

Dowry: Managing Africa's Many Lovers

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I'd like to thank the African Studies Course Union of the University of Toronto for the honour of being asked to deliver the keynote lecture at your annual conference. Special thanks are due to Ms Lili Nkunzimana, President of the ASCU, for her solicitude and the impeccable efficiency with which she organized my trip here today. Her last name tells me she is Francophone so I can comfortably say in my other language, Mademoiselle Lili, merci beaucoup. Je vous en sais gré! We learn all the time. It was only after I received your invitation that it occurred to me that I was hearing for the first time about an African Studies Course Union in a Canadian University. Naturally, I dug around a little bit. I am grateful to Professor Thomas Tiéku of the Munk School of Global Affairs, University of Toronto, whose prestigious African Studies Seminar Series invited me here for a lecture just this past November, for giving me useful tips about your set up. However, I must say that if another University of Toronto academic unit invites me for yet another lecture in the next couple of months, you will have to start paying territorial fees to my employers at Carleton University and ownership fees to my country, Nigeria.

Because Professor Tiéku is always extremely busy crisscrossing Africa in matters of international mediation and capacity building for regional institutions (he cannot be with us this evening because he is on his way to Ethiopia), I was pleased that he found the time, between connecting flights in the continent, to warn me in an email that you "are super serious people" (I'm quoting him) and that your "conferences are usually attended by senior people" (again I'm quoting him). As it happens, Lili sent a programme which confirmed Professor Tiéku's hints about the prestige of your events. I gasped in pleasant surprise when I noticed that your post-keynote lecture panel boasts such eminent colleagues as Professors George Elliot Clarke and Neil ten Kortenaar. That makes Professor Tiéku a master of understatement and the understated. By "senior people", who would have imagined he was talking about George Elliott Clarke, one of Canada's finest and most decorated contemporary poets, and Neil ten Kortenaar, one of the finest scholars of African literatures in this country? He should have warned me that you would go to the very top of the seniority shelf to assemble this panel. I thank these two illustrious colleagues for the privilege of their co-presence on this stage.

Dunno. Maybe it is completely fortuitous. Maybe the quiet hands of some benevolent ancestors willed it, designed it to happen this way. But I'm sure it has not escaped any of you that you have asked me to reflect on Africa and the Black Diaspora today, February 15, merely a day after the entire world celebrated the feast of love known as Valentine's day. No, I am not grumbling that you deprived me the opportunity of attending to matters of the heart yesterday as I had to

spend Valentine's day revising and cleaning up this lecture instead of buying roses and making arrangements for a candlelit dinner in a cozy, chandeliered environment. Don't ask me how she reacted to seeing me glued to a computer on Valentine's day. I won't tell you.

Anyway, I am not complaining. I am just drawing your attention to the uncanny coincidence that I am delivering a lecture about love and lovers - Africa's surfeit of lovers and the implications of that love affair for the Black Diaspora - only a day after the feast of love. Love is indeed in the air these days. Because I am a Nigerian and we are not usually accused by the rest of Africa of being dominant and having a tendency to suck the oxygen out of the room, I am not going to tell you proudly and boastfully that we have only just won the African Cup of Nations, the continent's most prestigious soccer competition, and are therefore enjoying our moment as the continent's beautiful bride within an overall atmosphere of continental love.

If you are still wondering what love's got to do with it (apologies to Swiss singer, Tina Turner), a look at the title of this lecture would convince you that we are here to reflect on and share the love. You must know that he who talks dowry talks about transactions and imaginaries of love; about matters of the heart; and about a particular mode of translating that human arrangement into culturally-sanctioned nuptials in certain cultures. Dowry? In Africa? Those of you with an ear for nuance and distinction ought to be worried by now. Isn't dowry mainly a Southeast Asian, especially Indian affair? Does this professor know what he is talking about?

I do. Admittedly, dowry is very often used whenever the speaker means bride price in many of the Englishes you hear in sub-Saharan Africa, that is not what is happening here. I have not fallen prey to that commonplace confusion. I am talking about dowry - money, goods, or estate that a woman brings to her husband at marriage - because that, precisely, has been the mode of Africa's transactions with the throngs of suitors, fiancés, and lovers that fate, history, and oftentimes, self-inflicted vulnerabilities have thrown across her path in the last five hundred years and counting.

