experiment," he later muses—"especially when the ones who conceived the experiment, the visionaries with sight of the end, with an understanding of the means, are all gone. No more Du Bois…no more King…" (99). He is unmoored by the inability to locate himself in the terms (or among the names) by which others understand and want to value him, from his literary agent on the one end—for whom the representative Blackness signaled by "urbanity" is that of a street literature bearing no relation to the narrator's work—to his mother on the other, who projects a lineage of Black intellectualism upon him. (His ability to meet these expectations—beginning, in theory, with his busing into predominately white, upper-class schools and granted access to forms of symbolic/academic capital that will allow him to *transcend* class and race to some degree—*is* the "social experiment.") Unable and unwilling to enter into the terms of discourse, he begins to lose language itself:

> It's a strange thing to go through life as a social experiment. If you were born of ideas, then all you have are ideas.
>
> …I feel artificial, manmade, like saccharin or LSD, something synthetic that was fucked up but issued nonetheless. My internal conflicts need be expressed not in words but through the *power cosmic*…Then love me or hate me, you'd at least see (98-99).

The "ideas" that constitute the narrator—that "synthetically" produce his subjectivity—are those drawn from bodies (lists) of Black literatures that precede him, and over-determine the very language to which he has internal, let alone external, expression. But of course, the foundational artificial idea—"fucked up but issued nonetheless"—is race itself. Given the very embeddedness of the ideology into language, and the dependence on pre-ordered racial categories for legibility, the expression he's seeking is through a "*power cosmic*"—something impossibly potent and unrealizable, before language and beyond racialization.

Writing, then, has not offered any relief in its additional registers of mediation, including its dependencies on markets (economic or symbolic) for race that constrain production. Writing also binds him, for better and worse, to Black American literary tradition—in ways that are self-imposed as much as imposed by market forces:

> I don't remember all of my desperations: desperate to publish before this author died…either to have them validate me or for me to tell them that they were wrong. I once was desperate to have writing do things, to contain transformative powers, but writing has never done anything for me. I trick myself for a moment…[try] to conceive the minds of unknown agents, faceless editors, and book review consumers. But part of me goes with it, chasing the words that follow the image as it moves up like braiding smoke offerings of ritualistic purification. It will never sell (277-8).

There is no safe or sure means of representation in which ideologies of race do not precede him; here, he speaks to the fantasy of writing's power to transform the self, but the novel is one long musing on the inability (or the loss of the ability) to locate subjecthood outside the projected imaginaries of race and literary tradition. The narrator no longer seeks or expects legitimation by audiences/consumers, because he understands those receptions to be formative of his legible selfhood. Those audiences—real or imagined—bring him into being through *reading* and through racialization, as inextricably related. In the face of his own contingency, he "loses the narrative"—alongside the will to narrate, within the only discourse available.

At the same time, *Man Gone Down* is a narrative articulated *through* intertextual conversations with an intellectual lineage. The refrain, "It's strange to go through life as a social experiment" echoes the opening paragraph of *Souls of Black Folk*: "being a problem is a strange experience," writes Du Bois in 1903. This refers, of course, to the strange experience of double consciousness—and Thomas's novel can be read as describing the end game of double consciousness for a narrator who is so thoroughly aware and anticipatory of his own readings that he cannot think, let alone write, his way around them. Du Bois describes what he envisions

as the "end of striving" for the American Negro: "to be a co-worker in the kingdom of culture, to escape both death and isolation, to husband and use his best powers and his latent genius" (2)—in a time when Black artists might be relieved of the need to legitimate their very humanity to white audiences. As Gates and many following him have illustrated, the burden to represent humanity through writing is fundamental to conceptualizing any Black American literary tradition, as it has its roots in the earliest of Black American literatures: the slave narrative. And, the liberatory promise of writing is always already compromised when in the position of *needing* to justify subjecthood to an audience, or a culture, that regulates the terms of discourse ("Literary Theory" 40-43).

Man Gone Down is in fairly direct conversation with the presumption that writing (or literacy) is necessarily liberating—including from race and racism—for minoritized writers. The narrator longs to be a "co-worker in the kingdom of culture"—to "use his genius"—in ways that at once place him within a "tradition" and disarticulate the artist, writ large, from race. But as readers, we have the novel itself as a product in the "kingdom of culture," working self-consciously alongside contemporary and historical representations of Blackness—and describing both the pressure and the failure to imagine racial continuity. In this way, the novel sets itself in stark relation to the "realm of ideas," or of these imaginaries—most blatantly through its references to academia. Leslie Larkin, in *Race and the Literary Encounter*, writes that Black writers' self-conscious performances of race—beginning with those techniques used by slave narratives to manipulate white readerly sympathy—themselves comprise a Black American literary tradition, defined by its deployment of "a wealth of aesthetic and performative strategies designed to intervene in scenes of reading" (6). Those interventions are most effectively accomplished, Larkin argues, by those texts that make explicit "the embeddedness of literacy,

education, and literary publishing in asymmetrical social structures" (8-9). In its descriptions of academia as a "scene of reading", *Man Gone Down* describes both an institution invested in a series of imaginaries, abstracted from lived experiences of racialization—and at the same time productive of those very experiences, as the narrator makes all too clear to his readers.

We know from the beginning that he left graduate school "all-but-dissertation" to write novels and poetry—that is, to do work ostensibly more creative, less reiterative of tired ideas, less "artificial." "I never wrote that dissertation," he reflects on his time in the Harvard English department, "because what the fuck can you definitively say about anything unless you pretend? Act like some circus ape gesturing and mimicking…" (217). The image of the "ape gesturing and mimicking" is a comment on academic work in general, but also on what he experienced to be a coerced performativity of the Black scholar. He understands his work to have been valued to the extent that it mimicked, or was legible only in reference to, other Black American literary scholarship (Black literature *not* having been his field of expertise).

Moreover, he reflects on the means by which people of color have access to academia in the first place—that is, as he sees it, by coercion into "representative" performances of ethnicity:

> Most white folks believe the reason you've come in is to lift up your people. But you can't bring your people inside except compressed into a familiar story that's already been sanctioned. And you wouldn't be there in the first place unless you were a recognizable type: the noble savage, Uncle Tom, the Afro-Centric, the Oreo, the fool (147).

For a literary scholar (at Harvard, no less), he seems here to be overstating the reductive signifiers available—perhaps, in order to emphasize the unself-conscious entrenchment of old, racist stereotypes in even the most liberal gestures of inclusivity. He describes an institution necessarily exclusionary, tokenizing—in other words, "straightjacketing"; this statement can be read as applying to the terms of inclusion in the institution, and the canon(s). And, "lifting up your people" is rendered ironic by the staggering financial pressures he faces throughout the

novel. If anything, he seems to consider his time in graduate school as counter-productive toward, at least, upward economic mobility. Its symbolic associations are likewise denigrating; he bristles as a co-worker insists on calling him "professor" despite his attempts to refuse the nickname. (It is the only time we hear him referred to by *any* name other than "dad.") That academia signifies as *something* (status) in the eyes of others only emphasizes the *nothing* he understands it to be: the ways in which his educational capital, around which so much was projected, has been emptied of meaning.

Yet his ideas, as readers have access to them, reveal how his academic background and his internal, intertextual relationships allow productive self-articulation as much as constrain it. Furthermore, his *uses* of literature—his frame of self-reference composed of writers and texts—include a sort of solace. And the works he turns to are frequently those of canonical white and otherwise non-African American writers: TS Eliot is as often referenced as Ralph Ellison, Shakespeare (nearly) as often as Du Bois. The novel's constant metatextual gesturing toward "literature"—as an imaginary, but also as bodies and works of *people*—show it to be infinitely expansive, unclassifiable, and a means of reorienting ideology. Or rather, it should be. But relations with individual texts (not inherently racialized) are set in contrast to the ideological organization of those texts and bodies. Literature represents, in a sense, the inaccessible "power cosmic"; and the novel's intergenerational, intercultural pastiche of literary voices show at once how such pastiche works to structure the narrator's consciousness, and how at the same time he cannot deconstruct the ways that race gives rise to meaning. This is what the near-claustrophobic internalism of *Man Gone Down* allows: for its readers to confront the violent tension between the racializing logics that make value legible, and how the writer becomes *il*legible to himself in his refusal to recognize racial classifications as sane or real.

In the moment of this novel's production in the early twenty-first century US, race is far from mappable according to a Black/white matrix (if it ever was). But the ways in which "Blackness" is institutionally naturalized, including by the academy, are made inevasible by a writer-narrator with one white parent and one Black, who is vigilantly hyper-aware of the extent to which his value is tied to his Black "authenticity." This arises as he thinks about his children—one of whom looks Black and one who, he says, "looks like me—except he's white" (12). They too go without proper names—referred to as "C" and "X," as if named chemical substances; only his wife, not subject to continuous re-identification by racial metrics, is named. He watches as they teeter, in early childhood, on the edge of coming into racial consciousness (and for one of them, double consciousness). He is ceaselessly anticipating and evaluating his children's receptions in the world in terms of race. (When his mother-in-law visits, he describes her as "surveying the wreckage of miscegenation" in greeting her grandchildren.) As much as his family, across generations, renders racial "authenticity" absurd, the narrator cannot help but reproduce its gaze—because he himself experiences its everyday confinements. Despite their intimacy, he feels his wife "looks at me in two ways: one that says she knows me and one that says she doesn't" (239). She is deeply confused, for example, by his refusal to sign a petition to increase the diversity of the children's school curriculum; he understands the liberal gesture to be a self-gratifying signifier, and nothing more. Likewise, he regards his children differently; he doesn't worry about X (who is "white"), in part because he doesn't know or understand enough to. "I do not know his mind," he reflects. "All I have are reports from the interior"—meanwhile commenting on the limits of the novel itself to communicate experience. Guiltily, he pays more attention to C, in part from desire to "pass on what I've learned"—as a Black man by default, in a culture with "no schema or box to fit him in" (16-18).

In this way, the novel goes as far as one can to de-articulate and de-familiarize its readers from the schema or straightjacket of racial representation. *Man Gone Down* is a narrative *about* the power and the failure of narrative to undo the work of discourse (and in particular, how race is written into language). If race, as Gates argued in "Loose Canons," is best understood as a "trope of ultimate, irreducible differences between cultures," when it comes to literature we should attend to the very "act of language that defines a black text" (8). And yet as Jarrett writes, the "one drop rule" persists in organizations of literary texts, such that African American literatures are uniquely construed according to a Black/white matrix that is well recognized, by its organizers, as the trope that it is. While academia is only one among so many sites of value (re)producing these metrics (and itself far from homogenous or consistent), in Thomas's novel it serves as a site to embody the most contradictory of approaches to race. The "acts of language" that set the bounds of "Black literature" need to be thoroughly troubled, in ways that deregulate not only literary classifications, but also open up new modes of valuation for organizationally challenging texts. Fortunately, a wealth of fiction has recently emerged to direct readers to reconsider literary/racial modes of valuation.

If an assumption underlying ethnic canon formation is that exhibiting "authentic" or representative Black American experiences is not only possible but necessary, then one of its consequences, writes Jarrett, "has been the denigration or neglect of a class of writers whose literary works defy the protocols of ethnic authenticity and representation" (167). In a sense, Thomas's novel proves this to be true in its singular concern with only the most canonical, recognizable writers. Yet the novel itself defies these "protocols" in its insistence on writing, but moreover *reading*, in opposition to race-based assignations, as well as to the very notion that some texts are *for* some audiences, and vice versa. *Man Gone Down* does not anticipate an

audience that would recognize itself in its narrative (or take the novel as "self-portraiture")—because what would there be to recognize? Alongside our disappeared narrator, the narrative of race has, from the start, already been lost.

"Diversity" and absurdity

In *Signs and Cities: Black Literary Postmodernism*, Madhu Dubey argues that while Black American writers have always deployed aesthetic strategies to disrupt (or in Larkin's terms, intervene in) dehumanizing, fetishizing, or otherwise essentializing readings, some of those strategies have become so generic as to "render the romance of race more palatable in postmodern times" (10). Present-day readers of literary fiction are all too comfortable with (formal) alienation—such that if anything, engagements with race become abstracted or decontextualized (10-11). If formerly disruptive aesthetics have become palatable within the general literary field, by what strategies might contemporary Black texts effect their interventions—toward readers and markets interesting in maintaining the margins of "race" and "literature"? How might they indict those means of value production, including canon formation, that hinge on marginalizing, if not omitting, texts that "defy the protocols of ethnic authenticity"?

Perhaps, through some combination of explicit description, direct address—and utter irrationality at the levels of both form and content. Works by writers such as Paul Beatty, Percival Everett, T. Geronimo Johnson, and Mat Johnson, among others, confront their own potential marginalizations as experimental writers of color. They figure literary markets interested in tokenizing and/or erasing non-whiteness; often, that market is figured as the academy. To level their critiques, these writers employ familiar traits of the "postmodern" novel—pastiche, self-referentiality, genre hybridity—and then, in very different ways, reorient

narratives toward the de-familiarizingly bizarre. These texts mirror a restrictive receptive landscape, governed by inclusive liberal ideals, that is internally unreconciled. But they are also characterized by different types of multi-valency and by pursuits, if ironic, of some logic underlying the irrationality of race-based classifications of texts and people.

For Kenneth Warren, it is only in relation to specific, historical institutionalizations of race and racism—particularly, the Jim Crow laws—that a "literature" emerged out of writing produced by Black Americans over the past few centuries. Rather than trace aesthetic strategies that indicate material conditions, Warren insists that the conditions of white racism have made the literature (if not the writing) possible: a literature that has sought in turn to give its readers a "glimpse of the emptiness, or at least the insufficiency, of dominant white American ideals" (22). To do so, this literature has marked itself is by its "commitment to making the past present to us by any representational means necessary" (23). As in *Man Gone Down*, one of the more familiar of these representational means is intertextuality: calling attention to how texts emerge out of a strategically imaginary "literature," itself a construct of a racializing social order. This is one common metafictional technique among others, including Black writer-characters in dialogue (internally or externally) with their readers, publishers, agents—*describing* readers' modes of reading to direct their own receptions. But many of these recent texts also share a deployment of the *strange* to represent historical conditions—of human subjection and enslavement—that renders the fiction, ambivalently and uncomfortably, absurd and/or hilarious.

"Whiteness, of course, has always been more of a strategy than an ethnic nomenclature," says the narrator of Mat Johnson's 2008 *Pym*, a novel concerned with making the past present—in ways so thoroughly de-familiarizing, and at the same time so much *about* reading's role in U.S.-specific ideologies of race and racism, that it intervenes in habitual readings through a

radical re-contextualization of racial histories. In the literary field, the historical structuring of the "strategy" of whiteness has been obscured, in part, by canon-formation: the imaginary unifications between texts and the authors they purportedly represent, according to a logic of racial authenticity. But of course, long before the canon wars, a problem throughout the majority of American literary history has been the exclusion of nearly all non-white literature from the American literary field. Hence the subject of *Pym*: a literary history in denial of its own erasures. Those erasures have been famously theorized in Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, in which she reads Edgar Allen Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* among other early American texts for how "images of impenetrable whiteness...function as both antidote for and meditation on the shadow that is companion to this whiteness" (33). That "shadow" is what Morrison calls the "Africanist presence" endemic to American literature, and is central to how white Americans understood themselves *as* American (as *not* enslaved, *not* disgusting) (52). The presence-via-shadow of Africanism suggests for Morrison the "complex and contradictory situation in which [early] American writers found themselves": inhabiting a nation built on democratic ideals *and* human enslavement (5).

Johnson's novel centers on a motivated reader of the early (white) American canon, in pursuit of the lineage of the fiction called "race"—at first undertaken from within the academy and then far, far beyond it. As its title might suggest, *Pym*, like *Man Gone Down*, is a twenty-first century novel articulated through explicit, intertextual conversation with earlier American literature—and, with racializing processes of canon formation. Johnson's *Pym* can be described as a re-telling of Poe's in the loosest possible sense. Poe's *Pym*—which as Johnson's narrator puts it, "makes no sense" (22)—describes a sea voyage gone terribly wrong. Arthur Pym and his companions set out for adventure on a whaling vessel only to endure shipwreck, cannibalism,

and other hellish trials: the most nightmarish of which is their "discovery" of the island Tsalal, whose inhabitants are (from Poe) "jet black, with thick and long wooly hair" (28). At first, Tsalal seems an advantageous place to have landed; the island is brimming with a type of sea cucumber that Pym recognizes as a tradable commodity, so the crew swiftly enslaves the Tsalalians. But soon enough, the Tsalalians rebel and murder all but Pym and one of his companions, Dirk Peters (who is described alternately as a "half-breed" and "white"). Pym and Dirk flee, and Poe's story ends as, drifting into the Antarctic, they share a vision of a giant, pale, shrouded figure emerging from the ice. Readers are left abruptly with the final, mystifying line: "And the hue of the skin of the figure was of the perfect whiteness of the snow" (32).

Johnson's *Pym*, meanwhile, is narrated by Chris Jaynes, Americanist literary scholar and assistant professor at a liberal arts college in upstate New York (where he teaches a course called "Dancing with the Darkies: Whiteness in the Literary Mind"). Jaynes studies Poe and other early American writers to discover "how Whiteness was constructed," and reads Poe's work as providing a "passage on a vessel bound for the primal American subconscious, the foundation on which our visible systems and structures were built" (34). Unfortunately, his project is just getting off the ground when he is denied tenure—and his academic career, along with his scholarly ambition, falls apart. The reason, Jaynes believes, is his refusal to sit on the department's Diversity Committee (having been hired to be the school's "professional negro"). The university president puts it otherwise:

> "You were hired to teach African American literature. Not American literature. You fought that. Simple."
> "So you want the black guy to just teach black books to the white kids."
> "We have a large literature faculty, they can handle the majority of literature. You were retained to purvey the minority perspective. I see nothing wrong with that" (13).

Jaynes has clearly been all too aware, throughout his academic career, of the academy as embodying the most absurd forms of liberal racism; no disillusionment needed. That as a Black man he can and must "purvey" authentic blackness is not surprising. Nor is the fact that he is valued to the extent that he—his Blackness, if not his work—allows the university to advertise and reassure itself for its "diversity" (so, *not* racist, *not* exclusionary). As he warns his replacement token Black professor ("Mosaic Johnson, hip hop theorist"): "The Diversity Committee has one primary purpose: so that the school can say it has a diversity committee…Nothing the committee has suggested in thirty years has ever been funded. It's a gerbil wheel, meant to 'Keep this nigger boy running'" (18). (The reference to *Invisible Man* reminding some readers, perhaps, of just how unchanged are conditions of academic access—under the banner of new multicultural rhetoric.)

More insidiously subtle is the extent to which "literature"—set in contrast to "African American literature"—is construed as white, which is apparently the same thing as *non-raced*. The same, as Morrison points out, can be applied to readers. "What happens," she asks, "to the writerly imagination of a black author who is at some level always conscious of representing one's own race to, or in spite of, a race of readers that understands itself to be 'universal' or race-free?" (xii). It is scholars and critics, Morrison contends, who continue to re-inscribe a foundational presumption as "knowledge": "that traditional, canonical American lit is free of, uninformed, and unshaped by the four-hundred-year-old presence of, first, Africans and then African-Americans in the United States" (4-5). Morrison sets academics and writers of color in clearly oppositional relation: "Criticism as a form of knowledge is capable of robbing literature not only of its own implicit and explicit ideology but of its ideas as well," through its deployment of "elaborate strategies" for erasure (8-9).

At the outset of *Pym*, Jaynes has one illusion, or fantasy, still firmly intact: that of the crucial, political relevance of his own scholarly work. (As he pleads to the university president: "it's about finding the cure!...If we can identify how the pathology of whiteness was constructed, then we can learn how to dismantle it. The work I am doing, it's just books, sure, but it's important, essential research") (14). As scholars do, he is seeking in literary representations how the fiction of race has been construed and written into history as true. However, just after his dramatic rejection of (or dismissal from) the halls of the academy, a rare book dealer contacts him with an incredible find: a manuscript by Dirk Peters, describing the very story of Poe's *Pym*. Poe's bizarre novel, it turns out, is based on true events. Jaynes' delirium over the discovery extends far beyond its implications for literary history (or its market value)—if Poe's text is actually non-fiction, Tsalal, the place "uncorrupted by Whiteness," must really exist.

Jaynes excitedly assembles a motley all-Black crew, including his best friend, his ex-wife, and his cousin Captain Booker Jaynes, vehement separatist ("my cousin felt that a white liberal was a Caucasian who said to himself or herself every day, "Don't hate niggers. Don't hate niggers. And that the rest of white America's racial perspective was 'Don't let the niggers hear you say 'nigger' out loud'") (145). Instead of the fantasy of Tsalal, though, the crew encounters something quite different in the Antarctic: the kingdom of those very giant albino snow monsters who appear fleetingly at Poe's *Pym*'s end. If that weren't absurd enough, they find Arthur Pym himself living among the creatures—preserved in his impossibly old age, and reverent of the "ice honkies" (as Booker describes them) as "gods." At first, the crew intends to "employ" some of the creatures as unpaid laborers—until in a swift reversal, they find themselves enslaved, owing one hundred years of servitude in the ice caves.

In the early days of his enslavement, Jaynes admits the following:

> I am bored with the topic of Atlantic slavery. I have come to be bored because so many boring people have talked about it. They appropriate it…degrading it with their nothingness. They take the stink of the slave hold and make it a pungent cliché…That is the source of my love for the slave narratives: they are by their nature original, even when they draw on the forms of earlier literary sources. They are never duplicitous, because they all have one motivation: to document the atrocity of chattel slavery and thereby assist in ending it.
>
> Turns out though that my thorough and exhaustive scholarship into the slave narratives of the African diaspora in no way prepared me to actually become a fucking slave (159-160).

