

# BOOK REVIEW

**Olakunle George. *African Literature and Social Change: Tribe, Nation, Race*.** Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017. 211 pp. Photographs. Bibliography. Index. \$30.00. Paper. ISBN: 9780253025807.

Olakunle George's *African Literature and Social Change: Tribe, Nation, Race* is an important addition to the contemporary scholarship on African literatures and their implications for nationalism, citizenship, and ongoing projects of belonging. George convincingly argues that Africa is simultaneously "text and desire"; fundamentally, the idea of Africa is "a product of intellectual labor and acts of language" (194).

The volume is laid out in six sections. In the introduction, George begins by defining the phrase *missionary moments*, which encompass African and African diaspora texts from the mid-nineteenth century to the present. George demonstrates how discussions of Africa frame the continent as "a testament to the challenge and promise of social change" (1). It is also in the introductory chapter that George explains his use of the term "tribe" in his analysis. In *African Literature and Social Change*, he uses "tribe" and "ethnic group" as synonyms, arguing for these words as testament to encounters of the West "with itself and its abjected others" (7). Overall, George successfully argues that African literatures enable readers to "desediment and rehistoricize" contentious categories of identity, including race, nation, tribe, and ethnicity (9).

In Chapter One, "Crossing Currents: Postcoloniality, Globalism, Diaspora," the author broaches ongoing conversations regarding literary globalism. He expounds on how the "confluence of postcolonial studies and literary globalism might allow us to rethink the relationship between the local and the global, the national and the transnational" (25). This fundamental realignment of political categories is visible at the very beginning of the book, when the author traces popular activism from the Maghreb's Arab Spring to the Occupy Nigeria Movement. This point is further expanded by George's analysis of Pan-Africanism, especially with reference to its roots in the black Atlantic. This first chapter covers a lot of critical ground, referencing such diverse thinkers as Édouard Glissant, Paul Gilroy, Kenneth Warren, W. E. B. Du Bois, Raymond Williams, James Clifford, and Gayatri

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Spivak. I found the theoretical engagement quite robust. However, a more deliberate focus on the black women who shepherded Pan-Africanism in its early days, including but not limited to Shirley Du Bois and Amy Ashwood Garvey, would have even more comprehensively informed this methodological review.


“Mission Tide,” the second chapter, performs a terribly important reading of black missionary texts from the mid-nineteenth century. George’s examination of Bishop Crowther’s journals and personal letters displays the mutability of identity in the half century leading up to anti-colonial independence movements in West Africa. At a time when a “Nigerian” identity was still under formation, *African Literature and Social Change* demonstrates the ways in which a black Atlantic consciousness coalesced. George offers an equally informative reading of Rev. Thomas Birch Freeman’s and J. E. K. Aggrey’s careers and influence on a younger generation of West African nationalists, not the least of whom being Nigeria’s first president Nnamdi Azikiwe. The intellectual lineage carved out in this first chapter is particularly intriguing, especially for its enormous potential to “Undiscipline Victorian Studies.”

The third chapter, “Decolonization Time: Abrahams, James, Wright,” reads South African Peter Abrahams, Trinidadian C. L. R. James, and African American Richard Wright. Between the journals and personal correspondence from the previous chapter and the kind of travel memoir created by both James and Wright, George convincingly argues for an expansion of the African literary archive. Similarly, while *A Wreath for Udomo* is not among Abrahams’s best-known works, George contends that this text is worth closer review precisely for the way it challenges our expectations regarding genre and aesthetics (133). Mukoma wa Ngũgĩ makes a similar argument regarding the critical analysis of pre-Achebe African literature in *The Rise of the African Novel: Politics of Language, Identity, and Ownership* (University of Michigan Press, 2018). In fact, as George argues, Abrahams’s 1956 text foreshadows some of the key concerns that plagued later generations of African writers, including “the role artistic representation” could play in African social transformation (138).

In his examination of contemporary works by Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka, Olakunle George posits that both writers foreground “Africa in terms of desire and agency” (145). Moreover, Achebe and Soyinka challenge pessimistic views of the African continent which magnify “crisis and sacrifice” (145). In this way, George returns to a key question regarding sacrifice, as previously explored in his introduction. In closing, George reads a 2006 *New York Times* article titled “The Post-Colonial Missionary” to argue not only for the continued relevance of rethinking Africa’s presumed progress toward modernity, but also to contend that such a process is unquestionably “a journey without a telos” (185).

*African Literature and Social Change* is a timely and extremely relevant study. Africa’s experiments with nationalism are ongoing. As recent events across the Maghreb, the Sahel, and the Horn of Africa demonstrate,

redefining key categories of identity and belonging is a task that is far from over. Pan-Africanists, across the continent and in the diaspora, will find much to reflect on in Olakunle George's work.

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