Indeed, it is safe to say that no continent has enjoyed more professions of love than Africa in all of human history. I don't make this sweeping assertion lightly. In other continents, the conquered were very often spared the nicety and the hypocrisy of pretense. For instance, I am not aware that the European hardened criminals, condemned prisoners, and nut cases who would become the nemesis of the Aborigenes in Australia went there professing love for anything or anybody other than themselves. And we don't even need to cite the case of our friends here in America. Didn't Friar Bartolomé de Las Casas, that tireless chronicler of the Americas who wrote *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, inform us that Hatuey, a famous Indian Chief from the island of Hispaniola, declared before he was burned by the Spaniards that he would rather go to hell if heaven was where the European Christian conquerors of the Americas went? There is definitely no love lost between the violated owner of the land and the European immigrant in this picture. The more than five hundred pages of Hernan Cortes's *Letters from Mexico*, translated

and edited by Anthony Pagden, are a veritable testimony to this absence of love, pretext, and hypocrisy between conqueror and conquered in America.

The scenario was slightly different in Africa. The land and people were fictioned as a receptive female subject to be taken, penetrated, and had in the imaginaries of those driven to encounter the Other by the curiosities unleashed by the spirit of the Enlightenment. The dominant idiom of this taking, this penetrating, this having, was love. I am not so sure, for instance, that King Mutesa of Buganda shares Hatuey sentiments when he encounters Europe, at least not if we are to believe one of the most memorable fictional refractions of that historical encounter between African and European. I am talking about David Rubadiri's great poem, "Stanley Meets Mutesa". Permit me to cite the powerful last verse of the poem:

The gate of reeds is flung open,
There is silence
But only a moment's silence-
A silence of assessment.
The tall black king steps forward,
He towers over the thin bearded white man,
Then grabbing his lean white hand
Manages to whisper
"Mtu Mweupe Karibu"
White man you are welcome.
The gate of polished reed closes behind them
And the West is let in.

White man you are welcome! Love, my friends, is in the air. In Africa, nobody is hurrying to hell to avoid contact with European Christians in heaven. If you are wondering why love is in the air, you have to consider the entire modes of discourse which preceded and framed this encounter. For such a framing of the politics of encounter, let us go to Cardinal Verdier, Archbishop of Paris in the heyday of empire and a staunch opponent of fascism. Describing World War II as a "crusade", Cardinal Verdier enthused that "we are struggling to preserve the freedom of people throughout the world, whether they be great or small peoples, and to preserve their possessions and their very lives. No other war has had aims that are more spiritual, moral, and, in sum, more Christian". Now, this is all very beautiful. You can't possibly fault these sentiments. The problem begins once Cardinal Verdier thinks beyond the platitude that he calls "peoples". Once he logs into more specific referents such as colour and geography, his humanism takes on the dimension of ecstatic love, hence this famous statement of his about the project of love that was the civilizing mission of France in Africa:

"Nothing is more moving than this gesture of the Frenchman, taking his black brother by the hand and helping him to rise. This hierarchic but nonetheless black collaboration, this fraternal love stooping toward the blacks to measure their possibilities of thinking and feeling...this art, in a word, of helping them progress through wise development of their personality toward an

improved physical, social and moral well-being; this is how France's colonizing mission on the black continent appears to us."

Although our Roman Catholic Cardinal was talking about fraternal love in his framing of French colonialism and the subsequent régimes of coloniality it spawned, history teaches us that Africa was the object of all the manifestations of that intense human emotion throughout her history of encounter with conquerors. Name any kind of love – fraternal, agape, carnal – and you are sure to encounter a very rich cast of characters, sallying forth from their European homelands in waves after the Portuguese blazed the trail in the 15th century, for picaresque adventures of love in Africa. So, in a way, Wole Soyinka is only partially right to have insisted in his latest book, *Of Africa*, that Africa possesses one unremarked distinction of having not been the subject of claims of discovery like the Americas or Australasia. Writes Soyinka:

"No one actually claims to have "discovered" Africa. Neither the continent as an entity nor indeed any of her later offspring – the modern states – celebrates the equivalent of America's Columbus day. This gives it a self-constitutive identity, an unstated autochthony that is denied other continents and subcontinents. The narrative history of encounters with Africa does not dispute with others or revise itself over the "discovery" of Africa... Africa appears to have been "known about", speculated over, explored both in actuality and fantasy, even mapped – Greeks, Jews, Arabs, Phoenicians, etc, took their turns – but no narrative has come down to us that actually lays personal or racial claim to the discovery of the continent."