Jaynes goes on to document his own experience as chattel: assaulted, inspected, and traded among the monsters; forcibly separated from his crew members; starved, worked, and frozen almost to death; and witness to his friend's savage maiming in an escape attempt. In other words, this section of the novel takes the form of a sort of slave narrative—except that the slave masters/monsters in this universe are actually un-human. And of course, this is the present-day: such that the characters (most of whom have questioned or taunted Jayne's "obsession" with tracing the origins of racism) are experiencing just how present is this particular past. Jayne's reference to the "originality" of the slave narratives alerts readers to the very power of documentary, or literary description—and the role of literary representation to intervene, to some degree, in even the most foundational social order. What intervention, then, does this absurd, twenty-first century slave narrative accomplish?

To some extent, it intervenes in the "political fantasy" of literary criticism—which as Guillory terms it, takes as its premise that "any and every effect we have in the world must be achieved through a practice of reading" and that "the limits of this reading practice constitute the limits of disciplinary power" (9). On the one hand, Jaynes is reverent of the slave narratives, as literature, for their very real political effects. On the other hand, Johnson's novel is utterly irreverent. The absurd, in this context, may be read as a comment on those readers (critics and scholars) who revere the work of reading to the extent that the content—the lived experiences of,

for example, African slaves in the U.S.—becomes abstracted or "boring" at best, and dangerously de-contextualized or appropriated at worst.

This is partly due to the terms of access, or selective affirmation, established by the academy: the conditional means by which people of color (via the texts they produce) have legible value. As Guillory writes, "if only the *works* of a given culture are studied in schools, those will be legitimated as objects of study through a process of deracination and de-contextualization from the circumstances of their production and reception" (*Cultural Capital* 40). By extension, the Black professor hired to "just teach black books to the white kids" is valued to the extent he serves as token (reassuring the liberal university of its own "diversity"). Valuations of the "black books" themselves are thus beholden to the extent they can be read as "representative" of a given culture—so that not only the particularities of the culture, but of conditions of production (for example, "white suspicions of black inferiority," for Warren), are de-emphasized if not obscured. Jaynes' final disillusionment with the "political fantasy" of scholarship lands as he confronts the limits of *reading* (in the academy) to appreciate the actuality of slavery.

But Johnson's critique also rests on a strategic oversimplification of how academic valuations presently work. In *Pym*, he describes supposedly common ways that scholars "struggle valiantly" to interpret and rationalize the baffling end of Poe's novel: among others, that the final image is an allegory for death. (A "just plain stupid" interpretation, in Jaynes' view.) Rather, the narrator offers his interpretation: "Just as Poe's vision of the blackness of Tsalal is perfectly horrific, his vision of this complete whiteness of his Antarctica is perfection itself…So, this theory states, the narrative reaches a dead end…negated by an overwhelming worship of whiteness" (230-1). In fact, as many readers would recognize, this reading is far more

in line with contemporary critical readings than those he holds up for ridicule. Jaynes' interpretation takes Poe's terms ("perfect whiteness") as expressive of Poe's own ideal, beyond which no narrativizing is necessary—or perhaps, even possible. The ending is not allegorical but descriptive of the context for the text's production, in which whiteness is understood not as a strategy but as a state of purity. Meanwhile, Johnson's novel directs its own reading by describing how *not* to read *Pym*: in spite of the absurd or utterly inexplicable, readers can't abstract themselves from the narrator's direct address, which *tells* us that race is a strategy, that reading and writing are conditional, and that literary traditions are borne from erasures.

The academy has helped to set terms by which this direct address necessary to disrupt any potential presumptions by readers: that scholarly interpretations are privileged or race-neutral; that "American literature" is something given and sacred; and that while few literary scholars would be so race-blind as Jaynes describes, the lack of lived diversity in universities is persistent. *Pym* describes an institutional ethos of total abstraction, in which *representation* is all that matters—or all there is. (A world in which one Black professor on the Diversity Committee signifies diversity.) And that description must be un-subtle enough for readers to register the absurdity.

The absurd thoroughly re-contextualizes the terms of *Pym*'s own receptions. It is the only representational means to make this particular past (of the institution of slavery) present: to challenge ingrained approaches to reading, and affective responses to familiarized history. The ways that the ever-unfazed Captain Booker rationalizes the absurdity—not only because "this is what white people do," as he often reminds his crewmates, but because these are the inevitable outcomes of capitalist logic—only emphasizes what literary representation *can* do, that other forms of description can't. The novel reminds us how and why literatures that "defy the

protocols" *matter*; these representational means can, to some extent, estrange readers such that histories take on new affective resonances, and ideologies register their own constructions.

The narrator's quest to understand the emergence of race and racism in the U.S. is, ultimately, a way to both "make the past present" and to demonstrate its ultimate inaccessibility. The promise that Jaynes reads as latent in Poe's novel is that of some basic logic that would explain the roots of American racism; some explanation, he feels, must be locatable for the unspeakably brutal and bizarre ways in which white supremacy has played out in the U.S. since the nation's beginnings. All he finds, though, is more *il*logic. The "realization" he comes to toward the novel's end is about how whiteness self-sustains: "by refusing to accept blemish or history. Whiteness isn't about being something, it is about being no thing, nothing, an erasure. Covering over the truth with layers of black reality...whipping away all traces of our existence from this pristine landscape" (225). Racialization is figured here as lines drawn in air, yet it is within those lines, drawn in service of exploitation and subjugation, that the non-white crew are constrained. Black "reality" is also the "blemish" by which an ahistorical absence becomes mythologized as "pure." Likewise, the literary field has structured itself so that white American literature becomes, simply, "literature."

Eventually, cousin Booker has a realization of his own: "Separatism: look where it got me. I come all the way across the damn ocean to the South Pole, and they still here. I was wrong. You can't run from Whiteness. You have to stand and engage it" (209). The place "uncorrupted by whiteness" does not exist; the idea of race-neutrality is just as fantastic as the multicultural ideal, and one that takes as its premise that to be white is to be (or be able to imagine to be) "race-free." From the start, readers of *Pym* understand race to be absurd. Estranged in the realm of the snow monsters, marginalization is exposed as just a measure of who can overpower

whom. However, that leaves open the potential for engagement, for confrontation rather than denial. If the strategy of race has produced an "American literature" through its own self-concealment, new literary exposures of the strategy allows the category to be re-imagined.

Johnson's novel, clearly, engages and extends Morrison's critique of scholarly appropriations or erasures via literary criticism. But it also complicates the binary by which Morrison positions academic/non-academic readers, and even readers/writers (or readers/texts). It does so in part through ironizing the very notion of the "black guy teaching black books." As in *Man Gone Down*, we access new registers of racial illogic through a narrator who defies easy racial classification—and yet he is continuously, handily classified. As readers discover well into the novel, through the terms of Arthur Pym—who ventriloquizes the language and attitude of a two hundred-year-old white, racist Nantucketer—Jaynes is an "octoroon." Or, in the terms of Jaynes himself: "I am a black man who looks white"—a statement that itself disarticulates logics of racial representation. That Jaynes' race is read (or hailed) differently in different contexts, demonstrates how language, and terms of representation, can be re-worked through absurdity: Jaynes' self-description absurdifies the idea of racial authenticity. But it also shows how racialization and reading are inevitably intertwined, and how racial metrics are overdetermined and embedded in language. (And the university is a catalytic site of racialization.) As Morrison writes: "for both black and white American writers, in a wholly racialized society, there is no escape from racially inflected language, and the work writers do to unhobble the imagination from the demands of that language is complicated, interesting, and definitive" (12-13). *Pym*'s metafiction does this work of unhobbling through its figuration of a racially ambivalent *reader*, tracing the very ways in which race has come to be embedded in discourse. In this way, recent

texts such as *Pym* are re-appropriating the "demands of language" in order to make demands of their readers, themselves.

The academy and the industry

Larkin writes that many modern and contemporary Black American novels acknowledge that literature, and reading practices, have as much power to reiterate social norms as to disrupt them—and so, some texts straightforwardly attempt to "retrain readers to resist racial abstraction or marginalization, to take up anti-racist reading practices, and to challenge the abstraction of 'the reader' from material scenes of reading" (22). The body of recent metafiction commonly describes an institutionally instilled expectation that reading and writing are transformative and transcendent—to individual readers, but also of material conditions. It represents a new generation of writers working to surface entrenched ways of reading Blackness (largely, through writing decidedly outside "acceptability"). But they also do so by describing their own limits or failures—as writers and/or readers—to transcend conditions, including those of language and race.

Many of these texts also insist upon the relationship between academic and "everyday" modes of reading/racializing—and suggest to scholarly readers that their modes of imagining Black American literature are both inscribed into, and informed by, reading publics. In her introduction to *White Scholars/African American Texts*, Lisa Long argues that scholars—but especially white scholars of minoritized literatures—can't afford to ignore the "fundamentally vexed nature of academic authority," in that "Education itself mimics the power structures of domination and subordination, for to 'master' any material historically has implied, in part, the imposition of one's self upon it" (6). As *Pym* demonstrates, this is true to an extent—the novel

tracks, through its reader-narrator, the effects of academic imposition (and canonicity) on not just material, but bodies and ideology, over time. However, it also reminds us that Long refers to an oversimplified binary, by which minoritized texts (and people) are subject to appropriation, or worse, by a predominately white scholarly field. In *Pym*, we see an academic of color reading the American canon to uncover its ideological underpinnings, complicating the distinction between "master" and subjugated, and the notion that academic readings occur in isolation from, or in opposition to, writers and their non-academic readers.

Additionally, *Pym* and *Man Gone Down* remind us that the receptive field is increasingly complicated in terms of race. While these texts explicitly address racist reading/"reading" modes, they are, of course, not *for* any readers (including white readers) in particular. Their own failures to fully evade or preempt racial classification reflect the failures of a literary/cultural field reliant on those classifications (whether to establish markets, narrate "traditions," or to leverage resistances). But as Jarrett points out, they also reflect an irreducible readership who, as a body, may be increasingly inclined to recognize ambiguity, rather than racial coherence, as self-representative.

The failures of the literary field (in particular, the mainstream literary market) to recognize Black American literature other than in terms of racial "representation" are written into Percival Everett's *Erasure* (2001). *Erasure* indicts everyone—ridiculing academics, but also publishers, agents, reviewers, prize committees, and readers, white and/or of color (in other words, the entire literary establishment). But within the novel, the ultimate erasure (or undermining of a status quo, negatively) is that of the Black writer. Meanwhile, Everett's readers experience the agencies of the writer to reorient terms of value, and to transform conditions of reception for Black literature. *Erasure* is so productively superficial in its take-downs that

readers can't go back—to perceiving the publishing industry, for example, as race-neutral or unmotivated. Its scenes of reading and writing (which comprise most of the novel) definitively "retrain readers" to place themselves within those material scenes of reading and to consider, in the terms of Jan Radway, the "event of reading" as a necessarily fraught and motivated activity. The novel does so by hitting readers over the head with the blunt instrument of literary description.

Erasure opens in a tone of exhaustion. The narrator—Thelonious ("call me Monk") Ellison—is an academic and writer of self-described "unreadable" postmodern novels (35). He is all too conscious of the inevitability of stereotype, whether his audience is shocked at his non-conformity or whether they go ahead and overwrite him, anyway. Not unlike the other Ellison's narrator, he is primed for the projections of others but already prepared to take them on:

> I listen to Mahler, Aretha Franklin, Charlie Parker and Ry Cooder...I am good at math. I cannot dance. I did not grow up in any inner city or the rural south...Some people in the society in which I live, described as being black, tell me I am not *black* enough. Some people whom the society calls white tell me the same thing. I have heard this mainly about my novels, from editors who have rejected me and reviewers whom I have apparently confused…I don't believe in race. I believe there are people who will shoot me or hang me or cheat me and try to stop me because they do believe in race, because of my brown skin, curly hair, wide nose and slave ancestors. But that's just the way it is (1-2).

There is no need for readers to *interpret* the contradiction—the very realness of race as an arbitrary concept—it is just the way it is. The sureness with which Monk anticipates his receptions is rooted in a principled authenticity, a trueness to particular selfhood which should not need explaining or defending. But the literary market and its unself-conscious contradictions, its insistence on capitalizing on the stereotypes by which racism perpetuates, unmoors him. When we meet Monk, he has long since resigned to being as *un*successful on the mainstream market with his experimental fiction as he has been successful as an academic. Monk embodies a

deep ambivalence toward intellectualism, in general. He "hated every minute" of college at Harvard, and refers derisively to his own writing, scholarly and literary (another demonstration of how these realms are far from discrete—when so many authors traverse both). He taunts a rival academic for claiming to have "unsettled readers" with his impenetrable work on the postmodern—implying such work has little effect of any kind on readers, because no one can understand it, or cares to.

There's no misunderstanding *Erasure*, however. The novel immediately unsettles readers through the various registers in which it engages and leverages stereotype. Certainly, the liberal academic/intellectual is mercilessly stereotyped (and at the same time, the rendering does more justice to the contemporary field than in *Man Gone Down* or *Pym*). But the text caricatures Jews, gays, women (especially Black women)—discomfiting and challenging liberal readers in particular to accept the terms of parody. Once he has thoroughly inured readers, Everett turns to "African American literature" as a prime site to examine the contradictions and market forces involved in racial stereotyping. Academia may be abstracted—rendered here as mostly impotent, rather than as wielding actual influence. Rather, it's the mainstream literary market that perpetuates, and even brings into being, insidious forms of racism disguised as celebrating multicultural difference. And while the book invites pleasure in its absurd humor, the effects of market *consumption* on the narrator (and then by extension, readers) are decidedly un-funny.

In stark contrast to the realm of highbrow intellectualism—supposedly abstracted from actual readers—Monk's undoing comes in the form of a highly marketable Black American novel: a smash bestseller by author Juanita May Jenkins, titled *We's Lives In Da Ghetto*. The market ascribes value to *We's Lives* according to a very specific metric: its representative, "authentic" Blackness and its suitability to a pre-established genre. (Which means, its use of the

most clichéd vernacular, its depictions of inner city poverty and violence, and its hyper-sexualization of Black men, as a start.) Jenkins is successful because she does *not* unsettle readers; her book fits neatly into one of the available classifications for the Black writer. One reviewer, among the many hailing it as a "masterpiece," sums up the novel's general reception: "One actually hears the voices of her people as they make their way through the experience which is and can only be Black America" (39).

In a fit of rage and confusion, brought on by Jenkins' face on the cover of *Time* and the fact that his own latest novel isn't selling, Monk writes a novel "on which I knew I could never put my name" (61-2). Instead, he names "Stagg R. Leigh" as the author of *My Pafology*: the story of nineteen-year-old Van Go Jenkins, which opens with Van Go wondering "which one of my fo' babies I'm gone go see" (66) and, over the course of seventy pages, devolves into a senseless crime spree. Monk asks his agent to shop it to publishers ("'If they can't see it's a parody, fuck them'"); Random House comes back with an offer of a $600,000 contract. Monk is tasked, then, with accepting the costs of refusing his *self*, and adopting another problematic persona as "real." So, he pushes it as far as he can, as if hoping that *someone* will acknowledge the depressing absurdity:

> *Stagg: There is one change I'd like to make.*
> *Editor: Certainly.*
> *Stagg: I'm changing the title. The new title is* Fuck.
> *Editor: Excuse me?*
> *Stagg:* Fuck. *Just the one word.*
> *Editor: I so love* My Pafology *as the title.*
> *Stagg: We'll call the next book that. This one is called* Fuck (210).

The new title may be read as the writer's amazed frustration that no one, including his editor, can see it's a parody after all; rather, Monk's most overblown deployments of stereotype are taken in earnest. It also demonstrates his reception as so overwritten that *anything* will be

interpreted as authentic racial self-expression, and thus valuable (and in this evaluative framework, the cruder the better). In tandem, Everett does his own work to push readers: hyperbolizing the deployment of stereotype by the literary industry. The members of a major literary prize committee, for example, describe *Fuck* as "The best novel by an African American in years…The energy and savagery of the common black is so refreshing in the story" (243). This blatant racism is so over the top as to be unrealistic; it's hard to imagine any prize committee in the twenty-first century being quite so unself-conscious. But as Thomas' and Johnson's novels exaggerate and ironize the academic field, Everett deploys satire to describe the broader literary market: on the one hand, to undermine these terms of value and demystify an intellectual class as "better" readers (or immune from racism, regardless of race); and on the other hand, to be as unsubtle as possible for audiences inclined to be obtuse about race as a still-determining factor in literary reception. Oversimplifying the terms of reception for Black American literature allows *Erasure* to write against those terms, which while less-than-realistic in the text, persist for writers of color in often subtle ways.

Immediately following the conversation with his editor, Monk delivers a direct address to readers:

> The fear of course is that in denying or refusing complicity in the marginalization of 'black' writers, I ended up on the very distant and very 'other' side of a line that is imaginary at best...the irony was beautiful. I was a victim of racism by virtue of my failing to acknowledge racial difference and by failing to have my art be defined as an exercise in racial self-expression. So, I would not be economically oppressed because of writing a book that fell in line with the very books I deemed racist. And I would have to wear the mask of the person I was expected to be (213).

Eventually, however, the mask begins to bleed into the man, and the end of the novel slips in and out of first- and third-person narration. *Erasure* is straightforwardly illustrative of the "beautiful irony" of a culture market for racist "racial self-expression." But as does *Man Gone*

Down, it also illustrates the ways in which that market calls fragmentation, or un-reconcilable conflict, into being. It is not nearly so simple as an un-self-consciously racist industry consuming the texts of "others"—because who, exactly, is the other? The line is permeable and unstable, such that the supposedly ideal "center" can only be figured as an absence. For the author to achieve success on such terms is to encounter total irrationality, with the only underlying logic as that of an economy for commodified racial representation. The novel ends with the ceremony for the prestigious "Book Award" (which goes to *Fuck* by a landslide), and Stagg/Monk approaching the stage:

> The faces of my life, of my past, of my world became as real as the unreal [audience], saying lines from novels that I loved, but when I tried to repeat them to myself, I faltered, unable to recall them. Then there was a small boy...and he held up a mirror so that I could see my face and it was the face of Stagg Leigh. 'Now you're free of illusion,' Stagg said. 'How does it feel to be free of one's illusions?"....'The answer is *Painful and empty*,' I said (264-5).

If "one's illusions" are the very idea that racism is *not* embedded in valuations (literary and otherwise), to be "free" means confronting the fusion of the representation—here, the performance of marketable stereotype—to the "real." In other words, perhaps paradoxically, it means confronting the imaginariness of "authenticity"—whether of the "common black," or "African American literature"—but also, that the author has nothing *to* authentically represent of comprehensible value. Jarrett points out how anthologies have helped to perpetuate a presumption of "an authentic version of ethnic literature in which the representation of ethnic characters must correspond to the actual ethnic identity of their authors" (166-7)—even when writers insist upon the gap between the fiction and biographical experience. As Gates describes it, evaluative norms for Black American texts have long relied on "how readily a text yields its secrets or is made to confess falsely on the rack of 'black reality'" (*Loose Canons* 40). Authenticity, or conflation between author and text, continues to serve as a primary term of

value—closely connected to pedagogy as a value term, in that readers (those implied in these texts) seek to learn something anthropologically "true" in even the most stereotypical representations. *Erasure* invites such conflation, leveraging the same value term to effect its interventions. It does so in part, like so many of these metafictional texts, via uses of the first person and dialogue with stand-in reader-figures—using readers' inclinations to take a Black writer character/narrator as the author speaking *to* us to lend authority to their critiques.

This is one of the ways in which Everett, Johnson, Thomas, and others "defy the protocols of ethnic authenticity and representation" established through institutional processes such as canons and anthologies. In *Erasure,* the market largely succeeds in its ostensible agenda to marginalize if not altogether erase non-whiteness by essentializing racial difference. But the overwhelming trend in contemporary Black American metafiction begins to deconstruct this unresolved tension: race-based marginalizations justified *by* liberal, multicultural ideals. As Morrison writes, "Living in a nation of people who *decided* that their world view would combine agendas for individual freedom *and* mechanisms for devastating racial oppression presents a singular landscape for a writer" (xii-xiii). Realizing the extent to which those mechanisms are systemic—increasingly subtle if not unconscious—is crucial. But as Morrison urges, it is just as crucial to "take this world view seriously as agency": that is, to treat mechanisms of oppression as semi-conscious decisions, requiring making and re-making. In an increasingly ambiguous racial landscape, an American literature is emerging—marked by its concern with bringing those less-visible operations to light.

Within the academic field, then, it's also crucial to appreciate multiple forms and locales of agency; in this context, that means allowing the cultural products themselves to orient the work. Guillory argues for the reclamation of pleasure in academic modes of reading, rather than

insisting on "political" justification for reading (such that texts are read to service an already motivated critique) (7). Many of these recent texts invite an uncomfortable sort of pleasure in their parody. Acclaimed and bestselling novels of the past few years, such as Beatty's *The Sellout* and McBride's *The Good Lord Bird*, evidence a readership primed for irreverence toward institutions of American racial formation—including the university and the literary industry. Texts' engagements with these mediating institutions are already changing the terms of reception, if selectively and unevenly (*The Sellout*, for example, was rejected by eighteen publishers before it was bought by a relatively small press—presumably because, as a novel largely *about* race in the US, it is too "unconventional" to sell widely) (Higgins).

