

From Post-Global to Post-Truth: African Literature beyond Commonsense

Pius Adesanmi

This article discusses Tejumola Olaniyan's submissions in his essay "African Literature in the Post-Global Age: Provocations on Field Commonsense" by problematizing some of his submissions on the temporalities, especially the global and the post-global, that have inflected the field of African literary discourse since the second half of the twentieth century. In doing this, the essay queries the idea that the category of the nation-state has been exhausted or overwhelmed by the global and the post-global. The essay suggests instead that the nation-state has been retooled and rearmed by a nascent temporality, the post-truth, in ways that have significant consequences for African literatures.

Keywords: African literature, African imagination, post-global, post-truth, Afropolitanism, Afropeanism

Tejumola Olaniyan published his seminal essay "African Literature in the Post-Global Age: Provocations on Field Commonsense" in September 2016, two months before Donald Trump was elected the forty-fifth president of the United States on November 8, 2016. I want to suggest that Olaniyan's "provocations" have been complicated by certain discursive and epistemological consequences of that election in ways he could not possibly have foreseen.

I contend that post-globality and its cultures and affects—the temporal frame of Olaniyan's submissions—have been supplanted by new and insurgent calibrations¹ in global spheres of politics, culture, and meaning. This implies the advent of a new temporal order beyond post-globality, with significant implications not only for African literatures and cultures but for what Abiola Irele, in a more encompassing manner, calls "the African imagination."²

Pius Adesanmi is a professor of English and director of the Institute of African Studies at Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada. He has published widely as a comparatist of Anglophone and Francophone African and black Atlantic literatures and cultures. His current research is at the intersection of social media and the production of new spaces of cultural conversation in Africa. He is the inaugural winner of the Penguin Prize for African Writing in the nonfiction category with his book, *You're Not a Country, Africa*. (Email: piusadesanmi@gmail.com)

1 I am using the term *calibrations* in the sense inaugurated by Ato Quayson in his seminal book of the same title. Quayson proposes "a reading of literature with what lies beyond it as a way of understanding structures of transformation, process, and contradiction that inform both literature and society." This hermeneutic methodology extends, in my view, to a reading of the temporal frames of culture and society.

2 See Abiola Irele, *The African Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

The new moment in question is the post-truth age and its corollaries of post-factuality or alternative factuality, consecrated in 2016 by Oxford Dictionaries, which elected *post-truth* as its 2016 international word of the year.³ Oxford Dictionaries was not just consecrating a word. They were flagging a temporal advent or, more precisely, a chronotope spelled out in terms of an ascendant ethno-nationalistic provincialism and a resultant assault on global cosmopolitanisms underwritten by the Trumpian rise of the American far right, with consequences in Europe: Brexit and the increasing assertiveness of ethno-national provincialism in France, Austria, Italy, Germany, and the Netherlands.

By foregrounding the post-truth age and its discursive consecration by no less a Western institution of canonization than Oxford Dictionaries, I am by no means attempting a centering or normativization of a new Western moment and time whose ramifications are still unfolding. After Johannes Fabian, after Ngugi wa Thiong'o, after Dipesh Chakrabarty, and the extensive body of work that emanated from postcolonial theorizing in the 1990s,⁴ it would be odd to proceed from a perspective that makes the African imagination incidental or marginal to yet another Western moment of ennui with her own logocentric self after postmodernism.⁵

On the contrary, what I propose to examine, as a way of interrogating Olaniyan's "provocations" and pushing them in other directions, are the ways in which post-truth, even within its own provincialist economies of meaning, is worlding a new imaginary of racialized alterities of the global south that requires vigilance and new modes of engagement on the cultural front, modes of engagement that are at once consonant with Olaniyan's provocations but also require that we urgently problematize and extend some of his submissions on what he calls "the field commonsense of belonging and identity."

It is gratifying that Olaniyan takes as his point of departure an affirmative answer to Kwaku Korang's oft-cited query of the tensions between originary questions of definition and boundary-cutting in African literary studies. Against the backdrop of the nativist/language debate in Makerere and its consequent inflections of the conceptualization of African literatures for much of the second half of the twentieth century, resulting in some of the nombrilistic textual strategies famously denounced by Achille Mbembe in his "African Modes of Self-Writing," Korang asks: "are 'post,' 'trans,' and globalist/neo-universalist propositions now (more than ever) definitionally viable for African literature?"

