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Who should I write for – Nigerians, Africans, or everyone?

What does it mean to be an ‘African’ writer? And is provincial writing always political? The Nigerian author explains why the best literature is accessible to all

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‘A description of a *molue*, the Lagos bus, is not complete without a description of its unique sound.’ Photograph: Pius Utomi Ekpei/AFP/Getty Images

When I published my novel, [The Fishermen](#), last year, one of the most common – and most surprising – questions I received was about my intended audience. This question, I came to discover, is frequently asked of

writers who have a similar provenance to mine. In the past few years, writers have responded in various ways. One reaction comes from a group of writers – including [Taiye Selasi](#) – who have sought to nix the idea of the “African” writer’s identity. Others, many of whom live in Africa, have argued that the solution is to play up their identity to an extreme – seeking to be read chiefly *because* of their origin rather than in spite of it.

In a recent article, Nigerian writer Eghosa Imaseun argued that provincial writing is always political, objecting to the way things are explained unnecessarily for international audiences. For example: “If you write ‘He dipped his hand into the *eba*’, a phrase will follow to explain that *eba* is ‘that yellow globular mashed potato clone made from Cassava chippings’.” His frustration is evident: “You’re like, ‘Arrghhh, don’t explain it, they can Google it!’”

Contrast this with [Wole Soyinka](#), writing in the introduction to his new translation of Yoruba novelist DO Fagunwa’s work. Soyinka describes how he translated the phrase “*Mo nmi ho bi agiliti*” as “my breath came in rapid bloats like the hawing of a toad”. This aroused a protest from a Yoruba critic who complained about Soyinka’s choice, noting that *agiliti* is a lizard not a toad. Soyinka concedes the point, but asserts:

But neither toad nor lizard is the object of action or interest to the hero Akaraogun or his creator Fagunwa at this point of narration. Fagunwa’s concern is to convey the vivid sense of event, and a translator must select equivalents for mere auxiliaries where these serve the essential purpose better than the precise original. In what I mentally refer to as the “enthusiastic” passages of his writing, the essence of Fagunwa is the fusion of sound and action. To preserve the movement and fluidity of this association seems to be the best approach for keeping faith with the author’s style and sensibility.

To me this is, in many ways, a precise thesis on creative writing, a rephrasing of the most cardinal of all writing rules: show don’t tell. When we compare Soyinka’s view with Imaseun’s argument, we see glaring disparities. Writers who are most concerned with provincialism – with pleasing a particular base of readers – are probably not concerned with conveying “the vivid sense of event”. Such a writer will almost always falter in his writing, and yield, more often than not, to telling rather than showing.

Suppose the African author wants to write about the *molue*, the iconic Lagos bus, and simply refers to it mid-sentence. He might praise himself, or be praised by defenders of this kind of politicised provincialism, for having been brave or authentic. But what does a reader see? Just a bus. There is no

doubt that a reader who lives in Lagos might be at an advantage. But if a writer describes it as “a beat-up squeaking yellow-painted bus with a constant metallic rattle”, everyone, including the Lagos reader, will have a clear image of such a bus, as it has been rendered in vivid detail. All readers – Ibekwe in Lagos, Ataman in Kayseri, Lars in Bremen, Abhinav in Assam, or Jane in Ann Arbor — will see and hear this bus and capture it in their minds. I’m not convinced that this can be achieved by merely using the word “molue”.

What is more baffling is that not even the defenders of provincialism believe they would be able to convey such a vivid sense of something by simply mentioning it without describing it to the reader. Imaseun provides an answer: “Google it.” Thus, a writer, in the name of political defiance, has abstained from his duty and tasked the reader with research. In an age when we complain of short attention spans and books compete with variegated media, some contemporary writers compel their readers to be distracted.



Chigozie Obioma. Photograph: Murdo Macleod for the Guardian

Even if we assume that everyone reading our books will have access to Google at the time they read, one could still argue that if a reader looks up *molue*, they may not get the picture of a *molue* bus in all its eccentricity. The description of a *molue* cannot be complete until there has been a description of its unique sound. For this, the reader might need to consult YouTube as well. The writer’s work, which should have been self-sufficient, would have failed in this most important of missions. It would have been aided by the work of another artist – a photographer, or a blogger, or a cinematographer. But if the writer had chosen to simply describe the bus, every one of the writer’s readers — Ibekwe, Ataman, Lars, Abhinav,

Jane – would see, feel and hear the *molue*, and so would Chinaza in Lagos, even if it pricks his ego that the account does not defer only to him. But that would not, should not, matter.

Labels are meaningless or of little consequence to my work. I could be an Igbo writer, a west African writer, a Nigerian writer, a black writer, or even a Nebraskan writer. But suppose I'm asked to select a particular audience and write for them as some writers claim they do. Then who will this audience be? Will it be the people of Nigeria? If so, why? Why am I thinking in terms of national borders? Do I even believe they exist? Nigeria, to me, is a foreign idea, which, as I have consistently maintained, needs to be rethought. Can one pick and choose what one wants to accept from the fallout of colonisation?

