

The Caine Prize and the Impossibility of 'New' African Writing

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The kind of short story writer we are all hoping that an award of this magnitude will attract, recognise, reward, foster, and perhaps even launch into the wider world—the newcomer with naked talent, a feel for language, and a fresh vision of the world—stubbornly fails to arrive.

—J.M. Coetzee, Judge's Statement, Southern African PEN Award, 2011

In our situation, where apartheid conditions have militated against the linguistic development of black people, both in the imposition of European languages and the neglect of education, the function of the literary prize becomes obvious. Not only is it inappropriate or inadequate as a means encouraging writing, but it actively perpetuates inequity by rewarding those who have been privileged . . . ensur[ing] a growing gap between what is actually produced and what legislative bodies imagine it ought to produce.

—Zoë Wicomb, "Culture Beyond Color?
A South African Dilemma"

In his now notorious 2005 *Granta* piece, "How to Write about Africa," Kenyan author and 2002 Caine Prize-winner Binyavanga Wainaina satirically delineates "Taboo Subjects" of writing in and on Africa, including: "ordinary domestic scenes, love between Africans (unless a death is involved), references to African writers or intellectuals, mention of school-going children who are not suffering from yaws or Ebola fever or female genital mutilation." The most popular article on *Granta's* site, even seven years after its publication, Wainaina's piece offers an exhaustive critique of how (mostly white, Western) authors write about the continent. But, as my mostly American students frequently point out when we read Wainaina's essay on the first day of our twentieth-century African literature course, it is also a piece that implicates the readers of African writing—putting names to the subjects we expect to appear in stories about Africa consumed in Europe and the United States. We feel implicated as we read from our U.S. classroom (as well we should).

The same uncomfortable feeling hovers over accounts of the now pre-eminent literary prize in anglophone African literature, the Caine Prize in African Writing. The Caine Prize, with its limits and possibilities, was first established in the year 2000, and thus stands as one representative lens through which to view Wainaina's searing critique of the fraught terrain of African literature in the twenty-first century. Its inception marks a distinct effort to move from "old" representations of the continent to "new"—and implicitly *better*—writing, as well as commercial opportunities for and recognition of African literature. The Caine Prize's seemingly progressive (in both senses of the term) goals belie the very practical and ideological contradictions of contemporary continental temporality that, as Achille Mbembe points out, "depend on . . . the interplay of interests whose determinants do not all lead in the same direction" (260). The Caine Prize is both a "shrewd investment" in the kinds of cultural arithmetic author Zoë Wicomb calculates above and an occasion for the "disambiguation" of the power lines that debates around the prize lay bare (182). A complete break between old and new may be impossible, but through this showcase for African writing in the twenty-first century, we might locate fissures of "fresh vision" that refuse to limit African culture to such fixed trajectories.

The Caine Prize in African Writing, sometimes referred to as the African Booker in reference to the prominent British novel prize, rewards a single short story published in English by an African author each year. Its inception was marked by, perhaps surprisingly, Wainainaiian exhortations (albeit not in the satiric mode) of broadening the global representation—and reputation—of Africa as more than "the West's continued pre-occupation with Africa's wars and famines" (Baroness Emma Nicholson, *Tenderfoots* 7). Nigerian Novelist Ben Okri, the Chair of the first Caine judging committee, continues to lament this logic of misrepresentation when he claims, "But it is difficult first of all to see Africa. To look at it, in its variety, its complexity, its simplicity, to see its people, and to see individuals, human beings" (10). That the Prize seeks to combat monolithic readings of the continent is, of course, admirable. That it must, in reiterating the struggle to do so, repeat the very "old" terms of African writing's misapprehension (and inevitably fall into those old forms of writing) is the unfortunate, if understandable, circumstance of critically reading contemporary African literature.