Olaniyan's affirmative answer to this question is premised on a number of temporal permutations he considers self-evident: the nativistic impulse, with its affects of language, geography, and race, coincided with a time when a sizeable number

3 See BBC's news entry, "Post-Truth Declared Word of the Year by Oxford Dictionaries," <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-37995600>.

4 I am thinking of Johannes Fabian's *Time and the Other*, Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Moving the Centre*, and Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe*. Tejumola Olaniyan contributed significantly to the 1990s' wave of "moving the center" by exploring some of the fault lines of postcolonial discourse. See, notably, the special issue of *Callaloo* he guest-edited: "On Post-Colonial Discourse," *Callaloo, Special Issue* 16.4 (Fall 1993).

5 See R. Radhakrishnan, "Postmodernism and the Rest of the World," *The Pre-Occupation of Post-colonial Studies*, eds. Fawzia Afzal-Khan and Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks, (Durham, NC: 2000), 37–70.

of practitioners of the African imagination were based on the continent. Harry Garuba has opined that this era produced textualities in which it was possible to map a mytho-ritualistic center in the works of most African writers of that era irrespective of their divergent sensibilities and ideological preferences.⁶

Olaniyan, agreeing with Korang, surmises correctly that the originary premise of the African imagination has been supplanted by a globalistic imaginary marked by such temporal and cultural-material signposts as globalization, transnationalism, deterritorialization, borderlands, and contact zones, in essence, the sort of global and cross-border reorganization of culture that has been theorized as privileging cosmopolitanism, diaspora, difference, and heterogeneity. These, among others, are the features of the global and post-global age, theorized as a given, a “field commonsense” by Olaniyan. This is the age of the so-called African writers of the second and third generations, characterized by a thematic voyage out, an ideological unmooring from the interpellations of the mytho-ritualistic textual and ideological centers of the first generation.

Olaniyan posits that high theory’s attempts to grapple with these developments with an efflorescence of the “posts” have predictably resulted in a dilemma in which the posts have become exhausted clichés, unable to capture the cultural complexities of a moment whose contours have outstripped the conceptual powers of the global. Just as a certain theoretical consensus was reached, especially in the circuits of African literary theorizing, that the “post” in postcolonial did not necessarily refer to a linear temporal time after colonialism,⁷ Olaniyan submits that the “post” in post-global does not in any way imply that “we are ‘beyond’ the global age”.⁸ However, post-global “does propose that ‘global’ no longer adequately describes the world we live in now” (389).

How then may we describe this world that “we live in now,” and how does it inflect Africa, African humanity, African society, and the vexed question of the African’s agency? How may we situate the African imagination in a world that has outstripped the global and rendered her inadequate? Olaniyan, in my view, does not offer nearly a satisfactory response to these questions made necessary by his powerful reading of the African present. Rather, he flags conceptual inadequacies and critiques epistemological simplisms in a way that perpetually underwrites his incredulity toward certainties that are now wholly circumscribed by concerns that are “larger than global”⁹ (391).

It is in theorizing the nation-state that Olaniyan offers us the closest to an empirical account of the otherwise inchoate features of the post-global. While the nation-state and the global reinforced and nourished each other’s certainties, the post-global effected an “emptying out of the nation-state and territorial sovereignty of the African of the last thirty years or so. Many of our writers and critics,

6 Harry Garuba, “The Unbarable Lightness of Being: Re-Figuring Trends in Recent Nigerian Poetry,” *English in Africa* 32.1 (2005) : 51–72.

7 Latin American theorists such as Walter D. Mignolo and Annibal Quijano resolved this dilemma somewhat with decolonial theorizing.

8 Tejumola Olaniyan, “African Literature in the Post-Global Age: Provocations on Field Commonsense,” *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 3.3 (2016): 389.