These new, widely read texts—some of which will certainly be widely taught and, eventually, anthologized—also direct us to read *outside* common formations of "African American literature" or "American literature," and indeed want to dispel those very distinctions. Likewise, they want us to account for various ways of reading as valuable, including those that run supposedly counter to "scholarly" interpretive modes. *Erasure* includes a scene of reading in which Monk drops a romantic interest in a fit of pettiness because she argues for the value of *We's Lives in the Ghetto*—not as "authentic" or "good," but as "lightweight fun" (178). Reading is not necessarily transformative, for better and worse; these texts take for granted that, despite the many forces mediating receptions, reading publics are themselves (re-)imagining value terms in conversation with the literature (and facilitated by the devices of metafiction). In this way, "loosening the straightjacket" of racial representation relies on understanding value as produced among various sites "in between" text and reader—of which the university, while an apt stand-in for institutional mediations, is only one.

Chapter 3

Consuming Difference: Book Clubs and the Specter of the Liberal White Woman-Reader

In November 2015, at an event hosted by the *Guardian* in London, Jamaican novelist Marlon James—winner of that year's Man Booker prize—told his audience why he thought his first novel was rejected seventy-eight times by publishers in New York and the U.K.:

> I could have been published ten times over. I knew that there was a certain kind of prose I could have written, that panders to that archetype of the white woman…astringent, observed, clipped, wallowing in its own middle-style prose and private ennui, porn for certain publications…We writers of color spend way too much time pandering to the white woman. Though we'll never admit it, every writer of color knows that they stand a higher chance of getting published if they write this kind of story. We just do (Cain).

Women, particularly white women, make up the majority of regular fiction readers and consumers in the U.K. and the U.S., purchasing about two thirds of all books sold (Perrin, Thompson). In James' view—and in his talk, he named other authors of color who share it[20]—since these readers dominate the market, "the male editors will only accept one type of story"; publishers actively seek such "wallowing" prose, thus to some extent conditioning what stories are *written*. James was careful to note that he was referring not to actual women, but rather "an archetype that exists in the fiction, in the criticism" (Cain). In other words, James' white woman is an implied or perversely "ideal" reader, perceived as orienting formal trends and tastes for sellable books—and so, actually, a stand-in for a highly conditional publishing *industry*.

To figure such an "archetype" is a reduction of, actually, a fairly heterogeneous market of book-buyers and readers in the U.S. While on the whole, women read more than men by a

[20] James named Roxane Gay and Marie Mutsuki Mockett as supporters of his comments (Cain). The countless recent public discussions among writers of color about the white-dominated publishing industry in the U.S. are discussed in the Introduction and Chapter 4.

significant margin, the margins are slimmer between white readers and readers of color—when it comes to readers of adult "literary fiction" (Perrin, Rainie). But the publishing industry really *is* that homogenous—although *not* because it's dominated by "male editors," as James contends. In 2015, small press Lee and Low conducted a survey of 34 publishers, including three of the "Big Five" conglomerates.[21] The results showed that among those surveyed, industry staff skews not only white (79 percent) but overwhelmingly female (78 percent). The discrepancies are even more extreme among editorial staff, who occupy the most hands-on gatekeeping positions between authors, their manuscripts, and publication: 82 percent white and 84 percent women. (Only at the executive level does the gender gap narrow; men hold 40 percent of those jobs) (Low).

Given their transactions with publishing staff (particularly editors), James and many other writers understand themselves as operating within a market singularly oriented toward a white *reader* whose specific tastes must be appeased. These tastes are not inherent to, let alone consistent across, the actual readers that comprise the literary market. They are construed, and thus to some extent produced, by an industry which presents a homogenous and restrictive market for publication to authors of color. As previous chapters have demonstrated, the literary field in the early twenty-first century is marked by hyper-self-consciousness among writers of color around conditions of reception for minoritized texts. Whether writers, for their part, are aware of the likely diversity of their actual readers (and presumably an author like Marlon James *is*), several recent texts by writers of color respond to their own conditions of publication by reducing readerships *in* the texts to a representative, critique-able reader-figure. Rather than delivering the pandering prose that amounts to "porn for certain publications," these texts render

[21] Staff at Hachette, MacMillan, and Penguin Random House participated in the survey; HarperCollins and Simon & Schuster staff did not.

a strategically essentialized *type* of American reader—embodying the taste culture of the U.S. literary fiction industry—as a white woman. This chapter seeks, in part, to determine what work this particular metafictional move accomplishes.

Meanwhile, an enormous sub-market made up predominantly, though not entirely, of white women readers has over the past twenty years grown to such a size that it has become a force unto its own, driving what publishers publish, what authors write, and how readers read: the book club market. Demographically, these readers are a much more homogenous group than the general book-buying public in the U.S., as the vast majority are women and college-educated; most are white, over forty, and middle-income (Park, Perrin). But book clubs are themselves a gendered receptive site—hailed as a women's activity by publishers and other agents. They also provide an ever-increasing wealth of materials to examine for the presumed values of American women readers, and for mediation of those values by the novels and their paratexts. Given the sheer amount of accessible text produced both *by* those readers (responses and discussions in online forums) and *for* them (publisher-produced marketing materials and discussion guides, as well as countless independent and commercial sites devoted to book clubs), book clubs make explicit the machinations of literary value construction, including the feedback loop among authors, readers, and mediating agents that co-constitute market tastes.

Publisher-produced materials, and to some extent literary texts, construe women readers of "ethnic" texts in remarkably consistent ways, while reader-produced materials (and to some extent the literary texts) show readerships to be expansive and irreducible. But very common to book club-associated paratexts is the primary, if implied, value term of *identification*—especially identification across ethnic difference. As Ted Striphas puts it, book club readers privilege the "dialectic with the everyday"—in part, in opposition to perceived academic modes of reading.

Book club-oriented paratexts also surface how readings for empathetic identification—a decidedly non-academic mode of reading—are commonly gendered feminine, particularly when it comes to reading ethnic others.

This chapter fills in the common omissions from more sociologically oriented work on literary reception, which tends not to account for formal qualities of literary texts—thus not accounting for how texts act alongside the literary industry to place pressures on readerly activities. Much scholarly work on book clubs also under-represents the increasing variety among those actual reading communities. By setting paratextual materials in relation to the gendering, in the novels, of a generalized "American reader" inclined to universalize and sentimentalize ethnic difference, this chapter examines how women/readers come to stand in for these values, and for an appropriative literary industry writ large.

The personal is pedagogical: Book clubs in the U.S.

As Catherine Burwell has pointed out, book clubs constitute one of the "largest bodies of community involvement in the arts" in the global North (282). As such, they are fertile ground for investigations into popular terms of literary value—albeit within a somewhat homogenous demographic. While book club participation increased dramatically between 2004 and 2009 (and has somewhat plateaued since), the participant demographics have remained relatively consistent (Park, Perrin). Precise book club data can be difficult to determine, but recent estimates of book club members in the U.S. range from five million to twenty million—not accounting for the massive online reading communities hosted by sites like goodreads.com, which has over forty million members (goodreads, Park, Wu). In 2014, bookbrowse.com surveyed thousands of women in the U.S. who read at least one book per month; they found that more than fifty percent

belonged to in-person book clubs (Park). Indeed, book clubs may well be partially responsible for the nationwide increase in adult reading of "literary material" by five percentage points between 2002 and 2008—the first marked increase since 1982—as reported by a 2009 NEA survey (*Reading on the Rise*). Other factors certainly influence those numbers, namely, increases in literacy rates (Burger); but book clubs have, over the past twenty years or so, socialized and popularized "literary" reading for millions of readers[22].

Mass-scale reading communities are nothing new in the U.S., and as Jan Radway has shown, it was the Book-of-the-Month Club (BOMC), founded in 1926, that helped to re-shape how social, organized reading is understood by reading publics—that is, as bound up in, rather than distinct from, market forces. Key to the BOMC's success and influence was its marketing toward middle-class, college-educated Americans, on whom it could bestow cultural capital in the form of literary taste. As Radway puts it, the BOMC "refused to perpetuate the distinction between two forms of value"—market value, and literary value, the latter being ostensibly "universal and transcendent" (*A Feeling* 153). At the same time that reading the "right" books could confer trappings of literary taste, the operations of the reading *market* became naturalized—accustoming readers to the idea that taste (and the literature itself) is, in part, produced by pre-existing markets and approaches to texts. As Radway argues, the BOMC's original and lasting influence on relations between readers and texts lies primarily in how it "envisioned culture as a material, time-bound commodity, topical, ephemeral, and above all, destined for circulation" (128). In part due to the BOMC, major publishers likewise reoriented their practices over the course of the twentieth century, from accepting and publishing

[22] The influence of book clubs as a cultural phenomenon is also evidenced in pop cultural texts *about* book clubs, of which there have been several in recent years, including the 2007 *The Jane Austen Book Club* (bestselling book, then high-grossing movie) and the 2018 movie *Book Club*.

manuscripts based on transcendent "quality," to seeking—or creating—manuscripts for already-constituted reading markets (Striphas 47).

Today, that shift—to understanding the literary as also commodity—is a more naturalized aspect of the literary field. However, in transactions with some markets, publishers serve a somewhat special mediating role in "creating" texts for pre-constituted publics. Major publishers have begun to account for the book club market in both seeking and marketing new texts, and book club readers understand their encounters with texts (consumption and reading both) to be mediated by institutional forces—largely, due to publisher-produced paratextual materials. Oprah's Book Club (OBC), founded in 1996, had enormous impact on what has become the common practice of branding "book club books" as such; now, each of the "Big Five" major publishing houses has staff designated to produce book club-oriented materials, such as discussion questions and extended author biographies, to enhance market appeal. While a much broader range of literary fiction receives these forms of book club branding than did even a decade ago, texts construed as "women's literary fiction" almost always receive it. Meanwhile, branding materials for texts by writers of color texts capitalize on, and co-construct, reading values particular to the current book club era.

This new era distinguishes itself in how readers articulate terms of literary value—and to some extent, how reading itself is perceived as valuable. While in the early mid-twentieth century the Book-of-the-Month Club legitimized, and leveraged, a relatively new conceit in popular approaches to books—that of "pleasure reading"—readers also sought to re-contextualize scholarly or more "serious" reading through participation in the BOMC, and "champions of the book returned again and again to its association with education and edification," writes Radway (167). On the contrary, the book clubs of the last few decades tend

to read *deliberately* differently than academics do, perhaps indicating a desire on the parts of "everyday readers" to counteract a hierarchy of literary knowledges. And the new prevalence of in-person, social book clubs—in which often pre-acquainted members meet regularly in small groups—supports the development of new, decidedly non-academic terms of literary value. Book clubs combine the appeal of social reading—discussion among divergent perspectives, the shared experience of what is otherwise a private activity—with that of self-exploration. The former fosters the latter, sometimes problematically; discussion, within the relative homogeneity of most book clubs, can reinforce existing ideas and biases that simply reading the literary texts might complicate (Berg 124-8, Burwell 280). Most sociological or ethnographic studies of book clubs have found that, overwhelmingly, discussions emphasize personal experience as the primary reference point for literary value, whether in terms of the reader's experience, or the authors' (presumed or actual) (Burwell 286).

Sociologist Elizabeth Long's 2003 *Book Clubs: Women and The Uses of Reading in Everyday Life* was one of the first extensive studies on the topic and remains one of the most rigorously researched. Her investigation of Houston book clubs in the 1990s anticipates more recent studies in how it takes book clubs as sites for "questioning a series of oppositions we've taken for granted as ordering relations": namely between the personal and social, the public and private. Another of these "oppositions" is that of the active producer/passive consumer; Long stresses how through book clubs, we can "understand cultural practices…as creative behaviors," as readers *produce* literary meanings through dialogue, and moreover "remak[e] themselves in dialogue with literary texts" (22). For Long, these "re-makings" are generally progressive, such that readers bring more empathy to their social worlds—especially as a result of "dialogue" with cross-cultural texts.

Long's research, along with subsequent studies, has shown how women's book clubs make meaning of their interpretive practices *in relation to* scholarly modes of reading—explicitly or implicitly. Sarah Twomey argues that not only are book clubs sites of deliberate resistance to academic interpretative paradigms, but that "reading club pedagogies create space for thinking outside the dominant masculinist foundations of the literary imagination" (398). The literal space that book clubs create—outside academia and exclusive of men—allows engagements with literature that are ostensibly "liberated" from both. That most book clubs attempt an egalitarian approach to texts—where open-ended debate is the goal, and no reader is more "expert" than any other—might be taken as an implicit critique of scholarly reading modes; Long takes the fact that that groups generally don't seek resolution in their discussions to be an "implicit critique of men" (149).

Likewise, Ted Striphas' investigation of Oprah's Book Club has shown how what he calls the "dialectic with the everyday" is the predominant framework for value—a framework seemingly marketed by the OBC's organizers *as* distinct from academic reading (118).[23] Striphas discovered that OBC readers privilege formal realism over experimentalism, because the latter might impede more "direct" affective or experiential access. Readers commonly judge and respond to literary characters as they would with real people, so that likeable, empathetic characters correspond directly to textual value; the entire discursive framework of the OBC is overwhelmingly rooted in readers' personal lives (127). At the same time, the OBC explicitly promotes diversity in text selection, strategically alternating between accessible novels and more

[23] Oprah's Book Club, of course, occupies a unique space in discussions of broader book club culture, and important distinctions should be noted—particularly, that the televised and online discussions of OBC members are commercially mediated, dispersed, and to some extent "top down," in that readers are generally responding to *Oprah's* response to a text. At the same time, the OBC's enormous influence on the book industry has certainly extended to book club practices and mainstream engagements with literature. And the body of associated paratexts—from reader responses to author interview videos—is enormous, particularly since the all-online "OBC2.0" launched in 2012.

"challenging" texts (usually meaning more formally strenuous) (122). For diligent OBC readers, then, reading is conceived as *instructive*—including in its fostering of empathy and understanding toward the experiences of cultural others.[24]

Based on a 2008 study of white women in book clubs reading African American fiction, Kimberly Chabot Davis concludes that self-reflexive encounters with literary others produce not only greater empathy but in turn, more engaged and informed politics. Davis stresses that while discussions almost always revert to members' personal lives, the very act of discussion serves to "intertwine" the personal and the political (160). For example, even if discussions of Edward P. Jones' *The Known World* focused on members' affective responses to the conditions of human enslavement described in the text, those responses are a sort of first step toward understanding cross-cultural specificities which may be otherwise foreign, inaccessible, and one-dimensional. Further, Davis reports that white readers were disturbed to recognize aspects of themselves in unwittingly racist white characters (in discussions of *Native Son*, for example)—recognition fostered by their empathy for Black characters (170).

As book clubs have begun to receive sustained attention from these and other scholars in cultural studies, this work overwhelmingly insists on locating and reclaiming the liberatory potential of reading, the agency of the woman reader, and on casting these women as necessarily "resistant"—to the gendering (and devaluation) of "un-serious" reading practices. It is certainly true that devaluating readings that privilege experience or affect belies condescension toward women readers in general, and extends a legacy of the belittling of sentimental (i.e. feminized)

[24] "You'll come away with greater empathy and understanding," says Oprah on the site for her February 2018 pick, Tayari Jones' *An American Marriage*. Those paired terms show up on an incredible number of OBC picks' materials.

reading[25] (Davis 86, Long 5). When Jonathan Franzen famously referred to Oprah Book Club selections as "schlock" (likely not referring to the selections of Tolstoy, Faulkner, or Morrison), he was in the same breath worrying that his 2001 *The Corrections* would be dismissed by male readers if it bore the Oprah sticker. Women buy Oprah's Book Club books; Oprah's Book Club selects schlock; women read schlock, if the logic follows. But to argue as Striphas does that self-recognition in texts, discussed in the book club context—or the "dialectic with the everyday"—provides women readers with "practical and symbolic resources for challenging reified conceptions of their own subjectivities" (128) glosses over how this overwhelming focus on the personal is a mode by which others become unspecific and decontextualized. Meanwhile, the narrow focus on readers' agency tends to exclude, unnecessarily, the operations of an industry and the influences of other mediating agents.

The interventions of agents mediating the text/reader encounter become particularly clear in the cases of minoritized texts, or texts marked as ethnically "other" and marketed *toward* a body of presumed majority white readers. As I noted in Chapter 1, critiques of essentializing and/or fetishizing approaches to minoritized texts are nothing new within postcolonial, critical race, and reception studies. But in the book club context, those approaches may be fostered by paratextual materials, produced by publishers who understand the marketability of legibly "foreign," but still relatable, experiences. The market for such representations is increasingly visible. As Catherine Burwell describes in "Reading *Lolita* in Times of War," stories about "third world women" have enjoyed recent popularity among women readers in global North (whether those stories are written by women or, commonly, by men)—reflecting readers' "related desires

[25] Radway, Long, Elizabeth McHenry, and others have discussed how the very idea of "pleasure reading" has historically signified domesticity and the realm of women—and Long argues that pleasure reading still connotes a "gendered vision…freighted with nostalgia for an idealized home" (13).

for uncomplicated unity and consumable difference" in literary others (291). Shared gender may facilitate that sense of "unity" (and work toward un-complicating it), as potentially intersecting concerns may be submerged through appropriative readings of "global sisterhood" (289). But "consumable difference" is commonly constructed by book club materials, whether or not (or regardless of what ways in which) such difference is asserted by texts themselves. Formulaic discussion questions produced by U.S.-based publishers ask readers to consider what they have learned about "X culture" and how it differs from "American culture," promoting a marking of, and privileged value of, legible difference through national signifiers.

"Learning" is as commonly cited by book club readers as by other reader markets in articulating valuations of culturally "other" texts. Long observes that book club readers seem to "enjoy exploring what is strange or different, which they can also learn from" (177)— reading the "strange or different" as pedagogy cast here by Long as unproblematic. But it seems that particularly for book club readers, learning, and even empathy, are foreclosed by difference that is *too* different—conflated, troublingly, with "too depressing"—to offer inroads to experiential identification (178). Long contends that literature "has the power to allow some white readers a quasi-experiential expansion of empathy or identification across the racial divide, but it is a fragile power, for it rests on the reader's desire and ability to make an inter-subjective bridge as she reads" (186). Arguably, readers' "intersubjective bridges" are cultivated through the act of book club discussion, and even by the self-reflection it commonly prompts. The "dialectic with the everyday" so valued by book clubs works helpfully toward deconstructing the bounds between fiction and lived experience, but only to a point. The very desire and ability to read "inter-subjectively" is in part both manufactured and constrained by forces outside the reader: namely, by market values, and by the texts themselves.

The industry as white woman

Both Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and Michael Thomas' *Man Gone Down* have been discussed in previous chapters for how they engage anticipated reader and market values associated with ethnic "difference." Both of these novels also, more specifically, anticipate values associated with inter-subjective (and interracial) identification—and they do so by figuring intimacies between narrators and white women. Indeed, the metafiction in these texts (the scenes of writing and storytelling that reflect receptive conditions for the authors themselves) works *through* identification—or rather, through capitalizing on presumed *desires* for identification—since readers, in theory, must be capable of recognizing some version of themselves if the metafictional interventions are to take hold. (Of course, as previously argued, that readers have developed mechanisms for *not* recognizing themselves is itself a condition of the current field.) Yet these novels are not written *for* white women readers; the point is not for white women outside the text to recognize themselves inside the text, in a one-to-one relationship. Rather, due to stereotypes around women readers in general, a long-held tendency among liberal white readers to universalize ethnic difference in literary texts, and a white women-dominated publishing industry mediating encounters between authors and readers, white women are deployed as stand-ins for a broader reading market that seeks means of "understanding"—identifying—across difference.

While living in the U.S., Changez, the Pakistani narrator of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, falls in love with Erica—a one-dimensional, well-meaning, white Manhattan socialite. Erica is granted very little activity, or agency, in the novel; for as much as she occupies Changez's internal world, in her actual encounters with him (and the reader) she is above all

passive. (Observing her early in the novel, Changez describes her as "utterly detached") (86). So much so, in fact, that it is difficult to understand her appeal—except that she is one of the few people in the U.S. who is remotely warm or receptive to Changez. But he soon discovers the reason for both her interest and her lifelessness: her lover and friend since childhood, Chris, has recently died. Erica's defining characteristic is an absent, nostalgic preoccupation with Chris, which develops throughout the novel into neurotic fixation. Her initial interest in *Changez* hinges on his seeming, to her, non-threatening (in opposition to how he is commonly read by other Americans, especially after 9/11 takes place in the novel). For Erica, Changez is ripe for over-writing with whatever identity suits her, precisely because his ethnic difference is *too* different—his Pakistani-ness is the barrier to their "identifying." So, she overwrites him with Chris.

Erica, then, rather than fetishizing Changez's foreignness, routes him through the familiar—to the extreme, erasing and effectively whitewashing his particularity. But it is Changez who invites her to do so, knowing that it is the only way to access her. Changez's illegibility to Erica makes him desirable because she can "read" him however she likes, but in turn, Changez deploys his own ethnic illegibility to his advantage (if guiltily). He asks her to "pretend he is Chris," and it is through this strange de-personalization that they have any intersubjective intimacy whatsoever. "Her body denied mine no longer," Changez remembers of this turning point in their relationship. "I watched her shut eyes, and her shut eyes watched *him*" (105).

In a sense, this seems Changez's way of coping with the "neither/nor" identity trope of the immigrant:

> I lacked a stable core. I was not sure where I belonged—in New York, in Lahore, in both, in neither—and for this reason…I had nothing of substance to give her. Probably

> this is why I had been willing to try to take on the persona of Chris, because my own identity was so fragile (148).

