Awarding "Africa":

the politics of literary prizes

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Abstract

The retrospectively realised prompt for this thesis is the 50th anniversary of the Booker Prize in 2018 and the 20th anniversary of the Caine Prize for African Writing, also known as the "African Booker", in 2019. Raising questions about 21st century reading and prizing cultures and canon formation in the context of the commercial category and continental impulse, "African literature"—and synthesising existing academic scholarship (James F. English; Doseline Kiguru) with conversations taking place in digital and journalistic spaces—it offers new pathways for tracking and tracing, discussing and debating, exploring and exposing the mechanics of major literary prizes. In setting the scene for the politics of major prizes, and specifically the place of African literatures within the literary landscape, it argues that anniversaries and missed opportunities, scandals and rule changes in these prizes' recent histories can offer room for reflection, reconsideration, remodelling and recovery—with the foreknowledge that these major moments in prizes' histories will inevitability bear consequence on their personality, trajectory, sustainability, and longevity for years to come. It asks: will the Booker Prize last to make it to a century? Will the Caine Prize for African Writing make it to a half century? How can prestigious prizes continue to remain relevant—and imagine new manifestos, new futures, and, indeed, new ways of prizing literatures?

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Introduction

Prizes Matter: On the Matter of Prizes

"If I won it wouldn't mean anything to me.
But I suppose you can't stop it meaning something to everyone else."
— Jen Calleja, "Literary Quartet"

"Everybody has won, and all must have prizes."

—The Dodo, in Lewis Carroll's Alice's Adventures in Wonderland

In "Literary Quartet"—the second story in her short story collection, *I'm Afraid That's All We've Got Time For* (2020)—the poet, writer, and literary translator Jen Calleja has written one of the most satirical and scathing, entertaining and erudite, take-downs of contemporary prize culture, 21st century publishing, and the literary landscape at-large. In this particular short story, written in a tone that is acerbic and alive, a novelist contemplates why, and also how, she has come to be shortlisted for the "Prize of Prizes Prize". She attends the prize-giving ceremony at Literature House (only to escape ahead of the winner announcement) and, throughout the story, assesses and undermines the inner workings and impact of the prize on her own writing career in particular and the world of publishing more generally.

> It was finally happening. Every year, for over twenty years, I had watched this historic occasion. The drama of it, the fuss, the prestige. I knew everything about the Prize of Prizes Prize; the compères, the scandals, the rumours, the *winners* […] For the past ten years I'd wanted it in the opening lines of my biography—and for it to be the reason I didn't need an introduction […] I followed them inside the Literature House to take part in, and perhaps become, an institution.
>
> […]
>
> Whoever receives the most votes overall will win the Prize of Prizes Prize, instant fame, glory, the works.
>
> […]
>
> I was proud to be here—and, I assumed, the others were too. We had worked hard and produced the finest works of the year, perhaps of our generation. We deserved this honour. But I, and maybe the others too, considered the nominations with some suspicion. I had to admit, I knew all three people who had got me on the longlist, which wasn't (technically) allowed.
>
> […]
>
> The ones who persevered, and didn't crack, would get there eventually—unless no one liked you, and I doubted anyone particularly liked me. But this award breeds awards.
>
> […]

> I know it's all a sham. I don't even want it. If I won it wouldn't mean anything to me. But I suppose you can't stop it meaning something to everyone else.
> […]
> I deserve it. I'm *owed*. It's all a fix anyway. The prize is only a beginning. The hard work comes after. (16; 18; 19; 25; 29-30; 31; emphasis in original)

On cursory glance, one thing is clear from these excerpted sections of Calleja's short story: the novelist-protagonist's thoughts on literary prizes are inconsistent, contradictory, constantly changing. She has desired the prize for over a decade and thinks she is deserving of it—in fact, she is "owed", she writes, in italics for emphasis—but she simultaneously also recognises the prize as a sham, a fix. She believes she has worked hard over twenty-five years to arrive at this stage in her writing career, but also thinks the real hard work will follow—and the prize is a portal of sorts. And, finally, because she sees behind the facade, she says that while winning the award won't really mean anything to her personally, she also knows it will be the reason her reputation will publicly precede her wherever she goes. Through such telling moments and more, Calleja confronts the anxiety and precarity of being a writer today: the push-and-pull between submitting to the system—the nepotism, the need to be accepted by the literary establishment, the hype, the constant hunt for the next new voice of the generation—and holding one's own in the face of it all. She thus tackles the twisted feelings of reverence for a prize—and the recognition it affords—when one's reputation and writing career is on the line. "The prize is only a beginning," she says, knowing a prize of this stature will breed more prizes, and therefore, more publishing deals and newer heights of success (31):

> We're in a labyrinth of ladders, arcing and curling around one another, following other's routes, occasionally being given a hand over treacherous rungs. Some ladders end in dead ends, other lead to platforms from where we can shout down encouragement or ignore all those beneath us. No one knows how anyone gets up, the routes are not well lit. (Calleja 26-27)

In the space of this short paragraph itself, Jen Calleja captures the various routes to success—of which there are several, she clarifies. There is no single, or straightforward, path to literary glory—and not even the "Prize of Prizes Prize" can guarantee it. Sometimes, the

system is rigged; at other times, writers play, even cheat, the system—breaking rules and befriending the right folks in positions of power in order to get ahead. Sometimes, years of hard work and perseverance leads to no visibility or celebrity. On other, rare occasions, writers make a name for themselves and come out on top—and then either choose to serve as models or mentors for peers and the next generation, or consider themselves far better than the rest, enjoying their time in the spotlight. In other words, there is no set formula—and the journey is by no means easy. "If I won it wouldn't mean anything to me. But I suppose you can't stop it meaning something to everyone else," she writes (29-30). Regardless of whether or not a prize may matter to the writer, for better or for worse, it matters to the writer's world; that is, on the larger literary landscape, it has value and exudes prestige. The writer is aware of this position that literary prizes do, or can, hold. Sometimes, the distance between how a writer perceives literary prizes versus how the rest of the literary world values prizes is narrow (or even non-existent); at other times, it is wide (and only getting wider), as in the case of Calleja's protagonist and the "Prize of Prizes Prize". It is in the gaps between these two states—the "labyrinth of ladders"—that the paradoxes of prize cultures can be exposed and elucidated (26).

At its core, this satirical short story slices through the heart of contemporary prize culture: its spectacles and scandals—and also the illusion of the seemingly single pathway to guaranteed glory and success. Calleja exposes the contradictions in feeling writers face when they are nominated for a prize, especially a prize with a stature such as the "Prize of Prizes Prize"—a thinly-veiled, fictional version of the prestigious Booker Prize for Fiction—and the ethical dilemmas it causes within them. Having experienced the high-drama of the world of the literati up-close, the protagonist, who eventually, as it turns out, wins the Public Choice Award category—created for "for light entertainment", the writer with the most bronze tokens takes home the "Public Choice gong"; meanwhile, the prize administrators "promise, unlike every other year, to not throw custard pies in the recipient's face" (18)—makes for the exit before the series of winner announcements. Far-removed from the world of the literary establishment, she instead watches the prize-giving ceremony online—it is a "dream I've never dreamt before" she says (32).

"Deferral and near misses are at the core of Calleja's writing," says novelist and academic Isabel Waidner on the book's back cover (n.p). In this context, I argue that "Literary

Quartet" can be simultaneously read as an embrace and a kind of rejection of literary prize culture. As mentioned, the protagonist leaves the Literature House before the winner is announced. Furthermore, throughout the course of the ceremony, she is constantly riddled in self-doubt and often second-guesses her place at the prize-giving ceremony, but also, more crucially, within the world of publishing and prizes. In a clever authorial move, the protagonist wins an award for which four writers—including herself—are shortlisted, but ultimately comes in third place for what is evidently a mock consolation prize. "Literary Quartet," then, is a kind of looking away—and a leaving of the room where literature is consecrated, canonised, and commercialised. It is a refusal to participate in the theatrics and play the games of prize culture and the world of publishing, where everything is always already rigged and where the odds are rarely in one's favour. It is a rejection of the very business of books—where writers and their works are commodified and pitted in competition with one another. If not a total rejection, at the very least, this short story can be read as an attempt at safeguarding and distancing oneself from the perils of prize culture and publishing at-large. At all times, Calleja's protagonist has one foot inside the door and one foot outside the door. All in all, it is a kind of rejection of what the "Prize of Prizes Prize" stands for and signifies—prestige and a sense of being all-powerful, but also precarity and its problematic functioning.

Jen Calleja's short story is but one fictional rendition—and rejection—of literary prize culture and contemporary publishing circuits. In his 2017 article in the *Times Literary Supplement (TLS)* titled "All Must Have Prizes," Michael Caines writes that, for writers, the acclaim of prizes "can be career-making, the moolah life-saving" (n.p.). Furthermore, "the scandals they occasion can be ridiculous but enjoyably ridiculous as in Edward St Aubyn's prize-parodying novel, *Lost for Words*. (Fate insisted that *Lost for Words* had to win a prize of its own, the Bollinger Everyman Wodehouse Prize in 2014)," he adds (n.p.). Yet one could, if one so desired, ignore them altogether, "only it would be self-defeating of writers (among the other parties involved) to ignore all those zeros in this context. (See Thomas Bernhard's *My Prizes*—published in English, as it happens by Notting Hill Editions—for an exquisitely misanthropic account of taking the money and running.)" he further writes (n.p.). After citing the pros and cons of prizes, in the second half of the same article, he proceeds to announce the first-ever—and last-ever—fictional "There Must Be Prizes" Prizes—including the "liter-

ary prize most likely to swallow itself" which goes to the then-Man Booker Prize for Fiction—all of which are but figments of his imagination. The final of Caines' five fictional literary prizes, is, as it turns out, for the best fictional literary prize, which goes to "The Prize" in Filippo Bologna's novel, *The Parrots*, which is sponsored by "The Patroness". In his 2013 review of the novel for *The Guardian*, Ian Thomson writes: "Filippo Bologna, who won the Strega Prize in 2009 for his debut novel, *How I Lost the War*, understands the murky business of literary awards in his native Italy. His second novel, *The Parrots*, translated by Howard Curtis, offers a bitter satire on the scheming and vote-rigging attendant on an Italian literary prize that may or may not be the Strega. The plot, unfolding in present-day Rome, concerns the in-fighting between three contestants known as The Beginner, The Writer and The Master. Who will win the prize and by what Machiavellian means?" (n.p.). Michael Caines too notes that the "anxiety and vanity pull together, in each competitor's case, to bring about humiliation and further anxiety. They are both ridiculous and all too recognizable types"—and "shuddering horribly at the accuracy of it all, the judges voted unanimously for *The Parrots* shortly before dissolving the "There Must Be Prizes" Prizes for ever" (n.p.). It is not an exaggeration to claim that if Jen Calleja's short story had been published earlier than 2020, and would therefore have been eligible be for Michael Caines' "There Must Be Prizes" Prizes in the best fictional literary prize category, it would have won—not just for the clever will she/won't she win suspense the author builds and sustains throughout the course of the story, but for precisely the "deferral" and "near miss" nature of her work that Isabel Waidner pinpoints on the book's cover and praises Calleja's writing for. Winning the fictional "Prize of Prizes Prize" may or may not mean something for the real writer—or indeed the fictional writer, as in Calleja's protagonist's case—but for the writer of "Literary Quartet" it offers a fertile ground to satirise, slice open, and parody questions of power dynamics and the paradoxes inherent in the mechanics and politics of literary prize cultures. Of even greater importance is that it is never exclusively the binary—will she/won't she win—but rather, and more increasingly, the question of—will the writer accept or reject, and go on to celebrate or critique, the prize?

"The Most Famous Non!": Refusing And Rejecting Prizes

"Two days after Joseph Andras' *De Nos Frères Blessés* (which had not been on the short-list of four) was astonishingly announced as the winner of the Goncourt first novel Prize," writes John Dugdale in *The Guardian* in 2016, "French literati were stunned again this week when Andras turned it down because his 'conception of literature is incompatible with the idea of a competition'" (n.p.). With this, he declares that the "2016 prize rejection season has at last begun"—alluding to the fact that this is a common occurrence, one that likely happens every year and every prize season—and offers a "guide" to other potential literary prize refusers (n.p.). In this tongue-in-cheek article, he lists five major motivations or ways to reject a prize—and calculates the risks, and the resulting pros and cons, of writers making these refusals.

First, there are those who refuse on the grounds of competition, he says, as John le Carré, who asked (unsuccessfully) to be removed from the 2011 Man Booker International Prize shortlist because "I do not compete for literary prizes", did (n.p.). Pro: "honourably self-sacrificial". Con: "can appear holier-than-thou" Dugdale concludes (n.p.). Next, there are the political rejections, as "illustriously exemplified by Hari Kunzru (who turned down the 2003 £5,000 John Llewellyn Rhys Prize, claiming its backer *The Mail on Sunday* was 'xenophobic' and 'anti-migrant'), followed by Javier Marías (who rejected a €20,000 Spanish government prize in 2012 because he didn't want revenue or recognition from 'state institutions') and Alice Oswald (who withdrew from the TS Eliot prize in the preceding year because she felt 'uncomfortable' about its investment-firm sponsor, Aurum)" he notes (n.p.). More recently, he adds, David Grossman cancelled his candidacy for the Israel Prize in 2015, accusing PM Benjamin Netanyahu of meddling with the judging process. For Dugdale, this attitude and approach sometimes "makes a stronger, more straightforward statement" than the work itself. Then there is also the "pre-emptive rejection", which is fairly self-explanatory (n.p.). Here he notes that some female novelists such as AS Byatt, Nadine Gordimer, Anita Brookner have declined to be submitted for the then-Orange Broadband/ Baileys Prize for Fiction [now Women's Prize for Fiction] over the years. Most recently—as Alison Flood reports in *The Guardian* (2020)—Akwaeke Emezi, who became the first non-binary trans writer to be nominated for this award in 2019 with their debut, *Freshwater*, also shunned the prize over request for details of sex as defined 'by law'—and declined to submit

future novels for consideration in protest against the prize. For John Dugdale, the pro in such cases is to "stay aloof from all the argy-bargy" of literary prizes from the very outset (n.p.).

Next, he writes about those writers who refuse "tardily"—and here he references "the most famous 'Non!' of all", Jean-Paul Sartre's letter of refusal of the Nobel Prize for Literature (voicing disgust about being "transformed into an institution"), which, arrived funnily enough, belatedly (he remains the official 1964 winner) (n.p.). The con? Losing out on the piles of prize money, of course. Finally, he says, there are the "acceptances that are also rejections"—as when Thomas Pynchon sent the nonsense-spouting comedian 'Professor' Irwin Corey to accept his 1974 National Book Award[1]; or as John Berger (who gave half his purse to the Black Panthers) did in his Booker Prize victory speech in 1972 (n.p.). The pro here is the spectacle of it all—and of perhaps being more talked about than the book itself, which is arguably always good publicity and a strong push for book sales. The con? It is "less pure than outright political rejection or no prizes policy—you're co-opted by the system, even if you treat that ironically or angrily," Dugdale concludes (n.p.). The novelist-protagonist we met earlier on in Jen Calleja's short story, "Literary Quartet" (2020), perhaps falls into this final category of an acceptance-rejection; as a new writer, she is, no doubt, co-opted by the system, but her strategic early exit can also be read as a silent, or a soft, refusal and rejection of that very system. By the time her name will be announced as third-place winner, she will have vanished—poof!—like a magic trick.

Keeping in mind the many motivations for rejections in John Dugdale's extensive—and entertaining—guide, "How to turn down a prestigious literary prize—a winner's guide to etiquette" (2016), it is worth, momentarily, to spend some more time with the major refusals and rejections in literary prize history—beginning with what he refers to as "the most famous 'Non!' of all", Jean-Paul Sartre's refusal to accept the 1964 Nobel Prize for Literature. If John Dugdale's aforementioned article is a guide for the would-be-rejectee, David

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[1] "But I do want to thank the bureau . . . I mean the committee, the organization, for the $10,000 they've given out. . . . Tonight they made over $400,000. And I think that I have another appointment—I would like to stay here, but for the sake of brevity I must leave. I do want to thank you. I want to thank Studs Terkel. I want to thank Mr. Knopf, who just ran through the auditorium, and I want to thank Brezhnev, Kissinger—acting president of the Unites States—and also want to thank Truman Capote, and thank you." —Professor Irwin Corey, accepting the National Book Award on behalf of Thomas Pynchon, April 18, 1974 (Quoted in James English (2005), 217)

Carter's book, *How to Win the Nobel Prize in Literature* (2012), serves as a set of guidelines for the would-be-laureate—collating and exploring the numerous complicated and controversial awarding decisions made by the Swedish Academy over its century-long existence. Carter's well-known book asks and answers questions such as: "What do you have do to impress, or be snubbed by, the Nobel Committee?" The book blurb reveals that readers can encounter "the many quirky considerations that hopeful writers must bear in mind". Certain factors are always an added bonus, readers are informed, such as (rather unsurprisingly) "being a [white, European] man" and "having your work translated into Swedish" (n.p.). Offering a selection of anecdotes and quotes from various prize-winning ceremonies, acceptance speeches, and fictional works, he asks a series of questions: why did some writers refuse to accept the prize, and why were others rejected? Is there evidence for political, ideological and geographical bias in the selection? Why was it sometimes awarded to two writers and sometimes not at all? What does it *actually* take to win the Nobel Prize? While some of these questions will be raised, revisited, and resolved through the course of the thesis—and while others will remain unanswered—it is Carter's astute analysis of Jean-Paul Sartre's rejection of the 1964 Nobel Prize in Literature that is worth attending to. He writes that, for the French Marxist Sartre, the "standardization and placement in hierarchical structures (by awarding prizes which recognized achievements of specific values) meant the loss of individual freedom" (33).

Following his refusal to accept the Nobel Prize for Literature, in an interview with Simone de Beauvoir published in *Adieux: A Farewell to Sartre* (1985), the writer said:

> These honours are given by men to other men, and the men who give the honour, whether it's the Légion d'honneur or the Nobel Prize, are not qualified to give it. I can't see who has the right to give Kant or Descartes or Goethe a prize which means now you belong in a classification. We have turned literature into a graduated reality and in that literature you occupy such and such a rank. I reject the possibility of doing that, and therefore I reject all honours. (qtd. in Carter 35-36)

In other words, Sartre was skeptical of who has the right—and therefore power—to bestow prizes, and by extension, prestige and privilege onto others. He rejects the idea of

hierarchies and competitions between writers—and of turning writers into institutions. (And here, Jen Calleja's (2020) protagonist's words come to mind: "I followed them inside the Literature House to take part in, and perhaps *become*, an institution" (16; my emphasis). In his groundbreaking 2005 book-length work on prize cultures, *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value,* James F. English writes that "refusing a prize has always been a delicate and risky manoeuvre"—and Sartre's "exemplary refusal of the Nobel in 1964 was, in his own view, an unfortunate entanglement, which he had tried to ward off in advance by asking the Swedish Academy to remove his name from the list of candidates" (219). The story goes as such, English writes in the chapter "Strategies of Condescension, Styles of Play": had the academy's secretary not misplaced Sartre's letter, which tactfully explained that a lifetime of refusing all such awards and honours (Soviet as well as Western) would be compromised by any special exemption for the Nobel, the entire affair could have been averted altogether. At the time, apparently Sartre was as "low-key and apologetic as possible" about refusing the prize; and yet, his refusal was widely regarded as an "act of formidable symbolic violence—and rightly so," adds English (219), who wishes Sarte had taken a different road instead:

> After all, Sartre could have taken the route of George Bernard Shaw, accepting the prize reluctantly, tactically, keeping none of the substantial monetary award for himself; he might have exploited the high-profile occasion of the acceptance speech to focus attention on the needy parties (perhaps some of the anticolonial movements in Francophone Africa) to whom he would be redistributing the money. By refusing even this much contact with the Nobel, Sartre was attempting to maximize the barriers to exchange, the "trade barriers" of the symbolic economy, between his cultural capital—his specific importance and value as an artist and intellectual—and the capital that the Swedish Academy held out to him. In his view, such an exchange transaction would be so much to his disadvantage, would issue in such a substantial net diminishment of his symbolic wealth (not to mention the gain to the Nobel, which would then be the one prize that even Sartre accepted) that the academy's proffered "gift" was in effect a Trojan horse. (219-220)

In other words, there is both a right way and wrong way of rejecting a prize; or as John Dugdale illustrates above (2016), there are both pros and cons involved in making the choice. The Nobel Prize website[2] states that Jean-Paul Sartre declined the Nobel Prize in Literature, saying "he always refused official distinctions and did not want to be 'institutionalised'" (n.p.). Furthermore, he told the press he rejected the Nobel Prize for fear that it would limit the impact of his writing. He also expressed regrets that circumstances had given his decision "the appearance of a scandal" (n.p.). Elsewhere, the official press release on the prize website[3]—in an address by Anders Österling, then-Member of the Swedish Academy —states that, in a public announcement, printed in *Le Figaro* of October 23, 1964, Sartre's refusal "was not meant to slight the Swedish Academy but was rather based on personal and objective reasons of his own" (n.p.):

> As to personal reasons, Mr. Sartre pointed out that due to his conception of the writer's task he had always declined official honours and thus his present act was not unprecedented. He had similarly refused membership in the Legion of Honour and had not desired to enter the Collège de France, and he would refuse the Lenin Prize if it were offered to him. He stated that a writer's accepting such an honour would be to associate his personal commitments with the awarding institution, and that, above all, a writer should not allow himself to be turned into an institution. (n.p.)
>
> Among his objective reasons, Mr. Sartre listed his belief that interchange between East and West must take place between men and between cultures without the intervention of institutions. Furthermore, since the conferment of past prizes did not, in his opinion, represent equally writers of all ideologies and nations, he felt that his acceptance might be undesirably and unjustly interpreted. (n.p.)

"Awards breeds awards," says Jen Calleja's writer-protagonist in "Literary Quartet" (2020), speaking of how winning the "Prize of Prizes Prize" would surely lead to the writer

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[2] Jean-Paul Sartre – Documentary. NobelPrize.org. Nobel Prize Outreach <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1964/sartre/documentary/>.

[3] Announcement. NobelPrize.org. Nobel Prize Outreach. <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1964/press-release/>.

winning more prizes, followed by more publishing deals (25). "Prizes spawn other prizes," writes James F. English in *The Economy of Prestige*, of the proliferation of prizes on the literary landscape in the late 20th and early 21st century, arguing that there seems to be a prize for anything and everything (18). Sartre's rejection of the Nobel Prize for Literature, perhaps one of the oldest and arguably most famous rejections within literary prize culture, is a testament to such statements. Writing in *The Paris Review* in 2017, in an essay titled, "The Literary Prize for the Refusal of Literary Prizes"—excerpted from *No Time to Spare: Thinking About What Matters* (2017)—Ursula K. Le Guin says she first learned of the Sartre Prize from "NB," "the reliably enjoyable last page of London's *Times Literary Supplement*, signed by J.C". The fame of the award, named after, and for, the writer who refused the Nobel Prize in 1964, is or anyhow should be growing fast, she adds (n.p.). "As J.C. wrote in the November 23, 2012, issue," she writes, "'So great is the status of the Jean-Paul Sartre Prize for Prize Refusal that writers all over Europe and America are turning down awards in the hope of being nominated for a Sartre'. He adds with modest pride, 'The Sartre Prize itself has never been refused.'" (qtd. in Le Guin, n.p.). Stating Sartre's reasons for refusing the Prize, which have been mentioned above, she further writes: "He said, "It isn't the same thing if I sign Jean-Paul Sartre or if I sign Jean-Paul Sartre, Nobel Prize winner. A writer must refuse to let himself be turned into an institution." He was, of course, already an institution, but he valued his personal autonomy" (n.p.). She then goes on to write about the time her own novelette, *The Diary of the Rose,* was awarded the Nebula Award by the Science Fiction Writers of America—which she had declined, "feeling it would be shameless to accept an award for a story about political intolerance from a group that had just displayed political intolerance". (Ironically enough, her award went to the runner-up, Isaac Asimov, "the old chieftain of the Cold Warriors," she laments) (n.p.).

Ursula K. Le Guin's thoughts on prizedom as a marketing ploy and as a political gimmick—which she expresses and elaborates on in the same essay—merit quoting at some length here:

> What relates my small refusal to Sartre's big one is the sense that to accept an award from an institution is to be co-opted by, embodied as, the institution. Sartre refused this on general principle, while I acted in specific protest. But I do have sympathy for

> his distrust of allowing himself to be identified as something other than himself. He felt that the huge label SUCCESS that the Nobel sticks on an author's forehead would, as it were, hide his face. His becoming a "Nobelist" would adulterate his authority as Sartre. (n.p.)
>
> Which is, of course, precisely what the commercial machinery of best-sellerdom and prizedom wants: the name as product. The guaranteed imprint of salable success. Nobel Laureate So-and-So. Best-selling author Thus-and-Such. Thirty weeks on the *New York Times* best-seller list Whozit. Jane D. Wonthepulitzer … John Q. MacArthur-genius … (n.p.)
>
> It isn't what the people who established the awards want them to do or to mean, but it's how they're used. As a way to honor a writer, an award has genuine value, but the use of prizes as a marketing ploy by corporate capitalism, and sometimes as a political gimmick by the awarders, has compromised their value. And the more prestigious and valued the prize, the more compromised it is. (n.p.)

For Le Guin, the Nobel Prize for Literature—albeit a lifetime achievement prize—ironically functions as an effacement of the writer and their work; in other words, prizes highlight the commodification of writers and the business of books to the extent that they obfuscate what matters the most: the writer and the work itself. As a result, the writer's prize-winning reputation precedes them on the literary landscape—and as James F. English (2005) writes, it is "the prize, above all else, that defines the artist" (21). Jen Calleja similarly satirises this idea in her aforementioned short story, "Literary Quartet" (2020), when she writes: "For the past ten years I'd wanted it in the opening lines of my biography—and for it to be the reason I didn't *need* an introduction" (16; emphasis mine). Moving on from the writer as an individual to the writing prize as an institution—which then turns the writer into an institution itself—Le Guin thus warns of the consequences and implications of prizes on the larger landscape, including those beyond the control of prize administrators themselves. For her, the inner workings and influence of awards—even their self-perception—matters less than their reception. What is clear, though, as Le Guin argues, is that "the more prestigious and valued the prize, the more compromised it is"—thus being more open to critique and controversy

(n.p.). One of the world's most prestigious—and therefore arguably also most "compromised"—prizes, the Nobel Prize is by no means the only prize writers have rejected time and again. Less than a decade later, John Berger would follow in Jean Paul Sartre's footsteps—on the road not taken—and protest against the Booker Prize, albeit for altogether different reasons. Therefore, the right kind of refusals matter as much as the wrong kind, and the smaller refusals matter as much as the bigger ones.

It is now public knowledge that the Booker Prize for Fiction, established in 1969, was off to a rocky start; that is, from its earliest days, it reportedly faced an existential crisis—and its administrators apparently considered and contemplated closing shop entirely. "But what happened instead," as James F. English notes (2005), "is that the Booker began, in 1971, to deliver a series of annual scandals. The best known of these—the one that gets mentioned in every capsule history of the prize—is that of John Berger's rude acceptance speech in 1972," he writes (203):

> Awarded the prize for *G.*, his novel about French migrant workers (which also won the James Tait Black and the Guardian Fiction Prize), Berger stood before the assembled Booker executives in the Café Royal on Regent Street, denounced their corporation as a colonialist enterprise built on the backs of black plantation workers in Guyana, and declared that half his prize money would be donated to the London branch of the Black Panthers. The specific political content of this incident is certainly of interest: although there were no immigrant or non-English figures involved, and the very category of "post-colonial fiction" had not yet emerged, it was perhaps at this moment that one could first glimpse the Booker's ultimately quite powerful institutional and ideological role in the struggle to define a postcolonial literature subject to domination (and commercial exploitation) by the London metropole. (English 203)

The history of colonial domination and exploitation associated with the Booker Prize, which is what prompted the 1972 winning author John Berger to protest against Booker McConnell's involvement in the Caribbean by donating half of his prize money to the British Black Panther Movement, will be further unpacked and explored in the following chapter, which

focuses on two major literary prizes—the Nobel Prize for Literature and the Booker Prize—and its most memorable, indeed scandalous, moments. For the time being, though, it is worth dwelling on some critical reactions and responses to the John Berger scandal. First, Sandra Ponzanesi (2011), writing about publishing, prizes and postcolonial literary production, sees the scandal as among the "many other controversies of an ethnic or postcolonial nature" that the Booker Prize has been surrounded by over the years (1138). Doseline Kiguru (2016), whose work focuses more specifically on African literary prizes—the Caine Prize for African Writing and Commonwealth Writers' Prize among these—states that "[John] Berger argued not only against the Booker's colonial history but also against the award industry's emphasis on winners and losers" (253). She elaborates: "In "Speech on Accepting the Booker Prize for Fiction at the Café Royal in London on 23 November 1972", he declared his discontentment with the award industry saying: "The competitiveness of prizes I find distasteful. And in the case of this prize the publication of the shortlist, the deliberately publicised suspense, the speculation of the writers concerned as though they were horses, the whole emphasis on winners and losers is false and out of place in the context of literature" (qtd. in Kiguru 168-169). In Berger's view, the Booker Prize was thus compromised for more than one reason—its colonial and nefarious connections, and its inherent competitive nature—and the writer arguably had both personal and political cause to critique it as a gatekeeping, prizing institution.