9 *Ibid.*, 391.

both in their work and in their life trajectories, are eloquent testimonies to this sociohistorical condition. And I dare anyone disagree with me that even our parents and relatives in our far-from-cities African villages deeply feel this condition too.”¹⁰

I dare to disagree with Olaniyan—not in the sense that the post-global condition has not deeply affected our “far-from-cities African villages.”¹¹ I disagree with Olaniyan because he is questioning the obvious. I believe he is questioning the obvious because, after a surfeit of warnings and caveats about the dangers of theoretical certainties, the emptying out of definitions and conceptual categories, the exhaustion of nativistic, linguistic, geographic, and other paradigms with which we once read and engaged African literatures, the *dépassement* of certain constitutive tools of producing and managing meaning, offering more than the broadest possible outlines of what the after global might or could be and mean would have undermined the cautionary dialect of his own reflection.

Yet, that after global can now be named—at least in my opinion—as the post-truth that emerged at almost the moment of consolidation of Africa’s cultural post-globality. I see the rise of Afropolitanism in Anglophone African cultural production and Afropeanism, its Francophone African counterpart, as the highest points of African cultural post-globality. First, Afropolitanism. I am more interested in the floating, cosmopolitan, post-globalist confessions of some of its spokespersons than I am in the expanding corpus that has fallen into the theoretical rubric of Afropolitan fiction.

Whether they have embraced the term or not, a majority of the Anglophone African writers of the millennial generation are now routinely discoursed as Afropolitan writers. The term embraces the globalist-itinerant members of the generation (Taiye Selasie, Teju Cole, Chris Abani, Chimamanda Adichie, Pettina Gappah, etc.) just as it embraces writers based in Lagos or Nairobi. What explains this is the fact that more than a geographical location, Afropolitanism is more about a culture, an imaginary rooted in a free-floating transnational imaginary organized around effects of taste, style, and self-definition that are African in feeling but wholly global (read Western) in connotation.

This explains constant disavowals of the label *African writer* by the most strident among the Afropolitan writers. From Pettina Gappah to Taiye Selasie via Teju Cole, “I am not an African writer; I am just a writer” became a popular rallying anthem of a certain influential fragment of Afropolitanism, forcing Kenyan author Binyavanga Wainaina to disown Afropolitanism in favor of pan-Africanism. Writer and critic Akin Adesokan captures this disavowing inclination thus:

There is something of a compulsion about the second attitude of African writers. A puzzling compulsion to disavow. This is the spectacular ritual rejection of the label of “African writer,” and the posture of two writers—Pettina Gappah, the author of *An Elegy*

10 Ibid., 290.

11 I have myself discussed the emptying out of African villages by post-globality in a plenary lecture delivered at the 2013 ALA conference in Dallas, Texas. See Pius Adesanmi, “Face Me, I Book You: Writing Africa’s Agency in the Age of the Netizen,” <https://xokigbo.com/2012/04/22/guest-blog-professor-pius-adesanmi-face-me-i-book-you-writing-africas-agency-in-the-age-of-the-netizen/>.

for *Easterly*, and Olufemi Terry, the 2010 winner of the Caine Prize—captures the spirit of this rejection.¹²

In France, Afropeanism performs its own post-globalist disavowal of the African-ness of the African writer by other means. Like Afropolitanism, Afropeanism is as much a critical-theoretical paradigm of engaging writers who, only a decade ago, used to be known as “migrITUDE writers” or the “children of the postcolony.”¹³ Some of the most accomplished novelists in this tradition are Fatou Diome, Alain Mabanckou, Léonora Miano, Wilfried N’Sondé, Sami Tchak, Kossi Effoui, Bessora, and Abdourahman Waberi.

As famously demonstrated in Sami Tchak’s novel *Place des fetes*, Afropeanism makes no concessions whatsoever to the identity category of diaspora, of the immigrant, of the transnational subject. Afropeanism stakes an unapologetic claim to an autochthonous European identity inflected by African origins. The Afropean’s ancestors may not be Gauls; it is no basis for him to concede the category of “autochthone” to those who trace their ancestry to the Gauls. The Afropean will not write *The European Tribe* in the self-distancing flaneur style of a Caryl Phillips for s/he is the European tribe *tout court*. The Afropean’s double consciousness does not speak of a division between being European and African at once but between the European and the tracery of Africa.