Changez is not deprived of agency in this relationship; he is simply constrained by what identities he can perform if he wants to be "identified" by/with Erica (and he does). But the performance belongs to him, and is strategically designed to go over with an audience who has made her values clear. After 9/11, as New York Erica's liberal elite crowd hosts high-society fundraising events, Changez becomes her "official escort": "This role pleased me indeed," he recalls, not least of all because among this audience Erica "vouched for my worthiness" (85) at the same time that he bestows on her a sort of liberal legitimacy. Readers, meanwhile, cringe at the mechanisms of legitimation laid bare; neither Changez's nor Erica's "roles" are ones with which liberal readers would care to identify.

Erica disappears, late in the novel, with no one (Changez, her family, readers) certain of her fate. She becomes an absent presence in the narrative—a relationship that "thrives only in my head," as Changez obsesses over her disappearance until the novel's end. In this way, the text neither forces nor forecloses intersubjective identification with Erica, because ultimately, she is a phantasm. Popular analyses of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* in reviews, curricular materials, and blogs construe Erica as an allegory for America itself, as the character's name is surely, unsubtly meant to imply.[26] But as a stand-in for a reading market, Erica more specifically dramatizes gendered values associated with American readers of ethnic "others." Her understanding of Changez is routed through her own experience; she values their relationship only for what he can teach her about herself, which requires erasing his particularity. Those

[26] In that her "obsession with the past is engineered to dovetail with America's nostalgia" (*The New York Times*), and that "she cannot get past the wounds inflicted on her" (Gradesaver).

values constrain Changez's self-representation, if he is to be legible in this receptive context. But while the "you," the unnamed American to whom Changez narrates the novel, stands in for Americans insistent on his difference—strategically *over*-identifying readers with the American listener—the relationship between Changez and Erica describes how readings for identification operate. They do so by gendering that reader who privileges identification, in order to work the transaction through a hetero/sexual relationship of mutual consumption. The reader-figure overlays the narrator's ethnic difference to the point of erasure, as a pre-condition of intimacy—while also fetishizing and using him to prop up her own displays of liberalism. The narrator-figure routes his desired intimacy with a generalized American audience through the only figure actually *desirous* of that intimacy, no matter her preconditions (something the narrator's blatantly metafictional "audience" in the text—the unnamed, uncomfortable American listener—cannot accomplish). But this dynamic does not mirror a supposedly one-dimensional American reading public; rather, it signifies a de-personalizing literary industry in whose terms the author must ultimately be legitimated.

Meanwhile, Thomas' *Man Gone Down* describes how the phantasm is structured in the Black writer's awareness of his reading public—in ways particular to a legacy of power relations in the U.S. publishing industry between Black writers and white agents in the field.[27] In Thomas' novel, the one-dimensional white women who occasionally appear do so only to fetishize the

[27] Of his 1955 novel *The End of a Primitive*, Chester Himes wrote: "I decided to write a book about an American Black living with a white woman…which would be an affront and challenge to all white American editors." In fact, several mid-20th century novels by Black male American writers figure Black male writer-characters in sexual relationships with white women—who were, even more so than in 21st-century works, easily read as stand-ins for a white-dominated publishing industry. In works by Himes, Cecil Brown, Ishmael Reed, and others, the critique of the industry is made possible by the feminization and sexualization of the white reader, who is only receptive to palatable representations of Blackness and Black masculinity—her body registering the presumed failure of white readers to comprehend heterogeneity across representations of Blackness. That the gendering of the white/liberal reader is more complicated in recent works may be read as responsive to more subtly restrictive legitimizing terms for Black authors today.

writer-narrator's Blackness. The fiction of "authentic" Blackness as a precondition to his publication (or success) as a writer is a major metafictional plotline; central to that fiction, readers see time and again, are both sexuality and suffering. Mid-novel, the narrator surveys his past for how values associated with his writing, and his Blackness, came to be conflated through experiences with white *women*:

> I scroll through twenty-odd years of white girls…The Black Studies units of history and English classes. The privileged children of the Bay Colony, talking Jim Crow, learning about lynching. Learning and looking at me, as the white teacher lectured, with pity and sex on the brain. They, later, much later…in the privacy off a dorm room…could fuck and cry some poor nigger's blues away, or they, at least, could try, and fail—*but at least they tried*. They could claim the effort, like some holy ticket to get them on the train, in the gates (231).

The narrator is all too aware of what has made him historically desirable (marketable) to his most receptive white audience—whose gratification, ultimately, comes through identifying as white saviors, through sex. "Twenty-odd years of white girls" reduces neatly and bitterly to a generalized liberal consumer of Blackness. These have been performative relationships on all sides—though perhaps less self-consciously so on the women's parts. They also seem to have been mostly pleasureless. As in Hamid's novel, we have the unsympathetic figuration of a liberal white woman over-writing the author of color with broader values associated with the "ethnic." But in *Man Gone Down*, the settings for such relationships are not intimate, not even fully private; they are as transactional as, well, market transactions.

More multidimensional is the primary white woman figure in the novel: the narrator's wife. Clair is both his *literal* reader and the mediator (explicitly, in the mind of the narrator) of his "readings" by white people. Much of the novel is preoccupied with how the narrator experiences himself as *seen* in terms of his race, as he moves through a racially non-homogenous city and immediate family. But how he's seen by white people, in particular, registers differently

when in Clair's company. Walking the streets of his gentrifying neighborhood alone, he notices white neighbors tend to either "stare" or "avoid," though he notes: "I don't think it was purely race (although I know most of them are racists: they believe they're good; they believe they're better)" (123). In case white readers of the novel care to disavow such an identification, the text narrates and undercuts the disavowing move. However: "It changed when I was with [Clair]. *I* changed—to them—seen through the lens of my wife. I was no longer frightening, perhaps intimidating but in an exotic kind of way, for the women at least…" (122). She is the mediating agent, rendering him palatable and bestowing a legitimacy he does not necessarily seek. Through this relationship between white "reader" and author of color, neither whiteness nor readerships are essentialized or caricatured; the distinction across difference is simply maintained. Between them is an intimacy *without* identification. Musing on a foundational tension in their marriage, he describes how she "looks at me in two ways: one that says she knows me and one that says she doesn't. And in the time we've been together I've never been able to span that gap…for her or for me" (229). Yet, the "gap" is what productively forecloses readings for identification—with her character, or with his. Rather than hail a phantasmagoric fetish-driven white woman/reader, this figure signifies something closer to a fraught irreducibility—of the dynamic between authors and readers when power relations are unequal and mutually beneficial, entrenched and necessarily complicated. In this way, the "ideal reader" in *Man Gone Down* may be that reader who desires, but does not demand, identification.

At the same time that Hamid, Thomas, and others write receptive reader-figures into texts, publishers' materials mediate encounters with those texts and reinstate the authors' ethnic "authority"—at the same time implying their readers as "non-ethnic." In these materials, including book club discussion guides, the value term "identification" is sometimes appropriated

to signify "foreignness" in the author, a paradoxical formulation accomplished through *biography*. In the discussion questions, interviews, and extended biographies produced for book clubs (usually, printed in first paperback editions), authors of color are conflated, selectively, with their characters—such that readers may "understand," and find means of "relating to," a text that might otherwise resist appropriative reading.

Marlon James, for one, in a 2016 interview again addressed the conditions of his own reception—particularly of his Booker-winning *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, a sprawling novel with several intertwining storylines, most of which takes place in Jamaica in the 1960s-1990s and some of which includes vivid scenes of gang violence. James said he had clearly disappointed interviewers for having grown up "comfortably middle-class" in Jamaica rather than "emerging from poverty":

> There's an assumption that the writer of color must have experienced violence firsthand…And when I say, 'No, my background was very suburban and very stable,' they ask by what authority do I know about these things to write about them? And I say, 'It's called using your fucking imagination. You know, like a white novelist, like any other novelist' (Morris).

(That article's title became, brazenly, "Rebel Novelist Escapes Jamaica to Win Top Literary Prize.") Meanwhile, the novel's scenes of writing turn on an American journalist describing what he *understands* to be conditions of the Jamaican drug trade (and associated cartel violence, infrastructural corruption, and economic polarization); his subjects, a group of Jamaican drug lords, threaten to kill him if he doesn't write his articles according to their directions. "Authenticity," or accuracy, here becomes beside the point; James makes clear, throughout the novel, that stories are by nature corruptible whether narrated from the "inside" or "outside" (itself, the novel suggests, a false distinction). His representation as an author-figure then—as

having "escaped" from pitiable "third world" conditions—produces an ironic tension, which is at the same time muted by the readings of the novel it produces.

James' publisher (Riverhead/Penguin) has not produced book club materials for *A Brief History*, nor has any major reading guide site. This is likely because the novel is simply too long and too experimental in form (and quite possibly, "too depressing"—without gestures toward redemption, hope, or closure at its end). But the book club discussion questions provided by Grove Atlantic in the paperback edition of Thomas' *Man Gone Down* bring James' concerns plainly to the fore. They start by asking readers: "Can you distinguish the first-person narrator with his author?" (The implication being that such a conceptual leap may not even be possible.) Of course, the novel invites such conflation—the narrator, like Thomas, is an ivy league-educated Black writer living in New York City—precisely to dramatize it, and show how these are operations are uniquely applied to writers of color. But those operations are legitimized, rather than disrupted, when the same invitation is extended by publishers' framing materials, which invite readers to approach the novel as a sort of experimental memoir. Likewise, the novel's ambiguous ending—in which the narrator, feeling a failure, notices the appearance of the north star—is interpreted for readers by publishers' discussion questions, by asking in what ways the star might symbolize the narrator's white wife as his "salvation."

Undoing authority

Some texts invite author/narrator conflation not to dramatize reader projections of "authenticity," but to dramatize an utterly codependent field of meaning-production including writers, readers, and all agents in between. Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013) centers on a woman reader-figure *not* in oppositional relation to the "ethnic" writer. Rather,

Ozeki's reader is herself an "ethnic" writer in her North American context, and throughout the novel the distinction between reading (as an act of passive, self-directed intake) and writing (as active, even resistant activity) comes undone.

Novelist-within-the-novel Ruth, at the beginning of the narrative, has writer's block. She lives begrudgingly on a remote Pacific Canadian island with her environmentalist husband; but things get interesting the day she discovers a Hello Kitty lunchbox washed up on the beach. Inside, she finds a journal written by Nao, a sixteen-year-old girl in Tokyo. Soon, Ruth has set aside her own writing and devoted herself fully to Nao's text—spurred by mysteries within the narrative, as well as the mystery of how it might have reached her shore. (She and her husband speculate that it may have traveled by way of the recent 2011 tsunami—for lack of other explanation).

The first journal entry tells Ruth that Nao intends to kill herself. Her family had moved to California for her father's tech industry job when Nao was little; recently, he was laid off, they returned to Tokyo, and she has been desperately unhappy ever since. "I was totally fucked," she writes, "because I identified as American" (43). This is not the familiar immigrant "neither/nor" trope; in Palo Alto as well as in Tokyo, she never questioned (or was prompted to question) her Americanness. In Japan, on the other hand, she can't speak the language fluently and is cruelly bullied by her classmates; all the while, her family's financial straits grow more dire.

In a move now familiar to readers of "postmodern" texts, *A Tale for the Time Being* includes footnotes, mostly supplementing bits of social/historical context or translating Nao's occasional Japanese. But an early footnote appears to document Nao's *reader's* experience, attempting to contextualize unfamiliar terms: "Can't find references to maid cafes or Bedtown. Is she making this up?" (16). Apparently, these footnotes are not interjections by the

author/narrator or for the edification of the reading public (as in Junot Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, for example). They are this fictional reader's notes-to-self: annotations, rather than directives against problematic readings. And this reader, Ruth, is in uncertain relation to the text's authenticity: is it fact? Fiction? Somewhere in between? This attempt to nail down the truth of Nao's narrative and experience (including the truth of what happens to her) drives Ruth's reading—so that the novel at once refutes the very premise of literary "authenticity" and invites reader/author and author/narrator conflation at every turn.

In other words, what's dramatized in the metafiction is not the production of the author's legible difference or ethnic authenticity. Rather, it's a sort of hyper-identification that collapses self/other distinctions almost entirely. Ruth slows her reading to match the pace of Nao's writing, in order to "more closely replicate Nao's experience"—as if to close the gap across identities (167). Nao, across the Pacific (but also in Ruth's hands), imagines her reader:

> I find myself wondering about you, what you look like, how tall you are, how old you are, and whether you're a female or a male…Sometimes I hope you're a man, so you'll like me because I'm cute, but sometimes I hope you're a woman because then there's a better chance you'll understand me…It's not such a big deal anyway, male, female. Sometimes I feel more like one, and sometimes I feel more like the other, and mostly I feel somewhere in-between (299).

While assuming greater "understanding" across reader and writer based on shared gender identity, in the same breath Nao undoes her own—as if to match her reader, who for all intents and purposes (like Schrödinger's cat) is "somewhere in-between." Her relationship to Ruth is neither hetero nor entirely unsexual. It's extreme, intimate identification of a sort particular to writers and their readers, to the extent that even time and space seem to collapse.

Ozeki carries this aspect of the narrative into the realm of the magical. Ruth begins to realize that Nao's journal exists only so long as it's being read: each time Ruth nears the end, more pages appear. (Thus extending Nao's very being—given Ruth's assumption that the end of

the journal will signal the end of *Nao*.) Likewise, when Ruth becomes consumed with worry and frustration, afraid to read on, she sees that the journal's remaining pages have turned blank. "It's like writer's block, only in reverse," a friend tells her:

> "…it's your doing. It's not about Nao's now. It's about yours."
> Ruth thought about this. "You're right," she said. "I don't like it. I don't like having that much agency over someone else's narrative."
> Muriel laughed. "That's a fine way for a novelist to talk!" (377).

By tangling up the author's and reader's agencies in constructing the text, the novel plays on the value of the "native informant." Readers seeking ethnic information are confounded by the text's refusals of legible difference (let alone authority): difference from whom? From where? Ruth (the character and Ozeki) is herself Japanese-American; Nao's text traversed national bounds, but as Ruth's husband points out, those are to some degree imagined as well. "Japan is coming here," he notes of the earthquake. "It moved the coast of Japan closer to us" (202).

In some ways, Ozeki's novel fits solidly into the trend of recent works metafictionally engaging readers to critique the role of the literary industry in U.S. racial formation. But here, the feedback loop is comprised solely of women readers and writers of color (in a North American context), and rather than fetishizing difference, the former can't tell where she ends and the latter begins. Ruth is not the strategically essentialized white woman reader-figure, nor is Nao a writer at the mercy of reader and market tastes (she's subverted all that by throwing her text into the ocean, allowing it to find whatever reader it will). Rather, anxieties around conditions of production, reception, and legibility are shared by writer and reader in mutual dependency. In a new way, then, *A Tale for the Time Being* extends the work of other recent metafiction: it reflects its own part in arranging the conditions of global textual circulation in the twenty-first century—and additionally, it reflects how dominant frameworks for theorizing cross-cultural reception are increasingly out-of-date. Critiques of reading that assume a homogenized liberal white American

reader appropriating the ethnic other's authority often neglect the multi-dimensional receptive field, including its non-homogenous, but also reductively feminized, reading publics. The reader-figure in Ozeki's novel does not need feminization in *opposition* to the writer-figure because the two are mutually constituted—at the same time that conceiving literary agency through an either/or (reader/writer) binary framework, as much reception theory tends to do, is revealed to be as much a fiction as gender itself. Ozeki's novel is a celebration of reader agency *and* a critique of how readers overwrite texts through the lens of personal, inevitably ethno-centric experience: dramatizing the pleasures, values, and dangers of literary identification.

At the end of the novel, Ruth confronts both the limits of her readerly powers to uncover "truth" and, in turn, the limits to understanding (or identifying with) the "other side" of the narrative: "I thought if I finished the diary, the answers would be there or I could figure it out, but they weren't, and I can't. It's really frustrating" (334). Searching for truth or reportage in literature, the text argues, is a particularly troubled form of identificatory reading practice, as such readings turn inevitably, un-self-consciously (back) on the self. The epigraph separating the novel's two parts, from Proust—"In reality, every reader, while he is reading, is the reader of his own self…"—can be read as a sort of warning about the limits of *learning* from literature. At the same time, that readers co-constitute the text does not mean total reader agency (or the death of the author's); it means readers are bound by their own values, which are mediated by authors *and* texts *and* agents in the literary industry.

Yet the publisher-produced paratexts to *A Tale for the Time Being* work hard to construct an "intersubjective bridge" across reader and text that makes some sense. They also invite conflation between Ruth and Ozeki herself, which of course, the text invites (as if to demonstrate the inevitability of such readings). But these materials also center questions about reading,

writing, and ethnocentrism in ways not typical to paratextual materials supplementing other recent metafictional works, begging the question: is there something more formally effective, explicit, or simply palatable about Ozeki's version? To what extent does the novel enact its own value terms—then mirrored in the paratexts—by pre-emptively feminizing the receptive field?

Generally, reading guides may include two or three questions about how readers "relate" to a particular character or "resonate" with a particular theme, but questions in the guide for *A Tale* are almost *entirely* about the reader—emphasizing the use of fiction to interpret readers' lives, rather than the other way around. To an extent, this mirrors a central aspect of Ozeki's metafiction: in some key sense, the reader is all there is. The first question is a standard one, asking readers to "respond" to the novel's beginning. However, since the novel opens with Nao trying to imagine her own future/present reader, the question becomes one about the work of metafiction: "How did you respond to this opening and its unusual focus on the circumstances of the reader?" Paradoxically, by prompting attention to "the reader," the question prompts attention to context—beyond readers' own identifications with characters and toward the "circumstances" that may determine relations between texts and readers to begin with. Most of the remaining questions, though, ask readers to turn inward:

> Imagine that you had a notebook like Nao's diary and you wanted to communicate with an unknown reader as she does. What would you write about?
>
> What lessons does [Nao's grandmother] try to teach Nao? How might you approach Nao's depression and other problems?
>
> Have your own religious ideas or spiritual practices been influenced by reading *A Tale for the Time Being*? What kind of enlightenment is Ozeki calling for in *A Tale for the Time Being*? Is it really available to everyone? Would you try to achieve it if you could?

These questions produce a book club reader-figure for whom the value of the literary text is about what one may learn—*not* about ethnic "others" writ large, but about oneself. After all, in

the world of the novel, reader and text are not quite distinct subjects—so the formulation of learning about foreign/other experience does not quite hold. The text, rather, questions the extent to which a literary "bridge" across text and reader may be possible, or useful, when the two are always already identified (being mutually constituted). In turn, the discussion questions ask readers to identify with characters—mainly, the more ostensibly "foreign" of the fictional women for presumed North American readers. Still, rather than asking readers to identify across ethnic difference, readers are asked to imagine how they might incorporate "lessons" or "practices" from these characters into their own lives. The novel foregrounds relations of *dependency*, but such relations are not easy fodder for discussions, or readings, that generically rely on terms of "learning" from and/or consuming *difference*; so, discussion may as well focus on what individual readers might write in notebooks to no one.

Penguin's reading guide for *A Tale for the Time Being* is more robust than most. In addition to the discussion questions and usual author notes, it includes a transcript of a lengthy email interview with Ozeki. These sets of paratexts—the former being publisher-produced, the other produced by the author (and edited by the publisher)—are both in tension and mutually supportive. At multiple points, the interviewer asks Ozeki to legitimate the novel's "authenticity":

> Q: In creating the character of Ruth, you appear to have drawn heavily on your own recent life…even naming her husband after yours. In what ways are you and the fictional Ruth most alike, and at what points do you most widely differ?
>
> A: I think of Ruth's story as a fictional memoir…Character Ruth and author Ruth have much in common—but character Ruth has a more limited perspective and a different set of experiences. It's not meant to be taken literally.

At once, Ozeki authorizes readings that take the character Ruth as a fictionalized version of her, the author. At the same time, she asserts what novelists of color have historically been compelled

to: that the work is indeed fiction, not anthropological data. In response to another question about her similarities to *Nao*, Ozeki gets more explicit on this point:

> Q: What were the challenges you confronted as a Japanese–American woman in Japan, and how, if at all, did they help you understand Nao's character and problems?
>
> A: Well, I was an adult when I went to Japan, and I was never picked on there...Any bullying I encountered was in the U.S. when I was little….Kids called me Jap and yellow, and they made jokes about my eyes slanting in different directions because I was "half."... When I finally went to Japan, in college, it was clear that Japanese people did not see me as Japanese at all.
> …I'm half-Japanese and half-Caucasian. I'm American and Canadian, and I speak Japanese. I have homes, real and spiritual, in three cultures. So yes, paradoxical, multifaceted, hybrid…this is who I am.

So far as readers of the novel know, this biographical data is Ruth-the-character's as well. But the point is not to legitimate a singular cultural authenticity—upon which the publisher/interviewer seems to want to insist. Rather, the metafiction allows Ozeki to leverage her own "paradoxical" identities to critique such legitimizing terms, while also hailing, or conceding to, their seeming inevitability.

Penguin does include, rather than edit out, further moments when Ozeki calls out what feel like Orientalizing impulses on the part of the interviewer. In itself, this move is self-legitimating on the publisher's part, symptomatic of the present moment of liberal/reader self-consciousness. It may also be, however, that Ozeki and her novel simply press the point, resisting "teaching" at every turn:

> Q: Do you have any more thoughts on the peculiar mix of innocence and precocious sexuality that one finds in Japanese pop culture?
>
> A: Hmm. Interesting. I think you're looking at this through a somewhat Eurocentric and post–Freudian lens…
>
> Q: At least one reader of *A Tale for the Time Being* has said that the book is two novels in one—one of them sounding perfectly American and the other perfectly Japanese. Was this your intention? Are there things that, to you, make a story "Japanese" or "American"?

