

UCLA

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies

Title

An Appeal to African Writers to be African

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2rc9795x>

Journal

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 1(1)

ISSN

0041-5715

Author

Pointer, Fritz

Publication Date

1970

DOI

10.5070/F711016352

Copyright Information

Copyright 1970 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

AN APPEAL TO AFRICAN WRITERS TO BE AFRICAN

by Fritz Pointer

African Literature is, first of all, that - African. So, before we get into some perverted dialogue about what is African, thus raising the question then, "what is African Literature?", let us try with our feeble minds to understand that. I mean we seem to get too easily confused. So in fact, "African Literature is, African Literature". I think having said that, we can chance experimentation and speculative analysis. To begin with, I will offer a simple analogy recently printed by a contemporary of mine: Clarence Major states, "when you go to a restaurant and you ask for orange juice, you don't want apple juice, prune juice or orange juice blend. What you ask for is orange juice, and that's what you want - Orange Juice!" What you might get is any variety or combination of beverages, but what you must keep in mind is your request for orange juice. As you are surely aware, there are any number of possibilities. These possibilities don't involve only the receiver of information, but also the giver. One must also consider whether or not your request for beverage could not have been more specific. For example, "Pure Orange Juice". The variables do begin to extend and the possibilities increase, but you still know what you want, what you asked for. In this case, we are concerned about African Literature, and it's what it is. Willie Kgositsile is quite in order when he states, "We must differentiate between African Art and art in Africa. Let us clearly understand that what goes on in Africa is not always African." Here we have another point of departure or variation on a theme, if you will. Mr. Kgositsile apparently has some knowledge about what goes on in Africa because he states so specifically when he says, "what goes on in Africa is not always African". I am reminded of an African proverb which states, "If you know the beginning well, the end will not trouble you." The meaning of all this will become progressively clear or confused, depending on your perspective, as we move along. Let us for just a brief moment recall our analogy of the "orange juice" and clearly couch it in the context of African Literature. Can I be so bold as to suggest that the juice that comes from oranges can rightly be termed "orange juice"? Well now you might say, that's not necessarily so, given modern tech-no-logical methods of "intravenous citrus fruit feeding", but we know that doesn't really hold water. Here we have introduced an element of some kind of, what we might term - "medicinal meddling". I guess you can begin to see where I'm going from here - and you're perfectly right; I most definitely will go there. This brings us very evenly to Willie's point about what goes on in Africa. Given a proper historical perspective, we can easily surmise the kind of injections into the African experience that would allow one to actually sit down and discuss or attempt to discuss, if in fact, there is such a thing as African Literature. And even more, to raise such heavy and debatable questions as: "Can African Literature written in the English language be considered African?" Or, "what standards or

criteria of evaluation can or do we use?" Or, "what is the historical significance of nigga's' writing?" That is, how many teeth are sparkling and cheeks alight because there are 5 or 10 new African novelists (no doubt) or writers; therefore, history has happened to the "Dark Continent" again and there's ground for believing there's been another giant step for mankind, and once pre-literate nigga's' can perform the very arduous task, the very awesome, progressive, necessarily human task of----look out! writing-----bravo! Bravo! BRAVO!

-----the nigga's can actually write fairly well-written novels, I tell you. Oh heavens no! Nothing like Hemingway, Faulkner, Hardy, Joyce and other faggots, but at least the missionary effort was not totally in vain (who said that?). Saw some Ghanian niggas doing *Hamlet* no lessooooooooo. Now this I'm sure tells you something about what's going on in Africa hence something, too, about what's coming out of her. There's another African proverb that fits appropriately right here, particularly if we recall our theme. It states, "Imitation is the highest form of flattery." And, I'm sure Europe feels good about its African English novelist. In fact, there is a survey and anthology edited by Anne Tibble entitled *African English Literature*. I think it might have been more realistically worded, from her perspective, *English African*, and have got away with more. But let's not get hung up there. Fanon makes the point about the Antilles negro, quite ubiquitous as far as the African experience is concerned, that "The Negro of the Antilles will be proportionately whiter--that is, he will come closer to being a real human being--in direct ratio to his mastery of the French language...A man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language." That's on page 18 of Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, which people like Achebe would do well to read. You see this kind of weak-minded individualistic, alienated or alienating artist, even if that term *artist* is deserving, belongs to the crumbling era of slavery and colonial domination. Quoting Kgositsile again he states that: "African Freedom is about Change; the destruction of Western values at all levels; the rebuilding of the African soul; the reshaping of our attitudes...." Now, you see, apparent complexities set in as we extend and elaborate an established phenomenon, that African Literature is, in fact, African Literature. What has happened here is the introduction of another primary variable--more specifically, the question of freedom, yes, you heard me, *FREE-DOM*. You see, Black people, Africans all, we are not yet free. This is 1970. Thirty years from a new century, and this writer is obsessed with African freedom or Black freedom, for those metaphoric *nigga's* who still don't know who they are--some even with Red Books in their hip pocket, but let's not go there. "African Freedom is about change..." Definition: African Literature is about change. A very important concept, something like "the permanency of the revolution". Or, as Ameer Baraka says, "the only constant in the world is change." Change! Change! Change! The only obligation a slave has is to free himself---by-any-means-necessary-kind of change. That means that these *oreo cookie negro/whi-tey* writers talking some stupid nonsense about "I don't want to be considered a Black writer, I'm just a writer" are