In screaming, “I am not an African writer!” and in the quest to find an autochthonous way of being French despite the stubborn persistence of Africa, Afropolitanism, and Afropeanism, the unrooted African subject seeks to enact the ultimate moment of errantry and cosmopolitan rootedness in a Western mythos masquerading as both globality and post-globality. It is precisely at this moment that post-truth emerges and the goalpost shifts—as it has shifted at every moment of Africa’s becoming for much of the last five hundred years.

The post-global that Olaniyan either does not name or whose contours he describes in very broad and general terms actually now has very precise configurations and consequences for diaspora formations of Africa-derived identities such as Afropolitanism, Afropeanism, on the one hand, and continental modes of articulating African agency in the twenty-first century (ethnicity, religion) on the other hand. Post-truth is not just an extreme ideological articulation of white supremacy underwritten by only its own claim to truth. Post-truth also comes complete with its own geographical, ethnic, national, and nation-statist materialist enactments. The nation-state, which Olaniyan warns us, has been emptied out by globalization and after-globalization has, in fact, rearmed and returned with a deleterious force and ferociousness that have left many a theoretical scribbler of her requiem scampering for cover.

12 See his essay, “I’m Not an African Writer, Damn You!” <http://chimurengachronic.co.za/im-not-an-african-writer-damn-you/>.

13 For an introduction to Afropeanism in contemporary Francophone African fiction, see the excellent 2014 book edited by Nicki Hitchcott and Dominic Thomas, *Francophone Afropean Literatures* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2014). See also, Pius Adesanmi, “Redefining Paris: Trans-Modernity and Francophone African MigrITUDE Fiction,” *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 51.4 (Winter 2005): 958–75.

Only this nation-state says she wants a wall whose borders are determined by the cultural boundaries of Western culture, history, and civilization. Only this nation-state says migrancy, transnationalism, globalization, cosmopolitanism, hybridity, cultural heterogeneity, Afropolitanism, and Afropeanism are ruses of invasion by colored others and othered others. Only this nation-state says that there is only one truth and that truth is white and Christian and Euro-American. Only this nation-state says even those she enslaved and who have contended with her physical and epistemic brutality for more than three hundred years do not even have the right to utter, “Black Lives Matter,” and she is ever ready to narrativize them as essential outsiders to her essential white and Western self. Where does this leave Chris Abani and Dinaw Mengestu? Only this nation-state says that the Afropean articulating a politics of autochthonous agency and belonging is “scum”¹⁴ that reminds him of “noise and odour.”¹⁵ Where does this leave Sami Tchak and Leonora Miano?

Olaniyan’s critique is at its most powerful when he engages the nation-statist project in Africa. I do not wish to rehash his well-argued points about the predilections of the nation-statist project, the tensions and the contradictions that have rendered it ineffectual as a mode of ensuring the African’s agency in the twenty-first century. However, whereas Olaniyan reads the nation-statist model in Africa as an exhausted praxis incapable of responding to the orders, agendas, and schemes of late modernity—human rights, the environment, social justice, and so on—I am wondering if there isn’t more to be said for continuities between the rise (or is it the return?) of the post-truth, totalitarian, provincialist state in the global north and contemporary articulations of nation-statehood in Africa?

Put differently, in the wake of Trump and the steady rise of a far right agitating for a racial-puritanical and provincial nation-state in Europe, is the global north in fact rediscovering what has always been true of African actuations of nation-statehood since independence? Hardly any African state enjoyed more than a decade of post-independence euphoria before disillusionment and contestations of the state set in. However, contestations and delegitimation of the state in Africa have hardly ever been about a will to surpass that particular political structure but about a desire to make her geographical boundaries, instruments of statehood, language, and culture coterminous with the provincialist affinities of specific ethnic groups.