> A: Well, I don't know about that. I imagine some readers might argue with the "perfectly" part of this assessment. I certainly didn't set out with any intention to make stories that were perfectly anything…The story comes from the characters. That's all.

Ultimately, *A Tale for the Time Being* is remarkable for how it meta-fictionalizes the operations of a reciprocal field of literary production and reception. The relations between book club readers, authors, and publishers are primary within the present U.S. literary market. The extent to which Ozeki's novel is a "book club book"—appealing to a broad market of book club readers—is an interesting question, given the novel's strangeness (the ways in which it confounds some expectations of mainstream literary fiction). It is also somewhat beside the point—not only because the question might presume a more homogeneous category of "book club readers" than really exists, but because it is *marketed* as a "book club book." (And so it is one.) The publisher-produced paratexts, for their part, reveal the industry's operations around a novel that engages and refutes the appeal of encountering the "other" in literary texts. We may read the interview questions and, to an extent, the discussion questions as working from the presumption that "book club readers" seek the familiar value terms of identification, authenticity, and pedagogy which the novel itself works hard to complicate. The paratexts mediate readings, to be sure; but the tension manifested in them supports as much as belies the work of the novel. Taken not as conflicting, necessarily, but as interdependent—like Ruth and Nao—we see the novel and its paratexts reflecting the actual irreducibility of readers. As Ozeki notes in response to a question about metafiction:

> Writers and readers are engaged in a reciprocal and mutually co–creative enterprise, and the book is the field of their collaboration. It's very personal, and very individual, too…My scenes come to life because a reader invests them with his or her experience and imagination. Of course, this means that every reader is reading a very different book, too…Anyone who has ever been in a book club knows this to be true.

Ozeki affirms the value of readings for identification, but somewhat flips the script: in this formulation, the reader "invests" the text with meaning rather than acts as receptacle for, or student of, the text's authority. Reader values commonly *overwrite* texts, and in cases of minoritized texts encountering white readers, such over-writings may counter-productively close the feedback loop. However, Ozeki hails the "book club reader" here as a more nuanced figure than is rendered elsewhere. Rather than wield the blunt instrument of the liberal white woman-specter, Ozeki continuously turns our critiques toward another phantasm: that of the unmediated, authoritative text through which readers may access (ethnic) others. *A Tale for the Time Being* represents, then, a new means for invoking the production of "ethnic" literature through deploying women-as-readers, or readers-as-women.

Chapter 4

Agents of Production: New African Writing and Terms of Publication

It was 2006 when Binyavanga Wainaina wrote his now-notorious essay "How to Write About Africa" for *Granta*'s "The View from Africa" issue. The Kenyan author had written a version of the piece years earlier as a letter to *Granta*'s editor, regarding the magazine's previous "Africa" issue (1994) which, he wrote, had been "populated by every literary bogeyman that any African has ever known" (Rausing). Those bogeymen become the sarcastic imperative in "How":

> Always use the word 'Africa' or 'Darkness' or 'Safari' in your title…Never have a picture of a well-adjusted African on the cover of your book, or in it, unless that African has won the Nobel Prize. An AK-47, prominent ribs, naked breasts: use these. If you must include an African, make sure you get one in Masai or Zulu or Dogon dress.
> In your text, treat Africa as if it were one country. It is hot and dusty with rolling grasslands and huge herds of animals and tall, thin people who are starving… (Wainaina).

At the time of its publication, *Granta*'s editor said the magazine "had published nothing so widely read or influential" (Rausing). Yet already, at the time of my writing in 2020, it is hard to imagine Wainaina's snarky provocation as, well…provocative. The idea that African literature (or literature about Africa) is subject to a uniquely restrictive constellation of legitimating terms is not new or surprising to anyone remotely interested in African writing. The veritable explosion in recent texts by African writers in international circulation—garnering major book deals, acclaim, and mainstream success in the U.S. and Europe—has in turn brought conversations about African literary production and reception to the fore. "How to Write About Africa," in retrospect, can be situated at the crest of a wave of diverse twenty-first century writers from

across the continent, publicly discussing what it means to achieve publication—and to be *read*—in the context of old, institutionally entrenched value terms.[28]

This is what makes the current African literary field such a rich site for analyzing cross-cultural reading today: the trendiness of African texts among non-African readers and, relatedly, new media for both publication and public discourse. Agents in a variety of positions (authors, publishers, critics, readers) are actively working out what this new wave *means* for African literary production, and alongside the literary texts, these debates are reaching broad international audiences. At the same time, African writers (including African-born writers in migration) seeking those audiences necessarily negotiate the politics of cross-cultural reading, since the publishing infrastructure for sub-Saharan African literature remains predominately U.S.- and U.K- based—and so are presumed readers. Hence the outpouring of literary works explicitly *about* that very negotiation; indeed, to the extent that African writers have long been preoccupied with the conditions of their own publication, metafiction has saturated African texts. Tracing the descriptive moves—in particular, descriptions of markets for "Africanness"—in recent African fiction allows us to see how writers understand their own situations, including in relation to histories of exploitation by non-African publishers. And to a great degree, terms of publication have evolved since the first wave of early postcolonial African writers, such that "African literature" is taking on new meaning for non-African readers and institutions. To establish the forces most powerfully influencing the field, this chapter will read a few recent

[28] Ikhide Ikheloa published his widely circulated "How Not to Write About Africa" in 2012, as a critique of the 2011 Caine Prize for African Writing finalists. In the essay, Ikheloa "conclude[s] that a successful African writer must be clinically depressed, chronicling in excruciating detail every open sore of Africa… It is as if these writers read Wainaina and misunderstood his sarcasm and rage as the bible on how to write" (2). I would argue that many of the texts he criticizes as a "lazy, predictable…riot of exhausted clichés" deploy such clichés self-consciously and strategically, rather than lazily or by mistake.

novels as social agents conversant with publishers—as actively describing and producing new terms of publication for African texts.

Meanwhile, that many of these young writers are also public intellectuals creates new forms of paratext to supplement, and mediate, the critiques leveled by the fiction—via twitter, TED talks, shareable think pieces, and other media. The sheer volume of discussion demonstrates an urgency to respond to market expectations, and reveals a *highly* self-conscious field of production. The use of new media—by authors, and metafictionally by authors-within-texts—amounts to value production outside the literary establishment, as they may work around traditionally powerful taste-makers (for example, editors and reviewers). In part, as so many are produced by authors in migration, these alternative discourses—between authors and their readers—trouble the binaries implied by "cross-cultural reading."

Attending to how values associated with Black African texts are understood and ascribed, within and outside of Africa, means attending to the most primary institution that mediates such values: the publishing industry.[29] In the vein of Wainaina's "How to Write," many of the most visible and mainstream voices weighing in on the state of African publishing do so in order to expose (to implied non-African readers) the "West subsuming Africa" model that seems firmly a condition of publication.[30] This chapter surveys the most relevant aspects of the history of publishing in Africa, to show how this has come to be the case, and also to understand just how entrenched are the value terms—namely, of anthropology and abjection—to which current authors are responding. In short: these are productive, mostly apt critiques, and also reductive to

[29] By "publishing industry" I simply mean the entire network of publishers—from the "Big Five" to small, indigenous African and/or independent presses—who buy, own, print, distribute, and sell books. Distinctions across presses contexts are extremely important to consider, as I will do through each analysis.

[30] Jeanne-Marie Jackson on the other hand, primarily in response to Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani's "African Books for Western Eyes" (2014) and Sarah Brouillette's "On the African Literary Hustle" (2017), argues that such a model is both the current critical norm and "incomplete to the point of being outdated, given the boom over the past five years in new, globally conscious small US literary presses collaborating with African writers" (3).

some extent given effects of globalization on the trade publishing industry writ large, and the growth of small independent publishers within and outside of Africa committed to publishing African writers. In addition to taking authors' extra-textual commentary as paratext, this chapter will examine how presses—from the small and/or indigenous to international conglomerates—promote the literature and, moreover, their own "missions" in regard to circulating new African voices.

In Chapter One I discussed how, in U.S. receptive contexts, African texts are in some ways exemplary of the condition of self-consciousness in markets for "ethnic" literature—and how those implied markets are figured in novels preoccupied with their own receptions (as "ethnic"). This chapter provides context for those anticipated receptions, and for the mediations in value by institutionally-situated paratexts. As this project seeks to illustrate the necessarily interrelated fields of production and reception (comprised of under-studied agents), this last chapter attends to the most essential agents of production: publishers and authors themselves.

Publishing in Africa – a very brief introduction

As an industry, publishing operates "at the intersection of two axes of value" in Janice Radway's terms—the commercial and the cultural (Radway 110). Publishing in postcolonial Africa brings the tense interrelation between these two axes to light: economic imperatives of publishers, national governments, and authors cannot be considered separately from the cultural products themselves. (That the dependencies across authors, texts, institutional mediators, and reading publics are *so* uneven in the context of African literature makes clear just how inextricable these relations are in *all* literary production and reception—even while the extremes here are unique to postcolonial contexts and postcolonial Africa in particular.) Literary

publishing in Africa, as an industry, took hold on any sustainable scale immediately post-independence, when the vast majority of operational publishers were British-owned and U.K.-based (Brouillette 4, Bgoya and Jay). As Walter Bgoya and Mary Jay write in their comprehensive 2013 study "Publishing in Africa from Independence to the Present Day," this was predominantly educational publishing by foreign-owned companies "keen to develop an untapped market": schools, at a moment of post-independence expansion of public education. As Bgoya and Jay note, "Books were not originated within Africa, but from publishing decisions made in the north: ideas, writers, and decisions were not African" (even when local branches of foreign publishers operated the actual press) (18-19). Instead of developing local publishing economies, government agencies—supported by African taxpayers—developed textbook content (rarely in indigenous languages) for publication by predominately British publishers.[31] Today, textbooks are still "by far the greatest part of publishing in Africa…and this market is still largely dominated by multinational publishers" (30). Otherwise, there simply isn't much of an industry relative to the continent's population: as of 2000, a study by the African Publishers Network (APNET) estimated that Africa consumes in excess of 12% of all the world's books, but produces less than 2%. According to Bgoya and Jay in 2013: "There is no evidence that has changed" (30).

In the drive toward establishing independent national economies in the 1970s and early 1980s, African governments "did not see books as exceptionally important to national

[31] While beyond the scope of this study, it must be noted that foreign publishers made possible much of the first wave of internationally renowned African writers, especially after Heinemann placed Chinua Achebe at the editorial helm of its African Writers Series in 1962 (Clarke 13-15). That the publishers had everything to gain financially does not discredit the work produced by authors such as Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Ama Ata Aidoo, and countless others, but is simply a necessary aspect to any contextualized analysis of the work. The lasting impact on what remains (for the moment) constitutive of "African literature" in global imagination has been well-theorized over the past several decades.

development," according to Sarah Brouillette—and while some independent African presses were founded in this period, "African governments favored state and parastatal publishing initiatives, especially for textbooks, as counters to foreign media dominance" (4). This meant a series of basic infrastructural disadvantages for independent presses: a lack of effective or enforced intellectual property laws (piracy remains a common problem in African cultural production today), and high taxes on materials (paper, ink, printing technologies, et cetera) (Bgoya and Jay 20-21). The 1980s and 90s saw the IMF/World Bank structural adjustment policies weaken the already-meager support for cultural production in sub-Saharan nations—including for state-affiliated publishers and libraries, which were nearly extinguished in this period (21-22). Enter NGOs and private foreign foundations—financing from whom remains a central driver for African literary production today. The African Books Collective (ABC), an organization of several sub-Saharan independent publishers, was started in 1985 with foreign donor support, and became a major conduit to publication for African writers. However, the out-of-reach expense of shipping books to customers—let alone of effectively marketing new titles—meant establishing ABC in the U.K., from where they distributed English-language titles worldwide (Brouillette 5). Thus, donor support for publishing African literature developed primarily *for* non-African audiences. Here we have the clearest possible example of the interplay of culture and commodity—or put another way, why cultural production and reception cannot be comprehended separately—as publication was overtly contingent on conforming to non-African tastes for "African literature." And even those donor-supported African publishers more often buy the rights to works by African writers from major U.S.-based conglomerates in order to distribute them locally than own them in the first place (Manyika).

Today, some of the original ABC publishers are still active, and the internet makes it possible for those and other independent African publishers to market internationally and distribute titles to wholesalers at much lower costs; some African writers are choosing indigenous presses over foreign ones given these new avenues to international readers (Brouillette, Manyika). However, the internet can only empower publishers so far when, outside of Egypt and South Africa, connection rates are limited and computers prohibitively expensive for most people (Bgoya and Jay 30). So are books, for that matter; in Nigeria, which has a relatively robust literary economy, the minimum wage is estimated as about $59 a month and a new book costs about $8 (Alter). All this adds up to good reason for African writers to seek publication by major international publishing conglomerates[32]—and for why the work itself is so often read as pandering to metropolitan, Anglophone, non-African audiences (primarily in the U.S.), even if "strategically" so.[33]

The writer's dilemma and the "global audience"

Sarah Brouillette has pointed out that

> …the recent renaissance in African literature has had little do with development of viable literary readerships in Africa, and viably capitalized production facilities…The field of contemporary Anglophone African literature relies instead on private donors, mainly but not exclusively American, supporting a transnational coterie of editors, writers, prize judges, event organizers, and workshop instructors. The literary works that arise from this milieu of course tend to be targeted at British and American markets (5-6).

In Chapter One, I discussed the common values associated with "African literature" for non-African readers as historically (and to a great degree currently) pedagogical: as teaching

[32] For writers who can assume the costs, self-publishing and vanity presses are accessible avenues for publication, though consumers are commonly limited to personal acquaintances (with the means to buy books) or, if commercially "successful," local schools (Nwaubani 2).
[33] Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*, Routledge, 2001.

anthropological "truths" about (generally abject) African experiences. This is why, as Carolyn Davis argues, "The current critical consensus continues to suggest that assimilation [to those values] is inevitable for African authors seeking acceptance in a globalised media industry" (3)[34]—even as the market for an arguably diverse range of African writing has seen such enormous recent growth. The publishing industry is also growing in Africa, contributing by some estimates as much as $1 billion annually to the continent's GDP (Nawotka, "A Peek"). But of course, these are uneven contributions—across region, country, type of publisher, language context, and in the view of many writers, degree of assimilation. In the first half of 2019 alone, several major book deals between African writers and large U.S.-based presses were announced, including for Nigerian Chigozie Obioma's *An Orchestra of Minorities* (Little, Brown) and Zimbabwean Novuyo Rosa Tshuma's *House of Stone* (Norton) (Nawotka, "A Peek"). For writers like Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani, these deals are representative of the African writer's paradoxical situation:

> Publishers in New York and London decide which of us to offer contracts, which of our stories to present to the world. American and British judges decide which of us to award accolades, and subsequent sales and fame. Apart from South Africa, where some of the Big Five publishers have local branches, the few traditional publishers in Africa tend to prefer buying rights to books that have already sold in the West, instead of risking their meager funds by investing in unknown local talents…All this combined can make African readers feel that African literature exists not for them, but for Western eyes. Why else have brutality and depravity been the core of many celebrated African stories? It appears that publishers have allotted Africa the slot for supplying the West with savage entertainment (stories about ethnic cleansing, child soldiers, human trafficking, dictatorships, rights abuses and so on). The same stereotypes Africans often claim to abhor tend to form the foundations for our literary successes (2-3).

What then are writers to do—insofar as there are choices to make in the processes of producing both culture (the work) and commodity (the publication)? How authors choose

[34] In *The World Republic of Letters*, Pascale Casanova argues that literary assimilation—conforming to dominant market demands—is the only means by which "all colonized or otherwise dominated regions" are offered access to "literary existence" (20).

publishers can both influence and reflect a given publishing field, as Bgoya and Jay note; they acknowledge the "psychological and economic reasons" for African authors to privilege U.S.- or U.K-based publishers[35] (26). This impact cuts both ways: Carolyn Davis notes that commonly, writers are lumped in with publishers when critics conflate the "pressure on African writers to produce African exotica and the collusion of the writer in the process" (3).[36] However, central to the question is that of audience: to whom (or *where*) is the work directed, and to what extent can readers be considered distinctly from publishers? If authors understand publishers as primarily U.S.-based, does that mean their ideal or implied readers must also be North American? To what extent do previous generations' debates over who African literature is "for" map onto the current generation of writers—and how are these tensions manifesting in, and through, the publishing field?

On one hand, as Brouillette notes, "viable African readerships" have not been institutionally fostered in most countries and as Nwaubani points out, African readers tend to be, at best, under-targeted in publishers' marketing of "African stories" (whether the stories are printed in Africa or abroad)—and at worst, thoroughly alienated from "African literature." On the other hand, all stakeholders in the field (authors, readers, and publishers at all scales and geographies) claim to seek more, and more diverse, African readers. In this moment of hyper-self-consciousness, authors and publishers alike are keen to disavow privileging or centering the "Western" reader. But historically, as Davis has argued in her study of Oxford University Press's operations in Africa, "the value of a publication was defined not only by its place of publication

[35] Bgoya and Jay hold up Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie as an exemplar of balancing sometimes competing senses of "duty" to both national development and "art": she writes in English and wants to be published principally in the U.S. and U.K., but "insists that her contracts give free copublication rights to her country of origin" (27).
[36] In a way, this maps onto the debates—represented most famously by Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiong'o—over African writers' uses of colonial versus indigenous languages.

but also by its geographic destination": for example, whether a text was bound for Zimbabwe or New York mattered for how it was valuated by African and non-African readers alike (34). And, at least in Nwaubani's generalized view, "Literary audiences in many African countries…simply sit and wait until the Western critics crown a new writer, and then begin applauding that person," while "Local writers without some Western seal of approval are automatically perceived as inferior" (4).

Both origin and destination of publication still seem part of how African writers are broadly legitimated. In spite of this, indigenous and independent publishers are gaining traction across the continent over just the past few years. In her 2016 *Guardian* op-ed "Why I Chose an African Publisher Over a Western One," Nigerian writer Sarah Ladipo Manyika explains her decision to work with Cassava Republic Press, a fast-growing independent publisher based in Abuja. After selling her first book to a British publisher, which sold the Nigerian rights to Cassava, she sold the world rights to her second book directly to Cassava "in the hope that they will sell these rights to other markets" (2). Her op-ed responds, she says, to constant inquiries about whether choosing a local publisher "makes financial sense"—but claims some benefits outweigh that risk:

> …unencumbered by some of the stereotypes of what so-called "African literature" should look like, they were able to think creatively…The covers of both my books eschew the lazy visual tropes that are often relied upon by the publishers of African-authored literature in the west (think sunsets, bare torsos, palm trees)….[Cassava] did not shy away from a genre that is currently perceived by its European and American competitors as an "awkward sales and marketing proposition," but saw it as something positive… their instinctive "crossover" cosmopolitanism allows them to serve a readership base that is broader and richer than previously imagined (3).

Nigeria is something of a special case, being (along with South Africa) home to many of the most world-renowned African writers, most of whom write in English and who have helped to establish the country as the continent's "vibrant literary hub" through continued close ties to

major American and British publishers (Alter, Brouillette). It makes some sense, then, that Nigeria seems especially concentrated in its new literary activities—including recently formed literary festivals, book prizes, writers' workshops, and independent publishers such as Cassava, Farafina, Parrésia, and Ouida Books. These Lagos-based small presses represent the variety of ways in which new indigenous African publishers are thinking about (or are aiming to think about) new "ideal readers" for African literature. Cassava, for one, states its mission as "bringing high quality fiction and non-fiction…to a global audience. Our mission is to change the way we all think about African writing" ("Cassava"). The "all" here seems to signify, well, everyone—the "global audience."[37] Kachifo Limited's tagline (publisher of Farafina Books and Prestige Books) is "Telling Our Own Stories…": the ellipses implying, perhaps, something like "for whomever wants to read them!" Ouida Books says it publishes "for the eclectic reader"; where this reader may be situated in the world is unmentioned. But all are clear in asserting themselves as Africa-*based* ("our stories") if not exclusively or primarily Africa-bound, and reflexively committed to "changing" the terms of African literary production.

It is arguable whether, as Manyika's self-promotional piece asserts, a smaller press like Cassava is actually "unencumbered" by foreign market expectations. Indeed, her endorsements of the press are to some extent aspirational: she sold Cassava her book rights "in the hopes" of reaching the "readership base that is broader and richer than previously imagined." But there is no question that these new, mostly Nigeria-based smaller presses are changing the terms of production, including to some extent on an infrastructural scale. The International Publishers Association (IPA) held its 2019 summit in Nairobi with the theme, "Africa Rising" (Nawotka,

[37] Cassava also has a more seemingly targeted imprint: Ankara Press, whose mission is "bringing African romance fiction into the bedrooms, offices and hearts of women the world over."

"The Fight"). According to *Publishers Weekly*, the primary outcome of the summit was the "Lagos Action Plan," created in conjunction with the Nigerian Publishers Association and the Kenya Publishers Association, which includes the goals of

> more investment, public and private…establish[ing] piracy and copyright protections for the digital age…prioritizing publishing in indigenous languages in order to increase literacy…and decolonizing existing institutions, such as textbook publishers and libraries—all of which are in various states of development by local African publishers and institutions, now with the additional support of the IPA (Nawotka, "The Fight").