Elsewhere in the world of literary prizes, when the South African writer Ishtiyaq Shukri requested that his work be removed for consideration from the inaugural FT/Oppenheimer Funds "Emerging Voices Award," he explained his objection by pointing out that the award is "just for people from poor countries," as Aaron Bady notes in an essay for *LitHub* (2016; n.p.). Indeed, as Bady writes, the award defines "emerging" in very concrete terms—only artists from "emergent market countries" are eligible, which the prize organisers take to be "defined by the World Bank Atlas Method (i.e. those with a GNI per capita of less than $12,746)" (n.p.). "This cut-off is so starkly arbitrary as to be more than a little bit silly," he adds, of the prize which divides the world into three regions of underdevelopment—Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa and the Middle East, and Asia-Pacific. He then

quotes Shukri's own statement of "thanks, but no thanks" directed at the prize—and it is worth reproducing here (n.p.):

> I oppose such ghettoised categories because, however euphemistic the terminology and well-meaning the intentions, they overlook the reality that southern countries are already home to artistic brilliance of the best kind—despite their GNI. They simplify a complex world, so that excellence in "developing countries" is rendered as invisible, as rare, and as exceptional as poverty and human rights abuses in supposedly "developed" ones. To contrive "special" categories for artists in poorer countries, and to use their GNI to justify such tokenism is not praise, but diminishment. Some will think me sensitive. I am. Consider the meaning of emergent: fledgling, embryonic, infant, in the early stages of development. Is the implication that in creative terms we are children? (qtd. in Bady 2016; n.p.)

This sense of contrived "ghettoised categories" for literature calls to mind Salman Rushdie's provocative proclamation in *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism* (1981–1991) that "Commonwealth literature does not exist" (63). As Stephen M. Levin (2014) writes, here Rushdie "reflects on the incongruity between the writers held to exemplify Commonwealth writing and the inclination these same writers to 'deny vehemently that they belong to [the Commonwealth]'" (Rushdie 61; qtd. in Levin 489). "In this reflection," he adds, "Rushdie articulates two main worries: first, that the rubric of the Commonwealth imposes a false sense of continuity among writers whose differences outweigh their similarities; and second, that it too frequently imagines individual writers as hypostatizing their respective national traditions, thereby conjuring 'the bogy of Authenticity'" (Rushdie 67, qtd. in Levin 489) Thus, Rushdie argues that this sort of categorisation of literature serves the sole purpose of presenting literatures outside of Britain as impoverished imitations—the Other—measured against the standard (read: better) literature of Britain. Rushdie writes that the formation of a category such as "Commonwealth literature" led to the creation of a false category—one that could and would lead to myopic and misleading understandings of the literary works themselves. In other words, for him, the category of Commonwealth literature had created a ghetto of the literature of all former colonies and it was:

> [n]ot only was it a ghetto, but it was actually an exclusive ghetto. And the effect of creating such a ghetto was, is, to change the meaning of the far broader term 'English literature'—which I'd always taken to mean simply the literature of the English language—into something far narrower, something topographical, nationalistic, possibly even racially segregationist. (63)

As it turns out, a decade later, the Indian writer Amitav Ghosh would decline the Commonwealth Writers' Prize: Best Book Award (Eurasian Region) in 2001 for his novel, *The Glass Palace* (2000). In a letter to *The Times of India*, he shares that his nominated novel was only considered for the award "partly because it was written in English and partly because I happen to belong to a region that was once conquered and ruled by imperial Britain. Of the many reasons why a book's merits may be recognized, these seem to be the least persuasive" (qtd. in Kiguru 2016b,169). Like Rushdie, Ghosh too objected to the category of "Commonwealth Literature'—and for a similar set of reasons—as is evident from his open letter to the prize administrators, which Sandra Ponzanesi (2011) quotes from at-length:

> As a grouping of nations collected from the remains of the British Empire, the Commonwealth serves as an umbrella forum in global politics. As a literary or cultural grouping however, it seems to me that 'the Commonwealth' can only be a misnomer so long as it excludes the many languages that sustain the cultural and literary lives of these countries (it is surely inconceivable, for example, that athletes would have to be fluent in English in order to qualify for the Commonwealth Games).
>
> […]
>
> The issue of how the past is to be remembered lies at the heart of *The Glass Palace* and I feel that I would be betraying the spirit of my book if I were to allow it to be incorporated within that particular memorialization of Empire that passes under the rubric of 'the Commonwealth'. I therefore ask that I be permitted to withdraw *The Glass Palace* from your competition.
>
> […]

> My objections to the term 'Commonwealth Literature' are mine alone, and I trust you will understand that I could hardly expect to sustain them if I allowed one of my books to gain an eponymous prize. (qtd. in Ponzanesi 1147)

As fate would have it, this was not to be Ghosh's only encounter with a literary prize embroiled in the history of empire. He was shortlisted in 2008 for the then-Man Booker Prize for his novel *Sea of Poppies,* an institution whose colonial connections have been explored earlier through the John Berger scandal. That year, the prize ultimately went to another Indian writer, Aravind Adiga for *The White Tiger,* but as Gaiutra Bahadur writes in "'Revenge of the colonized?'" (2009), were the *Sea of Poppies* to win—after all, Ghosh had not opposed the Booker nomination—it would have been a bit of a cruel, ironical joke: "The novel tells the story of 'coolies' forced to leave India to cut cane on plantations much like the ones owned by the Bookers. Josiah Booker I, the Liverpool merchant who struck out to Demerara in 1815, not only helped provide Ghosh with a backdrop for his historical epic through his demand for near-slave labour, but posthumously provided the Kolkata-born writer with a £2,500 check for representing those near-slave labourers in prose" (qtd. in Ponzanesi 2011, 1147). This is not an isolated incident; writers often reject prizes on ethical grounds, and through a twisted act of fate, their prize is sometimes then bestowed upon another writer—one who just happens to be as, if not more, politically problematic than the prizing institution itself. For instance, when Ursula K. Le Guin rejected the Nebula Award by the Science Fiction Writers of America as mentioned earlier in this chapter, she said, "with the perfect irony that awaits anybody who strikes a noble pose on high moral ground—my award went to the runner-up: Isaac Asimov, the old chieftain of the Cold Warriors" (2017). In the case of Amitav Ghosh and Ursula K. Le Guin, this was the unintended consequence of taking a stand against the (bad) politics of literary prize institutions—one which backfired in one way or another.

While writers have rejected big—arguably global and international—literary prizes such as the Nobel Prize for Literature and the Booker Prize for Fiction for personal or political reasons—from the notion of a writer's independence and not wishing to be turned into an institution to a prize's problematic politics and colonial connections—Ishtiyaq Shukri's and Amitav Ghosh's comments, on the FT/OppenheimerFunds "Emerging Voices Award" and the Commonwealth Writers' Prize respectively, pinpoint the ghettoisation and commer-

cialisation of literatures particularly from "emerging" countries or Commonwealth countries by institutions who tend to prize, and therefore legitimise, literatures based on where in the world their writers come from. Echoes of Jean Paul Sartre's half-a-century-old complaint, about the Nobel Prize's history of not "representing equally writers of all ideologies and nations" (nobelprize.org), can be heard in Shukri's and Ghosh's refusals too. Literary prizes, whether big or small, pit writers against other writers in what is rarely, if ever, a level-playing field. And as this study will aim to show, inequality, a false sense of hierarchy, and interior motives often lie at the heart of the inner workings and impact of literary prizes. To paraphrase George Orwell, prizes are proof that some writers are more equal than other writers. While one can make the case that all awards are competitions, and therefore, conceptually celebrate inequalities, hierarchies and subjective value judgements—only one winner can emerge—certain prizes, such as the FT/Oppenheimer Funds "Emerging Voices Award", the Commonwealth Writers' Prize, and the Caine Prize for African Writing, to name but a few —which reward (read: ghettoise) literatures from certain countries—further skew the scale in favour of the prizing institution, which in most cases are born and based in the West. In "Prizing Otherness: A short history of the Booker"—from his 2001 book, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*—Graham Huggan observes that the Booker's history of exploitation and its "eager[ness] to downplay its nineteenth-century colonial past" demonstrates "a history in contradiction with its current reputation as a postcolonial literary patron" (106). In this regard, the Booker Prize's recognition and rewarding of literatures from Commonwealth countries—or the role and function of the Commonwealth Writers' Prize and the Caine Prize for African Writing, which are both British prizes—for example, gives the appearance of "a colonial authority presiding over postcolonial texts," as Gillian Roberts writes in *Prizing Literature: The Celebration and Circulation of National Culture,* her 2011 study focussing on Canadian literary prizes (40). What's more, not all prizes are created equal either. While some are far too ambitious in size and scope—and often fall short of their claims and aims —others are myopic and problematic in their tendency to group, ghettoise and commercialise literatures from certain countries or cultures. Aside from their role as tastemakers, prizes function as gatekeepers, often ostracising writers of colour, queer writers, and disabled writers—and have variously been accused of gender bias (Griffith 2015), ageism (Walsh 2017), literary snobbery—in terms of rewarding certain genres of writing over others (Self

2011), being stacked in favour of big publishers (Marsden 2015; Jordison 2019), and other stereotypes.

And yet, despite the ways in which prizes pit writers against one another and inadvertently or consciously turn individuals into institutions, and despite writers' rejections of literary prizes and their refusal to participate in further perpetuating such systems of literary power, prizes matter. Prize matter, and as Jen Calleja's writer-protagonist says in the short story, "Literary Quartet" (2020): even if winning a prize wouldn't mean much to her, the reality is that she "can't stop it meaning something to everyone else" (30). Meanwhile, in stark contrast, in Simon Brett's 1989 novel, *The Booker Book*—about a novelist on the lookout for literary recognition—news of a new literary prize, to be established in 1969 (akin the Booker Prize), is not met with enthusiasm from London's literati. Geraldine Byers, the novel's protagonist—a minor novelist—is the only one who cares—and who aims to win the prestigious prize with her second literary offering to the world. As Brett writes, "Geraldine Byers now knew her literary destiny; she *would* win the Booker Prize" (qtd. in Auguscik 2017, 81; my emphasis). And thus, for all the rejections and refusals, there are also the wholehearted acceptances, embraces, and desires—and prizes matter, perhaps to some writers more than others.

Prizes Matter: On the Matter of Prizes

What makes a prize better than its peers and counterparts, what makes it the most significant and the most relevant? Is it the pots of prize money, or the prestige, visibility and celebrity? How does one measure its successes versus its scandals (good or bad)? Can prizes be seen as serving a larger and more ethical, less self-lucrative, purpose? What tools are needed in order to fathom, and re-frame, the current perils of prize cultures—amidst the pressures Anglo-American publishing markets and major prizes in the field exert on writers, and their work, and also on smaller, nascent prizes? Are literary prizes such as the Nobel Prize for Literature, the Booker Prize for Fiction, and the Caine Prize for African Writing—three major prizes born and based in Europe—in their heyday, or is it the end of an era? What do prizes say about the larger 20th and 21st century reading cultures, which has inevitably affected the way books—but also prizes themselves—are consumed, marketed, analysed and valued? Why is seemingly everyone in the publishing industry—including readers,

writers, publishers, critics, booksellers—continuously discussing, debating, and arguably obsessing over literary prizes? And more significantly, what are they all saying?

Writing in 2005, in *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards and the Circulation of Cultural Value*—the first and perhaps the finest book-length assessment of cultural awards at-large so far—James F. English says that his aim in the volume as a whole "is not to decide whether cultural prizes are a treasure or an embarrassment, whether they are conferred upon deserving or undeserving artists and works, whether they serve to elevate or to degrade the people's taste and the artist's calling" (26). Instead, he writes, it is to:

> begin an analysis of the whole system of symbolic give and take, of coercion and negotiation, competition and alliance, mutual disdain and mutual esteem, into which prizes are extended, and which encompasses not just the selection processes and honorific ceremonies, but many less central practices, and in particular the surrounding journalistic discourse—all the hype and antihype itself. (26)

While this thesis is interested in doing the things James F. English does—focussing on the surrounding journalistic discourse; unpacking the hype and anti-hype around major literary awards—it is also interested in doing some of the things he doesn't. Although the thesis does not place moral judgement on the existence of prizes, it tracks them as they evolve over a quarter, a half, and a whole century—as with the Caine Prize for African Writing, the Booker Prize for Fiction, and the Nobel Prize for Literature, respectively—thus focusing on pivotal moments in literary prize history and the potential perils of these big moments, big scandals, and big rule changes for the prizes themselves. It is interested not so much in whether or not we need prizes, or, indeed, whether or not they are good or bad for writers and books, but in questions of how much value has been afforded to them, in what ways they have canonised and legitimised certain literatures and at what cost, and what their respective roles in the prize hierarchy may mean for the institution of literary prizes as a whole. Claire Squires (2013) says it best when she writes that prizes "function as shorthand for literary merit" (although she is quick to add that "this shorthand is frequently questioned and contested") (291). Therefore, it is, in fact, unproductive to talk about prizes in cold, hard binaries, to argue whether prizes are good or bad, when we know they can be both: good *and*

bad. As shown earlier, prizes can launch writers' careers, afford writers the time and funds to continue to write, increase their prestige within the literary marketplace and their book sales —and also afford them visibility and celebrity status. But prizes can also pit writers against writers—where only one is *the* winner—be exclusionary in terms of eligibility, and turn individuals into institutions. As James F. English (2005) writes of the good *and* bad of literary prize cultures:

> On the one hand, cultural prizes are said to reward excellence; to bring publicity to "serious" or "quality" art (thereby encouraging the presumably philistine public to consume higher-grade cultural products); to assist struggling or little-known artists (thus providing a patron- age system for the post-patronage era); and to create a forum for displays of pride, solidarity, and celebration on the part of various cultural communities. On the other hand, it is said that they systematically neglect excellence and reward mediocrity; turn a serious artistic calling into a degrading horse race or marketing gimmick; focus unneeded attention on artists whose reputations and professional livelihoods are already solidly established; and provide a closed, elitist forum where cultural insiders engage in influence peddling and mutual back-scratching. (25)

But what if the arguably biggest, if not oldest, literary prizes in the world—the Booker Prize for Fiction and the Nobel Prize for Literature—and, in the world of African literatures, the Caine Prize for African Writing—are, in some, and slowly increasing ways, no longer the most prestigious prizes? The retrospectively realised prompt for the thesis is the 50th anniversary of the Booker Prize in 2018, and the 20th anniversary of the Caine Prize for African Writing in 2019. The thesis considers these two milestone moments alongside arguably the two biggest moments in literary prize history in perhaps all time: what was considered as the Nobel Prize for Literature's biggest-scandal-ever in 2018 and the Booker Prize for Fiction's biggest-rule-change-ever in 2014. The Booker Prize celebrated its 50th anniversary recently, and, while the Caine Prize for African Writing—with just over twenty years under it belt—is not as old, it is among the longest-running and longest-standing prizes for African writing in English. By virtue of it being referred to as Africa's equivalent of the Booker Prize for Fiction—although, it is, for all intents and purposes, a British prize— and widely considered as the "literary rite of passage" for African writers, it has arguably also

come of age after two decades. Will what has been covered as the biggest rule change ever in the Booker Prize's history change the identity of the prize forevermore? Can the Caine Prize for African Writing, which is based in England, continue to, in good conscience, remain Africa's top prize? Will the Nobel Prize for Literature, established in 1901, recover from its most recent scandal—or, indeed, from its Eurocentric leanings? My aim is to set the scene for the politics, ethics, and aesthetics of literary prizes—and to explore and expose the politics inherent to the mechanics of such institutions. The long-term sustainability, indeed the longevity, of these three prizes—and mainly the Caine Prize for African Writing, which is comparatively 'young' at two-decades-old—is under scrutiny here. It is clear—from ubiquitous critiques by prize theorists, journalists, and winning writers themselves—that the original models for, and missions of, these prizes, have, in some ways, become outdated. In the face of years of controversy and criticism, and with the threat of new and nascent—and arguably more politically and ethically sound—prizes each year, the landscape is more saturated than ever before: there's a prize for *everything*, but not necessarily for everyone. In this context, the older generation of prizes must address its own place within the growing prize hierarchy. English writes about this "proliferation of prizes" (17)—and how the burden of this falls on the most firmly established:

> It is in fact completely wrong to suggest that the field must by now be crowded with redundant awards to the point of their mutual suffocation. On the contrary, each new prize that fills a gap or void in the system of awards defines at the same time a lack that will justify and indeed *produce* another prize. And while the tendency for prizes to become more alike over time does impose a burden of redundancy, it is a burden that for the most part falls only on the most firmly established—those whose identities within the field are least fragile. For newcomers this moderating tendency is a boon, since it assures that the most obvious or visible positions of "purity," "integrity," "independence," and so forth are rarely occupied for long and are continually reopening in accordance with the temporality of generational succession. (67; emphasis in original)

Therefore, while there has been a proliferation of prizes, this thesis argues that there has simultaneously also been a dilution of identities and agendas of existing major prizes

such as the Nobel Prize for Literature, the Booker Prize for Fiction, and the Caine Prize for African Writing. Their cosmetic corrective measures—often more focussed on what is on trend and often merely reactive to the media—are no longer the adequate means of makeover to get them from one prize year to the next. Increasingly, and as the following chapters will show, their changes seem short-term, short-sighted, and selfish; they often don't translate into concrete action or change. New prizes are making interventions in the literary landscape every year—writing counter-narratives and sometimes serving as corrective or rival prizes. In the face of this pressure, old prizes must take charge of their own destinies—or else they risk becoming irrelevant and redundant and risk their place on a literary map where new platforms of validation and consecration are discovered and appointed every year.

*

"Despite literary awards playing a central role in UK literary and publishing culture for the best part of a century, significant cultural discourse considering their influence and effect upon literature has only really emerged in the latter half of twentieth century," writes Stevie Marsden, in *Prizing Scottish Literature: A Cultural History of the Saltire Society Literary Awards* (2021, 2). In the section on existing scholarship on literary prize cultures, she opens with Richard Todd's *Consuming Fictions: The Booker Prize and Fiction in Britain Today* (1996), which, as she notes, was one of the first book-length studies of prizes. Since, however, there have been numerous book-length assessments and academic articles about the Booker Prize, either exclusively or tangentially—including capsule histories published to mark a milestone and those that zoom in on a specific time period within the prize's history. As Stephen M. Levin writes in "Is There a Booker Aesthetic? Iterations of the Global Novel" (2014), "the history of the Booker Prize is well-rehearsed terrain" (479). Among these are Graham Huggan's *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (2001), Luke Strongman's *The Booker Prize and the Legacy of Empire* (2002)—which, as the title suggests, focuses on its colonial connections and residues—and, more recently, Anna Auguscik's *Prizing Debate: The Fourth Decade of the Booker Prize and the Contemporary Novel in the UK* (2017), which marks forty years of the Booker. Sharon Norris (2006) and Kara Lee Donnelly (2015), Claire Squires (2004, 2013), and Sandra Ponzanesi (2011, 2014), among others, have also written widely about the Booker Prize—and wider

literary prize and postcolonial cultures—and its impact on the literary landscape at-large. Then, there also a handful of comparative studies between the Booker and the Prix Goncourt, including Marie-Françoise Cachin and Sylvie Ducas's 2003 article, "The Goncourt and the Booker: A tale of two prizes" and Susan Pickford's article, "The Booker and the Prix Goncourt: A case study of award-winning novels in translation", which makes a similar comparison (2011). Meanwhile, Renee Winegarten's "The Nobel Prize for Literature" (1994), Pascale Casanova's *The Republic of Letters* (2007), and David Carter's book, *How to Win the Nobel Prize in Literature* (2012) all turn their focus on the Nobel Prize for Literature. Furthermore, and further afield, while *Prizing Literature: The Celebration and Circulation of National Culture* by Gillian Roberts (2011) is about the Canadian literary award industry, Edward Mack's *Manufacturing Modern Japanese Literature* (2010) hones in on the Akutagawa Prize. Beth Driscoll's work (2013, 2014) points its compass towards Australian literary and prize cultures, and as mentioned earlier, Stevie Marsden's *Prizing Scottish Literature: Cultural History of the Saltire Society Literary Awards* (2021) is a full-length study of "Scottishness" and literary prizes. Several articles have also been written about the Caine Prize for African Writing over its twenty-year history. While Doseline Kiguru's work, "Prizing African Literature: Awards and Cultural Value" (2016) is central to this discussion, Dubrota Pucherová's article, "A Continent Learns to Tell its Story at Last": Notes on the Caine Prize" (2012), remains one of the strongest and longest-standing critiques of the Caine Prize. Other critics have also written about the Prize's ten-year anniversary, marking this moment ("Reflections on the Tenth Anniversary of the Caine Prize for African Writing" by Lucienne Loh, 2011); on the genre of short stories and the Caine Prize for African Writing ("(Un)solving global challenges: African short stories, literary awards and the question of audience" by Shirin Edwin, 2016); and on judging the prize (including, most notably, "The Caine Prize and the Impossibility of 'New' African Writing" by Samantha Pinto, 2013). Alongside these articles and books—focusing either on prize cultures in general, or those that are studies on specific prizes, there are other works too, which tangentially, indirectly, or briefly deal with questions of canonicity, authenticity, prizing, and publishing more broadly—and these will also serve as theoretical, critical and creative touch-points throughout the course of this thesis.

*

While the thesis is concerned with wrestling with 'African literature' as a commercial category and continental impulse—that is, the way in which 'African literature' is created, consumed, and circulated—and the politics, ethics, and aesthetics of awarding 'Africa', it is also centred around how prizes position, and indeed *prize*, writers within the global marketplace. The ways in which leading literary prizes such as the Nobel Prize for Literature and the Booker Prize for Fiction, and, in particular, the leading prize for African literature—the Caine Prize for African Writing, or the "African Booker"—sometimes supersede, or fall short of, their remits; the ways in which they are myopic, misleading and manipulative—and market writers from certain regions or countries of the world—that is, the representational politics at play; and the ways in which their mission statements and their actions don't always align are the intersecting and interrelated points of discussion and debate in setting the scene for the politics, ethics, and aesthetics of contemporary literary prize cultures discussed here. The thesis opens with a survey of literary prize history and situates the sphere of prizes within the literary landscape before turns its focus on questions around awarding contemporary African writing in English—moving deliberately from the subtitle to the main title of the thesis. While this structural design seemingly moves from global to particular matters in terms of prizes, questions around awarding 'Africa' and questions about the state of contemporary African writing are the pervading and persistent focus of the thesis, which in turn attempts to collapse these binaries: of the global and the particular, of European and African prizes, of centre and periphery. Beyond this, the structural approach also highlights my original contributions to larger and wider debates around prize cultures. Because of the way things are, that is, the existence of global networks and connections, what will become evident throughout the course of the thesis is that it's not just a matter of big, old, European prizes filtering into the Caine Prize for African Writing unidirectionally; things are not as derivative or prescriptive. In fact, the thesis seeks to show how the Caine Prize for African Writing—or, indeed, prizes of varying sizes and statures, and from various locations—can inform and cause interventions within the debate around 'bigger' prizes.

Chapter One focuses on the Nobel Prize for Literature and the Booker Prize for Fiction and their biggest moments in literary prize history—namely the "biggest scandal ever" to plague the Nobel Prize (when it was cancelled for the first time since the Second World War in 2018) and the "biggest rule change ever" in the Booker Prize's history, which was

shortly before its 50th anniversary, when the prize was opened up to American writers and to all English-language works of fiction from 2014 onwards. It also looks back to two vital "firsts" and two wins in both prizes' histories: when Wole Soyinka became the first African writer to win the Nobel Prize in 1986 and when Bernardine Evaristo became the first black woman to win the Booker Prize in its 50-year-long history, in 2019. Through these key moments and, arguably, key wins, the chapter—and larger project—teases out tensions between the supposed aims and subsequent actions of these prizes, particularly through the lenses of geography and eligibility. In other words, it reveals and exposes discrepancies between their operations and optics and their inner workings and ethics. From the outside, these two prizes in particular boast a commitment to the 'global'—and to having an expansive, all-encompassing reach and rules of eligibility. Upon closer inspection, however, their scope is much narrower—instead limited and mapped by national boundaries and ethnic identities. Showcasing themselves as prizing global and international literatures and writers, these prizes remain resolutely and largely Anglo-centric and Eurocentric. This chapter also lays the foundation for looking at prizes in a comparative—but not derivative—manner, by pitting prizes against prizes—as prizes themselves pit writers against writers—in order to understand the shifting relationships and dynamics between prizes big and small, old and new. In a landscape proliferating with prizes, what comes to light is how prizes react to the existence of other prizes in the field, and re-make and re-model themselves (or, more often than not, don't) according to larger discourses and practices around literary prize cultures. Pivotal moments in these two prizes' histories and manifestations of the prizes' inherent myopia—and, specifically, the critical discourse around Wole Soyinka's 1986 Nobel Prize win—serve as a segue and critical springboard into Chapter Two, which sets the scene for 'Africa': staging the several stereotypes of storytelling about the continent and elucidating questions about canonicity, authenticity, and ideas around 'Africannness'.

Some of the questions this chapter asks include, but are not limited to: Who is an 'African' writer? What is 'African literature'? Why does 'African literature'—the commercial category and the continental impulse—exist, and at what cost? Can the burden and expectation of representation African writers across the world face ever be evaded? That is, why are African literary texts always already read as *more than* mere texts? And what of the particular expectations placed upon African writers in relation to representation—being made spokes-

persons for their cultures and countries of origin, or, indeed, the African continent at-large, beyond their work? This chapter analyses African literature as a commodity, container, and concept and addresses the complex positionality of writers navigating and publishing within the global literary marketplace. It uses Chinua Achebe's canonical text, *Things Fall Apart*, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's life and work as highly visible markers through which 'African literature' has come to be framed and represented, especially in the global North—in western media and academia—and draws out the similarities and digressions between their careers and the ways in which they have been celebrated. It offers 'Afropolitanism' as a useful and flexible framework for (re)thinking questions of identity and authenticity. In doing so, it reveals how texts and paratexts, particularly in the context of African writing and writers, rub up against each other in more and more murky and blurry ways. Through this comparative study, it asks: moving forward, whose writing will become part of the African literature canon? Indeed, who will be left out through such essentially exclusionary processes of publishing—and prizing—contemporary literature? What are the consequences and dangers of such reductive ways of reading writing from the continent?

In the context of such critical debates around 'African literature', Chapter Three then focuses on the Caine Prize for African Writing—or the "African Booker"—which turned twenty in 2019. Following suit from Doseline Kiguru's (2016) significant critical contribution to the field of African literary prizes, it charts the Caine Prize for African Writing's inception and inner workings (including its colonial connections—and how it has inherited the Booker Prize's legacy and geography); its impact and influence on the field of African literature globally; the various critiques and controversies it has faced, including those that reproduce stereotypical ways of storytelling; and, finally, offers circumventions, digressions, and new directions for future prize administrators and writers. The chapter interrogates the Caine Prize for African Writing's curious positioning as a prizing institution for African writing in English that was born in, and is based in, the UK—and is therefore tainted with the residues of colonial violence and visions—and simultaneously undermines its two-decade-long significance and status within the field of prizes for African writing. It also traces the limitations of a prize that theoretically claims to represent—and reward writing from—the African continent as a whole, but, in practice and truth, has been continually and increasingly biased and tilted towards prizing limitedly. Taking its cues from sources that are both academic and

journalistic, and foregrounding and synthesising the voices of writers and individuals who have been associated with the prize, this section seeks to integrate commentary around the prize in innovative and inclusive ways. Thus, taken together, Chapter Two and Chapter Three illuminate the ways in which both Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and the Caine Prize for African Writing, two touchstones within the field of African literature, inadvertently cause tensions for and put pressures on 'African literature' as a concept and category—even as they are arguably committed to doing otherwise: to working *against* such reductive readings. Once again, text and paratext, theory and praxis, cause friction—and sparks.

Raising questions about 21st century reading and prizing cultures and canon formation in the context of the commercial category and continental impulse, 'African literature'—and analysing and synthesising existing academic scholarship on literary prizes with conversations taking place in digital spaces such as on social media, blogs, and in small magazines—the thesis offers new pathways for tracking and tracing, discussing and debating, archiving and critiquing, exploring and exposing the politics of major literary prizes. Beyond an analysis and synthesis of the current debates and discourses in these spaces, and using my creative-critical position as an academic and literary critic, it weaves together conversations taking place in both spaces—academia and the media—with the mindset that the ways in which we talk about prize cultures in the 21st century is changing. As Beth Driscoll writes in "Twitter, Literary Prizes and the Circulation of Capital" (2013): "Among the rapid changes that characterise publishing in the twenty-first century, a number of phenomena are increasingly influential. Two of these are literary prizes and social media, both of which draw together participants from multiple areas of literary culture. Their intersection depicts with unusual clarity some of the dynamics of the contemporary literary field"—and while the conversations and reactions on social media may seem "ephemeral and perhaps superficial", they, in fact, perform important work and "build networks of recognition and influence among agents in the literary field" (103). That is, the most refreshing and radical conversations around these topics and issues are increasingly occurring in digital spaces—and cannot be ignored in critical conversations around prize cultures. It is also the three prizes'—specifically the Caine Prize for African Writing—digital footprints—that is, their social media presence and websites—ways of self-archiving and self-interrogating, but also curating a certain persona and position within reading and prizing discourse that offer new

pathways of reading these prizes' own framework and function within the larger literary landscape.

Furthermore, in setting the scene for the politics, ethics, and aesthetics of literary prizes and African literatures' place within the landscape, this thesis argues that anniversaries and missed opportunities, scandals and rule changes in these prizes' recent histories can offer room for reflection, reconsideration, remodelling and recovery—and does so with the belief that these major moments in the trio of prizes' histories will inevitability bear consequence on their personalities and trajectories, sustainability and longevity for years to come—and be beneficial for future prize researchers, critics, and archivists. Anniversaries are vital, pivotal moments for prizes. They serve as telling moments and offer time to take stock of the prize's past and present life—and its future moving forward. Will the Booker Prize last to make it to a century? Will the Caine Prize for African Writing make it to a half century—or will it step aside for other Africa-born and -based prizes? Whether or not they will, it is worth asking: how can prestigious prizes continue to remain relevant—and imagine new manifestos, new futures, and, indeed, new ways of prizing literatures?