Even if I choose to say that I write for Nigerians, this term is too encompassing to reach down to everyone. Can I claim that my grandmother would know what a *molue* is? I doubt if she does. If I say that I write for Igbo readers, this audience still does not include everyone, for even within that tribe, there are a lot of differences in dialects. And, then, why write in English, if my work is for the Igbo people? Why not write in Igbo? Suppose I choose to write in Igbo for the people of Umuahia in eastern Nigeria, will that suffice? Because then, I gain my granny as an audience. How then can I comfortably define my provincial base? Bear in mind, also, that I was not born in Igboland, but in Akure where another language, Yoruba, is spoken. So, how might I feel about leaving out the people of Akure by selecting a provincial base? Does it feel right? I think not. And to succeed, one must make the best and right decision in all circumstances, for "writing is decision-making", as the American writer Steve Almond once said.

An American writer writing about New York need not think about provinciality, and is less constrained by such encumbrances simply because most people know what and where New York is. As a child of nine, I'd learned all the 50 states in the US and their capitals by heart. I can guarantee that unless the child is born to a Nigerian immigrant family, you will not find an American child with any geographic knowledge about Akure. Akure is simply, in a global context, unimportant. In truth, most Americans know close to nothing about Nigeria, but no Nigerian, even in the remotest of villages, can make a similar claim about the US. Thus, because of the obscurity of the nation, it would be foolhardy to set your book in Lohum, or Tse-Agberagba, with no explanation of its geography, and dare your American or Serbian reader to consult Google. Even most people in Abuja or Lagos do not know where those places are.

By the time I had finished a first draft of *The Fishermen*, I had moved to the United States. I began to wonder how the book would be received in this age of societal prickliness, of adopting the position of the marginalised as the most gracious vantage, and in which it takes so little to offend people. In writing about a madman, would I be accused of stigmatising mental illness? If people in the west were going to read the book, would they be turned off by the familial “violence”? How about women – might most western women not worry that the subservient position of the mother in the novel is misogynist? And, as for Nigerians who have a national culture that somehow prohibits or sneers at any negative portrayal or criticism of their country to outsiders (As an Igbo proverb puts it: “We do not speak ill of our father’s farm to a stranger”), how would they receive my argument that Nigeria has failed? The list was endless.

In the end, I asked myself, what is true about what I know? What is honest? Isn’t the familiar “violence” of corporal punishment a norm in Nigeria? Why, then, should I be afraid to capture it so? Wouldn’t it be false to do otherwise? If I know of women, most women of my childhood, who are wholly subservient to their husbands, why then should I worry about offending western women? And if I believe that, when compared with other countries with similar resources, Nigeria has failed, why should I be concerned that some Nigerians think otherwise? I came to the conclusion that I should not care about any of these potential concerns. I should write only what seems to me to be honest, and aim to craft a novel with the grace of the novels I admire. To me, this should be the aim of great fiction. To do otherwise is to negate the very nature of literature.

Activist intrusion into the writer’s imagination always interferes with literary truth. I believe that fiction, with its untrammelled nature, speaks to no one, and by so doing, speaks to all. It must transcend boundaries, time and space, like Eleanor Catton’s *The Luminaries*, Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road*, or Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*. In these books, these writers produce images of worlds rendered in the most vivid of details that become recognisable to any percipient reader no matter where they live, have lived, or what their level of geographical exposure. A memorable chapter in Roy’s novel begins with this astonishingly detailed description of “May in Ayemenem”:

May in Ayemenem is a hot, brooding month. The days are long and humid. The river shrinks and black crows gorge on bright mangoes in still, dustgreen trees. Red bananas ripen. Jackfruits burst. Dissolute bluebottles hum vacuously in the fruity air. Then they stun themselves against clear windowpanes and die, fatly baffled in the sun. The nights are clear, but suffused with sloth and sullen expectation ...

A provincialist might ask, does someone in Ayemenem not know this is how the weather and seasons are? Why then does Roy need to tell us? She must be aiming it at a western audience. Yet she has artistically magnified the ordinary to anyone who lives in Ayemenem or Kerala. She has transformed the ordinary into art. The Ayemenem she describes is now both a real and a fictional place. Through this duality of vision, Roy achieves the height of her craft. This is what an African writer who is constrained by a demand for provincialism prevents himself from achieving.

Matthew Arnold, in his seminal essay “The Literary Influence of Academies”, referred to provincial prose as “second-rate”. A work tending towards provincial prose is defective, he said, and work done after writers have transcended provinciality is “classical; and that is the only work, which in the long run, can stand”. The non-western writer whose work exudes provincialism for the mere sake of protest rather than some artistic impulse is a radical without a cause.

- Chigozie Obioma’s *The Fishermen*, now out in paperback, is published by ONE.

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/oct/14/how-african-writers-can-bring-local-language-to-life-for-all>