This overwhelming concern with perception—more particularly, perceptions of Africa by the Western World—haunts the Caine Prize's history and the writing and reception of twenty-first century African literature. It particularly marks the critical ambivalence with which African writers and postcolonial critics have received the Prize both as a practical reward to be pursued in the face of minimal continental support for African writing, and a double-edged gift from the "bloody colonizers," as Wainaina refers to the Caine Prize committee in his 2011 memoir, *One Day I Will Write About This*

Place, one given in exchange for compromised readings of African struggle and trauma (188). As Michael Titlestad articulates in his humorous and thoughtful *Safundi* piece on his experience of judging a South African literary prize,

Viewed from beneath this rubble of history, literary awards appeared to be nothing other than conduits of capital, in the narrow sense: they were an excuse used by industrialists, corporations, publishers, and booksellers to cast an aura of high culture and sophistication around commercial endeavours. (462)

Echoing Graham Huggan (along with Richard Todd and Luke Strongman) on his critique of the Booker Prize's efforts to "press" postcolonial writers "into the service of manufacturing cultural Otherness" (24), Titlestad recognizes that the focus on ushering in the new from the old reproduces the structure of colonialism through the commodification of difference in the neoliberal, capitalist market. For Huggan, this move marks Commonwealth "difference" as the exotic property of the metropole.

Within Wicomb's, Huggan's, Coetzee's, and Titlestad's critiques, though, we glimpse another facet of postcolonial prize culture: the colonization of difference is not so much or exclusively a mark of the exotic and authentic, but also a part of a larger struggle with the material and intellectual violence of apartheid and colonial pasts. These debates over form vs. content, echoed in Coetzee's begrudging remarks on South African writing, perform either benevolent exorcisms of white guilt by endorsing versions of Africa that emphasize the damage done, so to speak, or stark adherence to models of literary taste that beg for less "obvious" politics (Huggan 26). Much as Huggan uses Salman Rushdie's "Booker of Bookers," *Midnight's Children*, as the lightning rod text that somehow offers both literary sensibility and colonial critique to the Western audience, we might say that Coetzee's own work has been African literature's most rewarded for fulfilling both sides of the struggle over new African writing. One of the patrons of the Caine Prize, along with Nadine Gordimer, Chinua Achebe, and Wole Soyinka, Coetzee and his late twentieth-century work has, in some ways, been received through a racialized split: Western recognition of "white" literary value against the celebration of the merely cultural value of a text like Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. At this uncomfortable crossroads of the temporal "modalities" of colonial aesthetics and anthropology lies the Caine Prize, and its own critical reception as proof of old injustices and/or harbinger of new frontiers of literary achievement (Mbembe 260).

The Caine Prize, established in the name of a late British businessman and literary administrator, Sir Michael Caine, and administered in England, is no doubt a prize focused on Western recognition and marketing of "the worth"

of African literature ("About the Prize"). In the interest of full disclosure and even further connection with Western resources, I have served as a judge for the Prize in 2010 and again in 2012 in my capacity as a representative of Georgetown University in Washington, DC, which hosts the Prize-winning writer for a residency each year. As my opening comments suggest, this task is a weighty, ambivalent one for a teacher and scholar who strives to complicate my students' views of Africa. This is a prize whose express purpose, in its origins, is exposure of what is "new" in African writing to the markets of U.S. and British publishing; in the words of journalist Jason Cowley in 2000, the Caine is a "glittering prize," meant to "create a thriving literary culture and thus encourage a new generation of both writers and readers" (57). Its critics, and even some of its own winners (and judges), could and do note its many potential failings along "old" lines: rewarding the "diminished" form of the short story over the novel, reinforcing stereotypes of struggle and racism in its shortlisted choices and winners, and privileging success in the West over institution-building in Africa itself.