just the kind of sell-outs Mari Evans talks about in his poem *Black Jam for Dr. Negro* which goes:

*Pullin me in off the corner to wash my face an
cut my afro turn
my collar
down
when that aint my
thang I
walk heels first
nose round an tilted
up
my ancient
eyes
see your thang
baby
and it aint
shit...*

There's more, but I think we've adequately made the point. We've looked into the mirror too long, the image is the same. It's still you staring back at you. Achebe should know this. Brother Achebe, we know the scene, we know the scene, we know the scene--we look at ourselves. How many different reflections do you think we can get if we keep holding up the same image? May I remind you, "African Freedom is about Change...." There are a lot of writers who apparently are unaware of this, who are more interested in being published than talking to Black people. The problem might be in the medium. Don L. Lee puts it this way: "Black poets will live their poems; they, themselves, will be poems." No more measuring up. No more trying to be like unto. No more, "it's my thing--I can do what I want to do." Our thang is the people's thang. I'll repeat that, "Our thang is the people's thang." It is for the people, African people that you write (if you're African), talk, or whatever you do. If it is for yourself, keep it to yourself. Europeans criticizing, judging, interpreting, establishing

the criteria for African Literature is silly and is considered as such by knowing Africans. And it's quite clear that we know. Once again the insight of Willie Kgositsile pierces us as he reminds us that, "With the reemergence of Africa and the rest of the Third World on the stage of history, the same sinister forces pick the *representatives* of Africa creative endeavor in much the same way they pick some carbon-copy Western monster for our political *leadership*." Like I said, we know. You see, this whole aspiration for *literacy* is in and of itself a big hoax, another game being run on the people. Now you're going to tell me that the overwhelming majority, *the masses* are *literate*...? Hell no! The masses of African People (in America and on the continent) are non-literate. Writing is something that a few have always done, like the painter, the lyricist, the preacher, the engineer (killer and locomotive), the presidents, the barbers, the carpenters, the bartenders, the janitors, the administrators, the writers are somewhere in there along with other such musicians. I mean really, who writes? I mean, the writer *writes*? And if I can ease this in, really, who reads? I remember Chairman Bobby Seale, in a couple of speeches declared, "The masses of Black people do not (get that *do not*) read." In the context we're approaching, you'll better understand what I'm saying:

THANKS GOD

There are books that never get read
in time---or poems
have you heard
it took a
what to do kind of question
Think about the wounds we inflict
with word and pen
the deaths *WE* cause
the same *ever seen a poem stop a .38?*
kind of a question
if we know
the how to do
the what to do

that what it takes

to live

to die

to live

and how to die

wit my boots on

Found my criteria in the 69' ed.

Harbrace College Handbook

proper

foot first

noting

(,) pause,

Stop!

Using!:

SO MANY!!!!!!!!!!

ex-cla-ma-tions

(,) pause-think

about the deadly/period (.)

or (;) that

which slows you down to a whisper....

.....and many missing words....

(the unsaid)

May Scream in-----deed

(the unheard)

may crack you ear

Drum silently

without punctuation

I think we can just say we're having a brief discussion on the legitimacy of literacy. And conclude that discussion with a quote from my Uncle Thabo that "in an Armed Struggle, Documentation of ideas is a form of suppression of knowledge. Unless that is you're not interested in living your poems or whatever you write--you writers and readers that is. As I said before, this so-called aspiration for literacy is, today, a big hoax, another game being run on the people. Specifically indicative of this is the paucity of Black students in universities and colleges in this country. The reason being given that "they have problems communicating." And believe me this is true of more than just the U.S.A. Black people the world over are systematically denied university and college (and in many instances, high school) education for any number of reasons, among the primary being communication; the first, of course, being our not having wielded sufficient power. Communication, of course, being defined as literacy. Not to mention the relevance of *European education* to Black liberation anyhow kind of a question. You see, tied into this whole notion of Liter-a-ture is that of literacy and its historical significance, particularly for African people.