I say Soyinka is only partially right because Africa has a second distinction that even the Nobel laureate appears not to have noticed. She is the only continent whose modes of encounter with and insertion into modernity were fictioned almost exclusively through registers of love by those with a superior capacity to narrativize and globalize those love stories. Let me emphasize this point: Africa is humanity's only labour of love. No greater love hath the Arab invader, the European explorer, slaver, colonizer, missionary, captain of industry, corporate CEO, Multi-National Corporation CEO, humanitarian aid worker, Christian charity worker, NGO worker, expert, expatriate, Hollywood celebrity serial child adopter; no greater love hath all these characters for Africa that they gave up the comforts of Arabia and Europe and came to risk mosquitoes and malaria in the heart of darkness. Even this imperative of love accounted for the obduracy of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan on the question of sanctions against apartheid South Africa in the 1980s. So great was their love for black South Africans that these two leaders of the free world opposed sanctions against the apartheid state for fear that their beloved blacks would suffer disproportionately.

These lovers introduced dowry as the only mode of transaction with the beautiful bride on whose account they travelled. Africa has been paying this dowry to her numerous lovers in the last five hundred years of her history. She has paid in cash and kind. She has paid dowries of land and territory to these lovers; she has paid dowries of copper, gold, diamonds, cocoa, coffee, rubber, ivory, coltan, uranium, crude oil. Africa is the bride fated to pay expensive dowry to lovers and

fiancés who do not mind polyandry. Never mind the rivalry between today's princes charming – America, Europe, China – seeking Africa's hand in marriage. So long as the dowry payments continue to flow from Africa, these guys don't mind polyandry. Sometimes, Africa's dowry payment has a name, a face, black flesh, and red blood. Patrice Lumumba was dowry and so were Eduardo Mondlane, Steve Biko, and Thomas Sankara.

Other times, the dowry is neither quantifiable nor measurable because it operates mostly as emotional jouissance for the career lover of Africa. The humanitarian aid worker, the Christian charity worker, the NGO development volunteer, the Hollywood celebrity serial child adopter, all kinds of organizations without borders, Bono, Jeffrey Sachs, Angelina Jolie, and Madonna are all career lovers of the continent functioning within a mechanism I have referred to in previous lectures and essays as the Mercy Industrial Complex. This category of Africa's lovers does not demand the sort of dowry exacted by the colonizer or the CEOs of Shell Petroleum, Halliburton, and Siemens. Their dowry lies in the unmappable emotional satisfaction of the messianic complex. Another child adopted away from the poverty of mealie in Malawi offers more than an occasion for media razzmatazz. To the Hollywood celebrity serial child adopter, the gesture offers the psychic satisfaction of the hand that giveth.

Other times still, the dowry régime has yielded consequences that have altered the course of history forever. The lover of Africa who was a slaver carried his human dowry across the Atlantic for more than three hundred years. At the purely economic level, Eric Williams assures us in his monumentally important book, *Capitalism and Slavery*, that the labour of that human dowry paid by Africa informed the complexion of capitalism as we came to know it. In other words, Africa's dowry produced a black diaspora in such a way as to profoundly inflect the topography of wealth creation and accumulation in the West.

Now, this is where this dowry business really gets interesting. We know that to create a diaspora is to create novel cultural life-forms, new imaginaries, new modes of being and apprehension, new modalities of sentience that are not just locked in the politics of emplantment in a new world but must also contend with that which cannot be disappeared: home. "That's all it takes really, pressure, and time," says Red in one of my favorite films of all times, *The Shawshank Redemption*. Pressure and time may dissolve the concrete geographical essence of home for the diaspora population but they never really empty it of psychic content, symbolic force, and matricial value. They never empty it of its capacity to mobilize and interpellate the diaspora population affectively in terms of articulations of identity. This explains why registers of tracery and connections underwrite the cultures of the black diaspora, of any diaspora: roots and routes, origins, sources, memory, remembering, re-remembering become crucial to a telos of subjectivity that Brent Hayes Edwards refers to as "the practice of diaspora" in his magnificent book of the same title.