Dobrota Pucherová's recent article in the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* is the most trenchant postcolonial academic critique yet, condemning literary prize culture itself as the kind of taste-making productions that force Western aesthetic and thematic expectations on non-Western literature, creating African literature as "an exotic commodity" (22). And I don't disagree. And yet, to extend Wainaina's words, these are both struggles; the writing represented by the Caine Prize frequently performs both sides of Wainaina's acerbic how to/how not to write about Africa coin—the old and the new, as well as the impossibility of disentangling one from the other—giving us a sense of the "ordinary" within the often overlaid contexts that make a story recognizable as "African" to the West. In this there are two sometimes conflicting lessons: attempting to control and police readership of African literature is a perpetually losing battle, and attempting to circulate more and different stories from Africa can potentially reshape, if not totally fix, the discourse surrounding African literature's reception. That Wainaina's *Granta* piece is so widely circulated is a nod to this very conundrum of how to produce and read this new wave of African writing that Coetzee finds so persistently disappointing.

This "new landscape" of twenty-first century writing, as Titlestad dubs post-apartheid literature in South Africa, contains a motley array of styles and approaches, from genre fiction to MFA-style prose (465). The Caine Prize, in its emphasis on literary fiction, nonetheless maintains such diversity: from the urban postmodernism of Brian Chikwava's "Seventh Street Alchemy," which is the template for his critically celebrated novel *Harare North* in 2009; to the lyric realism of Leila Aboulela's "The Museum," set in contemporary Scotland; to the historical surrealism of Mary Watson's "Jungfrau"; to the epistolary address of Monica Arac de Nyeko's "Jambula Tree." To claim

one kind of Caine Prize-winner would be a falsity in terms of aesthetics at the same time that many of the winners have had in common their relative invisibility on the publishing scene (more established writers have been shortlisted, from Nurrudin Farah to Ken Barris) and their direct or indirect engagement with what we might come to think of as “African” themes in Wainaina’s indictment: refugee camps, extreme poverty in urban “slums,” the experience of institutional and interpersonal racism, and above all children in trouble. One winner even hilariously said to me that s/he knew s/he had a good shot that year, since the Caine Prize was notoriously awarded to stories from children’s perspectives. These subconscious repetitions by Caine Prize judges (and writers), up to and including myself, surely fall into the reception issues outlined by Wainaina, or journalist Stella Orakwue, who levels a critique of the “uneven, underwhelming and unsatisfactory” writing in the Caine Prize stories (47).

But while that veneer of benevolent racism persists and should be interrogated, a closer look at some of the winning stories’ (not to mention the shortlisted ones) form along with their content tells a more complicated story. Olufemi Terry’s 2010 Caine-winning story, “Stickfighting Days,” is a case in point. Our charge for judging was solely this: we were looking for the best writing. As Titlestad suggests, it is slightly ridiculous for me, a literary critic, to believe that such a venture is possible, or without cultural baggage. But it is not just my paradox—it is what constructs “the best writing” among a group of Africans and non-Africans, writers and editors and academics. “Stickfighting Days” was unanimously chosen for the Caine shortlist because of the powerful originality of its narrative voice—the way it told the story of a glue-sniffing slum adolescent was void of sentimentality, nearly affectless. Instead, a rich and complicated language reflected just such a dense and meaningful world, with this adolescent character and his context deserving every bit of the literary attention that the numerous stories of emotionally wayward young middle-class white men that populate the U.S. and British literary and filmic market command. Terry’s first-person narration is as fully engaged as his reader in repurposing old stories into the present:

He comes at me, neither quick nor slow, his arms wide. One of his sticks, an ash thing, is almost as good as Mormegil. He let me hold it once, before we were rivals. Stiff as hell and with a good weight, maybe an inch shorter than my beauty. I fend him off easily. Markham is good but he’s cautious. He knows I’ll not risk much with an unknown stick. (60-61)