Hence, Biafra in Nigeria was an agitation for a provincialist nation-state whose boundaries would be coterminous with Igbo identity. It was not an agitation to surpass the nation-state per se as the political ambit within which Igbo agency could be guaranteed in the modern world. In the Nigerian context, Biafra was soon to give birth to copycat agitations for ethnically bounded nation-states known as the Odua Republic for the Yoruba and the Arewa Republic for the Hausa-Fulani. As Olaniyan correctly surmises, xenophobia in South Africa is an expression of a desire for the puritanical state from which the demonized other must be excised. Across Africa,

14 I refer to French resident Nicholas Sarkozy’s famous description of black and Arab dwellers of French suburban ghettos as “la racaille” (scum) in the wake of the violent 2005 uprisings.

15 In a famous speech in 1991, Jacques Chirac, then mayor of Paris, complained about “the noise and odour” of African immigrants who crowd apartment buildings in Paris as polygamists and live on welfare. The speech would become a famous rap song by Zebda, a rap group comprising French youth of North African extraction.

modern statehood has always sought to be a puritanical expression of the self-defined on the basis of very strict, narrow, and provincialist parameters. Led by the new American president, the post-truthers of the global north appear to be discovering what has always been true of the nation-state in Africa.

How might these permutations affect the field of African literary studies and, indeed, the African imagination? Olaniyan submits that:

the post-global is tearing to shreds the canons of provenance that have constituted what I call the “field commonsense of belonging and identity” of African literary studies since the 1960s. I am referring here to those unanimous or contested, spoken or implied assumptions of what constitutes the Africanness of African literature and literary studies.”¹⁶

I beg to differ slightly. The post-global is not tearing to shreds the canons of provenance. What the post-global really did was to create the possibility of easy assumptions on the part of the twenty-first-century African writer and critic. Such easy assumptions as the idea that narratives of origins have been overcome and cosmopolitanism is the only basis through which the African must engage the rest of the world. The itinerant, well-heeled African writer and critic, circulating in the capitals of the global north, the rootless cultural mongrel of Taiye Selasie’s “Bye-bye Barbar,” became the iconic embodiment of the mobilizing power of *diaspora*, *immigrant*, *global mobilities*, *hybridity*, *heterogeneity*, and every other identity interpellation that is cast as antipodal to “the Africa of the ixties” or “the Africa of Makerere and the language debate.”

The Afropolitan and the Afropean, as I have argued, are cast as the apotheoses of the post-global African. Yet, at the very moment of his transnational, diasporic coronation, the capitals of the West return to source, return to origins, return to a space in which the other can only figure as a cultural danger to a puritanical, ethnonational, and provincial idea of the nation-statist self. Whatever signs of primordial identity backwardness he projected onto the “provenance Africa” of the 1960s while reveling in the cosmopolitan jouissance of his post-global present has caught up with him in postmodern London, Paris, or New York of 2017. Discourses of the great cultural mosaics, melting pots, and multiculturalism are suddenly recast as endangering the body politic.

It therefore seems pertinent to me that a field commonsense has to be a return to questions left unanswered since Makerere in the 1960s. I am not by any chance proposing a facile reboot of the retraditionalization of Africa model. At any rate, retraditionalization has been extensively debated in African philosophy, sociology, and anthropology in the 1990s.¹⁷ I am also proposing a field commonsense that moves beyond Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s linguistic nativism. I subscribe to his vision of linguistic empowerment and agree that Europhonism has deleterious consequences

16 See Olaniyan, “African Literature in the Post-Global Age: Provocations on Field Commonsense,” 393.

17 For an in-depth discussion of retraditionalization in African discourse, see <FN> Kasereka Kawahirehi, “On the Concepts of Disorder, Retraditionalization, and Crisis in African Studies,” *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy—Revue de la philosophie française et de langue française* XXIV.1 (2016): 101–15.

for the continent. We do, however, need a field commonsense that revisits an “Africa” with the interpellative and conceptual powers of the Africa of the nationalist and immediate post-nationalist moment.