Meanwhile, some U.S.-based publishers have started to develop lists dedicated to publishing African works *in* the U.S., such as Catalyst Press and the Mantle (Nawotka, "A Peek")—and there is little ambiguity about their presumed audiences. Catalyst describes itself as "Your journey to destinations unknown": the tagline overtly hailing an American reader and, at that, one for whom Africa (writ large) or Africa-originated stories are "unknown." Just one of the ways that this is complicated is by the sheer volume and visibility of new African writers on the international literary scene who are in migration and/or describe, metafictionally, experiences of migration (often to/from the U.S.). In fact, the "coterie" Brouillard notes as reliant on private donors—a coterie of authors, but also editors, prize judges, and event organizers—are largely transnational. By virtue of the primarily North American donor base, Brouillard takes the literary output of this group to be primarily U.S.-facing ("of course"). Yet the literary texts themselves may complicate that logic at least to some degree. How can we read these novels as illuminating the field in new ways, given that they are themselves the commodity being consumed by the industry they seek to change? To what extent does Jeanne-Marie Jackson's point hold that "As such titles and presses continue to gain acclaim and recognition by an international readership that is aware of and hostile to shallow representations of Africa…critics will need to rethink some of their orthodoxies" (5)?

Big books

We may take specific texts as representative of levels of market success, publisher scale and locale, and metafictionality (how particular audiences are seemingly anticipated). The first of these levels comprises what publishers call "big books"—those that, for mainstream literary audiences, constitute the current "wave." These are books by authors who are: represented by U.S.-based known-quantity literary agents; have garnered hefty advances; benefitted from large-scale marketing pushes; have some notoriety as public intellectuals; and who have reached the top of *The New York Times* bestseller list. These are the authors who may be most influential in changing the terms of reference for African literature—that is, what is signified by "African literature"—for the broadest swath of U.S. readers, for whom it has long signified Chinua Achebe ("I think I read *Things Fall Apart* in high school?") and not much more. This group includes Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, NoViolet Bulawayo, Yaa Gyasi, Teju Cole, and Imbolo Mbue. These writers' recent bestsellers are all, to some degree, metafictional dramatizations of migration from Africa to the U.S., and experiences of being read and/or racialized in U.S. contexts.[38] Not all of the recent bestselling works of African fiction depict experiences of migration, nor have all recent African novels about migration become bestsellers (not even close). However, it seems worth noting that so many highly marketable (to major U.S.-based publishers) texts center on Black Africans in the U.S., or to a lesser extent in the U.K., directly

[38] This chapter—and others—deliberately leaves out work by white South African writers Nadine Gordimer and J.M. Coetzee, both of whom are certainly household names among African and non-African readers of "literary fiction" (both have won the Nobel Prize for literature). Examining how the receptions of these and other white African writers compare to those of Black South Africans is simply beyond the scope of this project.

engaging the politics of being "read" by predominately white, liberal, American or British audiences.[39]

Interestingly, the most overt, experimental, and damning (of a white/foreign-dominated publishing industry) metafiction seems to saturate the level of the mid-range international success: that of the critic's darlings, published by major and smaller houses, with respectable international sales figures but nowhere approaching potential Oprah Book Club status. These include novels by writers such as Obioma, Zakes Mda, Okey Ndibe, A. Igoni Barrett, Chris Abani, and Helen Oyeyemi. Mda, Ndibe, and Abani have written novels centered in the U.S.—but have done so in ways less palatable to the mainstream. Finally, there are the texts published, at least initially, by independent African presses—by authors such as Manyika, Fiston Mwanza Mujila, Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi, and Lola Shoneyin (founder of Ouida Books). Particularly since the independent presses described above were explicitly founded to publish and promote diverse African stories—in terms of genre, form, content, and authorship—it is most difficult and reductive, among this group, to select any given text as "representative"; and while experimental writers deploy metafiction in various ways, the indictment of a *specific* foreign (or local) audience seems altogether less common. For one of these, Makumbi's *Kintu*, reception has centered on questions of "African" representation and local/global audiences for African literature—at the same time that the text itself seems to muddle such questions strategically.

Alongside the recent outpouring across *all* scales of publication, questions emerge: how might these literary texts reveal an increasingly multilayered relationship of influence between

[39] Adichie, for example, achieved bestseller status and critical acclaim with her first two novels, *Purple Hibiscus* and *Half a Yellow Sun*—both of which are set in Nigeria. It was *Americanah*, however, that delivered Adichie the level of mainstream success she currently enjoys.

African authors and publishers? For example, do those writers who achieve (or seek to achieve) publication by a "Big Five" conglomerate seem more beholden to producing "African books for Western eyes" than those published by the local independent presses? What, precisely, is *new* about this moment in African publishing—and what terms remain relatively unchanged? At least one new aspect to the field—of African publishing and of "cross-cultural" literary reception more broadly—is the prevalence of metafiction, or how texts increasingly weigh in on these questions through scenes of cultural consumption.

2014 saw the first widely reported seven-figure advance for debut work by an African writer—paid by Random House to Cameroonian Imbolo Mbue for *Behold the Dreamers* (then titled *The Longings of Jende Jonga*). In 2015, 25-year-old Ghanaian-American Yaa Gyasi sold her debut novel *Homegoing* for seven figures to Knopf Doubleday after a much-publicized ten-bidder auction (Temple). These investments have since more than paid off: both books have spent months on *The New York Times* bestseller list, won prestigous awards, and received mostly glowing reviews by mainstream critics (*Behold the Dreamers* achieved perhaps the highest echelon of commercial success when it was chosen by Oprah's Book Club in 2017). Appearing just ahead of these other young women writers on the international stage, however, was Zimbabwean NoViolet Bulawayo with her celebrated debut novel *We Need New Names*, published in 2013 by Little, Brown (now a division of Hachette and officially included in the "Big Five"). Arguably, Bulawayo's reception went a long way toward setting the terms for Mbue's and Gyasi's deals; while her advance for *We Need New Names* has not been reported, its publication had all the trappings of a "big book," and its immediate success can only have whetted the appetites of other conglomerates to publish the next bestseller by an African writer. *Names* also, of these, most explicitly calls attention to itself as a cultural product up for

consumption, as it includes multiple scenes of Zimbabweans strategically performing "Africanness" for well-meaning, mostly white American and British audiences. Those scenes, and the novel's general preoccupation with strategic exoticism, have been variously taken up by critics; in retrospect, the novel seems to have prompted a new register of public conversations around what it takes for African writers to write and sell "big books."

It is, after all, easy to read *We Need New Names* as pandering to a global market for abject Africanness—or in Nwaubani's terms, as cynically "supplying the West with savage entertainment." *Names* is narrated by Darling, a young girl who at the novel's start lives in "Paradise," a shantytown in an unnamed country resembling the Zimbabwe of Operation Murambatsvina ("Drive Out the Rubbish"): a 2005 government-sponsored program of forced relocation.[40] Darling, the reader infers, is one of the "resettled"—that is, from a comfortable middle-class home to this community subsisting mostly on NGO support, with nothing remaining from her former life. The first half of the narrative, before her migration to the U.S., has Darling privy to the whole gamut of human suffering: from hunger (ever-present from the book's opening lines), to AIDS (she watches her father die from "The Sickness"), to her eleven-year-old friend's rape and consequent pregnancy by her own grandfather, to the normalized anxiety that accompanies extreme poverty. Meanwhile, Darling dreams of going to America to live with her aunt in "DestroyedMichigan" (spoiler alert: America is not all it's cracked up to be). As Akin Adesokan has written, it is to some degree reductive—if not irresponsible—to read scenes of suffering in recent African fiction as authors *simply* responding with "strategic exoticism" or "authorial self-consciousness"[41] to global marketplace expectations. Adesokan

[40] Officially known as "Operation Restore Order," more than half a million people were displaced by Murambatsvina; the operation targeted areas where opposition to Mugabe's regime was concentrated.
[41] Huggan and Brouillette, respectively.

argues that the appeal of such representations to global (Northern) audiences "are underwritten by actually existing global inequities, not simply attempts to subvert prior codes of representation" (3). This is certainly true. In *Names*, metafictional scenes of the allure and consumption of African suffering do the work of indicting the marketplace in perpetuating global inequities; by using "prior codes of representation" to conflate the commodity of the text with the commodity of "Africanness," the text hails anticipated consumers of the text as complicit in what "actually exists."

In the novel, the foreign gaze is always imposing itself; visitors to Paradise literally ask Darling and her friends to perform their suffering for "Western eyes." In the first chapter, the kids encounter a woman in "Budapest"—the wealthier gated community where they steal guavas from over-abundant fruit trees—who approaches them bearing a camera and a "Save Darfur" t-shirt. She tells them she is from London and appears eager to "relate": "Jeez, I can't stand this awful heat, and the hard earth, how do you guys ever do it?" (8). The kids stare in hunger and confusion at the foreign food the woman is enjoying (some sort of decadent pastry, it seems)—and she misinterprets the object of their interest:

> Oh, this? It's a camera, the woman says, which we all know; even a stone can tell that a camera is a camera. The woman wipes her hand on her skirt, pats the camera, then aims what is left of the thing at the bin by the door, misses, and laughs to herself like a madman. She looks at us like maybe she wants us to laugh with her, but we are busy looking at the thing that flew in the air before hitting the ground like a dead bird (8-9).

The camera is no foreign object to these kids, and its bearer—the outsider seeking to capture an image of Africanness—is rendered as absurdly obtuse, if not outright cruel. She promptly asks if she can take their picture—"you, with the missing teeth, look at me, like this"—and gets angry when, after saying "cheese" for a while, they get fed up and walk away (11-12).

Not long after this comes the most blatant scene of market transaction in the novel. When the monthly NGO delivery arrives in the village, the kids are playing the "country-game," in which they vie to be "country-countries" (the U.S., Britain, Australia, France): "Nobody wants to be rags of countries like Congo. Like Somalia, like Iraq, like Sudan, like Haiti, like Sri Lanka, and not even this one we live in—who wants to be a terrible place of hunger and things falling apart?" (50-51). When "NGO" arrives and interrupts the game, the children are well-conditioned in how to behave, though it is difficult to keep it together as the lorry approaches: "Now we are singing and screaming like we are proper mad…We squint in the dust and watch the doors of the lorry, waiting for the NGO people to come out, but we don't stop singing and dancing. We know that if we do it hard, they will be impressed, maybe they will give us more, give and give until we say, NGO, please do not kill us with your gifts!" (53).

Bulawayo, through Darling, describes Zimbabwe as a place of "things falling apart" several times throughout the novel, inviting in the specter of Chinua Achebe and of "African literature" itself (with its trappings). In so doing, Bulawayo is also inviting her receptions to turn on old tropes, specifically those already inclined to read Zimbabwe to "a terrible place of hunger." However, she can most effectively critique those tropes by metafictionally representing them *in terms of* a dramatized relation with white savior-figures. This relation of dependence is part and parcel of "things falling apart," about which the kids know enough to be cynical; the "gifts" come at a cost, namely, ensuring that the image of things falling apart continues circulating for donors' eyes (and on it goes). Fifty years after the publication of Achebe's hyper-canonical[42] novel, foundational aspects of the publishing industry in Africa have changed,

[42] Jonathan Arac, "Nationalism, Hypercanonization, and Huckleberry Finn," *Boundary 2*, 1992.

including the roles of benevolent NGOs and private donors; the referents for "African literature" *outside* of Africa, meanwhile, in many ways have not.

Darling is more interested in what motivates her audience than they are in *her* particularity: "They just like taking pictures, these NGO people…they don't care that we are embarrassed by our dirt and torn clothing, that we would prefer they didn't do it; they just take the pictures anyway, take and take" (54). She observes that the photographer is especially interested in her pregnant friend and her playmate Bastard, whose shorts are torn so that his backside is exposed. He preens for the camera and another friend chastises him—"You are not supposed to laugh or smile"—to which Bastard responds:

> …when they look at my picture over there, I want them to see me. Not my buttocks, not my dirty clothes, but me.
>
> Who will look at your picture? I ask. Who will see our pictures? But nobody answers me.

Their "readers" are so far away as to be abstractions; immediate, though, is the pressure to suit that market's demands. That the consumers are foreign, benevolent, under-informed audiences—with predictable tastes—is simply a given. As such, in these scenes, the novel describes the uneven relations that characterize the global literary field, and in particular, the contingent relations among contemporary African writers and a donor-backed field of cultural production.

Later in the novel, when "BBC men" are in Paradise documenting the funeral of a young murdered member of the political resistance, the kids play-act the man's death. "What kind of game is that?" the newsmen ask, to which one of the children replies: "Can't you see this is for real?" (145-6). Indeed. The "actual inequities" and the field of cultural production and consumption are not separable; in describing the characters' deprivation as *also* self-consciously deployable in market transactions, *Names* describes new conditions of dependency in which

strategically or no, there are limits on what forms of "Africanness" may be performed. The book, after all, *is* that performance, and of course can be (and has been) read to grant Bulawayo varying degrees of self-consciousness. Regardless, the foreign market value for such performances is long established—of which both authors and major publishers are highly aware.

"Channeling the rhythm and vibrancy of the storytellers who raised her in Zimbabwe," reads the jacket copy on the trade paperback edition, "Bulawayo tells a potent story of displacement and arrival…". The marketing team at Little, Brown well anticipated the established reader-values associated with the book's African "authenticity." The paratexts accompanying the book's first release show us what is interesting and *new* about that value-term. Anthropological or pedagogical value (of "learning about Africa") remains deployed everywhere, at the same time that such value is reflexively disowned among reviewers and prize committees. As a "big book," the legitimation of *Names* evidences just how mainstream this condition of self-consciousness—saturating a global receptive field in uncomfortable, ambivalent relation to old tropes—has become for publishers and readers of African literature alike.

Bulawayo won the prestigious U.K.-based Caine Prize in 2011 for the story "Hitting Budapest," which became the opening chapter of *Names*. The Caine win alone went a long way toward hyping the book's release and legitimizing Bulawayo for potential publication by a major house.[43] Upon the release of *Names*, Bulawayo also won the U.S.-based Hurston/Wright Legacy Award; in that press release, the judges explain that in "NoViolet's great characters, their entrapments, their miseries, their hungers…we also see ourselves" (Brown). Meanwhile, reviews such as that from the *Independent* praise Bulawayo's ability to "tell the story of a traumatised

[43] In recent years the Caine Prize has become a focal point of critique for legitimizing conditions for African writers. The review of *Names* in *The Guardian*, for example, criticized Bulawayo's "palpable anxiety to cover every African topic" as evidence of a "'Caine-prize aesthetic' that has emerged in a vacuum created by the judges and the publishers and agents over the years, and which has begun to perpetuate itself" (Habila).

nation without being unremittingly bleak….the reader is seduced by [the characters'] antics at the same time as finding out about the country's troubles. Bulawayo refuses to play the pity card, and although conditions are grim, Darling and her friends have fun" (Sanai).

These mediating texts cast Bulawayo as self-consciously responsive to a decidedly non-African audience's expectations, and as tasked with "telling the story" of Zimbabwe to readers who might "learn" it, for better or worse, through African literature. "Finding out about the country's troubles" is framed as key to the novel's literary value (insofar as presumed foreign readers might still "see ourselves"). Michiko Kakutani's *Times* review values the way in which specifically American readers might "see ourselves," in different terms: "We hear [Bulawayo's] anger at white liberals who speak patronizingly about the troubles of 'Africa,' lumping together all the countries on that continent as though they were interchangeable parts of one big mess" (Kakutani). Here, the text's hailing of patronizing white readers is cast in positive terms; again, that the novel is self-consciously engaged in *some* negotiation with the values of a presumed, cross-cultural reading practice is a given. Moreover, there seems to be some allure—suggested in both the legitimating paratexts and the novel's success—to readers' "seeing themselves" on the receiving end of the text's critique. Perhaps the days of presumable mainstream success for *un*self-conscious representations of Africanness have passed; in other words, that *Names* both *is* and calls attention to itself *as* a performance of old tropes might explain its appeal to a major publisher, at least as much as any of its other "literary" qualities.

Furthermore, there are new players in the field of African literary production to mediate, and contribute to, legitimizing terms: the big-book authors themselves, who act as public intellectuals and as culture brokers facilitating others' successes. Adichie is no doubt the most prominent and influential of these; Brouillette notes that just her appearance at a small press's

promotional event can have a major impact on marketing and, presumably, sales down the line (8). But Bulawayo, Gyasi, Mbue, Cole, and others are likewise helping to muddle the longstanding presumption of a "cross-cultural" relation between African authors and audiences—establishing creative writing workshops, book fairs, and new literary prizes in home countries, and lending legitimating blurbs to book jackets. Having accrued such cultural capital in response to old terms, these authors are now making *African* readerships more visible—who themselves are not new but are more newly accounted for, at least by indigenous presses. And while big book-status for African writers is still contingent on American consumers, *Names* has pointed out (to those consumers' gratification) that to some extent, the market can be played.

Never mind the audience

Meanwhile, for some African writers, frustration toward literary markets manifests somewhat differently in the fiction. While Bulawayo might be understood as representative of the market-savvy Oprah-oriented writer, others are writing novels further outside the bounds—potentially alienating enough to readers of Bulawayo, Adichie, and the others that their relative lack of appeal to Big Five publishers must be anticipated to some extent. These are those more unconventional novels—by authors such as Okey Ndibe, Nnedi Okorafor, Zakes Mda, and Chigozie Obioma—which are published by U.S.- and Europe-based presses (sometimes smaller non-conglomerate presses, and sometimes imprints of conglomerates), garner critical acclaim, and sell well enough to secure the author's position as creative writing faculty at a U.S. university.[44] Due in part to their relative experimentalism, metafiction seems most prevalent

[44] All but one of these authors—Mda, who is South African—identify as Nigerian or Nigerian-American. *The New York Times* has called Obioma the "heir" of Chinua Achebe, while Ndibe's publisher (Soho, now an imprint of Penguin RH) describes him as Achebe's "disciple." (Okorafor tends to be spared the comparison, whether because

across this group of recent African texts, insofar as they may be grouped together. Texts are not any *less* in dialogue with international markets for not pandering to them. Rather, their indictments of those markets are more explicit, rendered in moves presumably less palatable to *any* mainstream audience. The lack of a clearly targeted audience may be understood as one of the things that doesn't go down quite as easily for readers. Non-African readers are refused the satisfaction of "getting it" ("I am not that racist reader in the book") because the work does not address them. Published by U.S. publishers, these texts are also not marketed (as do African presses) as "ours."

Again, this is not to say that the question of audience is absent from the texts and/or from author-produced paratexts—rather that the question is raised in order to refuse a satisfactory answer. As Obioma wrote in a 2016 op-ed for *The Guardian*, after publishing his surreal first novel *The Fishermen* (first with an independent U.S. press) to critical acclaim,

> One of the most common—and most surprising—questions I received was about my intended audience. This question, I came to discover, is frequently asked of writers who have a similar provenance to mine…If I say that I write for Igbo readers, this audience still does not include everyone, for even within that tribe, there are a lot of differences in dialects. And, then, why write in English, if my work is for the Igbo people? Why not write in Igbo? Suppose I choose to write in Igbo for the people of Umuahia in eastern Nigeria, will that suffice? Because then, I gain my granny as an audience. How then can I comfortably define my provincial base? Bear in mind, also, that I was not born in Igboland, but in Akure where another language, Yoruba, is spoken. So, how might I feel about leaving out the people of Akure by selecting a provincial base? Does it feel right? I think not.

However, Obioma criticizes Nigerian writers who set up barriers to cross-cultural readers—whether cross-culturally Nigerian, or the thoroughly foreign reader whom he calls "Jane in Ann Arbor." For Obioma, these barriers within the fiction—specifically, the use of untranslated dialects—are writerly failures. In his example, if a Lagosian author vividly

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she is U.S.-born, a writer of primarily fantasy and science fiction, or a woman—or some combination of all three.) All of these writers have been to some extent educated in the U.S. and live and work primarily in the U.S.

describes a bus, rather than use the Lagosian term "molue," anyone may access the work's meaning ("not just the Lagos reader"). Further, Obioma derides Nigerian author Eghosa Imasuen who has said that if readers don't understand a word or reference, they should "Google it." For Obioma, Imasuen, among others, has "abstained from his duty and tasked the reader with research" (Obioma).

Of course, debates around the degree to which texts by historically marginalized writers (in global market-context) can and should refuse appropriative readings have been well hashed, particularly in the context of African literatures. Texts that set themselves firmly in geographic place—through uncontextualized local references, untranslated local languages, and/or lack of adherence to more "universal" mainstream literary genre conventions—are in Doris Sommer's approving terms "uncooperative books" that "detain [readers] at the boundary between contact and conquest, before they press particularist writing to surrender cultural difference for the sake of universal meaning" (Sommer ix). Indeed, Obioma's critique of particularism (or "provincialism" in his terms) may well be rooted in the market values so commonly associated with African literary "authenticity." (Particularism itself, after all, can be performative; it can also be "surrendered" to readers intent on "understanding.") However, there has not yet proven to be a mainstream international market for geographically/ethnically particularist African texts, even amidst the current "boom." Why *do* books about, or by, diasporic and/or migratory Africans saturate the international receptive field? Are major North American publishers presuming that North American readers want some familiar access point (to "see themselves" in some aspect of the fiction—even if negatively so)? Do more "particularist" texts happen to be less marketable for other qualities? Do most writers who achieve major book deals do so because they are *already* in migration—for example, having attended an MFA program in the U.S.—and

are more fluent in, or connected to, the market itself? (And/or, are simply "writing what they know"?)