This is no Africa outside of global time or space, but instead a relentlessly literate Africa, one that knows how it is perceived and pushes against that perception. With its nonchalant references to J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* series merged with an insistence on the present tense in this passage, for

instance, the story claims not the historical weight of colonial education as much as the belonging to the immediate ubiquity of popular media culture, of a global frame that defines interior experiences and fantasies of masculinity, subjectivity, and sociality in the modern world—one that includes and connects the narratives of slum-dwelling children of the developing world and fantasy-literature heroes. I might venture to say we chose the story from an impressive shortlist because of its forceful representation of that which we might, in the West, think we already know about continental experience—because of the deftness with which Terry's prose turns that one-way mirror of the reception of African literature by the West on its head to expose a radical connection across cultures and cultural form. This type of work, the turning of the "old"/Western story of Africa into new visions of transnational (and transnational literary) relations, can be just as critical to "new" African writing—as one sees in 2012's winning story, Rotimi Babatunde's "Bombay's Republic," which takes the Conradian narrative of a tour of duty through "exotic" lands and transforms it into a deep exploration of whiteness and colonialism through the perspective of an African (soon to be Nigerian) soldier in the British Burma campaign of World War II.

Perhaps, as Titlestad warns in his analysis of the literary judging experience, I am employing too much of a "a necessary suspension of disbelief" (463) in claiming Caine's aesthetic investments in writing beyond what Titlestad recognizes as the "proletarian realism . . . identified with resistance" (465) that clings to the recognition of African writing, for better or for worse. In this, I betray my own investments in the project that Wainaina ambitiously sets up in his *Granta* piece, one that refuses but cannot forestall the practices of literary tourism that perceive African literature as only able to tell a "single story," as Nigerian writer and Caine Prize shortlisted author Chimamanda Adichie's now famous TED talk warns against. Here we might find possibility in the Caine Prize's direction of attention away from the time and form of the novel. Critic Lucienne Loh sees in the short fiction genre a democratic form that allows for the "new," and for multiple voices to be rendered quickly on the literary scene of African writing, altering and exceeding the limited scope of content and form seemingly allowed in writing from the postcolonial world (1). Other critics, like Orakwue, are more cautious about the impulse to "collect" African writers without the time or institutional attention that the novel form claims, a dilemma that leaves Wainaina asking, "Where do they find published stories?" after a run-in with the formerly print-culture-only rules of the Prize (*One Day* 188).

This tension confronts the fact that part of the point of the Caine Prize is, uncomfortably, "development," or giving visibility and resources to a new generation of African writers. This difficult terrain of wanting and needing material recognition to keep writing within a highly variable African publishing industry mixes with the keen awareness of the negative,

generalized "recognition" by the West that Caine Prize attention entails. Nowhere is this summed up as clearly as in Wainaina's memoir, which itself contains an extended revision of his Caine Prize-winning story, "Discovering Home":

I am online all day and all night. Baba complains about the bills. An uncle is sent to speak to me. He had this new machine. It can take cheap alcohol and seal it in small sachets. "You talk well," he tells me. "You can do sales and marketing and make some money."

I am about to say yes when the e-mail from the bloody colonizers comes.

Dear Caine Prize Shortlisted Guy, called Binya . . . vanga. Do you want to come to England, and have dinner in the House of Lords, and do readings, and to the Bodleian Library for a dinner of many courses, with wine, and all of London's literati? At this dinner, you will find out if Baroness Somebody Important will give you fifteen thousand dollars in cash, and even if she doesn't, you should come because being shortlisted and having dinner at the House of Lords and such is like a big deal, a really big deal. Will you come?

Oh yes. I go.

I win the Caine Prize, and cry, bad snotty tears, and come back with some money. A group of writers and I start a magazine called *Kwani*?—which means so what? (*One Day* 189)

The ambivalence of the title of the now highly significant African literary journal *Kwani*?, founded with Caine Prize money and now the original home of shortlisted and winning stories in subsequent years of the Prize, mirrors the bitter optimism, or perhaps more accurately, the optimistic bitterness, of Wainaina's writing itself. It is not just the Caine Prize which is indicted, but the author himself, who has already rushed madly to create an entry out of what used to be a journalistic piece on Kenya just to enter the contest. Satirically translating the official language of literary recognition into the casual intimacy of memoir, Wainaina frames the "old," enduring, inescapable problematic of Western reception while at the same time offering a potentially "new" answer, if not totalizing solution, to the bind of being an African writer in the twenty-first century. African writing happens through participation in alternative communities of those writing under the same stifling circumstances/restrictions, historic and material, not just through the struggle for external recognition, in Wainaina's vision.