Chapter One

Big Prizes, Bigger Moments

Anniversaries, Missed Opportunities, and Scandals

"I tell my mother
I've won the Nobel Prize

Again? she says. Which
discipline this time?

It's a little game
we play; I pretend

I'm somebody, she
pretends, she isn't dead."

— Andrea Cohen, "The Committee Weighs In"

"Wuk, nuttin bu wuk

Maan noon an night nuttin bu wuk

Booker own me patacake

Booker own me pickni.

Pain, nuttin bu pain

Waan million tous'ne acre cane."

—David Dabydeen, "Song of the Creole Gang Women"

With regards to literary prizes, the year 2018 was record-breaking like none other—or certainly like none in recent literary prize history. As James F. English writes (2005), the Nobel Prize's position—established in 1901, it is "perhaps the oldest prize that strikes us as fully contemporary"—is held by the "single-winner axiom underlying the entire prize economy"; it "assures that the dominance of the Nobel is in no way diminished" (28; 62). But, that year, the Nobel Prize in Literature was cancelled for the first time since the Second World War—or, more specifically, since 1949, "when the academy decided that no nominee met its criteria," as *The New Yorker*'s Alexandra Schwartz reports (2018)—amid sexual assault allegations (n.p.). "Riven by infighting and resignations" following these allegations of sexual misconduct, alongside those of "financial malpractice and repeated leaks", the Swedish Academy, which awards the prize, considered it in its best interests to postpone the prize proceedings that year, add Henley and Flood in *The Guardian (*2018, n.p.). The Swedish Academy announced that no prize for literature would be awarded in the October of 2018 and that two laureates would be named the following year instead—a decision Claire Armitstead also describes in *The Guardian* as the Nobel's "scramble to keep its dignity" and a (likely futile) attempt to restore its credibility (2018, n.p.). "We find it necessary to commit time to recovering public confidence… before the next laureate can be announced," its interim permanent secretary at the time, Anders Olsson says in a statement (Quoted in Henly and Flood 2018). "This is out of respect for previous and future literature laureates, the Nobel Foundation and the general public," he adds (n.p.). While it is not unusual or unprecedented for the award to skip a year, hiatuses have usually been due to wars (six times in total during the first and the second world wars), and it was missed in 1935 for reasons that remain "undisclosed". Furthermore, it was also "reserved" due to a lack of worthy winners in an additional seven years, as Armitstead writes (2018a; n.p.). She closes her 2018 Nobel Prize coverage with a tongue-in-cheek comment on the Prize's notorious past and poor track-record of gender balance: "With a prize purse of £836,000, however, a great many sins can, and will, continue to be forgiven," she says, referring to this, the latest and largest-ever scandal the Prize has endured thus far—and to the consequent pause in its prize-giving process. "Who knows, the jury might even do something seriously face-saving," she writes, "like awarding two women in the same year" (2018a; n.p.).

The "Broken" Nobel Prize in Literature

Shortly after Kazuo Ishiguro's Nobel Prize for Literature win in 2017—what readers, critics, and editors deemed a safe and conventional choice after Bob Dylan was awarded the literature prize the previous prizing year, resulting in a host of partisans and detractors—Sam Carter, managing editor at *Asymptote*, wrote the thought-provokingly titled essay for the translated literature journal's blog: "The Nobel's Faulty Compass" (2017). He opens this essay with the clarification that when Alfred Nobel conceived the five Nobel Prizes in 1895, he specified that the literary prize should be awarded to whichever writer had produced "the most outstanding work in an ideal direction" (n.p.)[4]. Carter then proceeds to share a series of unsurprising statistics that seriously undermine what one might imagine or interpret this "ideal direction" to be or look like. For example, from 1901 to 2017, only fourteen women had won the prestigious literary prize (this is now a total of 16), and of the then-113 laureates (four more have been awarded since), twenty-nine have written in English (this list of English-language winners is further followed by the next ten winners working in European languages). "If these numbers are supposed to be approximations, or even representations, of an ideal direction, we should ask ourselves if the compass is broken," he writes with lament (n.p.). Carter's essay raises several important questions, mainly by way of statistics which speak for themselves, about the past trajectories and future directions of the Nobel Prize, and these will be unpacked later in this chapter.

In the meantime, to return to the 2018 scandal, writing in *The New Yorker* on May 5, 2018, following the Swedish Academy's announcement to postpone the prize (at least until the next prize season) amid the corruption and sexual assault allegations alluded to above, Alexandra Schwartz seems to have answered Sam Carter's question more immediately and existentially, if not directionally: "The Nobel Prize in Literature is broken", she declares, in an article titled "The Swedish Academy And The Illusions Of The Nobel Prize In Literature" (2018; n.p.). Schwartz realises that this scandal—which has since become well-traversed territory across global media and literature platforms—is a stark reminder that "behind the mystical Nobel curtain is a small, fairly homogeneous group of fallible Swedes who have taken it upon themselves to arbitrate all of world literature," and that this reminder "punctures the aura of supreme election that the prize has accrued" thus far. As Ursula K. Le Guin writes her afore-discussed essay on literary prizes, published in *The Paris Review* (2017):

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[4] The Nobel Prize has since made the full text of Alfred Nobel's 1895 will available on their website.

"the more prestigious and valued the prize, the more compromised it is" (n.p.)—and this could not be more true of the Nobel Prize for Literature, particularly post its 2018 scandal.

But the power of literature goes beyond the politics of prize cultures—even one as prestigious as the Nobel Prize for Literature. And while the scandal-filled Swedish Academy set sail on a search for its soul (and a new prize-bestowing body), The New Academy, founded by journalist Alexandra Pascalidou and approximately 100 Swedish cultural figures, put forth their own prize—the "alternative Nobel"—created "to warrant that an international literary prize be awarded in 2018, but also as a reminder that literature should be associated with democracy, openness, empathy and respect". The statement, shared on the website, reads: "In a time when human values are increasingly being called into question, literature becomes the counterforce of oppression and a code of silence." The organization further clarified: "In awarding this prize, we are staging a protest. We want to show people that serious cultural work does not have to occur in a context of coercive language, irregularities or abuse" (qtd. in Flood 2018a, n.p.).

The New Academy invited Swedish librarians to submit nominations from around the world, and then made the resulting long-list of forty-seven authors open to a worldwide public vote until August 14, 2018. This process would provide a list of three authors for final judging by the expert jury—presided over by editor and independent publisher Ann Pålsson, who would be accompanied by a fourth author based on a nomination from the Swedish librarians. In terms of eligibility, the prize was to be awarded to "a writer of literary fiction who within the reader has entered the story of mankind in the world". While the prizewinner could be from any part of the world, they must have at least two published works, one of which should have been within the last ten years, the New Academy clarified in their eligibility rules. Within this seemingly straightforward and simple process and these minor stipulations there lay great possibility—and reading between the lines a little further became far more gratifying than the one million kroner up for grabs for writers across the world.

First, a closer look at the functioning of the "alternative Nobel" Prize itself. The New Academy Prize in Literature, or the alternative Nobel, with its month-long worldwide public vote could not be more diametrically opposed to the Nobel's longstanding reputation of being opaque and elite in its selection process—and of its notoriously secretive and small

committee who have thus far taken it upon themselves to dictate literary value and taste for the world. This attempt at inclusivity was at its most integral at the prize's shortlist stage, where the New Academy enforced a gender quota (two male and two female authors must comprise the four-strong shortlist), which was surely a step in the right direction, perhaps even Alfred Nobel's "ideal direction"—and away from the dreadful, disheartening, and discriminatory, statistics otherwise associated with the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Next, an analysis of the line-up of authors who made-up the long-list—a list referred to as a "wonderfully eclectic line-up of authors" on a "long-ish long-list" of 47 (Flood 2018b). Perennial Nobel bridesmaids—those who have notoriously remained on the peripheries of the Nobel Prize, snubbed, yet awaiting nomination—such as Haruki Murakami, Margaret Atwood, Cormac McCarthy, and Ngugi wa Thiong'o, among others—shared space on the long-list with author Zadie Smith and musician Patti Smith; literary power couple Paul Auster and Siri Hustvedt; Olga Tokarczuk and Amos Oz (who have both been recognised by the Man Booker International Prize in some capacity); and globally renowned writers such as JK Rowling, Elena Ferrante, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Arundhati Roy, Neil Gaiman, and Édouard Louis, to name but a few. Twelve Swedish writers also made the cut. Several authors, including those who had been nominated, took to Twitter to express their opinions on the alternative Nobel Prize.

India's writer, activist, and poet Meena Kandasamy (@meenakandasamy) said: "Everytime I'm reminded of the fact that the Literature Nobel Prize hasn't yet gone to @MargaretAtwood, I curse the world and console myself that life's unfair." While it is clear who Kandasamy's vote went to, she also adds her reservations about the inherent nature of powerhouse prizes such as the Nobel: "I sort of think there's a musical chairs on these prizes, so if they give it to a Canadian (or whatever nationality), they wait for a l-o-n-g [sic] time before they give it to the next one", she tweeted (n.p.). This leads back to some of the questions and qualms regarding literary geography and national identity that emerge from the Nobel's statistics Sam Carter's aforementioned essay in *Asymptote* (2017) brought to light—questions that will be revisited in due course. Fantasy writers Nnedi Okorafor and Neil Gaiman also featured on the forty-plus long-list—and Okorafor's tweet (@Nnedi) made an important statement about the debates between serious "literary fiction" and what is generally referred to as "genre fiction": "I'll just say it, there's respect paid to many types of truth-

tellers, including those of fantasy, science fiction, and young adult literature. And it's done in the same space as "literary" fiction. It's about time" (n.p.). Arguing in the same vein, "how many lineups—for anything, let alone a literature prize—feature Neil Gaiman, JK Rowling, Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo alongside each other?" asks Alison Flood (2018b; n.p.).

The long-list of 47 was then culled down to four writers by the end of August 2018—and the reading public had voted for Haruki Murakami, Neil Gaiman, Maryse Condé and Kim Thúy. (For reasons unknown to the public, Haruki Murakami withdrew his nomination soon after.) The winner of the New Academy Prize in Literature was announced on October 12, 2018, and the Caribbean author Maryse Condé (best known for her book, *Segu*) won the not-Nobel Nobel: "Please allow me to share it with my family, my friends and above all with the people of Guadeloupe, who will be thrilled and touched seeing me receive this prize," she said in an interview (Condé qtd. in BBC; n.p.). Making a significant political statement, she added that "her part of the world" only makes global headlines "when there are hurricanes or earthquakes" (n.p.). At the announcement, the Swedish Academy said that Condé's work "describes the ravages of colonialism and post-colonial chaos in a language which is both precise and overwhelming". The author of historical fiction was awarded one million kroner at a formal celebratory event on December 10, 2018. The New Academy was then dissolved the very next day. It is safe to argue that if, according to Alexandra Schwartz—whose *The New Yorker* article (2018) was quoted earlier—the Nobel curtain has thus far held a reputation of appearing "mystical" and full of "illusions", the New Academy have staged a magic show of sorts of their own—only there are no sneaky tricks.

While the alternative Nobel was, essentially, a protest prize created in direct response to the temporarily cancelled Nobel Prize in 2018, the trio of book critics at *The New York Times*—Dwight Garner, Parul Sehgal, Jennifer Szalai—decided to fill the void of conversation in the books world—the "praising, bemoaning or just scratching its collective head"—which would normally saturate the air in advance of the Nobel Prize season each year. John Williams asks the trio of critics what the prize has meant (or not meant) to their personal reading habits; asked after their opinions on past winners (or snubs); and whom they would pick were they to play Nobel Prize judges that year. A lot of gems emerged from this conversation—including well-rehearsed criticisms of the Nobel Prize and the Swedish Academy—and interesting comments on the prize's awarding preferences—its trends and tendencies—

which will be subjects of discussion in another section. It is the answers to Williams's final interview question—"If you were a one-person Nobel committee this fall, whom would you give it to?"—however, that are worth inserting here. First, among Dwight Garner's choices were Margaret Atwood and Cormac McCarthy, both perennial Nobel bridesmaids (and both on the 47-strong alternative Nobel long-list); second, Parul Sehgal said she would be happy to see Ngugi wa Thiong'o honoured (and since there are apparently two prizes up for grabs in 2019, she also nominated the "sui generis" Yoko Tawada). "It's worth noting, too," she adds, "that only 14 women have been awarded the prize since it was first handed out in 1901—almost all from Europe or the Americas. The winners representing Africa were both white. No woman from Asia or the Middle East has ever won," she concludes (qtd. in Williams et al., 2018, n.p.).

What is evident from Parul Sehgal's recap of the Nobel Prize's roster of regional, gender- and ethnic-based inequalities, and other disparities and omissions—and from the short section of Sam Carter's afore-quoted *Asymptote* essay, "The Nobel's Faulty Compass" (2017)—is that there is more than one reason to question and take issue with the Nobel Prize's apparent normativity and its literary authority. The "single-winner axiom underlying the entire prize economy"—the one that "assures that the dominance of the Nobel is in no way diminished"—as English writes, is, arguably, dimming down (62). The latest sex abuse scandal in 2018 may have been of unparalleled magnitude in terms of the Nobel Prize's history of scandals, controversies and omissions—sailing along in the age of #metoo and swiftly taking down what Alexandra Schwartz (2018) referred to as the "fairly homogeneous group of fallible Swedes" (n.p.) from the book and prize world's mantelpiece—but this is not the first time the Nobel Prize has faltered or deviated from the "ideal direction" Alfred Nobel set out for it. Sartre's refusal of the Nobel Prize as early as 1964 remains an early example of this—and a later section of this chapter will return to this. In the meantime, writing in the shadow of the 2018 scandal, *The Guardian*'s Alex Clark (2018), and Alexandra Schwartz at *The New Yorker* (2018), played soothsayers of storytelling and foresaw a dramatic, darkened future for the Nobel Prize upon its scheduled return in 2019. While Clark writes that, "in fictional terms, the Nobel fiasco would not pass the verisimilitude test", Schwartz finds it sur-

prising that the prize has "managed to maintain its lustre for so long"—and it is worthing reading their arguments side by side (n.p.):

> A secretive organisation, whose inner workings may not be known but are yet powerful enough to transform anointed writers' careers; a man accused of long-term sexual abuse […] a wife–for the accused is not a judge of the literature prize, but his wife is–compelled to take responsibility for her husband's actions. The result: *a prize leaking authority by the minute, in a world where prizes are king*. (Clark 2018, emphasis mine)

> A man manipulating his cultural prestige to sinister ends, a scapegoated woman made to take the fall, literary squabbling and backstabbing galore: the Nobel scandal is truly a story for our times, though details like the flummoxed king and the arcane quorum procedure give it the sheen of fiction. It seems inevitable that all this chaos will damage the prestige of the Nobel Prize in Literature. (Schwartz 2018)

Whether the Nobel Prize will fully recover from a scandal of such scale only time and its future trajectory—beginning with the return of the 2019 prizes—would tell. Meanwhile, it is noteworthy that both critics describe the Nobel Prize's downfall similarly: it is surreal and stranger than fiction. Clark is convinced that its authority and legitimacy are "leaking" rapidly, that the personality and the integrity of the Prize are spilling over into unchartered and unimagined territories, whereas Schwartz reckons that the damage is already done and that it is only inevitable that the Prize's prestige has been placed under strict scrutiny—indefinitely. This said, Schwartz is quick to add that "there is nothing normative or definitive" about the Nobel Prize and its recipients. "What makes the prize relevant is our belief that it is… The prize only matters if we care about it," she finishes (n.p.). As James F. English (2005) writes:

> The prestige of a prize—the collective belief in its cultural value—depends not just on the prestige of the jurors, the scale of their cultural portfolios, but on their own apparent belief in the prize, their willingness to invest in it personally. Our belief in a

> prize is really a kind of *belief by proxy*, a belief in these others' belief. (127; my emphasis)

Schwartz's comment rings with truth; it is readers and writers, literary editors and critics, alongside others within the publishing industry who have placed the Nobel Prize on the pedestal it has arguably now fallen from. It is the critical conversations we have about it, and the literary and symbolic currency we thus confer upon it—this "belief by proxy", a belief that builds upon others' belief—that continue to keep it relevant and important on our critical circuit—and in the world literary marketplace. It is not an overstatement to say that the New Academy, with its "alternative Nobel", has nudged aside the Nobel Prize's apparent normativity, picked up the pieces after it fell from the pedestal it was once placed on, and made something bookishly beautiful from its failures. More importantly, perhaps, albeit if only for one prizing year, the future of books was where it arguably should be—in the hands of readers across the world. The reason the New Academy set up an alternative prize was partially because writers and readers deserved a literary prize of international stature in a year when the Nobel Prize community and the Swedish Academy failed to deliver. Despite its flaws, the Nobel Prize matters to us, as readers and consumers and lovers of literature, which is why it is held to high standards, and, year after year, accountability and fairness is demanded from it, and why it had to put its best and unbiased foot forward in 2019 and in the prizing years thereafter—particularly in the shadow of the sex abuse scandal, and in the age of the #metoo movement world over.

As mentioned earlier, for English (2005), the modern era of cultural prizes began with the advent of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1901. Writing in the early 2000s, for him, the prize, albeit one of the oldest in the world, still feels contemporary. He adds that "Oklahoma's Neustadt International Prize for Literature, for example, claims that it is often referred to as the 'American Nobel'. And for every would-be Nobel, there would eventually be dozens, hundreds, even thousands of ever more minutely differentiated variations on the theme of the Best, not to mention the many mock-prizes and antiprizes that play on the theme of the Worst—the Golden Raspberry Awards, the Bad Writing Medal, the Ig-Nobel Prizes" (29). The not-Nobel Nobel, or the "alternative Nobel" served as far more than a mock-prize or an anti-prize—but rather a rival prize, one that could step in when the Nobel Prize and Swedish Academy temporarily stepped down. The world waited on the 2018 and

2019 Nobel Prizes with bated breath—and indeed two Nobel Prizes in Literature were awarded, to Olga Tokarczuk and Peter Handke.

In advance of the announcement, Anders Olsson, new chair of the Swedish Academy's Literature Committee, confessed the prize's need to prioritise diversity and widen its perspective: "We had a more Eurocentric perspective on literature and now we are looking all over the world. Previously it was much more male-oriented […] we hope the prize and the whole process of the prize has been intensified and is much broader in its scope" (qtd. in Goyal 2019, n.p.). Funnily enough, with the nomination of two European writers, it has continued to have a Eurocentric prizing perspective—but this was not the extent of the criticism it received. While Jennifer Croft—one among Olga Tokarczuk's two translators in English—wrote in *The Paris Review* (2019) shortly after the announcement—"Olga is the Nobel laureate. She's the one the prize was made for"—several writers and organisations including Hari Kunzru, Fatima Bhutto, and PEN America, among others, condemned and regretted the Swedish Academy's decision to award the fascist apologist Peter Handke a Nobel Prize—and ironically alongside the anti-fascist Tokarczuk—on social media. Tweeting in a tongue-in-cheek manner, Alex Shephard (@alex_shephard), who usually covers literary prizes and books for *The New Republic*, wrote: "THE NOBEL MUST HEAR BOTH SIDES" (n.p.). It takes only a quick Google search to familiarise oneself with Handke's politics, and another to find the pertinent 2019 *The New Yorker* profile on Olga Tokarczuk's diametrically opposed politics, "Olga Tokarczuk's Novels Against Nationalism".

Writing after the 2018-2019 double announcement in *The New Republic*, Alex Shephard notes the one step forward, one step back double decision—which was far from the clean break, the "rebranding" he was expecting: "as Swedish journalist and Nobel-watcher Jens Liljestrand told me, 'The prizes mirror the Academy's identity crises.' Handke was likely 'a concession to the Academy old guard,' while Tokarczuk represents the kind of new voice Olsson said he intends to elevate" (n.p.). This crisis, this contradiction is confusing. "Both awards show that, despite its professed global ambitions, the Nobel Prize in Literature is still bogged down in Europe," Shephard adds (n.p.). "Perhaps the Nobel Committee's main mission these days is not to diversify or evolve, but to troll," he concludes (n.p.). One cannot ex-

pect all that's "broken"—years of imbalance and gross oversight—to be fixed in one year and following a single, albeit prestige-smashing scandal. But the Nobel Prize gave itself two shots—two prizes—at "rebranding" and redemption. It's hard to expect the Nobel Prize to come through, to make a comeback, in terms of gender equality, geographical, and linguistic diversity, all in the same prizing year—and researchers of literary prizes must thus learn to manage their expectations. Perhaps two out of three categories was wishful thinking, too—knowing it had found itself in a particularly desperate position to hold its own. Yet, the prizes went to two white European writers—if non-English-language writers. How has the Nobel Prize managed to stay stuck and so embarrassingly Eurocentric?

Following the scandalous events of 2018, a dark, deadly cloud loomed over the Nobel Prize's next steps. And yet, as the 2018-2019 prizes show, the Nobel Prize remains stuck in Eurocentric and politically problematic prizing decisions. As Sandra Ponzanesi notes (2011): "as with any prize, the Nobel Prize is based on a process of inclusion and exclusion" and it is "not only renowned for its prestigious list of distinguished laureates but also for its resounding omissions" (1128):

> The list is haunted by the ghosts of many monumental figures for whom this illustrious prize remained elusive: Leo Tolstoy, Joseph Conrad, Henrik Ibsen, James Joyce, Henry James, Virginia Woolf, Franz Kafka, Marcel Proust, Jorge Luis Borges, Italo Calvino, Maguerite Yourcenar, to name but a few. As Burton Feldman notes: 'As the list of laureates makes clear, the Nobel Prize in literature is still far from being the global award it claims to be. Its prizes have repeatedly gone to writing in a few major European languages, primarily English, French, German, Spanish.
>
> The prize's reputation as a purely European affair changed when Wole Soyinka was awarded the prize in 1986, followed by the Egyptian Mahfouz in 1988, and shortly afterwards by the anti-apartheid writer Nadine Gordimer in 1991, by the Caribbean poet Derek Walcott, well-versed in European styles and genres, in 1992, by the first African American writer, Toni Morrison, in 1993, by another Caribbean novelist, V.S. Naipaul, in 2001, by another South African, J.M. Coetzee, in 2003 and by the Rhodesian/English Doris Lessing in 2007. (Ponzanesi 1128-1129)

The Nobel Prize and its connection with African writers will be discussed later in this chapter, but in the meantime, and as James F. English (2005) writes, if scandals were once the "lifeblood" of literary prizes and "prizefighting"—as it is called in many headlines—"the very stuff of awards lore", as the "veil of magic, of collective make-believe, that prizes have traditionally cast across the scene of their concrete social effects becomes more transparent" and "as we lose our ability or our willingness to see the prize as a fundamentally scandalous institution, there is bound to be a period of painful contraction in the awards industry" (208; 194). He continues: "faced with the withdrawal of what has been by far their richest and most reliable source of publicity, prizes may after so many years of uncontainable expansion at last show some signs of fatigue"—and arguably the Nobel Prize is at tipping point (245-46). And while the Booker Prize for Fiction, in what I read as a sinister and sardonic contrast, celebrated its 50th birthday in 2018—the same year as the Nobel Prize scandal—with grand and golden celebrations, it too, is likely following suit and showing "signs of fatigue".

The Booker's 50th Birthday—But All That Glitters Is Not Gold

To mark the 50th year milestone of the Booker Prize for Fiction, and to celebrate five decades of recognising and prizing the "finest fiction", The Booker Prize Foundation launched the "Golden" Man Booker Prize on February 16, 2018. This special, one-off prize—which would place the backlist of winners in a battle of the best—"pitting the likes of Hilary Mantel and Ian McEwan against Iris Murdoch and Kingsley Amis" (Cain 2018a; n.p.), was to be shortlisted by a five-judge panel[5], and then put to a public vote. "The Golden Man Booker will put all 51 winners—which are all still in print—back under the spotlight, to discover which of them has stood the test of time, remaining relevant to readers today," said the press release on the Booker Prize website. Speaking in the same spirit, Baroness Helena Kennedy (Chair of the Booker Prize Foundation) commented on the website, "The very best fiction endures and resonates with readers long after it is written", and Luke Ellis (CEO of Man Group) added that they were delighted to be sponsoring the Prize in its landmark 50th year, and to be "celebrating outstanding fiction from the past half century, which remains as relevant and resonant as ever" (n.p.).

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[5] Five judges were appointed to read the winning novels from each decade of the prize: Robert McCrum (1969-1979); Lemn Sissay (1980s); Kamila Shamsie (1990s); Simon Mayo (2000s); Hollie McNish (2010s).

The five judges were each appointed the task of reading the winning novels from their allocated decade in the prize's long history. Robert McCrum picked VS Naipaul's *In a Free State* (1971); Lemn Sissay chose Penelope Lively's *Moon Tiger* (1987); Kamila Shamsie nominated Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* (1992); Simon Mayo put forth Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* (2009); and Hollie McNish's favoured George Saunders's *Lincoln in the Bardo* (2017). This resulting 'Golden Five' shortlist was announced at the Hay Festival, Wales on May 26, 2018, following which, the five books were put to a month-long public vote in order to choose the overall winner who would be revealed at the Man Booker 50 Festival on July 8, 2018. Here, Michael Ondaatje was crowned as the Golden Man Booker winner for his 1992 novel, *The English Patient*. At the time of the prize's initial announcement, judge Kamila Shamsie had said: "It says something about the importance and reach of the Man Booker prize that I read all the winning novels from the 1990s within months of the prize announcements…" She looks forward to revisiting the Booker library, she says, "to see how similar or different it might feel to encounter them again". "Whether it'll be possible to work out if any changed responses have to do with how the world has altered or how I've altered is something that remains to be seen," Shamsie adds (qtd. in Cain 2018a; n.p.).

Time is of the essence when it comes to understanding the Golden Man Booker Prize —what it embodies and what it then envisioned to be its prizing purpose. To reiterate, the press release stated that the prize endeavoured to discover which of the 51 winning authors and books had "stood the test of time"—emphasising that not one of the 51 books that have been bestowed with the Booker have gone out of print. In both their comments, quoted above, Baroness Helena Kennedy (Chair of the Booker Prize Foundation) and Luke Ellis (CEO of Man Group) use words such as "endure", "resonant", and "relevant" to describe their intentions for, and expectations of, the Golden Booker winner. Judge Kamila Shamsie's words also refer to the re-reading process, evoking the passage of time—how readers' relationships with books evolve over time—thus echoing the prize administrators' sentiments of longevity. At the prize's shortlist stage, one of the other judges, Robert McCrum, also spoke similarly of the 51 Booker books—in a sense recycling the phrases and sentiments from the press release: "I'd say that almost all the novels the judges had to read, reread and consider have stood the test of time" (n.p.). Furthermore, and of the five shortlisted books, McCrum says that if they were "placed in a time capsule for re-examination in 2118, it would provide a surprisingly reliable snapshot of the novel in English, 1970-2010 [sic]" (qtd. in Thorpe

2018; n.p.). Ironically, then, if the prize's administrators and judges have stressed the importance of time to the guiding inspiration and impetus behind the Golden Man Booker, it has also been the core component around which criticism of the anniversary prize has circulated. Ironically enough, the Golden Booker Prize has been, understandably, taken to task for this very terminology.

Before delving into these later critiques at-length, a brief look at some initial reactions and responses to the prize, from when it was first launched in February 2018 and leading up to the shortlist announcement later that summer. Shortly after the announcement, *The Guardian*'s Sian Cain reported that Salman Rushdie, who was the 1981 winner for *Midnight's Children*, was "likely a favourite to win, having already won the Best of Booker award in 2008, to mark the prize's 40th anniversary [by public vote], and the Booker of Bookers in 1993, for its 25th birthday [judged by a panel of three]" (2018a; n.p.). Literary prize expert, Dr. Stevie Marsden (@StevieLMarsden) took to Twitter to express her frustration at the Booker's tendency to re-reward the same titles: "Does it feel like they're running out of ways to say 'the best book'?" she says of the Golden Booker. "They're just continuing a sycophantic cycle of a select canon. It's boring. And I bet *Midnight's Children* wins again," she added, echoing Cain's words, if more mockingly and exasperatedly (n.p.). And if the odds were against Rushdie, as a repeat Booker winner, were one among the other four double-winners of the Booker Prize for Fiction—J.G. Farrell (1970 and 1973), J.M. Coetzee (1983 and 1999), Peter Carey (1988 and 2001), and Hilary Mantel (2009 and 2012)—likely to receive the crowning glory? Similarly, and closer to the shortlist reveal in May that year, Claire Armitstead's article asks: "Will *Midnight's Children* come up golden for Salman Rushdie again?" (2018b; n.p.). In the same article, she refers to the prize as "another publicity-driven hunt for the best-of-the-best" and then surveys the strongest contenders in each decade. "Will Rushdie run away with it again?" she wonders. While in Armitstead's opinion *Midnight's Children* "remains as piquant and relevant as ever"—and here, too, note the repetitive use of the word "relevance"—"tears may rise to eyes in Booker Towers if it does," she adds. After all, "Who wants to stay for ever stuck in 1981?" (2018b; n.p.).