Certainly, different forms of educational and cultural capital accrue for authors who have migrated to, and/or been partially educated in, the U.S. or Europe. Nigerian author A. Igoni Barrett is *not* one of those, which is in part why his strange, satirical novel *Blackass* is worth discussing here. *Blackass*, in its thorough Lagosian-ness, also describes how conditions of African book markets are such that actual Lagosians are far less likely than foreigners to read the work. In this way and others, it is not a novel that can easily be read as *for* anyone (including as intervening in any particular mode of reading); rather, it hails a literary *field* understandably preoccupied with identifying and cultivating its reader-market. At the same time, *Blackass* is representative of the culture brokerage that supplies many African writers with access to international publication. Early in his career, Barrett received a fellowship from the Chinua Achebe Center; the Center's director at the time was Binyavanga Wainaina. Wainaina, impressed with Barrett's work, introduced him to his agent and to his American publisher, Graywolf Press. Graywolf, a nonprofit independent press based in Minneapolis, has published both of Barrett's books (including his short story collection *Love Is Power, Or Something Like That*). Of course, these kinds of connections are often how access to publication and other opportunities work. However, at a moment when the field of production for African writers is attempting to redefine its terms, we should consider the extent to which this is possible, and for whom. Bibi Bakare-Yusef, founder of Cassava Press—one of the most successful and fast-growing Nigerian independent publishers—has asserted that now, African writers "don't have to leave the leave the country to enjoy Adichie-level acclaim" (Bady). The rapid increase in indigenous presses notwithstanding, Adichie-level *readership* has thus far been reserved for texts (if not also

authors) which *have* gone to U.S.-based houses. And for those who don't, perhaps, a connection like Wainaina is the next best thing. One early online review of Blackass noted that "Ironically, Barrett's readers abroad have begun to outnumber those at home" (Ikheloa). This may not be ironic so much as more or less inevitable. At the same time, the novel demonstrates just how much writing and reading is taking place in Nigeria within *and* outside print book culture; in fact, *Blackass* describes the limits of print publication and the uses, on the other hand, of internet-based literary production for writers and readers alike.

Blackass begins with a metamorphosis. Furo Wariboko wakes on the morning of an important job interview to find himself transformed into a horrifying creature—a pale-fleshed *oyibo* (white person). Furo, who lives with his family in Lagos, has been unemployed and job-hunting for several months, at a moment when employment in the city is near 50 percent. In an echo of Gregor Samsa's first nightmarish moments in his cockroach's body, Furo contemplates his next move as his mother knocks on the door, urging him to wake up. He decides that his new appearance will be too much for his family to handle—but that he cannot risk missing his interview. He waits until they leave the house, then steps out onto the streets of Lagos—not one of the city's few neighborhoods where seeing oyibos is common, he notes—and is treated with the shock and confusion one might expect of such a spectacle.

The interview, on the other hand, proves a far simpler transaction than walking down the street. Furo had not been hopeful, given the sheer number of applicants for a single job opening. But for this position—at a book distribution company called Haba![45]—his whiteness proves

[45] It may that the name, with its gratuitous exclamation point, references Kwani?: the Kenya-based literary magazine founded by none other than Wainaina. In addition to the journal, the Kwani? Trust, Kwani? Literary Festival, and Kwani? Manuscript Project have served as publication access points for many successful internationally *and* locally published writers. Kwani?, like so many indigenous presses, is primarily funded by U.S.-based NGOs and private foundations (in this case, The Ford Foundation). *Blackass*'s Haba!, on the other hand, is a distributor of Western-authored and -published business books. Haba! may be read as Kwani?'s antithesis and/or, more cynically, as

valuable. After extensive confusion around his Nigerian name and accent (a scene to be repeated with everyone he meets throughout the novel), Furo convinces company heads that he is indeed a white Nigerian. "We need a man like you on the team," his new boss tells him (25). As a formality, Furo must first answer just a few questions, including one he'd anticipated nervously, not being much of a reader: "When was the last time you read a book?"

> I love *Things Fall Apart*, he'd planned to say, it teaches us about our culture, where we as Africans are coming from. But in fact he chose that book because he was forced to read it in junior secondary…And in his head the voice of Mr. Zikiye, his English literature teacher, still droned: *The white man in this book is a symbol of progress. Okonkwo fought against the white man and lost. Progress always wins, that's why it's progress. Now tear out a sheet of paper, you have a test* (27).

Here, Barrett casts "African literature" (more specifically, "Nigerian literature") as a construct whose primary signifier—within and outside the continent—is *still* Achebe, even as the surge of African literature in global markets has very recently undercut *Things Fall Apart*'s hyper-canonicity. However, Barrett seems less concerned with this particular condition of the field than with satirizing modes of reading: modes that value "teaching" (literature as symptom of the "real") or modes that rehash colonial, racial, or otherwise embedded and backward logics. Audiences who expect something in particular from "African literature" are invoking a phantasm of which Achebe is still prime representative—but the phantasm itself is the point. These audiences are not necessarily non-African (or non-Nigerian); Furo has no more "authentic" an experience with Achebe's work than "Jane in Ann Arbor" would. In this way, *Blackass* avoids hailing a particular reader and instead hails the market, in which no geo-politically located reader is *necessarily* more identified with the text than any other.

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another version of an African company whose mission is some version of advancing literacy among African readers yet beholden to the Global North for its infrastructure.

One of the most common tropes to the most popular works of Black African writers in U.S. contexts is that of (meta-)fictionalizing processes of racialization: the experience of "becoming Black," as Adichie has described it, upon arrival to the U.S. Novels such as *Americanah* and to some extent *We Need New Names* are very much *about* race and racial formation in the U.S., in ways that productively remind readers that race is culturally specific. What is rarer in the global field of recent African literature, though, are descriptions of racial formation at "home"—and not because race "doesn't exist" in twenty-first century Nigeria (even if one never experiences racial *difference*). The ways in which *Blackass* is "about race" is perhaps the least interesting aspect of the text; the novel becomes a bit trite in its moments of reflection on race and identity as "constructs." However, this is one of the notable ways the book is not like others with which it is commonly grouped under the rubric of "new African literature," given how closely that category is associated with migration and what it means to "become Black"—which is not the same thing as "experiencing race."

Furo, as it turns out, has not turned completely white; a woman he has sex with, a couple of days into his new life, notices something strange when he turns to get dressed. He hears her scream behind him:

"Your ass, your ass! I mean your ass!...Your ass is black! " (74)

Furo must negotiate life in Lagos not only as an oyibo, but one smuggling evidence of his former, differently-signifying race. Swiftly, though—beginning with his unanticipated success on the job front—he starts to view his condition differently. It scares him; it has driven him from his home (to his family he is missing and feared dead, which Furo reasons is better than the alternative). However, he begins to find places where he "feels comfortable": wealthier neighborhoods where other oyibos, or people who have known or even seen other oyibos, might

live. Moreover, his economic distress prior to whiteness had been such that his newfound status and security—while he understands it is race-based—are strong lures to capitalize on whiteness's privileges. These include not only his new position as "marketing manager" for Haba! Book Distributors, but a new relationship and fancy apartment. Syreeta—the woman who first alerts him to his residual blackness—is immediately attracted to Furo, such that she invites him to stay with her indefinitely. (Having left home flat broke, he had spent his first nights as an oyibo in abandoned warehouses, hiding from public view—like a cockroach.) Syreeta, Furo learns, is aspiring to fit in with her social group of highly educated, middle-class women who marry oyibo foreigners and have "light-skinned babies." Furo is happy to oblige her fantasy in exchange for living comfortably. Over the course of the novel, he comes think of his remnant blackness as the "blemish on his backside" which he fears will "spread into sight, creep outwards to engulf everything, to show him up as an impostor" (111-112) and force him back into his former life. He starts secretly using Syreeta's skin-whitening creams on his behind; eventually—when he starts his new job—he changes his name to Frank Whyte.

The Lagos satirized by the novel is one where striving and social climbing are foremost values and where relationships are largely transactional. One form of social capital in these transactions is ethnicity—not to be conflated with race in a Nigerian context (a country in which near five hundred indigenous languages are spoken). Furo, for example, identifies as Kalabari, making him an ethnic and linguistic minority in Lagos—and giving Barrett countless opportunities to introduce, and then reject, the idea that a Nigerian reader is any more or less a targeted audience than "Jane in Ann Arbor." When Furo, funded by Syreeta, goes to bribe his way into a new passport, the agent addresses him:

> 'Kedu aha gi?'
> "Excuse me?' Furo said. He smiled in apology. 'I don't speak Igbo.'

> ‘I don’t speak Kalabari,’ the woman retorted, ‘but I doubt you do either’ (102).

In fact, it is Furo’s ability to speak Nigerian pidgin English that authenticates him as a (white) Nigerian to the majority of people he meets who cannot believe such a thing is possible. When he meets a particularly skeptical store clerk, whom Syreeta calls Yellowman, Syreeta vouches for Furo’s Nigerian-ness by asking him to speak:

> Yellowman’s face lit up with excitement. ‘Talk true? E dey speak pidgin?’
> ‘I full ground,’ Furo replied (152).

Language has been a central concern for stakeholders in the field of African literature for decades (at least), and like all else related to the field, those debates are recently reinvigorated and newly relevant to the many small presses establishing their missions. Ngugi wa Thiong’o, in his keynote at the IPA Lagos summit, predictably focused on how colonialism still intervenes in the establishment of an indigenous African publishing ecosystem—encouraging publishers to publish books in indigenous languages and countering presumptions that reader-markets for them don’t exist: “If Iceland, with 300,000 people, can sustain literary culture, why not Africa, where there are 40 million speakers of Yoruba, or 60 million Hausa, and 100 million speaking Swahili?” (Nawotka, “The Fight”). For this purpose, identifying audiences in ethnically- and linguistically-specific terms is politically necessary. Translation extends access to non-speakers, but texts must first be taken as assertions of indigeneity, making possible if not also privileging particular linguistic audiences. In part, this helps to trouble what is meant by “cross-cultural” in the context of reception, as a Nigerian writer (for example) has many potential cross-cultural audiences at home *and* abroad. At the same time, given the constellation of constraints on literary production, it makes sense that many African writers would prefer to leave the question of audience unanswered—allowing only limited opportunities for any readers to “see themselves.” For Barrett, it matters only that the languages of the place (Lagos) are on the page,

in circulation—not that all readers may understand them. In an interview, Barrett discusses how the particular Nigerian Anglophone needs particular expression:

> Right now, in Nigerian writing, we defend the way we speak; we defend Nigerian English…You have American English, and British English is something else, then there's Australian English, and Canadian English. But then you have Nigerian English. If you open a Microsoft Word document, and open the dictionary, you won't see an option for Nigerian English. This is a country of nearly 200 million people, whose official language is English, and we don't even own it. Many writers of my time are beginning to respond to that…In many ways, as much as we are doing this for ourselves, and a Nigerian audience, we are also doing this for the world because we are adding to the wider English language as we're also defining who we are.

Blackass "defends Nigerian English" by including lengthy untranslated—unitalicized—sections of dialogue in the language. When Furo first meets Syreeta's friends, they speak formal American English with him, but as the evening progresses,

> …the ladies' speech slipped further and further into the maze of slang, seeking those shaded places where meaning hid in plain sight:
>
> 'That my agaba Nikos nah proper olingo man sha.'
> 'Nothing do you kpakam!'
> 'Yemi still dey chop adro for inside Dublin?'
> 'Your oko jus dey love up like person wey chop kognomi!'
> 'Make una hear original gist o! This one fresh pass fresh fish—' (138)

The use of multiple languages, including multiple Englishes, ensures that for many readers—any readers who do not speak Nigerian English *and* Kalibari—at least a little bit of "meaning" will "hide in plain sight." One option for readers is to "Google it." The other is simply to allow the text to assert the particularity of its setting.

Ultimately, *Blackass* is about writing and reading—in Nigeria, in the present day. The novel conjures Lagos as a backdrop for its primary object of satire: the book market. On his first day at his new job, Furo's boss Abinze tells him: "Nigerians must start reading serious books, for work or for pleasure, that's my vision" (176). "Serious books," for Abinze, means Haba!'s supply of business books—like their bestseller, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*—and

Abinze means to supply them to the public in a semi-well-intentioned extension of access. However, when he and "Frank Whyte" attempt to make a major sale to the head of a business-owners organization, the customer stops short while scanning their backlist:

> 'There are no Nigerian books on that list.'
> The truth of this observation startled Furo into uncertainty, but Abinze's tone was assured as he replied, 'You're quite correct. We only sell world-class books…' (239).

When the buyer points out that Nigerian business owners might not find much use from books on foreign business models, Abinze replies:

> 'I strongly believe, sir, that the best business practices, like the best books, are universal. I have nothing against business books by Nigerians. But until they measure up, my company will never sell them' (239).

The field is such that, apparently, it had not occurred to Furo that Haba! sells *only* North American books (in English); for Abinze, it seems more often a selling point than not. In this view of the industry, it is not that Nigerians aren't writing books or that there aren't Nigerian readers to buy them; rather, the problem is that those books "don't measure up." Arguably, this echoes how, until the twenty-first century, the international receptive field implicitly justified the extreme under-representation of African writers in *any* market. This metafictional protest, then, is not hailing a readership, but the long-held terms of the industry.

The most overtly meta- aspect of the novel is that of a writer-character, named Igoni, whom Furo meets early on. They have a brief conversation in a mall food court; Igoni recognizes Furo's name as Kalabari because he is Kalabari himself. Igoni used to work for a publishing house but tells Furo he is now a writer of "fiction, short stories, that sort of thing" (57). The two part ways, but Igoni subsequently narrates a few interspersed sections of the text. The first of these begins:

> Furo Wariboko persisted in my thoughts after I left him at the mall, so I did what everyone does these days: I Googled him... From the first moment I saw Furo I suspected

> I'd found a story, but it was when I heard him speak that I finally knew. A white man with a strong Nigerian accent, stranded in Lagos… (77).

In a later section, Igoni reflects: "Even if I hadn't met the hero myself...even if I plucked the whole fiction out of the air, there was no way in hell the writer in me was going to miss the rat smell of the story" (160).

In pursuit of the story, Igoni finds Furo Wariboko's Facebook page, where he sees photos of a *Black* Furo Wariboko who, judging by recent posts from family members, seems to have gone missing. Eventually, Igoni lands on a source of near-constant written updates: Furo's sister's Twitter account.

> 11:15 This is NOT a good morning. Dad is driving us to the #mortuary in Ikeja. We're going to search for #Furo there!
> 12:21 I just knew the place would be UGLY #mortuary (91).

Igoni's section of the novel includes several full pages of the sister's tweets—some of which comprise the text's funniest moments. But they also illustrate the very real centrality of internet-based publishing, including via social media, to African literary production. Indeed, while the metafictional move to insert an author-named character/narrator is not uncommon,[46] most interesting about this instance is the way Igoni seems not quite *real* in the world of the novel, but somehow *of* the internet itself. The character describes himself as "born into Twitter" (80). Barrett himself has said in an interview that "Basically, the Internet was my M.F.A. program"; he is one of the rarer authors published by a U.S. press who neither attended a U.S. MFA program nor teaches at one (Carol). As many have pointed out, an overwhelming amount of writing and publication by African writers and publishers is taking place online (Alter, Brouillette, Nawotka, Shercliff). Online literary journals and writers' collectives, such

[46] This move is fraught in particular ways when deployed by writers of color in the U.S., as it invites the very readings for "authenticity" that texts might seek to refute—as discussed in Chapter 2.

as *Kwani?*, *Saraba*, *Brittle Paper*, *Storymoja*, and *Jalada*, are "bridging the void left by physical distribution challenges" (Shercliff). Teju Cole is perhaps the writer most associated with legitimizing Twitter itself as a medium for literary production, through his "Hafiz" and "Seven Short Stories About Drones," fiction fully composed in tweets; however, many writers *without* already-established non-African audiences are using Twitter in similar fashion (Adenekan). Arguably, online publishing is where questions of audience-*markets* bear the least on the literary production. Not to mention, in the words of Shola Adenekan, that writers are attracted to online production "probably to avoid the old postcolonially framed distribution and publishing networks thus writing in new voices to new audiences alike" (Adenekan).

This does not mean that online cultural production tends to be ambiguous about audience. Ankara Press, the romance publisher which primarily publishes e-books, outlines "Our Reader" on their submission guidelines page in quite specific terms:

> She is young, single and confident with some money in her purse and time to read. She is (or wants to be) financially independent, ambitious and interested in challenging boundaries and going beyond expectations. She enjoys fashion, Nollywood films, contemporary African pop music from across the continent and she wants to see herself reflected in what she consumes in her leisure time. You'll find her reading magazines and websites such as Genevieve, TW, True Love, Bella Naija, and watching soaps like Generation, Tinsel, Isidingo and Tyler Perry Hollywood romantic comedies.

It is a writer *and* reader who is identified here—neither of whom are, or are expected to accommodate, Jane in Ann Arbor. Much discussion of online publishing takes place in the broader context of the changing landscape of literary production, including the growth of indigenous presses; online production is often celebrated as the best avenue for access "until" those presses can offer authors the international audiences that as of now, still only U.S.- and U.K.-based presses can. "Until then," Ikhide Ikheloa has argued, the Internet has become "the

number-one publisher of choice of Africans today" and has in effect "broken up the West's monopoly on publishing" (Ikheloa).

While *Blackass* describes this new condition of the African literary field, Barrett sought and achieved print publication in the U.S. His publisher Graywolf's framing of the novel, on its website and on the book jacket, seems careful not to hail the audience who seeks "destinations unknown" in African literature. It gets closer, if anything, to invoking the "global audience":

> Blackass is a fierce comic satire that touches on everything from race to social media while at the same time questioning the values society places on us, simply by virtue of the way we look.

Graywolf's mission statement, meanwhile, similarly sidesteps the audience question in ways that attempt to neither universalize nor nail down a particular "cross-cultural" reader. If anything, it invokes broader conditions of (under-)representation:

> We champion outstanding writers at all stages of their careers to ensure that adventurous readers can find underrepresented and diverse voices in a crowded marketplace.

The ways in which the marketplace of African literature is currently "crowded" is with the African *immigrant* narrative; *Blackass* is not only weird enough on its own terms to satisfy the "adventurous reader," but it is a version of the underrepresented African text in U.S. circulation. It is self-consciously *not* about migration, nor does it engage the tropes of "African stories for Western eyes" critiqued in novels like *Names*. At one point Furo reflects on why he has chosen to stay in Lagos: "The migration stories were always there, floating around like redemption songs…He knew countless people who had chosen that path…" (187). *Blackass*'s "path," instead, is that of a Lagos-centric novel filled with references to Kafka, Ovid, and Apuleius, published by a small Minneapolis-based press.

And yet. Reviews of *Blackass* in U.S.- *and* Africa-based publications overwhelmingly focus on the extent to which the novel responds, or not, to U.S. market expectations. Such is this

moment in African literary production and reception: the field is in active flux, developing new conditions for publication and readership in relation to those previously so entangled with the Global North. In real time, those of us invested in the terms of "cross-cultural" literary receptions (from writers to readers and all agents in between) can view how the field is relational above all else—the ways in which texts, authors, publishers, reviewers, and readers (to start) respond to each other and mutually form one another. Aaron Bady, in the online magazine *OkayAfrica*, reviewed *Blackass* as an example of a broader "backlash" among African writers "against the entire category of African immigrant literature" and its dominance in the international market. He also noted, in response to the fact that all *Blackass* reviews reference Kafka (of course), that "We know how to read African writers when they are Chinua Achebe, when they write about the US and Europe, or when they riff on Kafka." In his *What's On Africa* review ("White Face Black Butt"), Ikheloa asserts that

> Western reviewers won't agree but in *Blackass*, Barrett has written perhaps the best book to come out of Nigeria in the past decade…Imagine a novel written by an African that does not pander to the West. Not once. It does not italicize egusi, does not explain it…It gives the West the middle finger and struts its writer's stuff sweetly and expertly. I don't care what the West thinks, *Blackass* is fresh, contemporary writing without even trying; this is not Diaspora writing, this is writing by a warrior in the trenches at home.

Meanwhile, in a *New York Times Book Review* piece titled "A Wave of New Fiction From Nigeria, as Young Writers Experiment With New Genres," Alexandra Alter noted that "many writers no longer feel compelled to write novels that respond to the legacy of colonialism or Western notions about African literature." Increasingly, the extent to which texts demonstrate this non-compulsion is a term of literary value among African readers and reviews. We will see whether, in the coming years, such non-compulsion becomes a term of *market* value for African texts in global circulation.

“This book is for Ugandans”

Certainly, such was not yet the case when Ugandan novelist Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi tried to find a British publisher for her novel *Kintu* in 2014.

Makumbi was a PhD student in African literature in the U.K. when she started working on what she then called *The Kintu Saga*. She has said that her supervisors were skeptical, if not outright unsupportive, of the idea that a Ugandan historical novel would *not* center on the colonial encounter and/or postcolonial trauma—or at the least, foreground the regime of Idi Amin (Bady). *Kintu*, as the work became, foregrounds none of these.

Still, *Kintu* is a big book—literally. It opens in 2004, in Bwaise (“a swamp beneath Kampala’s backside”) when a man named Kamu is taken from his home by local officials for questioning. The initial reason is unknown but probably benign; these officials, Kamu knows, “tended to ask pointless questions to show they are working hard” (3). But as he is led with his hands tied through the early morning marketplace, bystanders mistake him for a thief; it’s not long before Kamu is brutally beaten to death by a mob. Later, a neighbor muses: “It was in the name…Who would name his child first Kamu and then Kintu?” “Someone seeking to double the curse,” another replies. And with that, the novel sweeps readers back to the first generation of the Kintu clan, headed by Kintu Kidda: a powerful governor in the eighteenth-century Buganda Kingdom. The “curse,” we learn (according to the family lore), is unleashed when Kintu slaps his son Kalema—and accidently kills him. If this weren’t trauma enough, Kintu’s men bury the body improperly (“They used a stick to measure Kalema’s length, but while the stick fit into the grave, Kalema did not. They crammed him in”); as even further desecration, they place the grave next to a burial shrub for dogs (41). The repercussions—in the forms of sudden death, mental illness, and other misfortune—are borne out by the generations tracked across Makumbi’s

sprawling epic. Through the family, the novel is also narrating the story of Uganda since 1750, grounded in careful research—its history, geographies, politics, cultures—excepting the period between around 1800 and the 1960s. The novel, which moves from the early twenty-first century to the eighteenth to the late twentieth, and back and forth, lends no page space to the colonial encounter whatsoever. And while the figure of Amin (referred to as "the monster") surfaces across the novel's latter decades, the impacts of colonialism and postcolonialism are embodied by characters but not *taught* by the novel in the same way that it details the precolonial scenes. This coverage isn't needed—precisely because, as Makumbi has stated in numerous interviews, the novel is "for Ugandans."