This is not a romantic turn to the local but a practical vision of the literacies that the Caine Prize both fosters and has created. Wainaina, just moments before the passage quoted above, narrates the urgent yet thoroughly

"ordinary" context of his writing life, describing his online connections to other African authors and finding work to sustain him through and between "small features" assignments in Kenya (188). *Kwani?* attempts in some way to institutionalize this informal network created through technology in its online presence as well as its official print format. The Prize then indirectly supports—through capital and through its own inevitable public failures to address and fulfill the many "old" problems of African writing's reception—an enterprise like *Kwani?*, a material resource that is both local and global, and that, like its editor, offers a critique even though it cannot fully avoid the "Taboo Subjects" of African literary reception. *Kwani?* and some of the other form and forums created in the twenty-first century for African writing and culture—from the proliferation of MFA programs in South Africa, to Facebook pages used to advertise, collect, and disseminate new writing—create a compelling response to Wicomb, Coetzee, and Wainaina's criticisms of the limits of new African literary and cultural production, beyond the creation of one's own, "better," individually authored writing. Instead, an enterprise like *Kwani?* offers a comprehensive and systemic generative structure for the production of African literature, outlining both a "What We Do" in terms of publishing, training, and distribution and a "Why We Do It?" that contextualizes the existing institutional "lacks" and inequities that African writers face ("About Us," *Kwani?*).

Like the generation of African writers before Wainaina, this group seeks to create its own means of publication and distribution—a new network—that is formed using the technological and global possibilities of the twenty-first century, even as work is circulating in an increasingly monolithic literary aesthetic culture that privileges the novel. The focus on form that Loh rightly calls for in analysis of African literature also goes for the forums in which it is created, published, and circulated inside and outside of continental Africa (7). The afterlives of the Caine Prize are problematic, yes, and mimic the globalization of Western models of literary success in Wainaina's own institutional installation at an American College, Bard. But that is not its one-way, globalized limit, nor its only temporality; the Caine Prize is not just an old portrait of African writing any more than Achebe and other independence-era writers are only as flat as the reception and adoption of their texts has been. With its systemic power, the Prize can help to facilitate perhaps more radical artistic endeavors than it sets out to do in its own Council, creating both politics and form outside of the short story/novel divide. It opens up the circulation of African cultural form to other genres, such as the rich production of film, photography, and creative nonfiction, coming out of newly established institutional support in Africa itself.

Combined, forums like *Kwani?* and the Caine Prize can offer more and different venues for more and different—and dare I say, *better*, with my critical suspension of disbelief at the ready—new writing from the continent. As

critics, we might want to focus on some of the innovative combinations of old and new that, yes, engage with the problematic representations of Africa by the West, but also make inroads into the overpowering economies of colonialism and its continuing legacy on the continent. This might leave the Caine Prize as a significant, but not the *only* source for promoting twenty-first century African literary culture. Variety in publishing resources and critical attention is hard won and perhaps even harder to sustain, but in turn it offers the readers and authors of African literature one means by which to come closer to achieving the impossible task that Coetzee assigns for the future of continental writing and the critical literacies needed to close the gap that Wicomb calls for in her 1993 essay. Thanks to literary prize culture like that of the Caine Prize in African Writing, old-model aesthetic "failures" are now part of a public and fruitful conversation that is making its way into some of the most original new literature from the continent today. We might want to privilege those ongoing and surprising exchanges alongside the presence of the Caine Prize when we look to the future of the African writing.

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