Although Armitstead is referring to one Booker year, and one unique book, it is interesting that she thinks awarding Rushdie again would be akin to staying "for ever stuck in 1981"—whereas, arguably, for those bestowing the Golden Booker, it would be further test-

ament to the book's longevity, and thus in-line with the Golden Prize's philosophy. Besides, Rushdie's 1981 winning-book did win again via public vote in 1993 and as recently as 2008, with the Booker of Bookers and Best of Booker, respectively (n.p.). This pathway of interpretation gains plausibility when one returns to Armitstead's words in the preceding paragraphs of the article, where she questions whether George Saunders's *Lincoln in the Bardo* "is really any more innovative" than James Kelman's *How Late It Was, How Late* (1994) or John Berger's *G* (1972). "But who reads either of those today?" she says in resignation. The implication that a novel from the 1970s, or even the 1990s, may seem outdated, even replaced, by newer ones in the millennium, is diametrically opposed to the Golden Booker's mantra of endurance and relevance—and it already flags up the flawed, or not fully-fleshed-out, nature of the prize's purpose. Since the major 2014 rule change opened up the then-Man Booker Prize for Fiction to authors of any nationality working in English and published in the UK and Ireland—where it was previously only eligible to writers from Britain and Commonwealth countries—which has, most crucially, been interpreted as the inclusion of American authors and the implications of that—at the time of the Golden Booker, two American authors had won the British prize. Paul Beatty (*The Sellout*, 2016) and George Saunders (*Lincoln in the Bardo*, 2017) were thus eligible for the Golden Man Booker Prize. Therefore, as the Booker has, in recent years, also been on the American literary radar, Pamela Paul (@PamelaPaulNYT), Editor of *The New York Times Book Review*, cheekily calls The Golden Man Booker Prize "the priziest prize" on Twitter after news broke of its existence (n.p.). This echoes both Marsden's ("running out of ways to say 'the best book'") and Armitstead's ("best-of-the-best") reactions to the Golden Booker Prize quoted earlier. If the Booker awards the "finest fiction" annually, could it, with the Golden Prize, supersede its own superlative?

The purpose of and philosophy driving the one-off Golden Prize is debatable: while Armitstead calls it "a publicity-driven hunt" (2018b; n.p.), judge Robert McCrum considers it "a stunt" albeit "a surprisingly worthwhile one" (qtd. in Thorpe 2018; n.p.). But there is a flaw in the process, too; it is, arguably, full of loopholes—and long-term commentators of the prize did not hesitate to puncture its ballooned and boastful birthday reputation. In the same article, I also argue that with a time-span that covers half a century, one that has witnessed large-scale, often unprecedented, changes in literary prize cultures and history, including the Booker Prize's own trajectory, the question arises: How can one compare a 1969

winning book to a 2017 one, and judge them both based on the same criteria of "finest fiction"? While it's easy to discern whether a winner from the 1970s, or even the 1980s, has "stood the test of time", one can argue that fiction in the new millennium may be too nascent to be judged by the same yardstick.

Soon after the initial announcement, Sian Cain (2018a) notices anomalies in the judging process due to missed years (1970, for example, which was later compensated with The Lost Man Booker prize); double winners (Nadine Gordimer and Stanley Middleton in 1974; Barry Unsworth and Michael Ondaatje in 1992), and of course, fewer prizing years in the fifth decade in consideration (books only up to 2017). The late Eileen Battersby, writing for the *Irish Times* (2018) on her personal favourite and her prediction for the Golden Man Booker Prize, also pointed out this imbalance, although in terms of the quality, and not the quantity, of the eligible books. While she felt that the 1980s was the Booker decade "with the lion's share of fine fiction"—featuring Rushdie, Coetzee, and Ishiguro, to name but a few—the 2010s, "the Teens", she wrote, embodied the "Man Booker in our troubled times" (2018, n.p.). Meanwhile, Claire Armitstead (2018b) was of the opinion that "survey by decade gives a seductive new twist to an old game", but was also quick to add that the current decade "saw the great American invasion" (notably an unusual choice of phrase since the Booker's 2014 rule change is usually described as an opening up and letting in; more on this later in this chapter) (n.p.). And, "on a rostrum that often seems full of second-bests," Battersby continues in the *Irish Times*, Hilary Mantel's "two Tudor winners cast a long shadow both backwards and forwards, giving broadcaster Simon Mayo [judging the naughties] a relatively easy ride" (n.p.). As it happens, American author George Saunders's *Lincoln in the Bardo* as well as Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* eventually made the shortlist of the Golden Five, representing the best of the 2000s, and the 2010s, respectively.

Over on the other side of the Atlantic, Ron Charles (book critic, *The Washington Post*) wrote an article shortly after Michael Ondaatje's win, titled "The Golden Man Booker is the Worst Way to Pick the Best Novel—Except For All the Other Ways" (2018). His coverage opens with the Man Booker 50 celebratory weekend, which he described as an "orgy of literary eminence [that] was designed to reaffirm the Booker as an arbiter of supreme excellence" (n.p.). Charles then took to task the Golden Man Booker's self-proclaimed purpose of spotlighting books "that have best stood the test of time," which he thought was a "peculiar

claim", given that "*Lincoln in the Bardo* had stood the test of time since 2017—about as long as the potted fern on my desk," he writes, sarcastically (n.p.). "But in the end, the ultimate judge of which novels stand the test of time is time itself," he adds, allowing for an imagined posterity (n.p.). Eileen Battersby in the *Irish Times*, on the other hand, was less dismissive of, and more generous, towards George Saunders when she wrote that his win was so recent "as to understandably leave him standing on the side lines watching along with the rest of us" (n.p.). To return to Charles, though, and his scathing critique—from the manner in which the prize was structured to the way in which it was judged: "as a system of selection, this is a curious conflation of the single expert and the wisdom of the crowds," he notes (n.p.). While he acknowledges that having the "unwashed public" choosing the best novel sounds "wonderfully egalitarian", he also adds that it ignores "all kinds of unanswerable questions about the self-selection and legitimacy of the voters" (n.p.). "And, anyhow," he asks, "is the public a reliable judge of literary quality?" (n.p.).

A few months later, the "alternative Nobel" Prize, discussed earlier in this chapter, would adopt a similar, if slightly more thorough, process—starting with a long-list selected by Swedish librarians, moving further on to a public vote at the shortlist stage, and finally reverting back to librarians as the literary authorities to choose one winner. While there is truth to certain aspects of Charles's argument—the Booker Prize's 50th birthday prize, the Golden Booker, certainly was a case of blowing one's own horn—perhaps he was too harsh and skeptical in his analysis of the democratic system of public-voting, and likely did a disservice to lovers of literature by questioning their "legitimacy" as voters. Later, following Michael Ondaatje's win, judge Kamila Shamsie would also dismiss suggestions that *The English Patient* had won because it was the best-known novel among the 'Golden Five', mostly due to the film adaptation. "Hilary Mantel is very well known too, and if you're going to vote in something like this, you're probably voting because it matters to you," she clarified at the time (qtd. in Flood 2018; n.p.). As with my argument about the alternative Nobel in the preceding section, in a prize sphere where the authorities and arbitrators of literary value are being held accountable for their abuse and actions—although this doesn't directly apply to the Booker Prize—can the future of books be in any better hands than those of its readers'? Books and book prizes exist for, and matter because of, readers. Readers matter—and arguably their reading and voting choices should matter too.

Back within Golden Booker Prize home territory, judge Robert McCrum also shares his thoughts in an essay published pre-winner announcement and titled "The Man Booker at 50: Flawed—But Still the Best Way to Judge Our Literature" (2018). He recaps the Prize's 50-year history (the passage of time has been "both cruel and kind" to the prize, he notes); relays its current state of affairs ("a lottery more than a literary laurel"); and observes that "in an arena of book prizes, where you win some, you lose some, Booker was no exception" (n.p.). Ultimately, though, and "from the widest perspective", he concludes that the prize has promoted some "remarkable novels" in its lifetime (n.p.). "Were these sealed in concrete and prised open a hundred years hence, I believe that they would adequately represent the fiction of 1968-2018," he adds, and "whether readers of the late 22nd century will agree that these books are classics, only time will tell" (n.p.). As a judge of the Golden Man Booker, it is understandable, perhaps even predictable, that McCrum would promote and present the Prize's intentions and ideology. In the end, however, both Ron Charles's and McCrum's positions, whether harshly negative or neutral to positive, acknowledge that a leap of faith is involved in prizing a book in the present, in conferring upon it the status of a "classic" that will continue to "stand the test of time"—if and as it has done so until then. Surely, posterity would be the judge of that—and as it turns out the Golden Man Booker Prize-winner Michael Ondaatje himself would contribute to shaping the narrative.

At the prize ceremony, and in the press release, Kamila Shamsie says of the Golden Man Booker winning-novel, *The English Patient*, that it is "that rare novel which gets under your skin and insists you return to it time and again, always yielding a new surprise or delight" (thebookerprizes.com). Baroness Helena Kennedy, Chair of the Booker Prize Foundation, spoke similarly of how "this special book, chosen by the public, will continue to stand the test of time and delight new readers for many more years to come" (n.p.). From the perspective of the prize-givers, then, their intentions had translated into actions: the five judges began on a quest to find one among 51 of the "finest fiction[s]" that had "stood the test of time" and emerged with a worthy winner that embodied this expectation (n.p.). It is noteworthy here that when Michael Ondaatje originally won the Booker in 1992, the prize was tied between two writers (from then onwards a rule was put in place which stipulated that there could only be one winner annually—and which would be brazenly broken in 2019 when Margaret Atwood and Bernardine Evaristo emerged as co-winners). In the *Irish Times*

article quoted earlier, Eileen Battersby rightly asserts that, since then, *The English Patient* has become "all conquering" and has "long since shaken off the inexplicable decision to share the prize in 1992" with Barry Unsworth's *Sacred Hunger*, whom she refers to as "one of the most forgettable of Booker victors" (n.p.). But it is Ondaatje's acceptance speech, truthful and transparent in its subtle critique, that is most telling of the Golden Prize's pitfalls.

"Not for a second do I believe this is the best book on the list or any other list that could have been put together of Booker novels," he says of his own novel—"especially when it is placed beside a work by VS Naipaul, one of the masters of our time, or a major work like *Wolf Hall*" (n.p.). Ondaatje also reveals that he had not re-read his own novel: "I suspect and know more than anyone that perhaps *The English Patient* is still cloudy, with errors in pacing" (n.p.). While this may seem like a humble brag, characteristic of such circumstances, the second half of his speech refutes any such conjecture or conclusion. "It is important for us to admit that there are great books that never received the Booker Prize," said the Golden Man Booker winner, specifically naming authors such as William Trevor, Barbara Pym and Alice Munro, who have all been snubbed by the Prize, or who have bypassed the Booker and accomplished critical and commercial success, regardless (n.p.). He also went on to wish that the judges had invited the "Golden Five" nominees to speak about their personal favourite overlooked classics, so that the conversation might have been broadened to encompass and "enlarge what ought to be read, as opposed to relying on the *usual suspects*" (qtd. in Charles 2018, emphasis mine; n.p.). There is a lot to unpack here—and a lot of it strikes at the heart of the Golden Man Booker and undermines it.

First, through his acknowledgement of non-Booker-winning authors, authors who have "great books" to their name despite, and not in spite of, the Prize, Ondaatje shakes up the apparent authority of the Booker as the arbiter of the "finest fiction". Greatness can—and indeed, does—lie outside the circumference of the Booker's coverage, as Ondaatje claims. What's more, the Booker Prize has, in several instances, failed to recognise and reward it. Further, his suggestion to allow the shortlisted authors to speak of their favourite forgotten classics could not be more diametrically opposed to the idea of the Golden Booker. Where the Prize's approach was around celebrating books that are still remembered, still "relevant" and "resonant", Ondaatje wishes to resurrect lost, overlooked, and less memorable classics, but classics nevertheless. This argument comes to a head in Ondaatje's com-

ment regarding broadening the conversation, possibly even beyond the Booker, in place of "relying on the usual suspects"—a phrase that reverberates Dr. Stevie Marsden's earlier-quoted frustrations about a "sycophantic cycle of a select canon" quoted earlier (n.p.). For Ondaatje, then, these "usual suspects" may be past Booker winners (and/or shortlisted authors); certainly double Booker winners; and perhaps even repetitive recipients of any other large-scale literary prizes. Literary canons, oftentimes inadvertently produced by literary gatekeepers including prizes, the Booker in particular, are select and self-perpetuating—seeing as the Booker also has a particular tendency to re-reward the same titles. Ondaatje's speech, if taken as a lodestar, is an attempt to point the reading compass in other directions—and here, Alfred Nobel's intended "ideal direction" comes to mind—on a literary landscape where the Booker Prize repeatedly seeks to re-direct attention to its own canonised library and legacy of literature.

50 years on: "The literary prize most likely to swallow itself"[6]

Ultimately, I think, the Golden Man Booker Prize was a missed opportunity. Taking my cue from Ondaatje, I would argue that the occasion of the Prize's 50th year could have been an opportunity to make amends for absences so stark in the Booker's prizing history—a corrective measure and a turning-point. Michael Caines's satirical piece, "All Must Have Prizes" (2017), documents and discusses the proliferation of literary prizes and the potential perils and pitfalls of this—and also awards some fictional prizes of his own—as we saw in the introduction. It is no surprise that the Man Booker Prize for Fiction took home the title: "Literary Prize Most Likely to Swallow Itself". "Some notable novels have won this modest award, and they have even had some readers," writes Caines, tongue very much in-cheek. "Most notable of all, however, is the Booker's proclivity for self-basting," he adds (n.p.). He then proceeds to recount the one-off prizes awarded on the 25th and 40th anniversaries of the Booker—both of which were, as mentioned earlier, won by Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (this alongside Rushdie also being a nominee for the Man Booker International Prize

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[6] Caines, Michael. "All must have prizes." *Times Literary Supplement.* Jan. 30, 2017.

in 2007, when Chinua Achebe won[7]). "If anybody has any spare Booker they would like to donate to *Midnight's Children* or its admirable author, now is the time to do so," he adds (n.p.). It hardly comes as a surprise, then, that readers and critics were skeptical of, and slightly exasperated by, the Golden Booker announcement—or that they sarcastically reacted to and commented on the Booker's tendency to re-reward the same set of titles, over and over again, and specifically Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*.

After the "Golden Five" shortlist was made public (and put to a public vote), and in advance of the winner announcement, Emily Temple, who was "perplexed" with the shortlist, compiled a list of statistics for *Lit Hub* to help the voting public pick favourites—and to provide some perspective on the Booker's long prizing history. In the piece, titled "The Man Booker Prize: By The Numbers", she presented a breakdown of the winners and shortlisted writers based on gender, genre, race, nationality, age, and other factors. At the time she writes that a total of 52 prizes have been awarded in the Prize's 50-year history (it was split/shared in two years; and an additional prize, the Lost Man Booker (2010), was awarded to books published in 1970)[8]. Male authors have won 35 times (twice as often as their female counterparts) and been shortlisted an overwhelming 178 times (compared to women writers: 113 times). The Man Booker Prize for Fiction has been awarded to writers of colour a mere nine times in the 50-year history. The number of years the shortlist has featured zero women is two (this birthed the now-Women's Prize for Fiction—the then-Orange Prize for Fiction—in 1996) and the number of years zero writers of colour have featured on shortlists is sixteen (this birthed the Jhalak Prize (for Book of the Year by a Writer of Colour) in 2017). Much like the Nobel Prize for Literature, the Booker's terrible track record is no secret—and is painfully plain to see.

The gender gap, the glaring omission of writers of colour, and the geography/nationality of where the winning writers "come from" (more often than not, from within the

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[7] From 2005 until 2015, the award was given every two years to a living author of any nationality for a body of work published in English or generally available in English translation. A literary lifetime achievement award of sorts, it awarded an author's "continued creativity, development and overall contribution to fiction on the world stage".

[8] Temple's numbers do not include the regular, 50th Man Booker Prize (2018), which ran alongside the Golden Booker that year. With this 53rd prize, Anna Burns (*Milkman*) become the first Northern Irish author, and the first female author since 2013, to take home the Man Booker Prize for Fiction.

United Kingdom—and mainly England)—these are criticisms that have long-cloaked the Booker (and indeed, similarly, the Nobel Prize) across media and academic circuits—as also noted in the introduction. Reading the Booker Prize winners of the 1990s, Kamila Shamsie (Golden Booker judge) said she had been struck by the fact that there were six years in which just one or no women were on the award's shortlists: "God, can you imagine now if five years in a row the most women on a shortlist was one?" she says (Flood 2018b; n.p.). The 50th anniversary could have been an avenue into addressing such criticisms—a remedy, re-birth or rebranding—just as how the Nobel Prize's return in 2019, after the scandal in the preceding year, could have been a significant step in the "ideal direction". There come to mind several mechanisms and methodologies by which this could have been attempted, if not achieved all at once, and the mistakes and missteps of the past could have been addressed. For starters, as Ondaatje suggested, the Golden Booker may have awarded an author previously entirely sidelined or overlooked by the Booker Prize. Here, past winners of the Prize could have been approached to nominate or put forward their favourite titles over the years—thereby also ensuring the authority and integrity of the Prize, and keeping it within the family and legacy, as it were. Another alternative could have been to award the prize to one among the perennial shortlisted authors of the Booker Prize. Emily Temple's statistics show that while Ali Smith has been on four shortlists (and never won), at least eight other authors have been on at least three shortlists during the half-century of the Booker Prize's history. On a related note, the Nobel Prize's perennial bridesmaids, such as authors Margaret Atwood, Haruki Murakami, and Ngugi wa Thiong'o, also come to mind—and the Booker Prize might have picked up the Nobel Prize's broken pieces. In other words, instead of re-awarding an already-winner of the Booker Prize, it perhaps might have been more worthwhile to champion and celebrate—indeed *prize*—the work of a writer who has previously participated in the Booker Prize race, but may have fallen short of the finish line by a few steps—if not something as radical (for the Booker Prize, at least) as awarding it to a total outsider, or author totally tangential to the Booker universe.

Take the 2018 [Man] Booker Prize for Fiction—its long-list, shortlist, and winner—as a slice of some of the Booker's continued and consistent shortcomings—50 years on. When the 2018 long-list was announced in July, Justine Jordan (2018) wrote of how it both "overturned expectations" and embodied "new voices, but [was] less global" (n.p.). While the

long-list included the first-ever graphic novel to be nominated for the Booker Prize in its long history of prizing fiction—alongside a crime thriller and a novel in-verse (and thus "overturned expectations" generically)—"what has suffered this year is international diversity," she writes (n.p.). When the trustees made the infamous 2014 rule change, permitting writers from outside the Commonwealth to participate in the prize, it was "intended to make the Booker truly global," she adds (n.p.). But with only the UK/Ireland and North America represented on the 2018 longlist, "this is a narrow snapshot of world literature in English" Jordan concludes. In other words, stylistic and genre diversity overshadowed regional diversity. Similarly Sian Cain (2018b) writes of the long-list that it "seemed—for the first time in many years—to set new parameters for what could be celebrated as Good Literature", seeing as it broadened the scope of what is normally and narrowly perceived as prize-worthy "serious literary fiction" (n.p.). In the article titled "Man Booker Prize shortlist narrows the field—and also its sights?" she positively exclaims at the inclusion of a graphic novel (Nick Drnaso's *Sabrina*) and a thriller (Belinda Bauer's *Snap*) alongside literary fiction—and this echoes Jordan's observations regarding "overturned expectations" (n.p.). "And that five millennial writers… could all be considered for the glitziest symbol of the literary establishment, for only their first or second books, was a wonderful endorsement of a fresh generation of fiction writers"—as Cain points out, in favour of the sizeable debuts featured on the 2018 Booker Prize long-list (n.p.).

Moving forward from the long-list to the shortlist stage, however, Cain writes that the 2018 Booker seemed, suddenly, "far more narrowly conceived". "Most notably, there is a stark gap between what the judges have chosen to go through to the final stage, and what readers have actually been buying," she adds, of the "noticeable split" between what wins and what sells, thus alluding to questions of "serious literary fiction" versus consumable and popular fiction—and how what the Booker awards may not always align with readers' interests and book sales (n.p.). Ultimately, she takes comfort in the fact that four of six shortlisted authors were female and fiercely innovative in their fiction (Anna Burns, Rachel Kushner, Esi Edugyan and Daisy Johnson)—and this in the context of a prize "that has been variously (sometimes simultaneously) criticised for being too white, blokey, and, more vaguely, a little stuffy," she adds (n.p.). Likewise, Urvashi Bahugana (2018), reporting for *Scroll.in*, thinks that while the long-list was a "welcome expansion of the Booker's horizons"

—generically, if not geographically—the funnelling down into a shortlist "became an exercise in expunging most of the braver inclusions" (n.p.). Arguably, this sounds like a case of one step forward and several steps back—and of appeasing audiences by projecting a bold, broadened commitment on the prize's part—only to cull these "braver" choices at the shortlist stage and ultimately play it safe. In doing so, the narrative the Booker is creating, and the tone it is setting is this: these books are longlist-worthy only in, and so far as, they serve the purpose of generating positive publicity around the prize at the initial long-list announcement, but are dispensable once they have served this role. In other words, it says, that for whatsoever reason, these books cannot possibly be *prize-worthy*, indeed Booker-worthy. It is worth noting here that, while this is only a snapshot of the Booker in one prizing year, albeit its 50th birthday year, this behaviour is not specific or unique to 2018—and one can trace similar strategic moves and measures at the shortlist stage in other prizing years too. Additionally, this behaviour is not particular to the Booker proper either: taking 2018 as a sample again, the long-list to shortlist decisions for the [Man] Booker International Prize and Women's Prize for Fiction generated similar debates, along genre and gender lines, respectively—as did the Nobel Prize for Literature. While the former prided itself on featuring two short story collections on the long-list, the latter pegged its long-list announcement on the "inclusion" of a gender-fluid, non-binary author for the first time in the Women's Prize's history—Akwaeke Emezi for *Freshwater.* Mysteriously, although unsurprisingly for the Prize, and not dissimilar to the 2018 Booker Prize, these arguably braver and bolder inclusions had all disappeared from both shortlists (although, in Emezi's case, they requested to be withdrawn, as mentioned in the introduction).

Alex Preston, writing in *The Guardian* of the 2018 Booker shortlist on the eve of the announcement asks how the final six stood up:

> Picking a winner at this stage is a mixture of rune-reading and guesswork, aided by a knowledge of the judges and whom they might favour. Opening the prize to American authors in 2014 seemed to pique a large swath of the British literary establishment. With the last two winners—George Saunders and Paul Beatty—coming from the US, there might be a lurking impulse among the judges that three in a row would be too many, especially an all-American male like [Richard] Powers. It's now been

> five years since a woman (Catton) won the prize. Of course *none of these things should matter—it's the quality of the novels that's at stake*—but one knows from the loose lips of previous judges that they do. (Preston 2018, emphasis mine; n.p.)

From the long-list to the shortlist and the winner, one thing is for certain: one can never expect the Booker Prize to come through in terms of gender equality, genre inclusivity, *and* geographical diversity—all in the same prizing year. Perhaps two out of three criteria or categories, if one is lucky, and if the Booker Prize has found itself in a particularly desperate position to hold its own. Looking back, Robert McCrum (2018) has written how, in its first decade (the 1970s), Booker judges "on three occasions award[ed] the prize to novels about India". Following this, having given the prize to Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, "a profoundly influential decision, Booker then went on a multicultural spree through the English-speaking world (ex-America)" for the next two decades (n.p.). "'The empire strikes back' became a cliché of 1980s literary comment," he adds, but "having been right about the English literatures of India, Australia and the rest, the prize misjudged the other big story of these decades, the emergence of a brilliant new generation of female novelists" (n.p.). Whether in its first decade or its fifth decade, it is as though the Booker has persevered to be politically correct, but has only managed to tick one box at a time—that it has a predilection to box-tick is itself problematic—that is, its prizing priorities come in phases ("novels about India"; "multicultural spree"; debut novelists), or are prompted by a big scandal in the preceding prize year—and it is plausible that these phases, trends, and tendencies are steeped in a publicity stunt and what is most likely to make the Booker look prestigious—and as prizing the "finest fiction". To add to this, if one were to track media headlines about the Booker Prize year after year, it is also evident that its decisions have been an exercise in responding or reacting to, and rectifying, the previous year's criticisms and scandals. For example: if in one year, the prize has been called out for rewarding too many renowned voices, or for consecrating the same set of names in the prize circuit—for example: when the Booker Prize went to Hilary Mantel for the second time—in the next cycle it tends to foreground a slew of debut voices on its long-list and shortlist—thus maintaining an equilibrium of sorts. As Stephen M. Levin (2014) writes of the starkly dissimilar ways in which judges declared their judging criteria in 2011 and 2012: "The Booker operates, in other words, within the dialectics of structure and play, between the market's logic of exchange and the particular qualities of the unique work. The literary system generates both a type and the means to subvert

and destabilize this type with the production of supplementary narratives, a process sustained in this instance by the intervening event of 'scandal'" (481). Of course, the media is complicit in creating this image of the Booker—and the two bodies work hand-in-hand, and arguably feed off each other in what can be called a toxic, parasitic, self-serving relationship. Indeed, the Booker is known for courting the media in order to control its image, as Stevie Marsden writes (2021), alongside other critics such as Beth Driscoll (2013, 2014) and Claire Squires (2007, 2013). She evokes Anna Auguscik, who in *Prizing Debate: The Fourth Decade of the Booker Prize and the Contemporary Novel in the UK* (2017), argues that this has made it a "problem-driven attention-generating mechanism" (327). And while it may seem that media coverage often describes the Booker in a damned if you do, damned if you don't kind of way, there is no smoke without fire—and the Booker has been increasingly inflammable for some time now.

Alex Preston's comment, quoted above, that "none of these things [gender, genre, geography] should matter—it's the quality of the novels that's at stake," raises a crucial point (n.p.). While he is quick to add that these things do indeed matter, basing this knowledge on the gossipy behaviour of big-mouthed judges, he also dismisses it without further thought or probing questioning. Preston's statement may seem deceptively simple, but, in fact, strikes at the very heart of the Booker Prize's functioning in over fifty years, and should be taken very seriously. The occasion of the Booker's 50th birthday was orbited by over-the-top celebrations true to the Booker's show-off-y style. Alongside the Golden Man Booker Prize was the Man Booker 50 Festival (a collaboration between the Booker Foundation and the Southbank Centre for a weekend-long, one-off literary festival) and the launch of the sub-site: the Vintage Man Booker advertising the Booker-commissioned BBC Four documentary "Barneys, Books, and Bust-Ups: 50 years of the Booker Prize"; the British Library & National Life Stories film "Behind the Scenes: The Man Booker at 50"; and the opening up of the Oxford Brookes Booker Prize Archive for a special 50th anniversary online exhibition, and more).

Nestled among this reservoir of resources was also an article on the Booker's backstory by none other than the President of the Booker Prize Foundation: Jonathan Taylor. In this article, he writes: "From its inception to this day the prize has certain unchanged, endur-

ing features. It is for the best single book, in the opinion of the judges, published within the last 12 months; there are no other literary criteria" (n.p.). But the Prize has arguably also "evolved" over time. And about the controversial 2014 rule change to the entry criteria, where "entry was extended to any novel written by any novelist of any nationality from a UK publisher and published in English", he adds: "So the prize is now open to authors from Chicago to Sheffield to Shanghai. As the world's foremost prize for literary fiction it was felt that the Man Booker Prize should embrace all fiction written in English, in all its glory and versatility without regard to frontiers or passports" (n.p.). At a cursory glance, Taylor's comments too, like Alex Preston's, seem simple and self-explanatory—when they are in fact coded, hold deeper connotations and have consequences. In other words, there is a bigger conversation to be had here.

Taylor's first comment steers clear of the phrase "the novel in English" (arguably a crucial criteria of the Booker)—and makes eligibility and entry to the Booker seem suspiciously simple: "there are no other literary criteria," Taylor says (n.p.). But of course, as literary prize critics are aware, there are. Stephen M. Levin's article, "Is There A Booker Aesthetic? Iterations of the Global Novel" (2014), raises and aims to resolve the question it asks. ("Rushdie's novel is perhaps the closest we have to a prototypical Booker text, recognized as it was on multiple Booker anniversaries after initially receiving the prize in 1981," he writes (487)). While the Booker has, in recent years (since 2016), compensated for this English-language-only prize through the Man Booker International Prize (previously the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize)—and which has its own set of successes and shortcomings beyond the scope of this thesis—it is evident that certain unsaid but implied criteria and prizing tendencies do exist. After all, why else would the Booker Prize, in its 50th year, "overturn expectations" (Jordan 2018) by including genre fiction such as graphic novels and crime thrillers on its long-list? And of the score of winners between 1997 and 2017, why have only nine winning works been historical fiction? "It's not that those novels didn't deserve recognition and readership, but just that the Booker's seemingly broad scope… ultimately rewards certain kinds of writing more than others," notes Urvashi Bahuguna (2018). Furthermore, the rules and regulations of the Booker also stipulate that a submitting publisher must print at least two literary books per year in order to make their application to the Prize. The second half of Taylor's comment, however, holds more cause for concern. The mention of a UK pub-

lisher implies that "the best single book" may only be published in (often the capital—London—of) the ex-Empire—and that, while novelists worldwide, regardless of nationality, may write in English, their novels only have validity, and are therefore *prize-worthy*, when picked up by UK publishers, markets, and readers.

While it is understandable that certain rules of eligibility must exist for a prize—and not just the Booker Prize—to exercise purpose and exude a personality on the literary landscape, these rules necessarily also accompany restrictions. All literary prizes, big or small, are based "on a process of inclusion and exclusion," as Ponzanesi writes (2011, 1128). And while the criteria of a UK publisher (this now includes publishers in Ireland) is one way to address this, it also understandably complicates or contradicts—even undermines—the Prize's claims and aims to be global, international, and beyond strict borders. The Booker's brand is "fiction at its finest" or the finest fiction—and Taylor's phrase, "all fiction written in English, in all its glory and versatility without regard to frontiers or passports" reflects that in some respects. As readers, how wonderful it is to imagine a literary world without borders and citizenships. But Taylor's, and by extension the Booker's, vision of literature beyond borders is idealistic wishful thinking at best—and impractical and ignorant at worst. In other words, it may be imagined in theory, but the practical implications of it seem problematic or possibly far-fetched. I argue that the Booker's self-fashioned brand of recognising and rewarding "fiction at its finest" is nothing more than a distraction from the real issues of representation at hand. In asserting that it is the arbiter of the "finest fiction", and then proceeding to continually award the prize—and disproportionately so—to mostly white male authors usually writing "literary fiction", is not the Booker inadvertently claiming that this "finest fiction" is almost exclusively the product and property of the white European male at the heart of Europe? Yes, it is a British literary prize, but it has also always been considered the premier literary prize for Commonwealth literatures—and has itself increasingly self-identified and inclined as more international and global. Also, and as statistics have shown, the Booker's track record has been far from fair or consistent or politically conscious, if not politically correct—and it must make considerable changes before it even begins to conceive of a borderless literary world, without the burden of consequences, and moving forward from its 50-year anniversary.