On the Question of Oral Literature

A paradox to begin with, since literature is usually thought of as writings in prose or verse. Traditionally, western society has classified or categorized *pre-literate* people as primitive, a term which has very negative and dehumanizing connotations regardless of its anthropological and/or historical definition, which is most often applied to people of African origin. Historically, African people have an oral tradition, and oral literature is still alive and well--right here--right now. It lives and will always live--I know because, "I heard it through the grapevine." All people have oral literature--and some non-people. Yet Europeans persist in trying to establish written literature as the *only* literature. Oral literature, in contrast to written literature where the author may both live and work in an isolated way--a kind of individuation of literature. It is of utmost importance for Black writers today to be constantly reminded of their very isolated and to a large extent esoteric audience and the vicarious nature of their literacy transmission to the masses of our people. Literacy again is another device of Europe-an hanging, another means of screening people out of *their* definition of humanity, while they have the power, and we persist in permitting them to define. You see, our problem is not that we don't write enough, but that we're enslaved. Now some idiot is going to intellectualize here, and say: "well a part of the reason we're enslaved is because we don't write enough." Well.....

rather than get into a thing on that at this point, I'll just repeat, "ever seen a poem stop a .38?" Let us understand the purpose of language, which is to communicate. That's all, no more and no less, just simply that--to communicate. Like....what LeRoi Jones says in his "Introduction" to *Four Black Revolutionary Plays*, "What can I tell you about the world that you don't already know. Nothing. You know everything. You are everybody. You thought it up before I said it. Sure. You knew it all the time. So why even bother to read the plays? Just go on with the bullshit you call your life. Unless you're killing white people, killing the shit they've built, don't read this shit, you won't like it, and it sure won't like you." Now...did you listen or did you read--kind of question.

The nature of the question dictates the kind of answer that will be given. The question "is Oral Literature, Literature?" really answers itself when asked of an African. Or, let's ask another kind of question, "is African African"? Let us not belabor the point, Ameer Baraka (LeRoi Jones) both writes and speaks African Literature--ever heard him? Wole Soyinka writes and speaks African Literature, and what's more, he listens as he writes:

ALAGEMO

I heard! I felt their reach

And heard my naming named.

The pit is there, the digger fell right through

My roots have come out in the other world.

Make away. Agemo's hoops

Are pathways of the sun.

Rain-reeds, unbend to me, Quench

The burn of cartwheels at my waist!

Pennant in the stream of time--Now,

Gone, and Here the Future

Make way. Let the rivers woo

The thinning, thinning Here and

Vanished Leap that was the Night

And the split that snatched the heavy-lidden

She-twin into Dawn.

No sweat-beads droop beneath

The plough-wings of the hawk.

No beetle finds a hole between Agemo's toes.

When the whirlwind claps his feet

It is the sundering of the...name no ills...

Of...the Not-to-be

Of the moistening moment of a breath...

Approach. Approach and feel

Did I not speak? Is there not flesh

Between the dead man's thumbs?

One would have to conclude that Mr. Soyinka's pen is very vocal. African Literature is, in fact, what it is - you'll know it when you see it... or hear it. Fanon speaks adequately of that aspiration for humanity via literature and/or literacy when he states: "Still in terms of consciousness, black consciousness is eminent in its own eyes. I am not a potentiality of something; I am wholly what I am. I do not have to look for the universal. No probability has any place inside me. My Negro consciousness does not hold itself out as a lack. It is, it is its own follower." Likewise African Literature is not a potentiality of something; it is wholly what it is...has been...and will be. Through all the bullshit *literature* we are institutionally fed...we can be satisfied with pretending in order to keep a few crumbs coming or we can attack and destroy this *institutional* non-sense for the shit it is. This paper is a plea to African writers to "tell it like it is", because African Literature is, and can only be, African writers talking with and to African people.

FRITZ H. POINTER, a graduate of Creighton University, received his BA in English in 1966. He is now an MA candidate at the UCLA African Studies Center.