

Stephanie Newell, *Newsprint Literature and Local Literary Creativity in West Africa, 1900s-1960s*, Woodbridge, James Currey, 2023, 232 p.

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The generative potential – and therefore the potentially productive, fruitful and original utility – of socio-cultural and intellectual history, when approached and analyzed through newsprint literature, to open up not only new perspectives about the trajectory of the *domestication* of the encounter with Europe but also the emergence of new literary practices is eloquently captured in Stephanie Newell's *Newsprint Literature & Local Literary Creativity in West Africa, 1900s-1960s*. This domestication of the Enlightenment in West Africa in late 19th and early 20th century by the emergent indigenous educated elite involved reflections on the legacies of modernity - including subjectivity, centrality of reason, governance by consent, rule of law, obsession with novelty, etc.¹ - and the embrace and re-articulation of aspects of modernity in the context of their own reality.

Lucid and written with verve and fervor, *Newsprint Literature* is an insightful and rigorous work of literary analysis that re-emphasizes and redefines the significant role of the early-to-mid-20th-century newspaper press in West Africa in the continent's intellectual history.

Although Newell does not link the phenomenon and era that she studied in this book to the long arc of the domestication of the Enlightenment in Africa, particularly in the West Coast of Africa—as explored by other scholars, notably Olúfemi Táíwò and Philip S. Zachernuk²—*Newsprint Literature* provides a further elaboration of African agency in the (re)production of modernity in the context of the encounter with Europe, in this case colonialism. Beyond that, and more specifically, Newell presents a strong argument for understanding early-to-mid-20th-century African newsprint spaces as part of (if not the birth of) the 'archive of imaginative writing' (in West Africa), even though for long, it has fallen 'outside contemporary transnational understandings of literary genres and anglophone world literatures' (p. 2). The inclusion of such 'ephemeral' materials that were not hitherto regarded as part of African literature—including serialized fiction or real-life stories in newspapers and Nigerian pamphlets known as Onitsha market literature—she shows, broadens our understanding of 'modern' literary traditions of Africa and deepens our insight into how the local literati that produced this newsprint literature provided a wealth of information about history, politics, and society in the first half of 20th century West Africa. This is evident in the elaboration of imperialist actions and the struggle for African agency in formally colonized countries such as the Congo and Nigeria, the reflections on how to 'articulate' modern

¹ Táíwò Olúfemi (2010), *How Colonialism Preempted Modernity in Africa*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press.

² *Idem*; Zachernuk Philip Serge (2000), *Colonial Subjects: an African intelligentsia and the Atlantic Ideas*, Charlottesville, University of Virginia Press.



subjectivity through letter-writing and the use of English, and the contradictory deliberations on ‘moral quandaries’ of ‘modern’ womanhood in that era.

Arguing resolutely against Ngũgĩ’s staunch position that the use of European languages, particularly English, by Africans signaled ‘mental colonialism’ and limited the possibilities and potentialities of African languages, *Newsprint Literature* shows that, instead these local writers ‘treated English language as a global resource and refused to connect it with the experience of imperial racism’ in hooking ‘their imaginations into transnational discourses’ (p. 3)³. They also did so by affirming their participation in a universal discourse about the human condition, premised on their conscious efforts to understand the conditions of human flourishing under the changing politico-economic and social environment of the early to mid-20th-century Africa.

This is a superbly wrought exercise in an against-the-grain form of literary analysis focused on a social phenomenon which hitherto was not regarded as ‘literature’ in Africa. In this book, Newell engages in a fine-grained analysis not only to legitimize what she calls ‘newsprint literature’ but also to elaborate on ‘local literary creativity’ in West Africa, responsible for this form of literature. From epistolarity in the Nigerian newspaper press to Onitsha market literature that invented, imitated or replicated, absorbed, dramatized, deliberated on, interpreted, reproduced, and/or reimagined modern life as modulated or re-determined by the colonial encounter—while negotiating ‘tradition’ in relation to local and global transformations—the author analyzes the various ways in which newsprint literature combed, explored, and re-fashioned social life in the first half of 20th century West Africa. Newell shows why newsprint literature deserves a place in the discipline of African literary studies alongside oral literature and the creative writings of transnational African intellectuals. In addition, the pathway for literary analysis in Africa that this book initiates unfolds ‘alternative genealogies and methods for understanding contemporary literary forms such as social media creativity’ (p. 4-5).