To animate the emotion of "home" or "source" despite the wear and tear placed on memory by pressure and time, to articulate modes of being in the present nurtured by the political and

philosophical resonances of origins naturally involves a scrutiny of the transaction between the self-professed lover of Africa and the dowry-paying bride. This query is an epistemological obligation for the black diaspora population. Was dowry taken at gunpoint by a lover who would accept it only in human form capable of working on his plantations in the Americas or did Africa, the mesmerized bride, offer that dowry too quickly and too enthusiastically, carried away by gifts of rum, mirrors, and other industrial products dangled before her by the lover from across the seas?

The answer which various generations of black diaspora intellectuals have found for these questions have had profound implications for the genre of self-fashioning and self-writing known as the return narrative. If you look at a certain black radical tradition of home and memory, which encompasses the divergent and disparate intellection and praxes of, say, W.E.B du Bois, Marcus Garvey, Bob Marley, Aimé Césaire, Léon-Gontran Damas, and Molefi Kete Asante, you will encounter imaginaries of Africa and return narratives which devolve from what appears to be a clear conviction that Europe exacted that dowry at gunpoint. It is not for nothing that Bob Marley's Buffalo soldiers were "stolen from Africa", not sold in Africa by Africans. And we know who Bob Marley is accusing of theft. No text articulates this position better than Césaire's slim but powerful book, *Discourse on Colonialism*. For Césaire, the dowry was forcibly taken not just by Europe but also by the particular kind of Europe that the other encountered: a Europe that was at her most rapaciously and brutally capitalistic.

There is a second model associated notably with the Henry Louis Gates of the Wonders of the African World fame. I call it the dirty linen model. This model somewhat shifts the responsibility for slavery from the lover of Africa who went in search of slaves to the beautiful bride, Africa, who is deemed to have been too eager to offer the dowry. This model, obviously, has spawned more problematic imaginaries of Africa in the diasporic imagination. Lingering resentment of the home that sold you – if that is how you elect to see it – into slavery hardly allows for the romanticized memory-making of the first tradition. When Léon-Gontran Damas, one of the three founding fathers of Négritude, sings, "give me back my black dolls/so that I may play with them/the naïve games of my instinct," I don't think Henry Louis Gates would supply any chorus to that song. Rather, I imagine him quipping: pray, Monsieur Damas, how did your black dolls get to the Americas in the first place?

Despite these tensions, something unites these two modes of diasporic engagement of Africa and that is the desire to make Africa mean, to make her fundamentally mean something. Whether you are claiming Africa radically, romanticizing her, and longing for the day that your soul shall make the return journey to Guinée, like le vieux Médouze does in Euzhan Palcy's great film, *Sugar Cane Alley*; whether you are probing history and memory in order to establish what you call Africa's complicity in and responsibility for slavery, as is the case with Henry Louis Gates and those of his persuasion, you are involved, as a black diasporic subject, in a quest for meaning marked by an initial anxiety of contact. The anxiety here is not akin to the silence of assessment that brokered the encounter between Stanley and Mutesa. Rather, this is an anxiety spawned and

fed by the fear and the undecidabilities of the unknown. She is been gone for more than three hundred years this black diasporic sister. Africa is now a narrative to her and she is apprehensive of what this narrative might portend. In a keynote lecture I delivered to the annual conference of the Stanford Forum for African Studies at Stanford University last year, I tried to map this anxiety using the example of Richard Wright. Permit me to quote from this lecture at some length:

“This anxiety is captured most vividly in the opening page of Richard Wright’s *Black Power*. “Now that your desk is clear, why don’t you go to Africa”, Dorothy Padmore tells Mr. Wright. “Africa?” Mr. Wright’s dumbfoundment is italicized in the text. Then this bit of introspection: “Africa”, I repeated the word to myself (N.B: Africa is still only a word) then paused as something strange and disturbing stirred slowly in the depths of me. I am African! I’m of African descent... Yet I’d never seen Africa; I’d never really known any Africans; I’d hardly ever thought of Africa”. The entire opening section of *Black Power* is a paean to the anxiety of contact.”