It is true that the said Africa came with its own baggage of ideological rigidities and fanciful agendas that Olaniyan rightfully critiques. That Africa, however, created a transcendental, trans-continental space of meaning that enabled the nationalists to mobilize the masses on the basis of its power of appeal.¹⁸ What happened to that Africa is not the fact that globality and post-globality exposed its weakness and emptied it of meaning. Globality and post-globality only set upon it after it had been relinquished internally in favor of other modes of identity interpellation. In my view, globality and post-globality are preys of opportunity and are not a catalytic or causative factor in what became of the Africa of Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Leopold Sedar Senghor, and Nelson Mandela mobilized with considerable suasive effects.

Internal relinquishing of the mobilizing power of that Africa is what led to the delegitimation of its identity claims in favor of the global, the post-global, and the transnational, and inaugurated a discursive regime in which Africa was cast as antithetical to progress. After Hegel, after Hugh Trevor Roper, we started doing it ourselves through effects and affects of discourse. This inaugurated what I call a scramble for cosmopolitanism in African literary discourse.¹⁹

The fractious debates over the “posts” in the context of African literary discourse in the 1990s²⁰ had at least one connecting strand: the Africa of the 1950s and 1960s, with its claims to geographical and definitional rigidities, had become too “essentialist” to be a valuable conceptual tool for any critique of the African imagination worthy of the “post” tag. Senghor and Nyerere may have been able to map a conceptual Africa that operated seamlessly from Cape to Cairo, any such deployment in the era of the theoretical “posts” was “essentialist.” To read Achebe and Mphahlele as “Africans” was to dissolve their differences; it was not to pay attention to their particularities; it was to assume that there was any such a thing as a “transcendental category” called “the African.”²¹

This was a slippery slope of postcolonial surrender of Africa to the essentialism police operating, ironically, in the global, post-global, and cosmopolitan academies of the global north. It was only a question of time before the Afropolitan citizen of the world would arrive on the scene and declare that there is no such thing as an African writer while wearing a goatskin bag filled with Western literary prizes. The Africa we relinquished as a viable conceptual category because of the post-global needs to be returned to and re-engaged as an emergency field commonsense.

18 See Adam Branch and Zachariah Mampilly, *Africa Uprising: Popular Protest and Political Change in Africa* (London: Zed Books), 2015.

19 See Pius Adesanmi, “Africa, India and the Postcolonial: Notes towards a Praxis of Inflection,” *Arena Journal* 21 (2003–2004): 173–96.

20 See Niyi Osundare, *African Literature and the Crisis of Post-Structuralist Theorizing* (Ibadan: Dialogue in African Philosophy Monograph Series, Options Books, 1993).

21 I discussed this issue in broader details in a previous essay. See Pius Adesanmi, “Cats, Catritude, and the Limits of Contingency: Africa in North American Critical Theory,” *The Zeleza Post*, April 27, 2007. The essay was later reworked as a chapter in my book, *You’re Not a Country, Africa* (Johannesburg: Penguin Books, 2011).

I am in full agreement with Olaniyan's submissions on what he calls "the ideological test" of Africanness in his conclusion. Olaniyan contends that the ideological is the best equipped of all the field "tests" he critiqued to weather the storm of the post-global. This may be true. I am, however, interested in "the ideological test" for totally different reasons. I think it is the best equipped to deliver on the promise of a transcendental, actionable Africa of the sort that the nationalists deployed against colonialism in the first half of the twentieth century. However, such an Africa must be retooled and reimagined for our contemporary conditions, circumstances, and needs.

An Africa produced by a reimagined and remapped ideological terrain is the only weapon that the continent has against xenophobia. When, as recently as May 2016, a black South African pens an op-ed in *Sowetan Live* in which he openly boasts of the superiority of black South Africans to the rest of the junk in sub-Saharan Africa and said article is well-received by black South Africa,²² only a collective ideological reimagining—in which African cultural producers and critics must play a pivotal role—of Africa could revive what connected Nelson Mandela's generation to Nnamdi Azikiwe's generation.

Making it possible to embrace Africa again from Cape to Cairo in a transcendental fashion is the first field commonsense obligation of contemporary African literary commonsense—if not the only obligation.

22 See Prince Mashele, "SA Finally Africa, Thanks to Zuma," *Sowetan Live*, May 9, 2016.