Here I would like to briefly revisit Sam Carter's aforementioned-article, "The Nobel's Faulty Compass" (2017), to reiterate my point regarding the Booker's prizing philosophy. Carter writes of the Nobel Prize's skewed statistics: "If these numbers are supposed to be approximations or even representations of an ideal direction, we should ask ourselves if the compass is broken. After all, it seems hard—impossible is probably the more suitable formulation here—to believe that the magnetic north of the literary lies in Europe or in the languages that have emerged from it." While Carter takes issue with the Nobel's history primarily along linguistic lines (alongside mentions of gender and nationality), his argument is pertinent and applicable to the Booker. Prizes born in and home to the "Global North" may claim to have a British/Commonwealth, global, international, even borderless, outlook and scope, but ultimately don't travel very far. On the contrary, they have been increasingly inward-looking and narrow-sighted, as will be seen shortly. Neither has the Booker been risky enough with genre nor representative enough of the writing world-at-large in English. There has often been a discrepancy between its intentions and ideals and its actions, and it has failed to faithfully translate the former into the latter, despite its big and empty dreams and promises—thus carving space for criticism and controversy time and time again. As Bahuguna (2018) asks: What does it mean if, 50 years on, the "mission of the prize is [still] difficult to pin down"? (n.p.).

All that glittered was not gold when it came to the Golden Man Booker Prize—or the Booker's 50th extravagant birthday celebrations. Whilst the Booker was basking in its own glory, including by opening up its archives to attract attention to itself—and here it is noteworthy that the Booker considers any publicity good publicity—long-time followers of the prize were asking urgent questions ahead of, and in the aftermath of, its 50th anniversary. Bahuguna (2018) brings up the issue of the mystery that seems to surround the Booker's mission: "… it's unclear whether it is interested at all in either audience or innovation. Neither is a pre-requisite for good books, but this prize often mystifies critics and readers with its choices," she writes (n.p.). Read in the context of Jonathan Taylor's afore-quoted comments about the prize's "enduring" and evergreen intention and vision of awarding the "finest fiction", this mystification takes on an added layer. A contradiction lies at the heart of the Booker: it is at once too myopic and too mangled, too centre-specific and too convo-

luted, in its arguably precise yet vague personality and philosophy. The prize is also continually self-congratulatory, self-contradictory and self-damaging in a variety of ways.

Writing in the *Financial Times*, Nilanjana Roy (2018) acknowledges that the Booker has always had critics, but concedes that it is "nevertheless still likely to set the standard for some decades to come, perhaps because the Man Booker has consistently delivered good long-lists and shortlists, and because the prize constantly adapts to the zeitgeist" (n.p.). This is one way of putting it—and perhaps a little generous on Roy's part. Quite another would be of reading these adjustments or tweaks to the Prize as mere tactical moves, mechanisms to tap into the publishing-politics of that particular moment—and to one's advantage. Besides, it is evident that the Golden Booker was an exercise in nostalgia. Critics, too, wish for the Booker that was, the Booker of the past—the Booker in its apparent heyday. "At 50," Roy adds, "the Booker's biggest challenge will be to stay relevant" (n.p.). This echoes Alexandra Schwartz's comments about the Nobel Prize for Literature in *The New Yorker* (2018)—about how it is only as valuable as the value we afford it, and of its need to stay relevant, and not just conveniently timely or topical, moving ahead. It also reiterates my previous argument about the Booker's phases, its trends and tendencies to award books in a timely manner—mostly to placate and pacify its audiences in the aftermath of some serious misbehaviour on its part. Roy reads this as adapting to changes in the cultural zeitgeist, but perhaps it is nothing more than a clever survival tactic to weather the storm—or a last-resort effort to clean up its dirty act. Finally, to claim that it has "consistently delivered good long-lists and shortlists" is to disregard or dismiss the imbalance in statistics of gender, genre, and geography that the Booker has also "consistently delivered".

In this arena of arguments about the Booker's future, it is Rachel Cooke who proceeds to ask the hard questions, and to push the Prize's existential crisis to its limits, in her essay "Has the Booker Prize Lost Its Mojo?" (2018). Some of the issues Cooke raises, based on interviews with publishers and booksellers, including statistics of shortlist-generated sales are—how the shortlist has "stopped being a reliable indicator as far as readers go"[9]; how it is

[9] Interestingly, the 2017 Booker winner, *Lincoln in the Bardo* by George Saunders, "became known in the book industry as the lowest-selling Booker winner in the year of its win" (Tivnan 2018, quoted in Chatfield 2019), and while judges and book critics were worried the 2018 winner, *Milkman* by Anna Burns, was "unlikely to please booksellers" (Claire Armitstead, *The Guardian,* 2018), it was reported soon after that it "defie[d] 'challenging' reputation to become bestseller" (Alison Flood, *The Guardian,* 2018).

getting ever harder to find willing Booker judges; and "niggling anxieties" about the prize-giving ceremony (n.p.). In some ways, these are questions about the body of the Booker, its corporeality, its material functioning and future—instead of its often-debated personality and prizing philosophy. But a "larger cloud of anxiety looms over the Booker and all who sail in her," Cooke writes, once again, reverberating the critical imagery on the future of the post-sexual assault Nobel Prize scandal in 2018 (n.p.):

> The Man Group, the prize's sponsor since 2002, is signed up only until 2020, and the word is that Luke Ellis, its CEO, is somewhat less keen on the company's £1.6m annual commitment to both it and the International Man Booker prize than his predecessor. Given the well-publicised withdrawal of other sponsors from book prizes in recent years, no one is taking anything for granted. (Cooke 2018; n.p.)

While the pulling back of funding is a crucial concern for the Booker Prize's future, and indeed for any literary prize's future, Cooke also hopes to see it return to its former glamour and glory of the 1980s and 1990s—to when it was "as passionately and widely talked about" (n.p.). (In February 2019, it was announced that Silicon Valley billionaire, philanthropist and author Michael Moritz and his wife Harriet Heyman's charitable foundation, Cranksart, would be the new sponsor of the Booker Prize, a month after the Man Group revealed it was ending its 18-year sponsorship. The foundation has committed to an initial five-year exclusive funding term for the Booker, with an option to renew for a further five years. It will not give its name to the award, which will revert to its old name of the Booker Prize from June 1, 2019, when the Man Group's sponsorship ends.) But "maybe we've simply come, down the years, to expect too much of it" Cooke laments (n.p.). Here, again, her argument aligns with Alexandra Schwartz's on the Nobel Prize (2018)—on not taking the prize too seriously, on not giving it too much literary weight and cultural currency. There is some truth to this. On a literary landscape proliferating with prizes, perhaps too much pressure is put on a handful of prizes (the Nobel Prize, the Booker Prize) to perform to meet, indeed exceed, expectations. But, when prizes proclaim themselves as premier and the most prestigious in the field—the arbiters and awarders of the "finest" fiction—it is natural and necessary to hold them accountable. This is why the Booker Prize received waves of criticism when it announced a major rule change in 2014—a significant stunt through which

the Prize would begin to "swallow itself" as Michael Caines has written. Here, a throwback to this pivotal moment in the literary prize's history and trajectory proves productive.

The "biggest rule-change in its 45-year history"

In February of 2018, *The Guardian* reported that "tensions over the decision to allow US authors to enter the Man Booker prize [had] flared up yet again," with 30 publishers co-signing a letter, urging the prize administrators to reverse the change, or risk, what they called, a "homogenised literary future" (Cain 2018c; n.p.). This letter, initially intended to be private, had since been leaked and circulated on the Internet. It claimed that the 2014 rule change (allowing American authors into the Booker-sphere) had affected the apparent diversity of the prize, and also resulted in the "dominance" of American authors on long- lists and shortlists since the announcement:

> The rule change, which presumably had the intention of making the prize more global, has in fact made it less so, by allowing the dominance of Anglo-American writers at the expense of others; and risks turning the prize, which was once a brilliant mechanism for bringing the world's English-language writers to the attention of the world's biggest English-language market, into one that is no longer serving the readers in that market ... [It] will therefore be increasingly ignored. (qtd. in Cain 2018c; n.p.)

The letter further places the pre-rule change shortlist from 2013 (featuring authors from across Britain, Ireland, New Zealand, Zimbabwe, as well as an American-Canadian and a British-American) alongside the-then latest one from 2017, which saw three American authors on a six-strong shortlist, to elucidate its claims regarding diversity (in this case, the lack thereof). "In a globalised but economically unequal world, it is more important than ever that we hear voices not from the centres. The rule change has made this much less likely to happen" it adds (n.p.). The letter concludes with a plea: "As concerned friends, and as publishers who worry about a homogenised literary future, we urge you to reconsider your decision" (qtd. in Cain 2018c; n.p.). Shortly after this, the Man Booker Foundation released a statement in response: "The Man Booker prize expanded in 2014 to allow writers of any nationality, regardless of geography, to enter the prize providing that they are writing

in English and published in the UK. The rule was not created specifically to include American writers." It added that there was no palpable proof of the publishers' claims, and besides, "clear trends cannot be drawn from a mere four years of data" (n.p.). Finally, it clarified that "the judges… are charged with finding the best novel of the year, in their opinion, written in English. The trustees believe that this mission cannot be constrained or compromised by national boundaries" (n.p.). If one is to understand why this rule change has resurfaced as a topic of conversation, five years after it was first introduced, and in order to unpack claims on both ends of the debate—claims about nationality, eligibility, and diversity—it is revealing to travel back in time to the initial announcement in 2013, and the reactions it received in the immediate aftermath of this.

In what was covered[10] as the "biggest rule-change in its 45-year history" (Brown 2013a), the Man Booker Prize confirmed that from 2014 onwards, all English-language writers (with no exceptions) would be eligible for the award. Jonathan Taylor, chairman of the Booker Prize Foundation, elaborated in a blog post, "Man Booker Prize announces global expansion", on the prize website (n.p.). "The expanded prize will recognise, celebrate and embrace authors writing in English, whether from Chicago, Sheffield or Shanghai"; the change had been the culmination of 18 months of "extensive investigation and evaluation"; and "views of writers, readers, publishers, agents, booksellers and others were canvassed on both sides of the Atlantic and beyond," he writes (n.p.). He also shares that the team had considered setting up a separate prize, but had ultimately decided against it for fear of "jeopardising or diluting the existing" one. This global expansion, Taylor clarifies, was a move in the direction of reinforcing the prize's position, "which for 45 years has been the touchstone for literary fiction written in English of the highest quality," as the premier literary award in the English-speaking world (n.p.). "We are embracing the freedom of English in its versatility, its vigour, its vitality and its glory wherever it may be. We are abandoning the constraints of geography and national boundaries," he adds (n.p.). Up to this point,

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[10] "If the reason to sponsor your prize is to get your brand in the news, the Man Group must be absolutely delighted. The coverage of the announcement about the change in rules has been phenomenal," writes Peter Straus, on *The Bookseller* website. "A percentage of the British literary community has reacted with dismay, but it is worth noting this is not the first time there has been such a response. In 1975, when the Booker shortlist appeared, it consisted of just two contenders: an Indian lady, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, and an Australian gentleman, Thomas Keneally. There was outcry in the British press then too: the concern was that the prize had turned its back on British writers," Straus adds. ("Peter Straus on the Man Booker rule changes." 2013)

alongside British citizens, citizens of the Commonwealth (including South Africa, Zimbabwe) and the Republic of Ireland had been eligible for the British prize. Speaking from the same perspective, Taylor's fellow trustee, Helena Kennedy, says that writers were writing novels in English in places as far and wide as China, Brazil, and Israel—and that it was a shame that there existed a "border control" of sorts which prevented them from competing on the basis of what colour passport they carried (qtd. in Brown 2013; n.p.). But an attempt at disallowing one type of "border control" makes space for another kind of exclusion—even if unintentional.

So the Booker Prize's global expansion did, in fact, have its basis in geography and nationality; it evokes it—and this can be easily traced in the comments by its chairman and its trustee—even as it was seeking to evade it. Indeed, as initial, and more recent, reactions to its rule change reflect, this has had implications for the prize's own identity and ideas of inclusivity. It is ironic, though, that an eligibility change which endeavoured to embody a united literary world—if only along linguistic lines—had its citizens (media critics and literary editors; former winners and former judges; publishers and other prize founders;) so deeply divided into opposing teams of unquestioning supporters and dissenters, respectively. (Like with the Golden Man Booker, and its philosophy of time-as-testament of the Booker's "finest fictions", here too, the Booker's own language and terminology has backfired against its arguably well-meaning and well-intentioned rule change.) Ron Charles at *The Washington Post* and Tibor Fischer at *The Guardian*, writing retrospectively, and from either end of the Atlantic, deemed the rule change "perilous" (for the "already depressingly xenophobic" American reading audiences) and a "problem" (for novelists "here [in Britain] and from the Commonwealth"), respectively, and from the perspectives of each of their national literary landscapes and cultures (n.p.). Whilst acknowledging that it is perilous and a problem, both critics also use descriptors such as the Booker "opened their doors" and "opening the prize to global competition has been good for its profile"—suggesting that this has been a welcoming and embracing move (although Charles also refers to it as the moment of the "Americanisation" of the Booker) (n.p.).

Alex Shephard, writing about the Booker for *The New Republic*, and on two separate occasions, was more acerbic in his selection of words. He opened his 2015 piece with the

statement: "Two years ago, it seemed as if the Man Booker Prize was out to conquer the world." Further still, in the second of these pieces written two years later (2017a), he notes that whereas previously "the winner was determined by a small and incestuous circle of London elites", post-2014, the main complaint about the Booker is that it is not insular enough" (n.p.). Thus, these ideas of invitation and insularity also give way to those pertaining to the prize's identity. For example, in the former piece, Shephard felt that the prize was "somewhat liminal—both not quite British and too British at the same time" (2015; n.p.). He later concludes that, "by becoming an English language prize, the Man Booker ha[s] lost its identity as a British/Commonwealth prize" (2017a; n.p.). He was not alone in this identity crisis debate. Professor John Mullan had raised this issue in the *BBC*, in "'A surprise and a risk': Reaction to Booker Prize upheaval" following the 2014 rule change: "although it appears to let in lots more good fiction, it risks diluting the identity of the prize, which has a strangely generous range and yet a curious kind of coherence".

Once shortlisted and twice judge, author Susan Hill wrote "Not sure I can see a reason for this. Why can't we have a prize of our own?" Meanwhile, Kazuo Ishiguro, the 1989 Booker winner, and 2017 Nobel Prize winner, like Jonathan Taylor, chairman of the Booker Prize Foundation, notes: "the world has changed and it no longer makes sense to split up the writing world in this way". Alastair Niven, a 2014 prize judge, also adds: "I don't think that writers in this country have any reason to be paranoiac or timid about competition from the US. They should welcome the challenge. If American literary awards don't include British writing then more fool them. It's just another example of America First. Surely we don't want to encourage a Britain First mentality here" (all qtd. in Cain 2018c; n.p.). Similar varied reactions and opinions were first collected in a *BBC* article, "'A surprise and a risk': Reaction to Booker Prize upheaval", and foreshadow these 50th birthday debates. Words and phrases such as "international prize" and "the Booker is reaching out" (AL Kennedy); "anxiety" about the influx of US authors (Andrew Holgate); and "the Booker's 'impressive'

profile in the US might suffer if it lost its intrinsic 'Britishness'"[11] were recorded, and considered representative of the ripple effect created by the rule change (n.p.).

This relaxed entry had caused quite a stir—one that has resurfaced, especially after two Americans, Paul Beatty (*The Sellout*, 2016) and George Saunders (*Lincoln in the Bardo*, 2017), took home the prize in the four years they had been permitted to participate in it. Whether we should consider the post-2014 Booker as determinedly open, inclusive, and welcoming or be wary of its repercussions, raised by critics at large, is something time—and future shortlisted and long-listed authors and winners—will tell. In the short-term, though, the opinions that orbit the prize, and point to its personality through the persistent mention of its "Britishness" (or loss and lack thereof), form fertile ground for debate. The Booker's expansion was intentionally "global", and as AL Kennedy hopes, ideally even "international", but as can be gathered from some critics' comments, this could be at the cost of the prize's identity, its "intrinsic Britishness". In other words, for the Booker, this seemingly outward-facing, globe-spanning decision on the part of the prize, then, could perhaps be at the price of something closer to home.

Metaphors of contradiction have always been at the heart of the Man Booker Prize, which tends to find a home in thresholds and liminal spaces: what can a British (but not quite), English-language (translations excluded) prize, which claims to "abandon the constraints of geography and national boundaries" (Jonathan Taylor, 2018; n.p.), really accomplish or accommodate, circumvent or contain? And if it was attempting to bypass a literary "border control" of sorts, what new restrictions (regional and otherwise) of its own was it replacing old, arguably redundant, ones with? A prize whose identity has been called into question time and again, the Booker has, in turn, re-branded and re-booted in response to this; the 2014 rule change is discernibly the "biggest rule-change in its 45-year history"

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[11] One way to read the Booker's "intrinsic Britishness" may be through what Peter Strauss calls the its "uniqueness". (*The Bookseller* 2013) "Its current rules had three distinctive qualities: (1) the territory covered, the Commonwealth, was unusual; (2) every publisher could enter an equal number of submissions (aside from previous shortlistees); and (3) this territory allowed the judges each to read all the books entered, rather than divide them up between them." he clarifies. Speaking of this "conventional structure," but distinctiveness nonetheless, Stephen M. Levin (2014) adds: "one may pose the argument that the Booker stands out for its unique evocation of the Commonwealth and the appeal the prize makes to the unity of geography and aesthetics" (483).

(Brown 2013), but the scandals started early for the Booker—all the way back to its beginnings.

2014 and 1972: Mirror Booker

This current, post-2014 furor can be traced back to over forty years ago—to 1972 and the critically well-traversed John Berger fiasco—and these two moments (2014 and 1972) in the Booker's history can be mirrored to make an investigation into its identity and inner workings. It is not implausible to put forth the idea that the 2014 "Americanization of the Booker" (Charles 2017) was perhaps the most impactful controversy to circulate around the Booker since the one instigated by John Berger in its nascent years. This is not to say that the prize hasn't been studded with "scandals"—James F. English (2005) and others have argued—throughout its existence spanning half a century. He writes of Martyn Goff, the prize's administrator between 1970-2006: "a major figure in the history of prizes, [he] was fully and actively complicit in exploiting the association of the Booker with scandal, wagering that the prize stood to reap the greatest symbolic profit precisely from its status as a kind of cultural embarrassment […] And Goff came to realize early on that each new Booker scandal provoked objection not just to a particular jury decision or management policy or winner's acceptance speech, but to the very existence of the prize" (207-208). Similarly, Claire Squires (2015) reveals that he has been described as "the man who sculpted scandal to build the Booker Prize" (n.p.).

In fact, several critics predate Squires' position that the element of scandal has been essential and integral to the existence of the Booker Prize's sustained success. In *Consuming Fictions: The Booker Prize and Fiction in Britain Today* (1999), Richard Todd reaches the conclusion that "controversy has in many respects actually been the making of the Booker Prize" He adds: "It is surely evident that it is precisely by getting it wrong that the Booker survives" (64). Writing in 2008, James F. English agrees that: "it is an increasingly open secret that the success of the Booker Prize […] is bound up with the annual flurry of scandal that attends it in the dailies and in the literary press" (198). He further writes that "far from posing a threat to the prize's efficacy as an instrument of the cultural economy, scandal is its lifeblood; far from constituting a critique, indignant commentary about the prize is an index of its normal

and proper functioning" (208). Similarly, as Sandra Ponzanesi writes (2011), "in the end, these kinds of scandals, though negative, refocus media attention on the prize…" (1147). As early as 1992, ex-prize judge Mark Lawson admits that "it's the rows that keep the Booker going" (qtd. in Todd 64). Thus, it is safe to say that the Booker Prize has increasingly become synonymous with scandals, some more significant—indeed more scandalous.

To reiterate, two pertinent incidents, or scandals—John Berger's speech and the "Americanization of the Booker"—when paired, illuminate the issues around the prize's identity crisis, which, seemingly contemporary, can also be connected back to the Booker's early years and beginnings. This latest rule change in 2014, aimed as a "global expansion" on the part of the prize, can be considered as an active move. In her thesis, "The Booker Prize: Literature, Britain, and the World 1968-1999" (2015), Kara Lee Donnelly concedes that "the global […] lurked behind the prize" (7). She also adds: "The founders did not set out to create a global, postcolonial, or even robustly Commonwealth award; rather, they based their decisions on trade relationships, which were based on long histories of exploitation and underdevelopment. As a result, they set themselves up to become a global prize even though this role was far from the organizers minds" (18). As Stephen M. Levin (2014) notes, Richard Todd's *Consuming Fictions* calls "attention to the temptation to read the prize's expanding cosmopolitan appeal as a sign of its salutary results in expanding the parameters of English-language fiction"—and in Todd's characterisation, as Levin argues, the Booker Prize emerges as a "major catalyzing force" for the emergence of "a postcolonial literary era" (482):

> [The] unprecedented exposure of fiction from English-speaking countries other than the United Kingdom or the United States led to an increasingly global picture of fiction in Britain during the course of the 1980s. It is now the case that the line-up of half or more of a typical late 1980s or 1990s Booker shortlist is not centered on Britain. This reflects a new public awareness of Britain as a pluralist society, and has transformed the view that prevailed in the 1960s, that English-language fiction from "abroad" meant fiction from the United States. (Todd 83)

In other words, while the Booker Prize didn't deliberately set out to be global, it has unintentionally become more and more global over fifty years through its various activities and associations over the years—the active 2014 rule-change to include Americans is, arguably, contradictory to this claim. Furthermore, in her 2017 book, *Prizing Debate: The Fourth Decade of the Booker Prize and the Contemporary Novel in the UK,* Anna Auguscik's speaks similarly of the Booker's various "problems and precarious alliances" over the years (24). Then, there are also the various instances of the Booker branching out across the world—or rather, its various iterations and imitations; there exist several Booker-inspired prizes, or prizes modelled on the Booker Prize through their prizing ideals or inner workings. The Caine Prize for African Writing—over twenty years old and Africa's top prize—is commonly known as the "African Booker". The International Prize for Arabic Fiction (IPAF), arguably the most prestigious literary prize in the Arab world, is often referred to as the "Arabic Booker". And the relatively new JCB Prize for Literature hopes to be "India's Booker". In other words, the Booker's trajectory and identity has, from its onset, been interlinked with, and cannot be understood in isolation from, its various geographies and global locations, associations, and imitations. And if the 1972 John Berger speech and scandal calls to attention the Booker's colonial and "checkered history"—its past—as Graham Huggan writes (1994, 24), the 2014 "Americanization of the Booker" gestures to its interests and itineraries going forward.

"The history of the Booker Prize is well-rehearsed terrain," writes Stephen M. Levin, in "Is There a Booker Aesthetic? Iterations of the Global Novel" (2014, 479)—as is the 1972 John Berger scandal—but it is also one worth returning to and dwelling on for the purposes of this discussion. James F. English reports in 2008—as do Graham Huggan (1994), Richard Todd (1996), and Kara Lee Donnelly (2015), among others—and with research rooted in archival materials housed in the Book Trust Archives at Oxford Brookes University, that "the whole venture was very close to folding within just a couple years of its launch" (202). "What happened instead," he adds, "is [that] the Booker began, in 1971, to deliver a series of annual scandals" (202-203). But "the best known of these—the one that gets mentioned in every capsule history of the prize—is that of John Berger's rude acceptance in 1972," he claims (203). As discussed at-length in the introduction, Berger stood before the Booker executives and ceremony attendees and denounced the Booker corporation as a colonialist enterprise, donating half his winnings to the Black Panthers.

And lo and behold! The Booker Prize, which was preparing for a potentially early exit was, in a dramatic turn of events, propelled into prominence on the literary landscape. He adds that the "Berger incident could not have given such an enormous boost to the Booker's public profile had it not been prepared for by a modest scandal the previous year" (203). Furthermore, as Stephen M. Levin (2014) notes, "although they do not necessarily follow suit with Berger's overt criticism of the prize's sponsorship, similar protests serve to valorize a specific construction of literary value" (480). In 1971, Malcolm Muggeridge, resigned from the jury and wrote to the Booker secretary that the nominated books, "seem to me to be mere pornography in the worst sense of the word, and to lack any literary qualities or distinctions which could possibly compensate for the unsavouriness of their contents" (qtd. in English 204). Thus, the magnitude of the seemingly big Berger moment had its roots in a smaller, if less significant scandal, and very early on in the Prize's lifetime. James F. English follows in the critical footsteps of Graham Huggan, who wrote in 1994, and with the specific example of John Berger, and clarifies that: "the ironies behind the company's past have not been lost on former Booker Prize winners" either (25). In yet another early example, J. G. Farrell's 1974 Booker for *The Siege of Krishnapur* led to further critiques of the sponsors—and his acceptance speech referenced a better time when British miners "would get higher priority than businessmen, and rich people would not be able to buy privileged schooling for their children" (qtd. in English 205). It is safe to surmise that a series of scandals studded the Booker Prize from the beginning.

Reading the John Berger scandal retrospectively, and decades later, Kara Lee Donnelly also confirms that the writer would "draw explosive attention to Booker McConnell's practice of colonial exploitation" in an "acerbic acceptance speech in which he castigated the Booker", and that "the most significant news related to Berger's win was, [in fact], his attack on Booker's past and present exploitation of workers in the colonies rather than anything related to his avant-garde approach" (7-10; 66). Berger's "acerbic speech" gestured to the geography and the history of the Booker Prize's inception—and to the sponsors of the prize, Booker McConnell Ltd, a colonial agricultural firm with wealth that was derived from sugar plantations in Guyana. "The Booker's geographical area [then was] the Caribbean,"

adds Donnelly (21), gesturing to its colonial cartographies—and already decentralising and destabilising it as a British prize. But if John Berger's speech is anything to go by, and as the Booker's commercial roots indeed rest in the colonial Caribbean, its literary inspiration can be located elsewhere. And so, one begins to chart how, as Donnelly writes, the global truly may have "lurked behind the prize" since it first came to life in 1969 (7).

The brainchild of the Booker Prize was Tom Maschler, "a publishing *Wunderkind* at Jonathan Cape," who approached Charles Tyrrell and John Murphy of the Booker group in 1968—and who could "scarcely have envisioned that the literary prize he was proposing would become a household word and a nationally televised extravaganza," writes English (198). Maschler had previously attended the prize season in Paris, been attracted to the "intellectual fervor" enveloping the Prix Goncourt, and therein perceived an opportunity to recreate an annual prize-event, similar to the stature of the Prix Goncourt or Pulitzer Prize in Britain (199):

> Unlike the Goncourt and Pulitzer, which had been organized by entrepreneurs in publishing and journalism and hence promoted with great vigor and competence from the start, the earliest surviving book prizes in Britain—the James Tait Black and the Hawthornden (both contemporary with the Pulitzer)—had neither sought nor attained the limelight. To Maschler, this meant that an upstart prize in Britain had the rare chance to become *the* prize, to seize belatedly the virtually unassailable position of the *prize of prizes*: a position that is mandated by the single-winner axiom that underpins the entire prize economy, but which, in Britain appeared to be unoccupied. (English 198-199)

The Prize of Prizes

One can chart the constellation of prizes in Britain in that contemporary moment;—the landscape was not without literary prizes. English argues that, because the prize was hardly alone in the field of book awards, in many ways, the Booker was "not well positioned to succeed" (201):

> Not only had it missed by half a century the important symbolic distinction of being the oldest book prize in England; it also trailed the "second generation" of book

> prizes, which had emerged during World War II with the John Llewellyn Rhys Memorial Prize (a war-widow initiative), followed by the Somerset Maugham (1946), the W. H. Smith (1959), and a few others. In 1968, the Booker was competing, as well, with a vigorous cluster of newcomers: the Guardian Prize and the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize had been founded in 1965, and the Silver Pen had just been announced earlier in 1968. (201)

Yet, none of these could compete with the Goncourt in France or the Pulitzer in America in terms of boosting book sales or cultivating cultural significance. Maschler saw an "opportunity to fill this void" in terms of cultural prestige, as Donnelly writes, and the prize was formally launched on 3 October 1968 at a press conference at the Café Royal (12; 19). The Booker Prize for Fiction, first awarded in 1969, celebrated a British or Commonwealth author (including the Republic of Ireland and South Africa) for the "best work of fiction published in Britain". Thus, it is arguable that the Booker's history and trajectory has, from the beginning, boasted a global geography—and long before it began to do so intentionally. But if John Berger's speech prompted a window into the prize's provocative past, and pinpointed the literary world to its controversial and colonial coordinates, what did it say about the prize's future?