The anxiety of contact, the fear of the unknown, which makes a dumfounded Richard Wright exclaim –Africa?- on hearing that word is also at the root of the torn and divided consciousness which powers Countee Cullens’s famous poem, “Heritage”. The poem speaks for itself and we need not remind ourselves more than its first stanza here:

What is Africa to me:
Copper sun or scarlet sea,
Jungle star or jungle track,
Strong bronzed men, or regal black
Women from whose loins I sprang
When the birds of Eden sang?
One three centuries removed
From the scenes his fathers loved,
Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,
What is Africa to me?

The black Canadian novelist, Dionne Brand, who figures black diasporic anxieties as “a tear in the world”, underscores the double consciousness in Cullens’s poem more poignantly. The business of remembering and re-remembering that tear in the world of the Diasporic sons and daughters of Africa often involves, among other gestures of reconnection, symbolic voyages to Africa to visit the sites of memory. Those voyages to the Atlantic slave coast of Africa, those emotional narratives about returnee sons and daughters breaking down in tears in Gorée, Elmina, Cape Coast, and Badagry, are all part of a multilayered ritual of reconnection. There is, however, a problem with this mode of re-entry. If you explore the wealth of documentaries of re-entry, the literature, and even accounts that one collects in fraternal encounters with members of the black

diaspora community, you will discover that the Africa that is most sought after is largely a synchronic one, imagined as ancestral, fixed in her past and ancient grandness.

Irrespective of the actualities of the continent, Africa is where you go to find your history. Lagos, Accra, Dakar, Bamako, and Luanda are just locations of passage, intrusions or distractions that you must deal with before your grand encounter with the sites of memory. On arrival from the United States, from Canada, from the Caribbean, Africa's capital cities offer you an airport and a hotel to spend the night and prepare your trip to Africa – the Africa that is history, the Africa that is memory, the Africa that is ancient. You hardly have time to notice or connect with the postmodern whirl around you. You are in a hurry to get to sites of psychic communion with Kunta Kinte and Olaudah Equiano. You are more interested in Kumbi Saleh than Accra. Askia the Great and Mansa Kankan Musa speak to you more than Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and the insipid Goodluck Jonathan. The African Union and NEPAD are ancient Greek to you. You are looking for slave forts and slave routes and you don't want Africa's present all around you to get in the way. What accounts for this apparent fixation with the part of Africa that is historic as opposed to her actualities and contemporaneous vistas of meaning in the diasporic imagination? Does this harbor a desire to reconnect with Africa precisely at the point at which one left in the 16th century?

I think something deeper is going on and it is related to the postcolonial forms of dowry that Africa is paying to a nebulous lover we shall describe as Western desire for want of a better descriptor. I am talking about the desire which Chinua Achebe famously describes in his Conrad essay, "An Image of Africa". Writes Achebe: "Quite simply it is the desire -- one might indeed say the need -- in Western psychology to set Africa up as a foil to Europe, as a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar, in comparison with which Europe's own state of spiritual grace will be manifest." The dowry of the image or the dowry of the single story - apologies to Chimamanda Adichie - is what Africa now pays to this lover, Western desire. Now, this is a much powerful lover, with considerable technologies of dissemination.

With considerable impunity, this lover takes only the single story of poverty, hunger, and disease and broadcasts it in Western imagination as Africa's present. Mr. Western Desire singlehandedly determines what he wants to consume of Africa. A budding American scholar of African literatures and cultures, Mr. David Mastey, is currently working on a doctoral dissertation on the privileging and consumption of African child soldier narratives in the United States. Mr. Mastey is working under my supervision and I am learning a lot from his work and inquiry into the hunger for African child soldier stories by the American public. There is a desire for the single story of trauma and vulnerability and Africa pays that dowry willy-nilly. It doesn't even matter whether what is at issue concerns Africa or not, she is the continent that must keep on giving a singular idea of herself to feed Western desire. Witness Gail Collins, a columnist for *The New York Times*, assessing the Lance Armstrong tragedy in a January edition of her column:

"There's always a chance. Armstrong could demonstrate his remorse by dedicating the rest of his life to fighting rural poverty in an extremely remote section of Africa, preferably one where residents are limited to a quart of water a day. His fans would come flocking back, although Armstrong would hardly notice because the critical part of the deal would be staying in Niger or Burkina Faso forever."