In Chapter 1, the book uses, as a backdrop, an area of modern African intellection and sociality that is now receiving the kind of scholarly exploration that it deserves, that is, a dialogue with the traditions of the Enlightenment through the newspaper press by the emergent African elites/intellectuals starting from the 19th century. The domestication of the Enlightenment that the contributors to the newspaper press (as well as the owners and editors of these newspapers) engaged in as they negotiated the ‘modern’ and the ‘traditional’ in early 20th century Africa, the author shows, clearly indicated that they had a ‘global and cosmopolitan relationship’ with the English language and English literature. It also shows that they engaged in both interpretation and interpellation, which gave them greater agency than Ngũgĩ and the new decolonial turn would grant them. Rather than engaging in mimicry, the intellectual workers explored in this book contributed, in Edward Said’s view, to the global assertion of ‘a postcolonial humanist affiliation’ (p. 29)⁴. Although the author, wrongly in my view, uses the phrase ‘decolonial relationship’ (p. 22) in trying to capture this form of agency, thus reading back contemporary fad into a far more nuanced and productive intervention in the past, the materials and the analyses in this book, paradoxically, shows the severe limitations of the decolonial school that mixes up the broader legacy of the Enlightenment with the specific and corrosive legacy of colonialism. Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò’s *Against Decolonization* has eloquently exposed the gaps in the core arguments of the decolonial school by making a distinction between decolonization that involved ending imperial rule in Africa, and the current ‘decolonization’ scholarship/movement that seeks to delink the Global South from the legacies of the Enlightenment by mixing up the latter strictly with Euro-American racist thought and Western imperial practices⁵. Indeed, what the author excellently captures is the fascinating world of an emergent local literati; one that ‘reveals local editors and authors projecting the existence of an egalitarian world produced in and by print, populated by disembodied print-subject... who had access to the English language, who existed in and because of newsprint, and whose work had the potential to circulate globally’ (p. 29).

One of the most fascinating features of this book is the way the author enlivens the ‘untapped history’ of the epistolary traditions of the West African newspaper press and links this to nascent literary practices in the region. As local elites ‘used public letters to claim cultural prestige’ (p. 32) while exercising ‘their agency as subjects-in-print’ (p. 33), *Newsprint Literature* illustrates how the flow of correspondence between readers and

³ Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o (1986), *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, London, James Currey.

⁴ Said Edward W. (2004), *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, New York, Columbia University Press

⁵ Táíwò Olúfẹ́mi (2022), *Against Decolonization: Taking African Agency Seriously*, London, Hurst & Company.

newspapers not only helped to develop a genre, but also generated a new conception of time, locale, and reality that was critical to building a ‘modern’ public sphere and expanding the possibility of a new form of sociality. Pressing the ‘cumulative compositional processes’ (p. 49) that ‘went into works intended for publication’ in the newspapers by writers (many of them budding writers, including poets) involving what some, at the point, regarded as plagiarism or ‘deliberate piracy,’ Chapter 3 examines how the Nigerian nationalist newspaper *The Daily Comet* provided ‘literary inspiration’ and at the same time defined and dictated ‘the parameters of anglophone literary taste to the aspiring African writers’ (p. 44). This was particularly expressive during World War II when, as the editor of the newspaper argued, Europe had descended into ‘a boiling cauldron or habitation for maniacs’, thus returning to ‘that condition of savagery for which it was noted in the Dark ages’ (p. 55). In this and other chapters, Newell renders a deep appreciation of the expansion of the literary and intellectual horizons in West Africa, as well as the formation of aesthetic tastes and the building of an interpretive community that readers, contributors, and newspaper publishers were involved in as co-producers of local versions of ‘global humanist perspective.’

Perhaps the most penetrating and masterful (and also enjoyable) chapters of the book are the ones that examine Onitsha market literature (Chapters 4-9). Linking the colonial-era literary practices in the print press to the post-independence pamphlets to showcase the ‘newsprint creativity’ in West Africa, Newell investigates how pamphleteers mined newspapers for information and instruction to dramatize, articulate, and project political events, social issues, moral concerns and teach about practices of modern life, including letter-writing, and the emergent gender ‘crisis’ in the interface of ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ as reflected through patriarchal certainties. The author makes a compelling case for understanding the emergence of this form of literature in eastern Nigeria as a direct result of nearly a century of African newspaper production, as new authors in the independence era ‘inserted themselves into newspaper cultures’ (p. 68). Despite some limitations in the literary practices of this era, it is clear that the newspaper print culture that inaugurated them and the Onitsha market literature that emerged from them constituted a critical backdrop to the robust modern literary culture in Nigeria.

Endorsing ‘the practical worldliness of the English language’ (p. 83), these ‘reader-oriented, dialogical pamphlet genres’ (p. 84), even if partly ‘plagiaristic’ (though this ‘problem’ is approached through a ‘different critical framework’ by the author who is sensitive to particular conditions of the practices as well as the sociological context), the author not only raises illuminating questions about how to locate, appreciate, and elaborate on this literary tradition, she also centralizes the many socio-cultural and specifically intellectual/literary worlding that emerged from this tradition as a veritable system of knowledge production.

Whether through the reconceptualization of literary originality, throwing the question of the ‘real’ as well as temporality in the context of this literature into crisis, and close reading of the productive cultural tensions inherent in the narratives (plays, romance novels), or through detecting the gender-inflected moral discourses and the patriarchal overtones of the subjectivities invoked by the male authors (with ‘harlots’ overrepresenting the ‘new woman’), the articulation of global events in ways that ‘unfurls... egalitarian visions’ in the emergent creative practices, and detecting and then interpreting and elaborating aesthetic principles in a phenomenon that produced its own literary conventions, Newell’s analysis of newsprint creativity in this book provides students of cultural production in the Global South with a model of how to study newsprint literature and intellectual history in areas of the world and in an era when the future was being refashioned.

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