According to Squires (2013), the Berger episode was one of the few controversies that Martyn Goff didn't have a hand in. The Booker's then administrator (until 2006), notorious because he'd often "cultivate the media" and "court scandal to get press attention," Goff was, in the immediate aftermath of this occasion, uncharacteristically, rather displeased (297). "The attack on the sponsor was, perhaps, one controversy too far," Squires wonders (297). How, then, did the sponsors react to it? As it turns out, John Berger's speech "angered some Booker McConnell shareholders and annoyed a few at the company," but overall, "support for the prize both from the British office and the Caribbean affiliates was clear," writes Donnelly (66):

> As one high-ranking Booker executive based in Guyana wrote to the London office, Berger's remarks were reported but had little impact in the Caribbean and Booker's decision not to comment on them was correct. He also added that he hoped "Berger's reaction does not have the effect in any way of influencing us to withdraw the

> prize in future" […] Indeed, Booker's executives and the prize's management committee thought that the publicity generated by Berger's remarks was on the whole a boon to the prize […] Berger looked foolish while the company's reaction "earned it considerable credit and goodwill and certainly added to the stature of the Booker Prize itself". (Booker Prize Archive Box 1/6/1/1; qtd. in Donnelly 66)

Comments by the Booker McConnell team reinstate the significance of scandals for the success of the prize. By the late 1970s, post a trio of successive—and successful—scandals, "the tone of frustration had entirely disappeared from the committee's minutes," writes English (205). Instead, they were reportedly congratulating themselves on "very satisfactory" results, and particularly on the fact that "publicity for the prize has now gained its own momentum," he adds (206). The prize had been running for some time now—and had taken on a life of its own. On the surface, Berger's speech had positive effects on the Booker's profile and position in the literary marketplace—it was a "boon" and boosted its status. More pertinently, however, it served to reshape subsequent shortlists and the ideological stance of the prize. In his book, Richard Todd quotes John Sutherland, who wrote of the events of 1972 as follows: "for all that [Berger's speech was] mocked, it had a palpable influence in politically correcting the shortlist" (78-79). He then adds: "Sutherland's suggestion that Berger's 1972 outburst helped to sanitize the Britain-centredness of the Booker is certainly persuasive" (81). Thus, while John Berger's scandalous speech may have pointed its ideological compass to the prize's global and colonial connections in one way, in quite another manner, it had a prize-changing effect on the Booker Prize's functioning and future—and its "Britain-centredness" thus far.

If the 1972 Berger scandal was largely seen as one that strengthened the Booker Prize's position in years to follow, it is arguable that the 2014 rule change, generally know as the "Americanization of the Booker", and its aftermath, alongside the Golden Booker celebrations marking the Prize's 50th anniversary, has weakened it in some ways. To reiterate James F. English's words quoted earlier, "as we lose our ability or our willingness to see the prize as a fundamentally scandalous institution, there is bound to be a period of painful contraction in the awards industry. Faced with the withdrawal of what has been by far their richest and most reliable source of publicity, prizes may after so many years of uncontainable expansion at last show some signs of fatigue" (245-246). In other words, it is arguable

that the Booker prize is showing "signs of fatigue" (246). This next section negotiates how these circuits of controversial moments have simultaneously strengthened and weakened the Booker Prize's position with the literary prize landscape. One can claim that, one the one hand, because such moments are considered scandals, they inevitably tend to afford the prize attention; but on the other hand, this attention has often been at the cost of—and through the criticisms of—the prize's identity: its "British-ness" versus its "global-ness". Thus geographical roots and routes gain precedence in matters of the prize's identity and inner workings—and two examples will elucidate this point. First, to reiterate, if the Booker Prize wasn't intentionally global to begin with, as Kara Lee Donnelly argues (2015)—but became increasingly so during the course of its lifetime—and in contrast, if the 2014 rule change *was* deliberately global, I argue that the Booker Prize merely gives the illusion of a global mapping, when in fact, it falls short of the scope it claims. For example, Stephen M. Levin's 2014 article, "Is There A Booker Aesthetic? Iterations of the Global Novel" argues that, "positioned ambivalently within the literary marketplace, the Booker Prize both reaffirms and contests our imaginings of the global" (478). Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* "is perhaps the closest we have to a prototypical Booker text, recognized as it was on multiple Booker anniversaries after initially receiving the prize in 1981," he writes, offering a "glimpse of the double gesture" which, according to him, serves as a "constitutive aspect of the Booker literary system, a system that at once inscribes Rushdie as a member of the Commonwealth and then shakes the ground beneath the feet of that ideal" (487; 489). Before illustrating two iterations of what I believe is the Booker Prize's increasing and ongoing weakened position, let us take a brief digression to the Nobel Prize and its relationship with ideas of global-ness, which will serve as a springboard and segue for situating the Booker Prize's own position vis-à-vis the global.

In early 2018, Allison Flood reported in *The Guardian* that the newly-opened "Nobel Prize archives show Graham Greene might have won [the] 1967 prize" (2018c; n.p.). Graham Greene and Jorge Luis Borges were serious contenders in that year—among seventy nominated authors, as archival material on the Swedish Academy reveals—but ultimately, Miguel Angel Asturias was to take home the prestigious prize (beating Samuel Beckett and Saul Bellow, to name a few writers). A journalist at the Swedish newspaper, *Svenska Dagbladet*, Kaj Schueler speculates that Graham Greene may have lost support "because the academy

slowly was orienting itself towards a more global outlook—it was after all the second half of the 1960s and the climate in western societies was more interested in everything outside Europe," (qtd. in Flood 2018; n.p.). The Nobel Prize's slow orientation towards the global, supposedly starting in the late 60s, would in fact be at snail-speed, and not discernible until a few decades later, if at all—and here it is interesting that the Prize's own website explains that, beginning in 1984, "attempts were being made to achieve a global distribution" (nobelprize.org) (n.p.).

Sandra Ponzanesi (2011) pins this "orienting" towards a "global outlook" down to a specific prizing year and prize recipient, to the first African writer to win the Nobel Prize. As noted earlier, the reputation of the Nobel Prize for Literature as "a purely European affair changed when Wole Soyinka was awarded the prize in 1986" (1129). After this, and within a short span of time, several other African and African-American writers were awarded the Nobel Prize—including, but not limited to: the Egyptian Mahfouz in 1988, the anti-apartheid writer Nadine Gordimer in 1991, the first African American writer, Toni Morrison, in 1993, and so on, until 2007 (2011, 1129). While there is some truth and merit to this statement, that the Nobel Prize post-Soyinka was no longer exclusive to Europe, as Burton Feldman, writing in *The Nobel Prize: A History of Genius, Controversy, and Prestige* (2000), notes, the Nobel Prize in literature is still "far from being the global award it claims to be"—seeing as its prizes have "repeatedly gone to writing in a few major European languages" (qtd. in Ponzanesi 2014, 50). Acknowledging this, Sandra Ponzanesi adds that "an attempt was made in the last decade to have the prize compensate for its shortcomings and to redress the accusations that the prize is patriarchal and Eurocentric" (51). Similarly, in an article titled "What Happened to the Nobel Prize in Literature?" (2017b) Alex Shephard argues that while it has "never had a fixed identity in its century-plus existence—it was conceived as a lifetime achievement award before the advent of lifetime achievement awards, and put writers on the same level as those who were forging world peace and expanding our knowledge of the physical universe"—it has also displayed "dismayingly Eurocentric" tendencies. Within these broad parameters, then, "it has never been entirely settled what the Nobel Prize in Literature should be," he adds. For example: It has been given to "canonical writers" (William Faulkner, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Toni Morrison), "obscurities" (Dario Fo), and "oddities" (Winston Churchill, who won for his historical writing and speeches, he

writes. This is not unlike the Booker Prize, as Urvashi Bahuguna argues (2018), where the "mission of the prize is difficult to pin down".

From the slow orienting towards a more global outlook in the 1960s to Wole Soyinka's win, which traversed into and charted new territories for the Nobel Prize in the 1980s, and from Burton Feldman situating the Nobel Prize as "far from being […] global" in the millennium to both Sandra Ponzanesi and Alex Shephard pinpointing its continued shortcomings and conflicting identities a decade after Feldman—one can argue that the Nobel Prize has been seriously slow to catch up with its far-reaching—indeed, in "an ideal direction"—claims and coverage of world literature:

> The great merit of the Nobel Prize for Literature is that it is international in scope—even if internationalism, like idealism, is a cultural virtue, not strictly a literary one… the judges for the Nobel Prize for Literature appear to presuppose that there exists a common culture or civilization… (Winegarten 72)

If "the great merit of the Nobel Prize for Literature is that it is international in scope," as Renee Winegarten writes in "The Nobel Prize for Literature" (1994), she also agrees that this is but one aspect of the award; and while it is "honorably universal, embracing writers from India… Japan… Nigeria… the Caribbean, the citations monotonously discuss literature in terms of ethnic identity and nationality," Winegarten adds (72-73). In doing so she acknowledges that while the Nobel Prize aspires to "internationalism" in theory, this is, nevertheless, nominal in its approach of awarding non-European literary figures and languages—and actually tends to re-assert national and ethnic boundaries that are far-removed from a universal understanding of the literary world. And if, on the one hand, Winegarten charts the Nobel Prize's journeys as only ostensibly international or global, for Sam Carter—whose 2017 *Asymptote* essay was discussed in detail earlier—the Nobel Prize for Literature is likely a little lost, and its "compass is broken" (n.p.).

Carter's anxieties about the Nobel Prize can be applied to the Booker without hesitation—and in order to broker the back-and-forth-ness between its "British-centredness" and "globalness". With London as the seat of the Booker Prize, is it implied that "the magnetic north of the literary lies in Europe"? Where are prizes born? Where do they reside and

travel to—and why does this matter so much? What geographies do they gravitate towards and what does this reveal about the politics of prize cultures? If we were to pursue the journeys prizes make, and specifically the journey of the Booker Prize, does it follow in the footsteps of the Nobel Prize—and similarly manifest the illusion of an international or global mapping? Answers to these questions don't always lie within the limits of this thesis, but the two examples discussed previously elucidate how the Booker Prize's position has deteriorated and become destabilised in recent times. To double-back to the beginning, and the outrage orbiting the 2014 rule change of including American writers, Ron Charles' *The Washington Post* (2017) piece draws parallels between the two aforementioned prizes: "Opening the Booker up to any work of fiction written in English comes perilously close to creating another bloated monster like the Nobel Prize in literature, an award with such broad standards that it stands for nothing at all," he writes (n.p.). As the Booker Prize celebrated half a century of its existence in 2018, and announced the one-off "Golden" Booker Prize which placed its backlist of winners in a battle of the best to mark the milestone, the question remains: can the "broad" and "bloated" monstrous Booker Prize hold its own for much longer—or will it burst at the slightest prick?

The Past, Present, and Future of the Booker

The Booker's weakened position can be seen in broadly two phases (some of which have been dealt with in earlier sections): first, in direct reactions to the major 2014 rule change, and second in more recent developments, which were born from its 50th anniversary celebrations, the Golden Booker, and Brexit. Having dissected the structure, shortcomings, and successes of the Booker as a standalone prize to some degree, this next section situates it within the larger literary landscape of Britain—and in particular, its prize industry—to better understand the position the prize holds among its peers. It revisits the Booker Prize's relationship with its contemporaries when it first arrived on the prize circuit in the late 1960s and reveals how this has changed in the half century since. Furthermore, the status that other literary prizes previously held in the literary imagination have shifted; that is, the status quo has been restructured—and new hierarchies lie on the horizon. To better understand the Booker's weakened status, this argument bookends the existence of the Booker Prize with literary prizes that prefaced its launch in the 1960s, and prizes that have relatively newly popped up on the literary landscape post 2014, alongside its major rule changes.

What will become apparent, I hope, is that the pedestal upon which the Booker was once placed—metaphorical, geographical—is slowly being unsettled and destabilised, and its position—in the post-imperial metropolis, London—is being displaced. If the Booker Prize was once the premiere literary prize in Britain—and arguably, by its own extension, the book world—and if, in the past, existing prizes sought to compete with the standards it set, the Booker Prize is now changing and morphing in, albeit subtle, ways to keep up with the competition cropping up on the prize circuit—and with the times. In other words: if prizes such as the Caine Prize for African Writing and the International Prize for Arabic Fiction were once modelled to mirror the Booker Prize, the Booker has, of late, metamorphosed to mimic other prizes. Finally, perhaps, it is also possible to read the Booker's weakened position as a last-straw attempt to strengthen itself in new ways, and to hold its own, in a space where literary prize cultures are turning more and more prestigious and prominent.

When the Booker Prize first appeared on the British literary landscape (1968-69), it was not "well positioned to succeed," writes James F. English—and this because the prize was "hardly alone on the field of English book awards" (201). Arriving when the Booker Prize did in the late sixties, it was simultaneously half a century too late to call itself the oldest book prize in England, and also second to the "second generation" of literary prizes which had emerged during World War II, he further notes (201). By 1968, the birth year of the Booker Prize, it was "competing, as well, with a vigorous cluster of newcomers": namely the Guardian Prize for Fiction and the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize, both founded in 1965, and the Silver Pen, announced earlier in 1968 (English 201). Therefore, the mid-to-late 20th century prize circuit in Britain, that is, the pre-Booker phase of prizes, was certainly already cluttered. But while the Booker may not have held precedence as the *only* prize on the literary landscape, it boasted some level of originality, says Richard Todd in *Consuming Fictions*; in other words, it was dedicated to exclusively prizing the novel form—a trait untouched by its predecessors (92). This aside, we now know that its journey had started off shaky, but a series of scandals had propelled it into success—and a position of prestige. But by the 1990s, approximately two decades after its arrival, it finally found itself on firm ground—and fellow existing prizes in the field, such as The Whitbread Awards and the Guardian Prize for Fiction, folded themselves in order to feast on the Booker's "leavings" (Todd 92):

> By the early 1990s it seemed that one of the roles of the Whitbread was to offer the possibility of challenging the Booker in what might in the public view be regarded as a 'weak' Booker year.
>
> […]
>
> Another prize (not in the same financial category but enjoying a prestige exceeded only by the Booker and the Whitbread) that negotiates the space between profiling itself distinctively and picking up Booker 'leavings' is the Guardian Prize for Fiction. (Todd 88; 92)

In other words, by the 1990s, the Booker was seen as the model prize based on which other prizes sought to mould themselves. Todd's above-quoted observations, when read alongside each other, show that even in a seemingly 'weak' Booker year, the Booker's prestige was prominent enough to still have other prizes pick up its 'leavings'. But, as English also notes: rather unremarkable in terms of age-limit, award value, and aims, the Booker was, after all, "a national novel-of-the-year award of the most generic sort, one more would-be Prix Goncourt" (202). "Indeed, in this respect most of the higher-profile fiction prizes (except those reserved for younger writers, such as the Somerset Maugham and the John Llewellyn Rhys) seem identical, and their selections even sometimes duplicate one another," he adds (202). On the one hand, English's comments gesture to the Booker's ordinariness: it was just another prize on a literary scene saturated with prizes; it was a pseudo Prix Goncourt. On the other hand, this very visible and bold competition among British literary prizes, with rival prizes rising to meet the Booker's status of conferring literary value, and living in its literary shadows, evidences that the Booker also embodied something close to extraordinary. Even in a 'weak' Booker year, it had the semblance of maintaining a stronghold in the prizing industry; even in its ordinariness, it was edging towards the exceptional. As Stephen M. Levin (2014) writes of the prize's exceptionalism: "To all appearances, it may seem difficult to justify a claim for the Booker's uniqueness: prizes of all varieties, including literary prizes, have proliferated apace within British and global world-literary systems; and, further, the criterion of a "best novel" appears not to distinguish the Booker in any meaningful manner from a legion of such prizes. However, despite this conventional structure, one

may pose the argument that the Booker stands out for its unique evocation of the Commonwealth and the appeal the prize makes to the unity of geography and aesthetics" (483). (Here, he is quick to add a footnote that it remains to be seen if the opening of the prize to all English-language novels—that is, the 2014 rule change—will weaken the Booker's associations to the Commonwealth and London's literary culture.) And yet, "the particular temporality of the Booker Prize—its emergence within the historical context of decolonization, its status as an instrument to resignify an institution's colonial past, and its founding commitment to the imagined community of the "Commonwealth"—indeed adds to a sense of the Booker's singularity," he adds (483). For him, it is because of these very conditions of the prize's genesis that any discussion of the Booker Prize necessarily entails as well a consideration of the larger field of world literature and the historical development of global fiction. "The Booker, then," he writes, "suggests the paradoxical condition of being both singularity and prototype" (483).

But the Booker Prize, once the crème de la crème of prizes, would not always be so. Crossing into the 21st century, the Booker has had to face stiff competition, and this sometimes at the cost of its identity and iconicity. Its aforementioned 2014 rule change, and the consequent circle of debate around it, has been cited earlier on—and endlessly. Epithets such as "Americanization" and "internationalization" (Charles 2017; n.p.) were fastened onto the Booker Prize by book critics—frequently, and sometimes in a frenzy. Yet another recurring theme of the times was the name-dropping of the Folio Prize—and the jittery position it placed the Booker in with its arrival on the literary awards scene. Claire Armitstead (2018) classifies The Goldsmiths Prize[12] and The Folio Prize (now The Rathbones Folio Prize[13]), as "not exactly outsiders, but "corrective prizes"—both of which were "set up to

[12] The Goldsmiths Prize was established in 2013 to celebrate the qualities of creative daring associated with the College and to reward fiction that breaks the mould or extends the possibilities of the novel form. The annual prize of £10,000 is awarded to a book that is deemed genuinely novel and which embodies the spirit of invention that characterizes the genre at its best.

[13] First awarded in 2014, the Rathbones Folio Prize is open to all works of literature written in English and published in the UK, and is worth £30,000. All genres and all forms of literature are eligible, except work written primarily for children. The Rathbones Folio Prize is also known as the 'writer's prize'—the only major literary award for which all the books in contention are selected and judged by an academy of peers, members of the 300-strong Rathbones Folio Academy of esteemed writers and critics.

counter existing awards" (n.p.). Thus, sometimes prizes are created as "corrective[s]" and counterpoints, and to address lacunas of structure or scope—both literary and of the geographical variety—but as can be ascertained from the media coverage of the post-2014 Booker, journalists have tended to heighten this healthy competition, and refer to prizes as rivals, and as created in aggressive reaction to one another.

Tibor Fischer concedes that the move is a "good one for the profile of the Man Booker prize itself," but calls it out as a "kneejerk reaction to the transatlantic appearance of the Folio prize" (n.p.). He adds: "I quite like the idea of a merciless arena, a gladiatorial free-for-all where all-comers can come and have a no-quarters contest, one big massive cage fight" (2017; n.p.); AL Kennedy, author and former Booker judge, is of the opinion that the Booker Prize has had a "bumpy ride" over the past decade, and has, without doubt, felt the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award and the Folio Prize nipping at its heels (2013); and Alex Shephard (2015) writes:

> Instead, the impetus for these changes seems to stem from the decisions made by the administrators of another award: the Folio Prize […] when the Man Booker Prize expanded its parameters, it was seeing the Folio's bet; when they announced the changes to the Man Booker International Prize in 2015, they were raising it [The Booker] has, to the best of my knowledge, the broadest scope of any literary prize being awarded today—without the Folio, it certainly has no competition in the "Best English Language Novel" department. (n.p.)

And later, in 2017(a):

> In 2013, the Booker was in a kind of arms race with the Folio Prize, which was first awarded that year to writers of any nationality working in English. This evidently spooked the organizers of the Booker […] turning the Man Booker International Prize, a separate award, into a Nobel-lite lifetime achievement prize for *non*-English language writers. The move paid off: The Folio Prize went dormant in 2014, though it did return in 2017 as a shadow of its former self. (Now the Rathbones Folio Prize, it is open to fiction and nonfiction for some reason.) (n.p.)

Meanwhile, while Andrew Kidd, founder of The Folio Prize, was "a little surprised" at the Booker Prize news, "because when we created the Folio Prize, it was because we perceived a gap," he also appreciates that there's room for both. However, the Booker's "impressive" profile in the US might suffer if it lost its intrinsic "Britishness" and became harder to distinguish from the Pulitzer Prize, he adds (qtd. in Brown 2013b; n.p.). Prizes often seek to one-up and undermine each other. Prizes also seek to imitate—and as an inevitable, if unintended consequence, become indistinguishable from each other. Prizes live, launch "lite" versions of other prizes, and become redundant or dormant—and die. Sometimes, when resurrected and reshaped, they indulge in rivalry, and instigate such extreme reactions within the literary community. At other times, they enable healthy competition, allowing a variety of prizes to expand their scopes and horizons. Regardless, one can rest assured that in today's life and literary times, no one prize—neither the Nobel Prize nor the Booker Prize and the Pulitzer Prize—can serve as a synecdoche for prize cultures, or be free from criticism. The privileged positions that prizes have previously occupied are constantly shifting and unsettling; hitherto major literary prizes are struggling—and there exists "enormous pressure to keep prizes contemporary and to make sure that they make a splash, year after year" (Shephard 2017a; n.p.).

In a recent article, "Awards for women, writers of colour, small presses" (2018), Claire Armitstead asks: "Why are there so many book prizes?" As she sets her eyes on two relatively new and niche prizes, The Jhalak Prize (book of the year from a "writer of colour") and the Republic of Consciousness Prize (for the smallest of small publishers), both of which were "set up in reaction to the status quo by writers with a mission," she says that "an incidental USP of Jhalak—as of the relaunched Folio—is that its given criteria enables it to build bridges across genres," while the strength of the latter lies in that "it pits translated and non-translated books against each other" (n.p.). In certain circumstances and cases, book awards tend to reproduce—or even exacerbate—existing inequalities in the industry. Thus, in the UK, a number of new literary awards have emerged with the aim of addressing these challenges and shortcomings. Alongside the The Republic of Consciousness and The Jhalak Prize are the Barbellion Prize—founded in 2020, and which celebrates writing which represents the experience of illness and disability—and also founded in 2020, The Novel Prize, a joint venture by the independent publishers Fitzcarraldo Editions, Giramondo and New

Directions, and which awards the winner a book deal with a $10,000 advance against royalties. This innovative structure, which works similarly to a manuscript prize, disrupts the usual role of a prize in consecrating already-published work, and allows the award to instead champion and support unpublished writing. Having gained some insight into the clash of the prize titans (the Booker and the Folio), alongside the criticisms trailing the Booker Prize since 2014, it is commendable that formidable, if small, forces are seeking to displace and destabilise existing prize hegemonies and hierarchies. Armitstead (2020) writes that "the value of this [prize] industry has long been hotly debated, with some writers going so far as to maintain that having so many prizes deforms the literary culture" (n.p.). Nevertheless, they are also necessary—to "challenge the status quo" and to address the lacuna on the prizing landscape.

In some ways, the arrival of new literary prizes on the landscape such as The Jhalak Prize and the Republic of Consciousness Prize has been the least of the Booker's worries. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the 2018 Golden Man Booker Prize, to mark the 50-year milestone of the prize, was a missed opportunity—and an exercise in nostalgia. Instead of looking to the future—or in other directions—the Booker pointed its prizing compass to the past, and towards its own canon of already consecrated writers and books, by awarding the Golden Booker to Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*. Later that year, the 50th Booker Prize would go to Anna Burns—the first female author since Eleanor Catton won in 2013 and the first Northern Irish author to ever win a Booker—for *Milkman* (notably, Michael Ondaatje's *Warlight* was long-listed for the 2018 Prize). I've written elsewhere (Goyal, scroll.in 2018a) about the discourse around this win, which does not merit discussion here, but it is safe to say that all eyes were on the Booker Prize the following year, when it would step into a new decade of prizing the "finest fiction"—after fifty years of having done so. And if the Golden Booker was a missed opportunity, so was the 51st Booker Prize for Fiction, which, in an unusual and unexpected move, was jointly awarded to Margaret Atwood and Bernardine Evaristo, who would split the £50,000 prize for their novels, *The Testament*, and *Girl, Woman, Other*, respectively. In true Booker style, however—scandal, self-aggrandisement—the judges' rule-breaking antics took precedence over what could've been a truly record-smashing, history-making, trajectory-altering move for the prize, which is now just over half a century old. While Evaristo became the first black woman to be spotlighted by the Booker in its em-

barrassingly long history, the news of the double-win overshadowed the prize coverage—and this moment.

As in the case of the belated 2018 and the 2019 Nobel Prize for Literature joint announcement—when Olga Tokarczuk and Peter Handke, respectively, won—and when critics considered Tokarczuk as *the* winner, in the Booker's case too, critics deemed Evaristo as the one true and worthy winner. At 79, Atwood, who previously won the Booker Prize in 2000 with *The Blind Assassin*, became the prize's oldest winner—and also the fourth writer to win the Booker twice. As already discussed, the Booker Prize has also been split before: 1974, between Nadine Gordimer and Stanley Middleton; and in 1992, between Michael Ondaatje and Barry Unsworth. Following the second split, the rules were officially altered so "the prize may not be divided or withheld". And yet, the chair-of-judges Peter Florence brazenly flouted these rules. But of course, the case was less about Atwood being undeserving and more about wholly and fully rewarding, validating, and celebrating the first black (British) woman to win the Booker Prize for 'fiction at its finest'.

On the one hand, the case of two female writers co-winning the prize is heartening, —considering the Women's Prize for Fiction was conceived as a corrective prize a quarter of a century ago to address the Booker's gender-based shortcomings. On the other hand, this is a classic case of the Booker's tendency for box-ticking, and performing cosmetic corrective measures—taking one step forwards, four steps back—and while the prize went to two women, the first Black woman to ever win was made to share this honour. All of this doesn't mean we pat prizes on their backs for the bare minimum; this doesn't mean we stop holding them to higher standards or never shake up the pedestals we've placed them on. The annual Booker backlash, year after year, is expected—even entertaining at times—but the serious discourse and critical currency it generates around and about the politics of literary prize cultures can no longer be circumvented or dismissed as the stuff of memes or prize gossip. The 50th winner of the Booker Prize in 2018, *Milkman* by Anna Burns, was deemed a "difficult" read by the judges—but has gone on to become a bestseller. The Golden Booker was a case of the prize basking in its own glory. Instead of re-consecrating the Booker's own—those already within its narrow orbit—why not make the Booker family bigger, bolder, more diverse, and move it in new directions? After all, if, with its comeback in 2019, the Nobel

Prize had two opportunities to correct its past mistakes and direct a new future for itself, the Booker Prize could have made the most of one.

*

In 2019, and over 50 years of Bookers later, Bernardine Evaristo said this in her winning speech: "I will say I am the first black woman to win this prize, and I hope that honour doesn't last too long. I hope other people come forward now" (n.p.). Alongside Evaristo, in the Booker's over fifty-year history, only three other African writers have won the prestigious prize for fiction—namely J.M. Coetzee (who has won twice), Nadine Gordimer, and Ben Okri—although a fair few have been nominated from time to time. I've already noted the impact of Wole Soyinka's Nobel Prize win—as the first African writer—in 1986 and how the tides then seemingly turned in favour of African writers in the context of an otherwise Eurocentric prize. Similarly, James F. English (2005) also notes that the Swedish Academy marked its 200-year jubilee "with special emphasis by presenting its Literature Prize for the first time to a writer from the African continent (indeed, for the first time to any writer of African heritage): the Nigerian poet and playwright Wole Soyinka" (298). He writes that, for years, Nobel-watchers had expected that the first African winner of the prize would be Léopold Sédar Senghor, a monumental figure in twentieth-century letters, co-founder and major exponent of the Négritude movement, alongside being president of Senegal for the first two decades of its independence (300). For this reason, and more significant ones, which English delves into, "the event was by no means cause for unequivocal celebration in the African literary world" (298-300). He adds that, "as is often the case with Nobel laureates, Soyinka had come very close to winning the prize the year before (1985), and the resulting disappointment of expectations had provided the Nigerian press with an occasion for a dress rehearsal of what would prove to be fierce and prolonged debates over the value of the Nobel Prize in Africa" (299).

English further shares that the outgoing secretary of the Swedish Academy, Lars Gyllensten, described Soyinka in his presentation speech "precisely as a cosmopolitan writer for whom African elements supply only one aspect of a complex and highly original vision"—and presented the award to Soyinka for having managed "to synthesize a very rich heritage

from your own country, ancient myths and old traditions, with literary legacies and traditions of European culture," adds English (302). He argues that, in this manner, the Nobel Prize "was being deployed against the interests of the most outspokenly 'localist' and black-nationalist factions, in favor not exactly of European neo-imperialism, but of what would within a few years come to be called, in Nigeria as elsewhere, cultural globalization" (302). For English, "this globalist strategy, by means of which the terrain subject to the 'Nobel Effect' ('Nobelization' of the markets for literary esteem) was in the process of being greatly expanded, depended crucially on the identification of writers with particular local or regional—but not necessarily national—fields of production" (302-303). English reports that Soyinka donned an agbada (traditional Yoruba ceremonial robe) to receive the prize and made it emphatically clear in his acceptance speech, and in numerous statements to the press afterwards, that his award was to be understood as Africa's award: "His position as laureate was a representative one; he received the prize 'as an African', and lost no time in leveraging it in the cause of the anti-Apartheid struggle in South Africa." At the same time, English notes that Soyinka's deepest pleasure in the prize came, "not from being the first African to receive it but from having the opportunity to bring it home as a 'national honour' for Nigeria" (303). "'To me that is the great thing about the prize,' he said, 'that it was really a national thing'" (303). But unlike Ponzanesi (2011), who merely argues that Soyinka's win shifted the Nobel Prize's focus from Europe to elsewhere, and to Africa for the first time, English argues that something far greater had occurred:

> Rather, the prize had become a means of articulating, across the various and far-flung sites of its production, a particular category of literature that might be recognized as properly "global," a literature whose fields of production and of reception could be mapped—and whose individual works could be valued—only on a world scale. (304)

Thus, for English, the "Nobel's foray into Africa is part of the strengthening of a global economy of literary prestige that often draws upon and makes profitable use of national literary hierarchies and systems of value, but without simply affirming or reproducing them and at times by discounting them quite radically" (304). It is worth mentioning here that among Soyinka's toughest critics, specifically after the Nobel Prize win, was Chinweizu; "In

Africa," for him, "the Nobel can be won only by a writer of 'sophisticated literary versions of airport art'", a writer who carefully applies just enough "Africanesque patina and inlays" to his Euro-assimilationist texts to satisfy a "Western tourist taste for exotica" (quoted in English 307-308). Thus, as mentioned earlier, Wole Soyinka's Nobel Prize win was by no means cause for unequivocal celebration, especially in the African literary community, who claimed —or at least implied—that Soyinka had given the Nobel precisely the kind of work and career it was interested in prizing; he had actively "applied" Africanesque elements to his work which was also "Euro-assimilationist" in an effort to please and pander to the westerner's reading tastes and lenses for "exotic" literatures. In other words, Soyinka, for these critics, was a sell-out to the West—offering up a reading of Africa worth rewarding.