Now, how did this columnist make the leap from Lance Armstrong to the idea of rural poverty in Africa? You could essay the explanation that deep in her subconscious lies the idea of Africa as a site of redemption for Western rejects and abjects but that would be cold comfort. It doesn't account for the reflex. That reference is gratuitous and silly but such, often, is the first point of contact with what is constructed as Africa's present for her sons and daughters in the Diaspora. Everywhere the Black Canadian or the African American turns to in terms of the imagery of Africa that is fed into Western imagination and consciousness, they encounter a depressing tableau of abjection, trauma, and tragedy. Africa's past, recycled and romanticized in robust traditions of black intellection and identity making, comes to represent – at least in the diasporic imagination – a safe haven from the monolithically constructed ugliness of the continent's present.

If you are an African American or a Black Canadian beginning to take a very serious interest in Africa, Gail Collins just made Niger and Burkina Faso (trust me, she won't write about Burkina Faso's recent story of triumph in soccer) very unpalatable for you. If your interest in Africa survives your encounter with Collins's column, chances are you would prefer Négritude's Africa of beautiful bucolic black dolls of the ancient times to Collins's Africa of contemporary misery. And if you persist in tracing your origin, it is unlikely now you will claim to have discovered that your ancestors came from Burkina Faso or Niger. I wouldn't blame you if you rigged things in favour of Botswana.

Sometimes, the single story of the African present comes from her own sons and daughters in the diaspora. Witness the damage done by Keith Richburg in his 1997 book, *Out of America: A Black Man Confronts Africa*. This is one angry black man who spends years covering some of the continent's most brutal conflicts for *The Washington Post* and arrived at the conclusion that he is extremely lucky that those African savages sold his ancestors into slavery. At least they are now Americans and have escaped Africa's horrendous present. Make no mistake about this, I may grumble about Mr. Richburg's book but I do perfectly understand where he is coming from. In fact, a Nigerian is not in the position to grumble too loudly about Mr. Richburg. To grumble too much is to elicit the question: so what have you guys made of fifty years of the Nigerian present? Have you not produced your own brood of postcolonial black Nigerian lovers of Nigeria who are now exacting dowry from the Nigerian people, leaving them in unbelievable poverty and corruption even with so much oil wealth? If you look too closely at Nigeria's present as it has been produced since 1999 by Africa's most corrupt and most cruel ruling elite, it is not too difficult to understand why a Black Diasporic subject may want to have nothing to do with the African present.

The responsibility of Africa's ruling class in producing a present that could be so unpalatable for our Black diasporic cousins aside, what does Africa try to do about this postmodern dowry of the singular image that she keeps paying to the much more determined lover that is Western desire? How does she struggle to get past the impunity of silly and gratuitous negative referencing as exemplified by Gail Collins? Africa could offer counter-narratives into which the Black diaspora could plug for glimpses of a present much richer than what the single stories present. Despite the nightmare that is her ruling elite, this is what my country, Nigeria, has achieved for instance with the phenomenon that is Nollywood. I believe it is no news to anyone in this audience that Nollywood is the world's third largest movie industry. And you also know, I presume, that Nollywood movies are not just immensely popular across Africa, they constitute a new cultural bridge between Africa and her diaspora. In Canada, in the United States, and across the Caribbean, Nollywood offers counter-narratives of the African present to the Black diaspora.

Sometimes the counter-narrative of the present comes in the shape of youth culture and agency. The Azonto dance, for instance, originates from Ghana, sweeps through the rest of the continent, especially Nigeria, and has become a cultural connecting point with the continent for young black and African diasporans in the West. I mention Nollywood and Azonto because Africans, hung up on science and technology, often underestimate the power of culture to globalize every area of their genius, including their technological innovations. There is no better narrative of the Japanese people – and her technology – than the statement that Sushi makes on Western and non-Western palates alike. Never underestimate what Gangnam style is doing for the South Korean brand on the global stage. Who in the West is developing a taste for Korean cars and technology after encountering Korea through Gangnam style? That is what culture has the potential and capacity to do.

The bitter truth, however, is that counter-narratives of the African present function in asymmetrical power relations with narratives of impunity which insist on Africa as a single story. Nollywood may have made inroads in Canada, for instance, and may have even gone beyond the black Canadian community since Nollywood movies are now often represented in Canadian film festivals, all it takes to roll back the gains is one powerful Canadian single story about Africa. Consider something as simple as language. The linguistic diversity of Nigeria, Ghana and other African countries is shown even through the deployment of various Englishes. Then one Canadian novel is published. This novel talks about language but constantly hints at "dialects". For the perceptive reader, language comes across as an intrusion into a world of dialects. Language is only comfortable in its world whenever the plot shifts to Canada. Then this Canadian novel goes ahead and wins the 2012 Scotia Bank Giller Prize, by far Canada's most prestigious literary prize.