Here we have an African novel whose value turns on pedagogy for an *African* (specifically Ugandan) audience, and in fact those elements intended to "teach readers about Uganda" were presumed to work against the book's value to non-African readers. Makumbi was told by British publishers that the novel was "unpublishable," that is, "much too African" to publish without some fundamental changes to make it friendlier to non-Ugandans (Bady). In addition to the "surprising" omission of the colonial period, which one *Guardian* reviewer notes is "so often the obligation of the historical African novel," *Kintu*, like *Blackass*, is saturated with geo-politically particular language, references, ways of naming, ways of knowing.[47] Unlike

[47] In his introduction to the 2017 Transit Books (U.S.) edition of *Kintu*, Aaron Bady imagines the subtext of British publishers' rejections: "Perhaps a sprawling multi-character saga like this one might work if the characters were white…and if their names were solid English names (and for goodness sake, only one name each!). In Great Britain, after all, who has even heard of Kintu, the mythical first man on earth and founder of the Buganda Kingdom? Who would know to pronounce his name with a soft ch sound, instead of a hard k? …Could the book-buying public be expected to care about the struggles of an extended family in present-day Kampala?" To make his point, Bady draws on Wainaina's "How to Write About Africa" without actually referencing Wainaina—such is the influence of that text *and* the extent to which awareness of the receptive field is embedded in discourse around African writing: "If you must write about Africa, then you write about dictators, ethnography, and war…You write about Africans who have left Africa and migrated to the United States or Europe. You write about the legacies of colonialism. If you can't make Europe the hero of the story—and these days, you can't—then you can at least make Europe the villain…" (Bady ii-iii).

Blackass, whose particularity and strangeness may render it more accessible to readers—the vast majority of whom, given its specificity, will be cross-cultural to some degree—*Kintu* speaks to Ugandans. (Interested non-Ugandans can "Google it.") Makumbi did seek publication by major U.K-based publishers; presumably, that non-Ugandans would read the book was not only a given but, as a debut novelist seeking a book deal, part of the goal. Commercially, those non-Ugandan readers matter. As a cultural product, the book was produced with Ugandan readers in mind. As Makumbi told the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, "I wanted Ugandans to start looking at the history of Uganda before colonization—how Uganda was organized before Christianity and before Europe arrived—and to compare that with what we have at the moment. We need to start having those conversations" (Underwood).

If precolonial histories are commonly perceived—by writers and/or publishers—to be uninteresting to non-African audiences, complicated representations of present-day cultural politics may be presumed "inauthentic." In Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's 2009 story "Jumping Monkey Hill," Nigerian writer Ujunwa attends an African writer's workshop facilitated by Edward, a powerful white British journal editor. Embodying the terms of the publishing field, Edward asserts that Ujunwa's story about a Nigerian family accepting a daughter's homosexuality "wasn't reflective of Africa, really."

> 'Which Africa?' Ujunwa blurted out.
> …He looked at Ujunwa in the way one would look at a child who refused to keep still in church and said that he wasn't speaking as an Oxford-trained Africanist, but as one who was keen on the real Africa and not the imposing of Western ideas on African venues…'How African is it for a person to tell her family that she is homosexual?' Edward asked (108).

The character knows enough to claim he is not doing exactly what he is doing: that is, telling a Nigerian writer what is or is not "Nigerian." "Jumping Monkey Hill" is prime evidence of this dissertation's central claims, in its hit-you-over-the-head critiques of the field of "ethnic

literature" and the (often self-legitimizing) self-consciousness that pervades it. *Kintu* is not metafiction; it does not explain to presumably cross-cultural readers what it can and cannot do as "African literature." If it wants to complicate readers' ideas of the "authentically Ugandan," it wants to do so for *Ugandan* readers. One of the "conversations" Makumbi has said she wants to start among Ugandans is around gender and sexuality; she notes in an interview that, after the Uganda Anti-Homosexuality Act was passed in 2014, there was "an idea [among Ugandans] that homosexuality came with colonization, and that before that, Africans never engaged with homosexuality. I thought, let's go back to the past and see" (Underwood). In *Kintu,* gender is not binary and norms fluctuate; non-binary characters are sometimes accepted and sometimes very much not; polygamy is not desirable to all men; sex is sometimes consensual and pleasurable for women and sometimes very much not.

The book describes human complexity in ways that are culturally specific, and much of this specificity is *not* a "conversation" the book needs to start; those are the aspects that are simply givens for Makumbi's ideal reader. When asked by an American interviewer why a character returning from the dead "wasn't treated as a surprising event in any way," Makumbi replied, "that's the kind of question that Ugandans would not ask me." She added: "I know that books travel, and that there would be Western readers who would struggle to understand that" (Underwood). Those readers may also struggle to understand the "unabashed amalgam of Europe and Africa" that is *Kintu*'s Uganda—in the words of Namwali Serpell, "in everything from cooking to spiritual possession to mental health to sexual mores" (Serpell). As Makumbi said in another interview, "We are both Europeanized and Ugandan. We speak both traditional languages and English. Someone goes to church, but then will go to the traditional healer. Someone is a scientist but will have an intense spiritual life" (Serpell). Perhaps most explicitly,

like *Blackass*, *Kintu* asserts its specificity through the frequent use of untranslated Luganda (e.g.: "Baale had been reluctant to marry because he still wanted to kulya butaala like an untethered goat") (54). Again unlike *Blackass*, *Kintu* does not metafictionally critique the reader who seeks cross-cultural "understanding" and/or fetishizes difference—because for the Ugandan reader such critiques are irrelevant. As Ugandan writer Bwesigye Bwa Mwesigire put it in his review for the *Johannesburg Review of Books*, "…books have imagined readers. In this case, readers who would read the fiction and hear Luganda." He goes on to note: "The Ugandan reviewers of Kintu were unanimous in their praise" (Mwesigire).

He's right, which speaks in part to how beautifully written a novel *Kintu* is. As ever, the text's reception is produced in relation to the whole of the field—of the historical *and* changing conditions for the publication and legitimation of African writers. *Kintu* was first published in 2014 by Kenya-based Kwani? after Makumbi won their 2013 Manuscript Prize (and then the 2014 Commonwealth Short Story Prize). Kwani?, as discussed earlier, has become one of the most prominent of the (mostly foreign donor-funded) indigenous presses, having published several commercially successful African writers who were later published in the U.S. and U.K. *Kintu* is one of these. Oakland-based independent press Transit published the U.S. edition in 2017, followed by the Oneworld U.K. edition in 2018. In his introduction to Transit's edition, Bady writes that

> Ugandans have waited a long time for the book you are holding to exist…It's not hyperbole to call *Kintu* the great Ugandan novel. It is, simply and obviously, plain fact.

He describes following Makumbi around the Writivism Literary Festival in Kampala in 2016 as "readers and other writers caught at the hem of her garment. In such circles, it is hard to overstate what a rock star she is, and how precious this book has already become" (i). He goes on to explain that Kintu was borne from Makumbi's

> desire to give Ugandans a taste of their own long and complicated history, to do for Ugandans something like what Chinua Achebe novels did for Nigerians in the 1960s...To remind them that Uganda's history did not begin in 1962…or even a few years earlier, when Europeans first 'discovered' them (iii).

The *Guardian*'s review, which praises *Kintu* for how it refuses to make the authenticating gestures that seem the "obligation" of African literature, makes that authenticating gesture in almost exactly the same terms: "With a novel that is inventive in scope, masterful in execution, [Makumbi] does for Ugandan literature what Chinua Achebe did for Nigerian writing" (Arimah). Meanwhile, Makumbi has referenced her own relation to the specter of Achebe like so:

> For a long time, *Things Fall Apart* and Chinua Achebe have carried the weight of the rest of Africa, so whenever people read *Things Fall Apart* they said, oh, this is the moment that Africa fell apart. I really don't think so. We were not colonised the same way…Uganda has been around as a kingdom since the twelfth century.

By the time Bady wrote his intro to the U.S. edition, it was safe to declare *Kintu* the "great Ugandan novel" because Ugandan reviewers had broadly acclaimed it and East African readers were continuing to buy it in droves. But in addition, as when *Blackass*'s Furo is stymied to think of any African novel *other* than *Things Fall Apart*, there are simply not that many Ugandan writers (in particular) who are well-known and widely read, within or outside of Africa, due to the lack of publishing infrastructure detailed in the first half of this chapter. It is worth remembering too, as Makumbi does, that "books travel"—so that in actuality, while *Kintu* explicitly privileges Ugandan readers (who are more likely to speak its languages and recognize its references), the book was never bound for a singular reader, Ugandan or otherwise. As Makumbi told a South African interviewer, in addition to writing "for Ugandans,"

> I wanted to tell the world about Uganda…When you tell most people, 'I'm Ugandan', especially when I went to Britain, the first thing they say is, 'Ah, Idi Amin!' or, more recently, 'Ah, homophobia!' And you want to say, look, they're not the major exports of Uganda. There are other aspects of Uganda. But out there, there was nothing good to say or hear about Uganda. At least you guys have Nelson Mandela, you know?

For Makumbi, the "Ugandan reader" may be the figure to whom the book overtly "speaks"; certainly, the book is not *about* non-Ugandan readers at all, as opposed to recent metafiction like *Names* which conjure the white reader-figure in order to critique her (and which was snapped up by a major U.S. publisher). Arguably, both texts particularize readers: *Names* and other ostensibly more "universalizing" texts particularize *American* (or British) readers for their own purposes. In part, Makumbi wants to address Ugandans who may be under-informed about precolonial histories (including gender and sexual norms), partly due to the publishing infrastructures that for many decades created and distributed textbooks exclusively by European authors. At the same time, it is the *non*-Ugandan reader who may need telling that the singular Ugandan is a phantasm; with the novel, Makumbi wants to do that, too.

Unsurprisingly, *Kintu*'s international reception has increasingly foregrounded its writ-large Africanness precisely because of its path to publication. As Mwesigire argues, "the story of how the manuscript that became *Kintu* was repeatedly rejected by British publishers, because of its 'Africanness', now stands in as the novel's origin story." In 2018, Makumbi won the Yale-sponsored Windham Campbell Prize, one of the most lucrative literary prizes in the world (awarding winners $165,000). Suddenly, a slew of headlines across U.S.- and U.K.-based media ran resembling one on the news site Quartz: "A Ugandan author once dismissed for being 'too African' has won a major literary prize." The coverage itself tends to resemble CNN's, which understandably speaks far less about the novel than its sales history: as Makumbi told the network, "Publishers in the UK are thinking about their readers in Britain and normally when they publish African novels they prefer to publish novels that deal with Europe as well…The book was sold in East Africa and it was an instant hit" (Giles).

This is precisely the point. As Mwesigire notes, "While *Kintu* is a landmark achievement, its backstory should not be one of the 'overcoming the colonial odds' variety. Rather, it should be one of the 'embraced by the African literary establishment' variety: for it was not rejected by African publishers; and is not 'too African' for African readers" (Mwesigire). For some good reasons, the former narrative prevails; it's not only an attention-grabbing story, but one that starkly illustrates what Wainaina and every African writer in this chapter have been declaring for decades: that there remains a specific register of "Africanness" rendered marketable by the international literary industry, even while that register shifts over time. However, *Kintu*'s plural receptions show how African writers, who throughout the years have relied on the terms of non-Africans for publication, increasingly ascribe their *own* terms of value. In tandem, publishing infrastructures are working fast to produce the commodities (books) that are valued (desired to be *read*) by African consumers. Those infrastructures are far from autonomous, and it remains the case that African readers alone cannot broadly sustain the market.[48] Still, it is no longer quite true that African writers seeking international publication *need* American or European audiences, displacing "Jane in Ann Arbor" as the figure who must be negotiated, appeased, and/or rebuffed.

Rather, the present field comprises networks of writers who are to some degree dependent on foreign markets and international donors—and, as influentially, on each other as cultural brokers. The Writivism Festival, where in 2016 Kwani? sold out of copies of *Kintu* as Makumbi enjoyed her "rock star" status, is an exemplar site for this new balance of forces: co-founded by Mwesigire in 2013 in response, he says, to "all the trauma from attempts to find quality African Literature published on the continent," the East African festival, workshop, and

[48] Kwani?'s print publications in the context of Kenya's economy show this clearly: Kwani? titles are sold in shops in Nairobi and Mombasa, but the vast majority of Kenyan people live far outside these cities. The books are also sold online, but a minority of Kenyan people have internet access. Cost is also prohibitive for most (Strauhs).

mentoring program has grown in size and prestige each year.[49] Writivism is also primarily African-funded; while founders received some initial funding from the British Council, Writivism now relies on African companies, institutions, and donors for 70 percent of its funding (Ibrahim). Other African writers' organizations have taken hold across the continent by the dozens, sometimes attached to publishing venues; more often, they offer workshops and fellowships. Directly or indirectly, though, these organizations are active agents in literary production—often through their ties to what remain two of the most prestigious literary prizes for African writers, the Caine and the Commonwealth, both U.K.-based (Kiguru). Both prizes have partnered with organizations like Kwani? and Uganda's FEMRITE to hold writing workshops for their long-listed authors (such a workshop was the inspiration for Adichie's "Jumping Monkey Hill"); the resulting writing is frequently entered into other competitions. In this way, the mutually-dependent prize bodies and writers' organizations produce and award literary value. The non-profit organization Short Story Day Africa, which is funded by "the African writing community," offers the winners of its yearly competitions direct submission to the Caine Prize; those, then, sometimes achieve print publication. The cultural products may commonly remain strategically "West-facing." However, the relays between literary production and literary *value* production are re-balancing, with many more agents of the latter actually *in Africa*. The field of African literary production makes visible the dependencies of value (culture) upon the product (commodity); whether reliant on other African writers or on Global Northern publishers, work cannot be valued until it is published and read. At the same time, the literary

[49] As further impetus for Writivism, Mwesigire notes the role of social media to make visible writers without access to readers via print: "From Facebook interactions, it is easy to see that there is a lot of good literature being produced on the continent. But hit the book shop in Harare, Kampala, Abuja and other cities and you can't find it."

work is successfully directing new terms of value—the foremost of which seems the (sometimes performative) shunning of readers' expectations, wherever those readers may reside.

Untapped markets

In April 2019, *Publishers Weekly* published an article on the "Netflix literary connection," describing how "the streaming service is on a book-buying spree as it seeks more content for its ever-growing global subscriber base" (Boog). The "spree" is deliberately international in scope, partly due to said global subscriber base; the percentage of subscribers outside the U.S. grows steadily every year. However, the U.S. remains well ahead the rest of the world in Netflix use with over 60 million subscribers (followed by Brazil, with 15 million) (Moody). Netflix intends to secure and grow its reach into every corner of the world with culturally-specific content—sometimes taking a single product and variously "tweaking" it for particular audience-markets (e.g., U.S. author Harlan Coben's thrillers will be adapted by "global producers" for an untold number of national audiences), and sometimes acquiring "foreign" content that is presumably "cross-culturally" appealing to audiences in the U.S. In either case, rather than take chances on wholly original content, it can be safer to buy rights to literary works that have proven their appeal in particular marketplaces.

Examples include the recent adaptations of Polish novelist Andrzej Sapkowski's *Witcher* series and Turkish novelist N. Ipek Gökdel's *The Protector*. Netflix has also bought the rights to adapt Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude,* which has never previously been adapted for the screen, as a limited series. The deal stipulates that the series be Spanish-language, filmed in Colombia, and acted by Latinx actors.[50] "In the past, the prevailing wisdom

[50] Despite receiving "many offers" over the years to adapt the book to film, Márquez has said most offers were "non-starters" precisely because they proposed English-language adaptations (de León).

would have been to have everyone speak English in order to make it a more global show," a Netflix VP tells *PW*:

> But the executive found through her time at Netflix that "authentic" foreign-language properties can resonate with "universal audiences"—a realization that inspired her development teams to seek literary talent in other languages and other cultures. "We'll continue to look to books to find new voices, especially as we're expanding into the African continent," she added. "There's a lot of great literature there. We're really actively looking to tap into some stories there that perhaps didn't have the right platform to be told on a global scale before."

In theory, this could provide some welcome support for African-run presses whose titles may be sought; when screen adaptations are commercially successful, book sales go up,[51] and fans of one adaptation are likely to seek out other literature by the same or "similar" authors (Boog). However, given the historical relations between Global Northern culture-consumers and African authors, it is worth noting that the "universal audiences" the executive refers to are, presumably, *primarily* U.S.-based. Much of the coverage of the company's forays into Africa point out that, while Netflix has invested in local content around the world, it has "largely ignored" the continent: as one analyst puts it, as opposed to in Seoul, Tokyo, or Mexico City, "Log into Netflix in Johannesburg, Nairobi, or Lagos, and almost any movie or show you could watch [takes] place somewhere else" (Brown). But the company's own statements don't seem overly concerned with African viewers, beyond noting the "untapped market potential" of the millions of people who, with the predicted expansion of affordable internet over the next few years, may start choosing streaming services over satellite TV (Boog). As with readers, investments in African-produced content are likely not sustaining if Africans alone are *watching*. So rather than

[51] This has been noted as both potential problem and opportunity for the smaller African publishers who hold the rights to adapted content. Hachette's imprint Orbit Books in the U.S. publishes *The Witcher* in English translation; the sudden demand for print books upon Netflix's release meant strain on the company to produce an extra half-million copies. As the *New Publishing Standard* notes, it will be particularly important for indigenous presses to prepare to take advantage of new reader-markets opened up by screen adaptations (Williams).

the question of what African viewers may want to watch, the primary question (from a business standpoint) seems: What do non-African viewers want to watch about "Africa"?

That the cultural content have the markings of "authentic properties" seems key as ever. What signifies "authenticity" for African cultural content has shifted somewhat since (for example) the colonial literary publishing industry began exporting African literature for a broad Global Northern readership several decades ago. Netflix is making some of the required authenticating moves for those recently self-conscious liberal consumers—including, at the end of 2019, the well-publicized hire of Kenyan film producer Dorothy Ghettuba as the inaugural head of African Original Programming. Over the next several months, as the global coronavirus pandemic has given Netflix an additional 26 million subscribers around the world—but meanwhile has shut down production of new content in *most* parts of the world—Ghettuba has been frequently in the press, touting the new shows and films she has commissioned. "We are diving all in when it comes to Africa—we are not just dipping our toes," Ghettuba told Bloomberg Tech. (Meanwhile, notes the article's author, "a handful of African productions is a relatively low-stakes investment for Netflix") (Prinsloo).

More than in literary industries where, as Jan Radway's work has illustrated (following Bourdieu), the literary commodity's value is tied up in its perceived *quality*,[52] discourses surrounding TV as a cultural product skew toward the explicitly economic: markets over art. In this way, they make starkly visible the commercial market values for representations of (in this case "African") "ethnicity" in cultural products. As Ghettuba told a CNN interviewer, "We want

[52] Or, as Ted Striphas puts it, that "the value of books would seem to lie, first and foremost, in their capacity for moral, aesthetic, and intellectual development, and only secondarily—if at all—in the marketplace" is "one of the most entrenched myths of contemporary book culture" (6).

you to know that if you're looking for the best African stories, then you will find them on Netflix. We are going to expand heavily to ensure that goal is met":

> [Interviewer]: "If you look at the rest of the world, they're able to capitalize and monetize on talents. But the continent, as a whole, is not exporting a lot. Do you think that it could actually be a different type of commodity that we could export?"
> Ghettuba: "Our shows are broadcasting in over 190 countries. Surely that is the fastest way to export our stories and our culture to the rest of the world…Netflix is that vehicle and if you look at the stories we are telling, our culture is there…We want our African stories to be watched across the globe" (Chen).

Ghettuba's repeated use of first-person plural in both the U.S.-based corporate "we" and in speaking for "our culture" establishes her as, in Y.D. Kalogeras's terms, a prime "metacultural critic": authorized as speaking on behalf of two cultures at once. Whether to read Netflix's "heavy expansion" as the start of a sort of parallel postcolonial infrastructure to that of literary publishing, or as something closer to the current, more mutually informative field of African literary production, the situation is one of a foreign corporation establishing itself as the monopoly "vehicle" for both production and audiences in this medium for "African stories." What, then, will the output look like? Given how generalized are references to "African culture"—while at the same time, legitimizing discourses leverage the value-term of "authenticity"—we see the hailing of audience-markets that seek to have it both ways. As one article puts it, some of this new content is "about taking viewers so deeply into an unfamiliar place that they feel at home there" (Brown). At the same time, the productions will undoubtedly be already responsive to their own anticipated receptions—for the same reasons that the continent remains an "untapped market" (i.e., the uniquely restrictive conditions that pervade the field for African cultural producers, wherever they reside). Primarily, it will be fascinating to see how much the products *display* and *deploy* such self-consciousness, metafictionally or otherwise. And as new agents in *literary* value production continue to emerge—including Netflix, at the

moment—so will opportunities to examine how cultural and commodity values are shaped in tandem, and from all corners of the global field.

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