In her essay, "Shut Up and Write" (2019), originally presented at the British Library as winner of the tenth PEN Pinter Prize—the prize is awarded annually to a writer from Britain, the Republic of Ireland or the Commonwealth—and later published in the *New Statesman*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie writes:

> After my first novel was shortlisted for the Orange Prize, but did not win, a woman in Nigeria, a stranger who came up to me at the airport, told me, "Congratulations. We will win next time." Her use of the word "we" moved me very much.
>
> There was in this "we-ness" a kind of collective ownership of my work, a kind of pride that spoke not only to my achievement but to a larger collective triumph.
>
> And when I did win a few years later, I had many moments of being hugged by strangers in Nigeria, being told that I had represented us, and I, too, in some ways came to see it as a prize for Nigeria, and for Africa, because I was the first woman from there to win—although of course I alone got to keep and spend the prize money. (Adichie 2019; n.p.)

Here, the echoes of Wole Soyinka's words—his Nobel Prize win as Africa's award and a national honour—are evident. Where Soyinka was the first African to win the Nobel

Prize for Literature in 1986, Adichie became the first woman from Africa to win the then-Orange Prize—now renamed as the Women's Prize for Fiction—for *Half of a Yellow Sun* in 2007, and which was later also voted the best of the Women's Prize's 25 years of winners (see here: the echoes of Booker of Bookers, Best of the Booker). Writing about art, citizenship, and collective ownership—and the resultant burden and expectation of representation, that is, what it means to be an "African" writer—she adds:

> But the glow of this we-ness dims too quickly. Or perhaps it remains bright but sits alongside a shadow, and that is the shadow of expectations. Because to talk about our winning, to gesture to this collective ownership of a literary prize, is a statement about a shared identity. A shared citizenship. But herein lies the conundrum: the person who is hugged at the airport is the citizen, the representative of Nigeria, of Africa, and yet the person who is the citizen is not quite the person who is the artist.
>
> And so to be a Nigerian writer published in what we call the West is to be a repository of both pride and suspicion. It is to be scrutinised for the *right kind of* African representation. You are required to perform the rituals. You are required to bow to the expectations of citizenship. (Adichie 2019, my emphasis; n.p.)

Further on in the essay, Adichie proceeds to write about how she no longer belongs to herself—and about how in writing, and publishing, realist fiction about a place like Nigeria, especially in the West, she has become a synecdoche, "a part of representing a whole" (n.p.). Over three decades apart, Wole Soyinka's Nobel Prize win in 1986, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's retrospective reflections of her 2007 Orange Prize win, over a decade later in 2019—both wins as national honours and as "Africa's awards", emblematic of that collective sense of "we-ness"—these moments serves as a segue into the next chapter, and towards setting the scene for 'Africa' and its place within the landscape of literary prizes. Questions of "Africanness", authenticity, canonicity, stereotypes of storytelling—the "Africanesque patina and inlays" Soyinka is accused of; the "right kind of African representation" Adichie alludes to—continue to plague writers, and particularly prize-winning writers, from the African continent and across the diaspora into the 21st century. As the following chapter will elucidate, for every *right kind of* African representation, there exists a

wrong one—an exotic one. For an African writer, the expectation of representation—serving as a spokesperson for one's country or continent—is never too far. One is, more often than not, expected to perform and pander—to tell a certain kind of story.

Taking into consideration Chinua Achebe's continuing authority over the canon, alongside Wole Soyinka's Nobel Prize win and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Orange Prize win (and larger life and work), some of the questions the next chapter asks are: Who is an 'African' writer? What is 'African literature'? Why does 'African literature'—the commercial category and the continental impulse—exist, and at what cost? Can the burden and expectation of representation African writers across the world face ever be evaded—seeing as they are often made spokespersons and cultural ambassadors for their respective countries or the entire African continent? Why are African literary texts always already read as *more than* mere texts? The following chapter analyses African literature as a commodity, container, and concept and addresses the complex and constantly shifting place of writers within the field—as they navigate the global literary marketplace. It uses Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's life and work as markers through which 'African literature' has come to be framed and represented, especially in western media and academia, in dangerous and reductive ways. In doing so, it reveals how texts and paratexts, particularly in the context of African writing and writers, are interconnected and constantly in tension.

Chapter Two

Setting the Scene for 'Africa':

"At the Altar of Authentic Africanness"[14]

[14]Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozie. "Shut Up and Write." *The New Statesman*. 2019.

> Then Edward spoke. The writing was certainly ambitious but the story itself begged the question "So what?" There was something terribly passé about it [witchcraft and Pentecostalism] when one considered all the other things happening in Zimbabwe under the horrible Mugabe.
>
> [. . .]
>
> Edward chewed at his pipe thoughtfully before he said that homosexual stories of this sort weren't reflective of Africa, really.
>
> "Which Africa?" Ujunwa blurted out.
>
> [. . .]
>
> "This may indeed be the year 2000, but how African is it for a person to tell her family that she is homosexual?" Edward asked.
>
> [. . .]
>
> That evening, the Tanzanian read an excerpt of his story about the killings in the Congo, from the point of view of a militiaman, a man full of prurient violence. Edward said it would be the lead story in the *Oratory,* that it was urgent and relevant, that it brought news. (Adichie 171–72; 173; 175–76)

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's short story titled "Jumping Monkey Hill", first published in *Granta* in 2006, and later collected in *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009), tells the tale of a fictionalised African Writers' Workshop held at the eponymous, evasive resort, located on the edges of Cape Town, South Africa. "Ujunwa found it odd that the African Writers' Workshop was held here, at Jumping Monkey Hill", writes Adichie (2009, 154). "The name itself was incongruous, and the resort had the complacence of the well-fed about it, the kind of place where she imagined affluent foreign tourists would dart around taking pictures of lizards and then return home still mostly unaware that there were more black people than red-capped lizards in South Africa" (154). Ujunwa looks for "lurking monkeys" but eventually comes to the conclusion that there are none to be found. "Jumping Monkey Hill" instead is the name of a resort that also caters to certain expectations, with its thatched-roofed cabins and names like "Baboon Lodge" and "Porcupine Place". On another level, through the story's title, its author Adichie also "alludes to exoticist ideas about Africa, namely that a story set in South Africa must include monkeys," notes Maximilian Feldner (2020), in his

book, *Narrating the New African Diaspora: 21st Century Nigerian Literature in Context* (59). Adichie attended the first-ever, and Ford Foundation-financed, 2003 Caine Prize African Writers' Workshop held at Monkey Valley Resort in Noordhoek, suburban Cape Town after her short story "You in America" was shortlisted the preceding year. Whilst there, she produced the story "Lagos, Lagos", which was later revised and retitled as the title story of *The Thing Around Your Neck*. In another act of retitling, the Caine Prize for African Writing became the Lipton African Writers' Prize, and Monkey Valley Resort became Jumping Monkey Hill in her story "Jumping Monkey Hill". This veiling via fiction aside, it is worth noting, as Nathan Suhr-Sytsma (2018) makes evident in his reading of the short story, that "Jumping Monkey Hill" is "a work of fiction about the meaning of fiction, not just a condensed *roman à clef*" (1102).

Writing in 2013, the-then Caine Prize for African Writing administrator Lizzy Attree (2013) declares that the workshops are something of which the Prize is "particularly proud", and defends their choices of location by saying this: "it is possible that the workshops could move from their previously rural, isolated locations to more urban venues, but the benefits of isolation for writing are not to be dismissed too quickly" (38). Championing them as catalysts for building continent-based literary networks and connections, Attree adds that "involving twelve writers each year, the workshops have facilitated contact between authors from different countries, creating a self-sustained community, as participants stay in contact, share, and critique one another's work" (39)[15]. Since their inception in 2003, the Caine Prize writing workshops have travelled to almost a dozen African countries, and in 2018 took place in Gisenyi, Rwanda. Although the website doesn't list further on-site, continent-based workshops since that year, in 2020, the Prize announced the New Online Editing Programme—Online with Vimbai [Shire]—which will focus on mentoring writers in producing stories eligible for submission to the Caine Prize for African Writing. Speaking in a joint statement about the programme, Chair of the AKO Caine Prize for African Writing since 2019, Ellah Wakatama OBE, and Administrator Dele Fatunla said: "We are very pleased to expand on the Prize's mission to support and accompany African writers as

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[15] The Prize website reveals that participants include shortlisted authors and "other writers who have come to our attention through the selection process", who then contribute their respective short stories to the annual Caine Prize for African Writing anthology, published alongside that year's shortlisted stories—and that these workshopped stories are automatically entered for the following year's Prize.

they find their feet in the publishing industry. Our aim for this programme is to open up access for writers and support them in their journey towards publication" (caineprize.com) (n.p.). In some ways, it is easy to note the benefits of this mentoring programme, which has since replaced the communal purpose of the workshops—which, while affording "the benefits of isolation" as Attree alludes to, may not have been physically or feasibly possible for writers across the continent, and beyond, to attend. Speaking of the workshops, Attree further points out how the Caine Prize for African Writing "can be said to be helping to produce as well as evaluate contemporary African writing" (39). It is not so much the Prize's contributions towards the production of contemporary African writing, but its perpetuation and prizing of a certain kind of "African" writing, that critics tend to take issue with.

Meanwhile, to return to the textual location of "Jumping Monkey Hill", Adichie's writer-characters—chosen and curated by the British Council, and commercially catalysed by the Chamberlain Arts Foundation—are expected to produce a story for possible publication in the *Oratory*, and this under the mentorship of their workshop moderator Edward Campbell. In stark contradiction to his feedback on the participants' stories quoted above, Edward clarifies his position as not "an Oxford-trained Africanist, but as one who [is] keen on the real Africa and not the imposing of Western ideas on African venues" (Adichie 2009, 174). As Adichie's protagonist, Ujunwa, coupled with her writer colleagues, experiences the pressures of "the patronage that sometimes frames this [creative-writing workshop] process of literary production and canonisation" ("'Which Africa?' Ujunwa blurted out"), these pressures leave the layers of the meta-fictional text, and leak into larger discussions of literary production, canonisation, distribution, and consumption of African literature (Adichie 2009, 173; Kiguru 2016a, 206).

For Doseline Kiguru (2016a), "Jumping Monkey Hill" comments on "the act of inclusion and exclusion at the point of production as well as consumption of literature", and also explores the "nature of the canon formation process" (208) through its particular focus on the creative writing workshop. Similarly, Suhr-Sytsma (2018) offers that Adichie "attempts to reclaim the criteria of literary judgment from London-based or -centred literary gatekeepers—and to suggest the masculinist bias of representations of Africa" (1100). Daria

Tunca (2018a), too, comments on this "extra-textual relevance" of Adichie's text in her article-length analysis of it. Reading "Jumping Monkey Hill" through a metafictional lens, and as a literary manifesto, she argues that, "by putting different ontological levels into dialogue, the story establishes how multiple themes and incidents may illuminate each other [both fictional and real], and how they eventually converge to comment on the position of the African writer in the contemporary literary market" (78). And more recently, Maximilian Feldner (2020) reads the short story—and the short story collection, *The Thing Around Your Neck*—as clearly "a story about resistance in many forms" (58). Therefore, whereas Attree considers the creative-writing workshops as supporting mechanisms for African, local, and home-grown literary production, Kiguru, Suhr-Sytsma, Tunca, and Feldner call into question, and show how this contribution may be skewed, and not as straightforward as the Prize may lead us to believe.

Indeed, Edward's evaluation of the workshop stories—an embodiment of Western-funded forces—is emblematic of the power dynamics, privileged positionality, and point of view of at play: for him, Mugabe is manifestly a metonym for Zimbabwe, and Congo is construed merely as a container of violence. Furthermore, his feedback foregoes the personal in favour of the political: the story of the Senegalese writer grieving at the death of her lesbian lover is as *un*-"African" as the Tanzanian's is urgently, and news-worthily, "African". His views are in line with perceptions of African countries as places where nothing but conflict, violence, and war is possible—the "representation of contemporary Africa as a site of perennial political and humanitarian emergencies" (Adesokan qtd. in Feldner 57). For Feldner (2020), the story operates on two levels and in this way exposes Edward's posturing and self-declared expertise about Africa:

> On the story level, he dominates the scene; his comments remain mostly uncontradicted by the workshop participants. But he does not go unchallenged on the discourse level, as the events are filtered through protagonist Ujunwa's third-person perspective. The figural narration, which presents her thoughts and feelings, provides a running commentary on Edward's statements and thus offers a different view of the workshopped stories […] By contrasting Edward's views with those of Ujunwa, the story reveals and criticises Edward' racist opinions. (57)

Furthermore, the critic Eve Eisenberg (2013) makes the case that, at its core, "[this] is a conversation […] not only about good and bad writers, but about good and bad *representers* of Africa" (14, my emphasis), and that "Jumping Monkey Hill" reveals "the position of the African writer from whom only certain narratives are being solicited" (16)—and indeed validated and rewarded. Edward, and by extension western publishing elites, expect the Zimbabwean "to produce a text that clearly and mimetically represents atrocity", she adds, and moreover, "to represent the atrocities specifically associated with her national origins, an expectation emphasised by Adichie's choice of identifying all the writers (except for Ujunwa) solely by their nationalities [the Zimbabwean, the Tanzanian, the Ugandan, and so on and so forth]" (15). Edward's reductionist national representations are further linked to his keenness on "the real Africa", and to continental generalisations. Suhr-Sytsma (2018) argues that Adichie's choice "may index the tendency to identify African writers with countries of origin, a tendency that can verge on patronizing tokenism" (1102). Indeed, the manner in which the Prize frames and categorises its shortlisted and winning writers through a national lens dismisses and does a disservice to their diasporic (and also intra-continental, pan-African) connections and affiliations, thematics and aesthetics, lineages and journeys, real or textual.

Adichie's own stance, specifically on the Caine Prize for African Writing, is no secret, and is worth a short digression here. Of "Jumping Monkey Hill" in particular she has said that the short story is "quite autobiographical" and that it was based on her "horrible personal experience" and "propelled by rage"; she also added that the then-administrator of the prize had "the audacity to tell a group of young, impressionable writers from different countries in Africa what an African story is" (qtd. in Tunca 2018a, 70). To return to Adichie's thoughts on the Caine Prize for African Writing more generally, in a 2013 *Salon* interview with Aaron Bady, who asks after her opinion on the overwhelming number of Nigerians shortlisted for that year's prize (four out of five), she reponds: "Elnathan was one of my boys in my workshop. But what's all this over-privileging of the Caine Prize, anyway? I don't want to talk about the Caine Prize, really. I suppose it's a good thing, but for me it's not the arbiter of the best fiction in Africa. It's never been. I know that Chinelo is on the short list, too. But I haven't even read the stories—I'm just not very interested. I don't go to the Caine

Prize to look for the best in African fiction… I go to my mailbox." (n.p.)

Following this, some of the shortlisted authors, such as Abubakar A. Ibrahim (@Abubakar_himself), immediately took to the social media platform Twitter angrily—accusing Adichie of arrogance and calling her out on her comments regarding the "over-privileging" of the Caine Prize for African Writing (n.p.). On a related and curious note: it is significant, certainly interesting, that Adichie has herself never won the Caine Prize for African Writing. As mentioned earlier, she was shortlisted with the short story "You in America" in 2002, the year preceding her workshop participation. While she has won the-then Orange Broadband Prize for Fiction (now the Women's Prize for Fiction) for her full-length fiction work, and the prestigious MacArthur Foundation grant—both of which have propelled her to international success—it is interesting that she has done so by circumventing the Caine Prize for African Writing, often considered a rite of passage for African writers. In other words, as Suhr-Systsma (2018) says, "she fashioned this career without winning the Caine Prize" (1101). Do we then read Adichie's scathing critiques of the Caine Prize for African Writing as rooted in personal resentment and bitterness? Or, does it say something more significant about the one literary prize that prides itself on being the foremost identifier, arbitrator, determinator, and rewarder of "African" writing?

In her own defence, Adichie has clarified in interviews that, rage aside, "Jumping Monkey Hill" was not merely a personal attack. Instead, it addressed "the larger question of who determines what an African story is"; "I remember feeling helpless," she adds (qtd. in Tunca 2018a, 70). "This is the result of 200 years of history; we can sit here and be told what our story is" (ibid). To the question posed earlier, Eisenberg (2013) certainly leans towards the latter for an answer, as does Suhr-Sytsma (2018), and finds Adichie's meta-fictional short story as reflective of the actual African literary landscape and of the questions being raised in Adichie's own fiction (hence Eisenberg's title: "'Real Africa'/'Which Africa?'"). Tunca (2018a) also advises against reading "Jumping Monkey Hill" as "gossip or "revenge fiction""—and her article aims to steer clear of such a reductive reading (71).

Keeping in mind this discourse and context around Adichie's work, the central question posed by Taiye Selasi's (2015) essay in *The Guardian* is this: "Why must writers from

Africa always bear the burden of representing their continent?" (n.p.). She further asks: What does an "African story" look like? Who gets to tell it—and under the weight of what kinds of rules and burdens and expectations? She then proceeds to point out the "prioritisation of perceived cultural allegiance over creative output" (n.p.). The "most scathing critique of the African writer is not that she is insufficiently talented, but that she is insufficiently African", Selasi writes. (n.p.). And lo and behold, as Adichie's short metafiction stages, this holds as true for African writer-characters as for their real-life counterparts. What is evident from Edward's crude comments is that some types of stories—those suffused with cultural and continental stereotypes—are relevant to, and reflective of, Africa *really*, while others fall short of such "African-ness", and are therefore not fit to be funded, or foregrounded on the global literary stage. Inspired by Adichie's meta-fictional critique—what Suhr-Sytsma (2018) identifies as her "strategic fiction" (1109), not revenge fiction, and in a similar critical vein to Eisenberg and Tunca—the next section of this chapter points to the plethora of writers who seek to avoid storytelling that is seen as stereotypically and expectedly "African", and puts forth a triad of critical departure-points—each of which distinctly serve to dismantle the discourse on stereotypes—to do so.

Stereotypes and Ways of Storytelling: Africa is *Not* a Country

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's 2009 viral TEDx talk, "The Danger of a Single Story" (2009), signals how deeply stereotypes are embedded into our ways of storytelling: "Show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become", she says (9:25; n.p.). Stereotypes, for Adichie, are solidified through relentless repetition and also through under-representation: "The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story" (12:56; n.p.). In other words, why is there only one presumption and expectation of what an "African story" should look like—in the singular, never in plural. "Of course, Africa is a continent full of catastrophes", but to cash in on such catastrophes, as workshop moderator Edward Campbell does in Adichie's short story "Jumping Monkey Hill"—but also to not take into consideration other narratives and stories and non-catastrophes—is to be complicit in the creation of a selective, "single story": one that conveniently and narrowly falsifies, filters, and falls short of the full picture (13:24; n.p.).

Therein lies the "danger", dearth, and shortcomings in certain kinds of storytelling.

The late great Kenyan writer Binyavanga Wainaina's groundbreaking *Granta* essay, "How to Write About Africa" (2005), uses his particular brand of powerful and thought-provoking satire to subvert the storehouse of sweeping stereotypes used by journalists and novelists, among others, when writing about the African continent at-large:

> In your text, treat Africa as if it were one country… Don't get bogged down with precise descriptions. Africa is big: fifty-four countries, 900 million people who are too busy starving and dying and warring and emigrating to read your book [. . .] so keep your descriptions romantic and evocative and unparticular.
> […]
> Africa is to be pitied, worshipped or dominated. Whichever angle you take, be sure to leave the strong impression that without your intervention and your important book, Africa is doomed.
> […]
> Remember, any work you submit in which people look filthy and miserable will be referred to as the 'real Africa,' and you want that on your dust jacket. Do not feel queasy about this: you are trying to help them to get aid from the West. (n.p.)

"Africa, Wainaina reminds the would-be scribe, is a homogenous space in crisis", writes Madhu Krishnan (2014, 1). Later, in *Contingent Canons* (2018), she writes, in the same vein as Wainaina, albeit more matter-of-factly, less satirically:

> Even a simple discussion of Africa, the physical space, seems doomed to fall into similar forms of confusion from the outset. Africa, the continent, encompasses fifty-five sovereign states and is the second largest continent after Asia; across its totality, it features unparalleled environmental, geographical, linguistic, and cultural diversity. Yet, in its quotidian usage, Africa is often used as an all-encompassing shorthand for sub-Saharan Africa, perpetuating a racialised distinction between the Maghreb and the rest of the continent. Two decades into the twenty-first century, there remains a perception in popular discussions that the continent is little more than an undifferenti-

> ated mass, where the Sahel could just as easily be swapped in for the tropical forests of the Equatorial region, or the mountains of the Western Cape for the savannahs of the Great Rift Valley. (5)

If, for Adichie, stereotypes are "incomplete" half-truths, Wainaina has a tendency to exaggerate them—to extend each stereotype and bring it to the brink, to breaking point. Furthermore, although "How to Write About Africa" holds the record as "the most-forwarded article in *Granta*'s history" (Okeowo 2010; n.p.), one cannot overstate that the parenthesised "Not" in Wainaina's essay title has an implied presence, pregnant with writerly wisdom. Indeed, and to this effect, Ikhide Ikheloa, a literary journalist and blogger who has routinely followed, documented, and critiqued the Caine Prize for African Writing, restored the implied "not" in Wainaina's title when composing his own his blog-post about the 2011 shortlist, "How Not To Write About Africa" (2012, n.p.).

Taiye Selasi (2015) offers a variant, if equally valid, interpretation of Wainaina's title and text, saying that: "Wainaina is telling us not how to write about Africa, but how to invent it" (7). She ignores the invisible "Not" in the title; instead, suggesting that Wainaina is addressing the likes of the Oxford-trained Africanist workshop moderator Edward Campbell from "Jumping Monkey Hill", who "invent" "this singular Africa". "[It] doesn't exist: it must be imagined and insisted upon," she adds (7). This stretch of imagination—which is arguably wildly narrow in nature—and this insistence—on repeating and reiterating the same imagery for emphasis—lies on lies—is the home of stereotypes, or incomplete truths. It is where false perspectives or incomplete stories live and thrive and are reborn. Whatever the open-ended and playful reading methodology, commentators on Wainaina's essay are in agreement that the actual targets of his satire are those readers of "Africa" who arrive at these stories and histories with a perilous predilection for continental readings, renditions, and reductions.

While Adichie and Wainaina attempt to smash stereotypes around "Africa" with their misrepresentations and exaggerations, writers Namwali Serpell and Taiye Selasi wrestle with the label "African literature"—and its expectations and commercialisations—itself. One step further, Krishnan (2018), for the "sake of simplicity and to minimise the number scare

quotes," uses the term 'African literature' to "refer to that body of work consecrated and canonised by the global literary market" and by contrast, 'African literary production', "to capture the larger fullness and diversity of literary activity emanating from the continent and its diasporas" (5). In an interview for *Africa in Words*, Lilly Kroll asks the 2015 Caine Prize shortlisted Namwali Serpell (who went on to win the award that year) if she could borrow two questions from the author's own Twitter timeline and direct them back at her: "How can we change the conversation about "African" writing?" And "is it still possible to generate interesting debate around the age-old question, 'What is African literature' or should we be talking about something else entirely?" (n.p.). In the interview, Serpell suggests a starting-point:

> Serpell: Yes, there are other questions that would generate different and more vibrant conversations. "What is African literature?" is essentially unanswerable and tends to devolve into rigid binaries (this is African literature v. this isn't) or sweeping vaguenesses (everything is African literature; there is no such thing as African literature). I find questions about the relationship between, say, form and politics, or genre and ethics much more interesting. Perhaps tweaking the question slightly to "What does African literature *do*?" would be a start. (Kroll and Serpell 2015, n.p.).

This "tweaking" that Serpell suggests and offers as a new pathway of thinking and considering the label of "African Literature" can be placed alongside Taiye Selasi's (2013) lecture, titled "African Literature Doesn't Exist", where she suggests that readers and writers wipe the slate clean of stereotypes and start from scratch. Reflecting on this lecture two years later, in an interview with Aaron Bady (2015), she says:

> Selasi: I find that, as a rhetorical strategy, once you've *emptied* something you've given yourself the space to refill it, to reflect on what *should* go inside. In saying "African Literature Doesn't Exist" I was simply trying to empty the container, to ask then: now that it's empty, what should we put inside? If we didn't know what African literature was, if it did not exist *a priori*, what would we put in that container? What do we want it to be? (Bady and Selasi 156)

"Why do we call […] an Achebe novel a Nigerian one, worse, an African one?" asks Selasi in her aforementioned lecture (2013). "Where does that instinct come from?" (2). It is this "instinct"—earlier also referred to as an "insistence"—this continental impulse, that Selasi is interested in—and that this project too invites an interrogation of. For a continent that has long been contained and characterised by its cartographical boundaries, a monolithic block on the map of the world, the commercial category "African literature" "is an empty designation", says Selasi (2013)—and one dangerously heavy with premeditations, preconceived notions, and prescriptions. As a consequence, three questions resolutely remain at the core of this category, she finds: "Who is an African writer, what should she write, and for whom is she writing?" (n.p.).

Madhu Krishnan's *Contingent Canons* (2018) is interested in:

> provoking thinking about whether it is possible to engage in a critical analysis of African literature in an institutional landscape which is not mediated by a centre/periphery topography as its default position and to think about the canon of African literature beyond the North/South binary. What would an African literature based around, against, and towards African institutions—and the institution of African literature therein—look like? What forms—aesthetic and material—might emerge? What possibilities could inhere in a view of the African literary landscape in which the primary interlocutors for literary production and primary drivers of valuation function against a different kind of topography? How might this impact upon the ways in which we think about literary canons and canon formation? (69)

Going forward, the challenge lies not just in allowing for a container that is more accommodating, less *containing*, but is also critiquing those who create and continue to create and perpetuate the container as it currently exists: the likes of Edward Campbell, western publishing elites on the whole, and other similar literary gatekeepers. Can writers, readers and consumers of "African Literature" rid themselves of, or actively resist, this instinct, insistence, and impulse? How does one actively empty the container? Who curates how it is "refilled"—who is included, and perhaps most significantly, who gets excluded? Krishnan's series of questions also alludes to the 'possibilities' present—albeit still latent—in imagining

new topographies and thematics for African literatures and African literary institutions—and these questions are worth holding close when considering contemporary "African literature" as a category.

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Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor's (2015) TEDxEuston talk "Words for Worlds" provides a bridge into the future gestured at by Selasi, Serpell and Krishnan:

> Word of the season: Ebola.
> The other day, one of my friends was laughing over the alacrity with which the world surrendered the Rising Africa narrative to Ebola Africa.
> [. . .]
> Yet, the Ebola pandemic—this really sorrowful crucible—offers *our Africa* a profound gift. It commands us to face the force of Africa's crisis of meaning. It demands that we ask again —
> What does Africa mean for Africa? Before we bother with what Africa means for the world. (emphasis in original; n.p.)

Owuor stages Chimamanda Adichie's "single story" of stereotypes—"Ebola Africa", and in the process jumps onto the Binyavanga Wainaina-bandwagon and subverts it—"the Ebola pandemic [. . .] offers a profound gift"; like Serpell and Selasi, she poses open-ended questions—"What does Africa mean for Africa?" and "Where do we go from here?". Furthermore, often the consumers also tend to be among the curators of the label "African Literature". How does one account for this privilege, this positioning? To go back a bit, of course, there are no conclusive answers to Selasi's (2015) questions: "Who is an African writer, what should she write, and for whom is she writing?" (n.p.). But the questions themselves remain valid—and worth asking and staging. Perhaps the most desirable and determined feature of Serpell's, Selasi's, and Krishnan's approaches are the aspirational qualities of their formulations of African literature: "What does African literature *do*?" "What do we *want* it to be?" What are the possibilities?

As it turns out, these seemingly rhetorical questions—"Who is an African writer, what should she write, and for whom is she writing?"—are not altogether redundant; while Selasi's strategy can be situated in a contemporary discursive space, these seemingly contemporary and "timely" debates can be traced back to over half a century ago. It was in the aftermath of the first African Writers Conference, "A Conference of African Writers of English Expression" (June 1, 1962), when Chinua Achebe declared that those attempting to define "African literature" had been similarly defeated:

> There was [one] thing that we tried to do and failed—and that was to define 'African literature' satisfactorily. Was it literature produced in Africa or about Africa? Could African literature be on any subject, or must it have an African theme? Should it embrace the whole continent, or south of the Sahara, or just black Africa? (qtd. in Selasi 2013, 4)

Evidently, historically the term "African literature" has resisted definition—geographically, thematically, linguistically, artistically—and necessarily so. But for all its confrontations, a continental reading (and writing) impulse remains intrinsic to the commercial aspects of literary production, as does the market's and literary academy's capacity to canonise texts and circulate them conveniently. Krishnan (2018) also explains that these continental generalisations, stereotypes and usage of shorthand aside, "in its current form, the canonical idea of African literature, at least as exists in the academy and the global North, is itself predominantly Anglophone" and the "ascendancy of the novel [is] the de facto form associated with African literature today"—gesturing to linguistic and generic preferences. This "rise of the novel" which has "served to nearly eclipse other forms," she writes of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* in particular, is another form of overshadowing and 'eclipsing' (6). Furthermore, and alternatively, as Tanure Ojaide notes in "Examining Canonisation in Modern African Literature" (2009): "the African literary canon is suffering the inability of the cultural home (Africa) to define itself and so surrenders its identity to others to define in the editorial rooms of Western publishers" (17). Perhaps this accusation of "surrender" is unfair to make—to consider the "cultural home" as passive in the process of its canonisation. Regardless, though, the impulse to circulate and consume stories is, sadly and continually—from the 1962 conference to contemporary conversations and debates—still brimming

with stereotypical ways of storytelling. And while there are increasingly more interventions in the field now—more stories and shifting perspectives—it is the larger power dynamics around storytelling around Africa that this thesis is interested in. If we sometimes read the story of a singular and stereotypical violence-poverty-disease-stricken "Africa", we also read 'a single story' of African literature: Chinua Achebe's now 'classic'[16] story of colonialism, *Things Fall Apart* (1958).