That novel is *419* by Will Ferguson. Mr Ferguson is a travel writer. He has travelled extensively and published four travel books. He did not travel to Nigeria or Africa to research his novel. Africa is the place you can represent with impunity, especially if you have expatriate friends in Africa who "know" the culture. Says Mr. Ferguson:

“I was fortunate to have several superb early readers who provided insights, advice, and corrections: Kirsten Olson; Jacqueline Ford, who has travelled extensively in the francophone region of West Africa; Kathy Robson, who has lived and worked in Nigeria; and Helen Chatburn-Ojehomon, who is married to a Nigerian citizen and working in Ibadan, north of Lagos. Many thanks to all of them for the feedback! The depictions of Nigerian culture and customs are solely my responsibility...Helen and Kathy in particular gave me excellent advice on the English spoken in Nigeria but in the end I found the richness of the dialect too difficult to capture on the page. Instead, I added only the slightest touch, to give readers just a hint of the full flavor.”

I guess it is too much to expect Mr. Ferguson to get off his butt and go to Nigeria for this gigantic project instead of relying on a handful of expatriates for expertise on “Nigerian culture and customs?” There is mention of more sources on his website but I found none when I visited it. Well, let us examine the quality of the expertise offered Mr. Ferguson by his expatriate knowers of Nigerian culture and customs. No Nigerian would read this howler on page 117 by the omniscient narrator – with strong hints of authorial intrusion – without risking a heart attack: “*Egobia* was from the Yoruba language, the language Winston spoke with his grandparents. *Ego* meant “money,” and *bia* meant “come to me,” making *Egobia* more an incantation than an actual name. “*Money come.*””

The mislabeling of two Igbo words as Yoruba is not a one-time occurrence in the novel. Make no mistake about the gravity of this howler. There is a Sergeant Brisebois in the novel. As Canadian readers of the novel, this is the equivalent of your being told by the narrator that the last name, Brisebois, is from two Anglo-Canadian words, “briser” and “bois”. Imagine what our French friends from Québec would have done to Mr. Ferguson if this had happened. Sadly, there are more howlers in the novel. Of the January 1966 coup, Mr. Ferguson’s omniscient narrator informs his Canadian readers that this was “the same coup that left Nigeria’s prime minister dead and the regional premiers rounded up and imprisoned.” I wonder who, among his “superb early readers”, told Mr. Ferguson that Samuel Ladoke Akintola, the Premier of the Western region, was rounded up and imprisoned. Somehow, none of Mr Ferguson’s expatriate experts of Nigerian “culture and customs”, none of his editors at Viking Canada, none of the judges of the Giller Prize caught any of these howlers. I wager that Mr. Ferguson could very well have written that “Ego” and “bia” are two Gikuyu, Swahili, or Lingala words and nobody would have noticed. In Africa, we are interchangeable.

Yet, this is the canonized cultural artifact, an award-winning novel, that will shape Nigeria and Africa in the Canadian imagination, carrying the imprimatur of the Giller Prize and the considerable capital that comes with it, in the foreseeable future. Can Nollywood as a counter-narrative stack up to a novel that has won the Giller Prize in Canada? No matter how well spoken Desmond Elliot, Ramsey Nouah, and Genevieve Nnaji are, they and their ilk are now fixed for Canadian consumption as a bunch of dialect-speaking Africans.

When a black Canadian picks up this novel in a Chapters book store and encounters “Nigerian culture and customs” described by a powerful Canadian writer relying mostly on the second hand accounts of his expatriate friends, would this black Canadian wonder if Mr. Ferguson would not have spent months in France immersing himself in the culture and the language of that country if he was writing a novel about France? Would this black Canadian want to move beyond this novel to ascertain if it is not Nigeria’s greatest innovation as Mr. Ferguson claims? And, most importantly, would the black Canadian understand that the Nigeria trapped in the 399 pages of this prize-winning Canadian novel is yet another dowry paid by Africa to one of her lovers in 2012?

I thank you for your time.