'The One'—or a 'Single Story' of the African Literary Canon

Tope Folarin's 2016 essay, commissioned by the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, and titled, "Against Accessibility: On Robert Irwin, Chinua Achebe, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and Imbolo Mbue's "Behold the Dreamers,"" complements and echoes concerns raised by the concluding chapters of Madhu Krishnan's monograph, *Contemporary African Literature in English: Global Locations, Postcolonial Identifications* (2014). The two texts, when read side by side, make for productive parallels and pathways in thinking. Folarin's piece reminds the reader to re-assess notions of canonicity, genealogy, and indeed, "accessibility" of global African literature. One need only juxtapose their statements and conduct a cursory reading to situate the similarities—not just between Folarin's and Krishnan's attitudes, but also the resonances of unanimous utterances by literary critics at-large. A sample here:

Krishnan argues that

> the story of *Things Fall Apart*'s publication has become a founding myth of sorts in the canon of modern African writing, repeated ad nauseam in stories of its genesis. […] The subsequent dissemination and reception of *Things Fall Apart* has served as a template of sorts, engendering from the outset the tensions and contradictions of which have persistently reproduced in the circulation of African literature around the world to the present day. (130-131)

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[16] I take Ankhi Mukherjee's definition: "a peculiar codependence: the classic is that which survives critical questioning, and it in fact defines itself by that surviving… The critic's quest for the classic is indeed Romantic and Oedipal, but if the classic is a fantasized point of origin it is also a new departure and signals breathless new arrivals at debates that define and contest literary modernity and the literary present" (2014, 3).

And Folarin opens his piece with the pertinent question:

> Is there a canon of African novels? And if there is such a canon, which novels have managed to make the list? There are a number of ways to answer these questions, more than a few novels to consider, but one way to answer them is to simply say *Things Fall Apart*. […] One great success. One reference point. They [African artists, African-American artists, artists of color [sic]] understood that everyone else would be perceived according to their similarity to or difference from *the one*. (emphasis in original; n.p.)

Krishnan formulates the publication of *Things Fall Apart* as "a founding myth of sorts", whereas Folarin renders it a more real, if also riskily reductive, "reference point" in charting the canon of African writing (in English). It's worth clarifying at this stage that Krishnan's and Folarin's individual (and indeed this thesis's) concerns are not that of contesting Achebe's inarguable contributions to the canon—which is a contestable category in itself, one full of exclusions and privileges—but of the book's receptions, reproductions, and repercussions on the creation and circulation of contemporary African literature now and world over. As Krishnan notes later in *Contingent Canons* (2018), the novel is "unparalleled in its visibility as a representative of African literature, writ large" and *Things Fall Apart* is notable for several features and reasons—including its "integration of Igbo language and terminology and cultural and religious customs"; "its depiction of a humanised African personality, something which might be read as a rebuff to the European vision of the continent in which, as Achebe himself once lamented, Africa functions as mere 'setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as human factor'"; "its adaptation of modernist forms and conventions (including its title)"; and, most significantly, it offers readers a "densely populated world far removed from the alien land devoid of humanity once described in the works of Conrad and his contemporaries" (9). Similarly, whilst she too acknowledges Achebe's contributions to the canon, her actual interest is to "consider the ways in which the text has been positioned—seemingly intractably—as the founding text of African literature and the implications which so arise for how we think about African literature as a category" (9-10). In the same book, she writes: "the institution of African literature is intertwined with two particular historical moments: the publication, in 1958, of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

and the founding, in 1962, of the Heinemann African Writers Series, of which Achebe's novel served as the first title." She recounts how both events have strong and significant bearings on how the canon has subsequently shaped up, "particularly with respect to the patterns and politics of visibility which have mediated its constitution over time" (7). She quotes James Currey, who, reflecting on the publication of *Things Fall Apart* in the Heinemann African Writers Series in *Africa Writes Back: The African Writers Series and the Launch of African Literature* (2008), notes: "If people have read one novel from Africa it is most likely that it will have been *Things Fall Apart*. Sales in English may well have passed 10 million. There have been translations into almost fifty other languages. It now appears in Penguin Modern Classics" (qtd. in Krishnan 9).

In the same strain, Elleke Boehmer (2009) writes that Achebe "offered a way of writing Africa that would prove influential, not to say path-breaking" and "standing at the head of a tradition or genealogy of writing as Achebe does, he has become a dominant point of origin, a *hyper-precursor* one might say, in whose aftermath virtually every African author self-consciously writes" (141-142; emphasis in original). Similarly, as Simon Gikandi (2001) writes, "Achebe is the person who invented African culture as it is now circulated within the institutions of interpretation" and his novels have "become an essential referent for the African cultural text" (6–7)[17]. If we take these authoritative standpoints cumulatively, the contradictions become clear: *Things Fall Apart* is at once reductive *and* a real reference point, an exaggerated hyper-precursor *and* a non-existent, mythical point of origin. Either way, and these contradictions embodied, it indubitably, if not deliberately, creates a 'canon' that is "normative, evaluative, and self-perpetuating" (Mukherjee 5). And as Krishnan (2018) argues, "as is inevitably the case with origin stories, both [*Things Fall Apart* and the Heinemann African Writers Series] function less as absolute historical starting points and more as potential sites through which the ideological processes of canon formation and literary valuation might be explored" (9). It is this self-perpetuating of *Things Fall Apart* within African literary networks on the continent, but also in the larger English-speaking world—globally and continually—which is worth considering and interrogating. "No one novelist can bear the burden of representing a continent," writes Selasi (2015) in *The Guardian*, "and no one novel should have to" (n.p.)—and this notwithstanding, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* contin-

[17] See also: Stephanie Newell's book, *West African literatures: Ways of Reading*, published by OUP (2006).

ues to carry the weight of the African literary canon on its spine, whilst also simultaneously exerting tremendous pressure on it. And if "Achebe's novel [once] became a cornerstone in the project of recuperating a positive notion of Africa culture and heritage," as Krishnan (2014) writes (132)—securing a subversive stronghold after decades of distorted discursive spaces about the continent's culture and (lack of) literature—today, "stereotypes persist, not only despite *Things Fall Apart*, but also, ironically, because of it," writes Tunca (2012, 231). She adds: "one can easily imagine how reading *Things Fall Apart* as the unique narrative of the continent might flatten the perspective which Achebe was trying to enhance, and thus give rise to further pre- and misconceptions" (231). In other words, if his influence leads to an expectation from writers to imitate his formula in order to be taken seriously—consecrated and canonised—on the world stage; to be published and perceived within the framework of "African Literature", this naturally and obviously limits the diversity and directions this category encompasses and embodies—thus creating a homogenous, flat terrain of texts (Feldner 59). "Like no other piece of writing," adds Feldner, "this novel has determined the look of the African novel, to the extent that it has almost become a template for African fiction" and "for better or worse, Achebe has become a viable model for 'African literature' which many African writers consciously follow"—or are expected to follow (53).

While Krishnan (2014) admits that "the shape of African literature as we know it today would be unthinkable without Achebe and his involvement with the African Writers Series," she is also quick to add that "dwelling upon this foundational myth, moreover, highlights the tensions which have marked the emergence of African literature as an institution, since these incipient moments" in the 20th century (131). In saying so, she then acknowledges the impact and iterations of Achebe's long-lasting legacy on African literature—locally and globally—more institutionally, intrinsically, and structurally. In 2018, she also lays out the details of the publication history of Achebe's novel—what she refers to as "a story of happenstance and providence, mediated by a range of benevolent gatekeepers whose ultimate support would result in the publication of *Things Fall Apart*, changing the course of literary history as we know it"—revealing the coincidences and chances along the way: "This is in itself something at which to marvel, and the continual retelling of this story is indicative of the mythic status to which the novel has ascended and, with it, the mythic status of African literature itself" (11). Furthermore, she writes that in a 1998 lecture at Harvard Uni-

versity, Achebe himself likened the "launching of the Heinemann's African Writers Series" to an "umpire's signal for which African writers had been waiting on the starting line" (qtd. in Krishnan 2018, 19).

Ainehi Edoro, founder of *BrittlePaper*, in a recent essay titled "Chinua Achebe and the Risky Business of Being an Ancestor" (2017), acknowledges that the publication of *Things Fall Apart* "inaugurated the African novel as a global literary project"—that it was "essentially the global debut of the novel as an African form" (n.p.). She actively advises gazing back to the foundations (and also to the future) of African literature: "Staying in touch with Achebe involves an intellectual and aesthetic project driven by the notion that what will become the African avant-garde will emerge by means of an excavation of the African literary archive" (n.p.). Both Krishnan and Edoro suggest a looking back—a revisiting of, reliance on, and revaluation of Chinua Achebe's uncontested contributions—by way of the status afforded to *Things Fall Apart* (and by extension, the African Writers' Series) within the African literary canon in the global literary marketplace—the positions held on high pedestals, the pressures they exert, and the pivotal role they play. But, as Krishnan (2018) points out, to understand the powerful effects of those early beginnings—those "incipient", foundational and formative moments—is, on the one hand, to disregard other, older, parallel histories, archives, citations, connections and conversations, and on the other hand, not to disregard the "tensions" increasingly manifest now, and the trajectories African literature as an idea and institution, concept and commodity, has taken since. She writes about these statements that have "come to function as shorthand to describe the origins of the African literary canon, saturated with the language of historical compression and a retrospectively anticipatory temporality," and admits that, reading these in repetition, over and over again, "one might be forgiven for assuming that the years prior to the institution of the African Writers' Series were little more than a vacuum, an 'expectant, Achebe-shaped pause' in which little activity of any merit occurred" (Newell, qtd. in Krishnan 19).

This "single story" of African literature, holding critical currency and the most visibility in the global North, she writes, "is one in which the African Writers' Series is positioned as a necessary measure intended to fill a market gap" (19). Most significantly, and dangerously, "this is a story founded on a discursive matrix which speaks to the dual imperative of

obligation and necessity which was so frequently deployed in the rhetoric of the civilising mission, rife with commentary that the series" (19)—that is, the canonisation and consecration of Chinua Achebe and *Things Fall Apart* via the African Writers Series—alongside the 1962 Makerere Conference—was dependent and contingent on the benevolence and validation of institutional and individual gatekeepers in the global North. Not only does all of this "solidify the sense that the Series was a necessary precondition for the valuation of African literature in a global literary field still oriented around a centre/periphery axis," she concludes, it also "indicates, this is far from a simple historical truth, simply one story among many, endowed perhaps with a particular mode of visibility but far from the only possible tale to tell" (19-20). And as far as origin stories go, this one too sits on and is saturated with stereotypes, asymmetric relations, incomplete truths, and myopic views—thus stepping on the toes of a whole host of other genealogies, institutions, publications, locations, networks, archives, and beginnings, which may have existed simultaneously, whether in rivalry or in harmony. As Krishnan (2018) concludes:

> There is too often today a tendency to view processes of canonisation and literary historiography, which are at their heart contingent, as immutable historical truths. To a certain degree, this reflects the potency of fossilised disciplinary and institutional structures which continue to mediate the kinds of scholarship – and storytelling – that is possible. It should be fairly clear by now, however, that, like all origin stories, the story of *Things Fall Apart*, the African Writers Series, and the emergence of African literature might be said to occlude as much as it illuminates. (25)

The consequences of the contradictory canonical status of *Things Fall Apart* and the African Writers' Series on contemporary African literatures will be discussed—and destabilised further—in due course. "Immutable historical truths" will give way to re-questioning and re-positioning, and the revealing of alternate, parallel histories, stories and truths—multiple truths which have hitherto been eclipsed and overshadowed by a single, dominant story. In the meantime, the thesis returns to Folarin's essay (2016), which opened this section, and where he speaks of a specific shift in 2003, when the Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie arrives on the literary landscape, becomes an instantaneous favourite among Amer-

ican critics—and nudges aside this nostalgia for a singular point of origin, for Chinua Achebe and *Things Fall Apart*, of the African canon. But it is neither, as will soon become known, Adichie's Commonwealth Writers' Prize: Best First Book-winning work, *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), nor *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006)—which secured her a MacArthur Foundation Genius Grant in 2008—that Folarin's aforementioned *Los Angeles Review of Books* essay draws our attention to. It is "the idea of Adichie. Of what she represented," he writes. It is the idea

> Of Adichie as the possible heir to Achebe.
>
> Of Adichie as, perhaps, the next *one*. (n.p.)

To offer some background and backstory to his claim, Folarin shares that he recollects reading a galley/proof copy of *Half of a Yellow Sun* and tuning into the advance reviews orbiting the novel: "She was the writer Africa had been waiting for! She was the next Achebe! She was the most important African writer!" the critics all seemed to chant, celebratory, in unison—and echoing his own thoughts (n.p.). He soon realised, he writes, that Adichie had "inherited Achebe's status as Accessible African Writer" (in the West—or at least in North America). In other words, he clarifies, where African authors—but also publishers, readers, consumers of African literature—previously (that is, until 2003) held up their work and new work "to the light of Achebe", Adichie now became the new literary figure to litmus test against, to hold against, to compare with, and to aspire to.

This literary legacy aside, in time, Adichie has increasingly also inherited inescapable metaphors of familial lineage with/to Achebe—and the two are often inextricable. "Nowhere perhaps has this academic obsession with Achebean (af)filiations been more evident than in scholarly responses to the books of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie," notes Tunca (2012, 263). This preoccupation also holds true of the media: if Chinua Achebe is the "Father of African Literature", Bill Broun (2004) calls her his "21st-century daughter" (n.p.). Furthermore, critics also tend to fixate on the fact that she was raised in a home once owned by Achebe. Eisenberg (2013) also, and similarly, agrees that literary critics and journalists usually frame and formulate their relationship "within a kind of 'father-daughter' narrative" (2013, 9). She elaborates that Adichie's explicit references to Achebe in especially her early

fiction; her introduction to Everyman Library's 2010 single-volume collection, Chinua Achebe's *The African Trilogy*—which "cements her place in Achebe's lineage simply by being [its] writer"; and her "paralleling her own development as a writer with Achebe's" in her record-breaking TEDx talk, "The Danger of a Single Story" (2009), and elsewhere, render this progenitor-heir relationship all the more imaginable and tangible (9-10). Hence, Adichie "appears to *descend* from Achebe—her writing an extension or extrusion of his oeuvre—and/or to be obliged to *dissent* from him," she adds (9). There is a sense of devotion to Achebe, but also a digression and diversion—indeed distraction—from him, and his contribution to the African literary canon.

In this critical context, Folarin's (2016) conclusion—"Adichie as the possible heir to Achebe"—becomes a highly plausible and understandable claim to make (n.p.). But even as Folarin appreciates that Adichie opens up worlds of opportunities for other African women writers—"especially when men—and one man in particular—have dominated African fiction for so many years"—because Adichie is the *current* Accessible African Writer, "much of the African fiction that finds its way into the hands of readers closely resembles the accessible narratives that she has already published," he laments (n.p.). Case in point, he writes, is Cameroonian writer Imbolo Mbue, who became known as "Africa's first million-dollar novelist", after having secured a seven-figure deal for her debut novel, *Behold the Dreamers*. Folarin finds that while Adichie, like Achebe before her, and in her own way, paved the way for a new generation of women writers from and affiliated with the African continent, this would not have been possible in the first instance "if Adichie did not prove that African fiction is a viable commercial venture"—one worth publishing, selling and reading, one of value. (2016, n.p.). Similarly, Sisonke Msimang (2017) asks, situating the "split between the object of representation, and the people who read it", in a context where works are "set in East Africa… but readers are North American": "What kind of transactions have taken place so that these African fictions can succeed in a global scene?" (n.p.). What are the power dynamics like? What 'transactions', but also what compromises have been made for these writers and their works to not only travel across worlds, but also survive and thrive in them? Does Adichie then embody the very "danger of the single story" she sought to elucidate, evade and eradicate? Furthermore, if one were to re-phrase and re-appropriate Eisenberg's argument quoted earlier: Do other African women writers 'appear to *descend* from [Adichie]—[their]

writing an extension or extrusion of [her] oeuvre—and/or to be obliged to *dissent* from [her]'—the way Adichie has done with Achebe? And if this holds true, are current creators and consumers of African literary fiction *definitely* doomed—reading, writing, and publishing vicariously via Adichie's fiction first? It then also begs the question—and to play devil's advocate—is Folarin perhaps too linear in charting the literary legacy from Achebe to Adichie? And are there no departures, detours, indeed *dissents* in this trajectory—which travels through the course of over half a century, and from the 20th into the 21st century literary marketplace? The following section attempts at some answers.

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Daria Tunca's recent essay, "Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie as Chinua Achebe's (Unruly) Literary Daughter: The Past, Present, and Future of "Adichebean" Criticism" (2018b), dedicates the discussion to finding new directions of reading, pathways not as simplistic or linear as have previously been taken, for what she—using a playful portmanteau—calls ""Adichebean" criticism" (107). Tunca's argument and critical approach is a compelling and comprehensive one for several reasons—and is worth inserting and discussing here in some detail. To summarise: she opens her article with a questioning of what has motivated and merited these continual comparisons of literary lineage between Achebe and Adichie that were listed before—what Eisenberg has referred to as the "thoughtless tendency to link Achebe and Adichie"—and which Tunca thinks could be more productively replaced (piggybacking on Eisenberg's prompt) by "asking ourselves *why* it makes sense to include them in the same breath" (Eisenberg qtd. in Tunca 108)—if at all. She then proceeds to situate and survey the critical landscape in which this connection, that is, the genealogical/familial metaphor in particular, has stuck—acknowledging its selective benefits, but also the pitfalls of the "Adichebean" criticism of the past and present (108). In this context, she then investigates how Adichie's "ambiguous interventions" into this projected father-daughter literary relationship, and her "rebelliousness" or "unruliness", may allow us to "reframe the debate not only in regard to [Adichie's] own literary identity, but also, more generally, in relation to the wider field of contemporary African writing and its criticism" (108). For a topic that, arguably, lies at the cornerstone of the African literary canon, there is, understandably, a lot to unpack in Tunca's essay. In order to refrain from digressing too far, my focus will be

two-fold: first, on a single passage, which stitches together some of the questions raised through and about Adichie's short story, "Jumping Monkey Hill", discussed some sections ago; and second, on Tunca's concluding suggestions for the future of "Adichebean" criticism, which will then serve as a segue into my own understanding of Adichie as an "African writer" in the African (and global) literary landscape.

For Tunca, at the core of this Achebe-Adichie (dis)connection is the "fact that Adichie's position as an African writer in the twenty-first century differs from Achebe's in the second part of the twentieth" (111)—and it is this notion of positionality that will be prodded at further. Tunca takes her critical cue from Eisenberg (2008), whom she quotes at-length, generously and in agreement with. Similarly, of the father-daughter framework, Eisenberg (2013) later writes, within the context of Achebe's consistent self-identification as a political writer throughout his career, that critics "discursively figure [Adichie's] authorial person according to [Achebe's] image of the African writer as resistance activist (9). Such a reading has persisted despite Adichie's stories, which, on the contrary, "resist the very call to literary-political activism about which they speculate" (10). To explain this further, Eisenberg elucidates how "Jumping Monkey Hill" is an exemplar of such a critique—of "the discourse of African authorship that emphasises the mimetic exposure of atrocity as a primary obligation of the literary-creative enterprise" (10)—and which has already been discussed in this chapter's earlier engagement with the short story in some detail.

Tunca then picks up from where Eisenberg left off—from Adichie's (meta) textual positioning of the African writer to Adichie's extra-textual self-positioning—and shows how Adichie's self-identification vis-à-vis the label of "political writer," publicly, has been self-contradictory—or inconsistent and far more complicated and strategised, at the very least. Adichie's distance, or the scale that Tunca sees and sets it on—of Eisenberg's "clever homophonic pair, descent or dissent"—from Achebe has only increased (in the direction of dissent) with age. Still very much tongue-in-cheek with the literary lineage imagery, she writes that the "obedient child of Adichie's literary beginnings, who had politely asserted her individuality while still 'writing forth' in the spirit of her literary idol, had by the late noughts [sic] turned into an unruly teenager bent on 'talking back'" (121; 113). Following her career trajectory further into the 21st century, I would argue, in a quick aside, that Adichie's "rebel-

liousness" and "unruliness" have spilled over, outside of this progenitor-heir on-the-page relationship, and into other aspects of her literary life and public persona[18]. Krishnan (2018) also argues that if major literary figures such as Achebe—but also Wole Soyinka and Ngu˜gı˜ wa Thiong'o—"served both as literary representatives of the continent and socio-political spokesmen for its emergence into the post-independence era and beyond," the new writer in the 21st century has been put on a pedestal, and been made into a media celebrity and a spokesperson—amplified by the development of the Internet and digital technologies and, particularly, the rise of social media" (36). This is how the canonisation of early African literature occurred, she notes. A subset of writers, usually those published in the Global North, particularly London, New York, and Paris, and usually those "affiliated with large institutional apparatuses such as the African Writers Series", became "celebrities and spokespeople in their own right, known not only for their creative work, but for their high-profile interventions in public social and political life" (36).

By way of a conclusion, and in order to circumvent the usual "Adichebean" criticism, Tunca (2018b) offers two possible openings: one very much *of* the text (close readings of Achebe's and Adichie's texts), and the other, through a triangular inter-textual approach (inviting James Baldwin and Graham Green, alongside Joseph Conrad, into the Achebe-Adichie conversation) (116). Although she makes some comments about Adichie as a female African author in the article, it is worth noting here that Tunca's triangular diagram already places Adichie in a gendered dynamic—and this equation is worth exploring too. Additionally, while her arguments and suggestions are a significant starting-point in destabilising the past and present state of "Adichebean" criticism among scholars, it is Tunca's reading of Adichie's "rebelliousness" and "unruliness", on the heels of Eisenberg's observation of her "dissent", that serves as a departure-point for this thesis's own analysis of Adichie's positionality as an African writer in the world of African literature(s)—globally.

And if Tunca transforms the father-daughter duo into a triangular reading model, this section steers towards a methodology that focuses wholly on Adichie as a prolific writer and public figure, reading her rather exceptional literary career (as Achebe's once was, in its

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[18] Matthew Lecznar speaks similarly of "the rebellious streak in Adichie's public statements", her "rejection of likeability" and preparedness to "risk the loss of her popularity" in "Intellectual Interventions: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and The Ethics of Texture and Messiness" (*Wasafiri*, 2019, 38; 43).

own way, and relatively long before her) in isolation. When read on her own, it becomes apparent that Adichie's individual case carves out an alcove for itself—neither necessarily in Achebe's long shadow and nor does it overshadow its (female) contemporaries' careers. It also circles back to the prominent roles both (Achebe and Adichie) have each played in the image of the African literary canon on the international stage—in the late twentieth century, and the early twenty first century, respectively—and the differences, divergences, distances, and disconnections between these roles in terms of how they have each shaped (and also simultaneously been shaped by) the global understanding of "African literature" as it currently stands.

Adichie's peculiar positionality is then pondered towards two-fold aims: in an attempt to lighten the burden of Chinua Achebe's literary legacy on the continent's canon, and to address, even question, Folarin's (2016) belief of "Adichie as the *current* Accessible African Writer" (n.p.). All this is in the hope that the findings from this reading method will not only help drive the discussion in the next chapter—which will see a zooming-in on the Caine Prize for African Writing as its case study—but also, more imminently, go some way in answering what is a very interesting (and not asked enough) question: If Adichie is the "current accessible African writer"—and if the Caine Prize for African Writing is considered the literary rite of passage for African writers—what does it mean that Africa's most "accessible" writer of the 21st century has never won it? What does this, in turn, tell us about African writing in the global literary marketplace—its consumption, perception, transaction, validation, and dissemination? And finally, what does this say about the Caine Prize for African Writing—and arguably the disconnect between the leading British prize for African literature, and African literature as a field more generally?

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: Appeal, Adoration and 'The Brand'

In March of 2017, Adichie's third novel, *Americanah* (2013), won New York's "One Book, One New York" initiative—where the literary community among the city's citizens, for a certain time, circle around the buying, reading, discussing, and celebrating of one book. This prompted a pertinent essay-long observation from 2016's Miles Morland Schol-

arship-[19]shortlisted writer, Otosirieze Obi-Young—"As Sales Approach the Million Mark, Is *Americanah* Now Adichie's Signature Novel?" he asked:

> But even before this remarkable feat [the million mark], the novel, since its 2013 release, has been a certified bestseller… shifting 500,000 copies… 500,000 is a Booker- or Baileys Prize-winning figure and *Americanah* got there without winning either—shortlisted for the latter, overlooked entirely by the former[20]. It is a testament to the novel's popularity that Adichie… is now referred to as "the author of *Americanah*". Which could mean either of two things. First: that knowledge of the novel to which she is most associated, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, is now being taken for granted. Or second: that *Americanah* has simply become the book most people talk about when they talk about Adichie. But while this is partly because it is her most recent novel, it is also partly because this novel has followed its author into places the former did not: into race and feminist politics, into pop culture. (n.p.)

Following this assessment of *Americanah* in particular, Obi-Young goes on to ask: "Which is her signature novel—the one people first loved [*Purple Hibiscus*], or the one the most people have praised [*Half of a Yellow Sun*], or the one the most people are buying [*Americanah*]?"—with this question, the essay comes to a close, and Obi-Young leaves his readers spoilt for critical choice (n.p.). If, when we talk about "African Literature", we talk about Chinua Achebe, then, when we talk about Chinua Achebe, we talk about *Things Fall Apart*. That is, in our imaginations, the novelist and the novel are, more often than not, interchangeable and one and the same. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's career trajectory, laced with literary cosmopolitanism, and 21st century literary celebrity culture, could not be more apart from Achebe's—and it is not long before it becomes increasingly enigmatic to evidence how Achebe and Adichie could be placed side-by-side on the same literary pedestal, or be-

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[19] "Miles Morland: "Based in London, the Miles Morland Foundation (MMF) is a UK charity which makes grants in areas reflecting its founder's interests. The Foundation's main aim is to support entities in Africa which allow Africans to get their voices better heard. It is particularly interested in supporting African writing and African literature. The Scholarships are open to anyone writing in the English language who was born in Africa or both of whose parents were born in Africa." The MMF also donates towards the Caine Prize for African Writing.

[20] It is worth noting, however, that by the time *Americanah* arrived onto the publishing landscape, Adichie had already won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for *Purple Hibiscus* and the Baileys Prize (then Orange Broadband Prize) for *Half of a Yellow Sun*.

stowed with similar, if not the same, literary prestige, at all. No single novel is as-yet a synecdoche for Adichie's still nascent, if supremely successful and commercial career—this "signature" status is always shifting (due to multiple market-related factors and prize cultures) and Obi-Young's essay explains the difficulty, relativity, indeed impossibility, of pinning the author down to one novel. More significantly, in Adichie's case, and as this section will show, her novels alone do not define the novelist (nor do mere prestigious prizes or bestseller lists) completely. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's appeal, as will be argued, is inimitable, indeed incomparable, because of the self-defining, self-positioning, and self-fashioning work she has done of her life and times as a literary figure and public intellectual—through "ambiguous interventions" (Tunca 2018b) and "intellectual interventions" (Lecznar 2019), to name but a few methods and causes. Adichie's "signature" authorial brand like her "signature" literary work is extremely difficult to ascertain. And her stance has had serious consequences on the 21st century global African literary landscape, and on her own place within it. Sarah Brouillette's monograph (2007) channels the work of critics such as Pierre Bourdieu (*The Field of Cultural Production,* 1993) and Gérard Genette (*Paratexts,* 1997) to further the conversation and conclude that literary production is influenced by "the development of authorship as a profession," and that "authors' careers are key paratexts for reception and reproduction" (2-3). Brouillette adds that "the author's name and attached personae have become key focal points for the marketing of literary texts, so much so that one could argue that the current industry brands literature more by authorship than by other aspects of or ways of approaching a given work's meaning" (65-66). This two-way relationship between novelists and their oeuvres or careers, and the heavy presence of, perhaps even pressure, paratextual elements exert on textual ones was evidenced through Obi-Young's observations quoted earlier, and further back, through the analysis of Adichie's meta-fictional short story "Jumping Monkey Hill". Through Tunca's essay (2018b), too, readers are made aware of Adichie's "ambiguous interventions" with regards to the Achebe-Adichie father-daughter literary lineage—and ambiguous or antithetical though they may be, to the extent of "unruliness" even, they are an indication, particularly in her case, of how paratexts are far from passive. Returning to Obi-Young's 2017 essay, and specifically to his comment on how *Americanah* "has followed its author into places the former did not: into race and feminist politics, into pop culture" (3), though, helps pin-point the spaces and positions Adichie has taken—in physical places, digi-

tal spaces—across the world as a storyteller and spokesperson, public intellectual and figure, and literary celebrity.

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One key into understanding the fertile ground, and friction, between the text and paratext as it functions in Adichie's case is through the concept of Afropolitanism. "Despite its relative theoretical thinness as a concept," as Krishnan (2018) notes, "Afropolitanism, now the subject of countless think pieces, journal articles, special issues, edited collections[21] and more, has become something of a compulsory grounding point against which the contours of African literature are measured" (41-42). Although the origins of Afropolitanism are often difficult to trace, it is generally agreed that Taiye Selasi's conceptualisation of it in her 2005 essay, "Bye-Bye Babar", is when the term began to gain critical currency in Anglophone scholarly spaces, and as a consequence, to also generate controversy. It is worth noting here that Achille Mbembe is commonly attributed with its coinage in academic circles; however, as Stephanie Bosch Santana (2016) finds, one reason for the relative neglect of Mbembe's version is that, first appearing in *La Grande Sortie de la Nuit*, it has not yet been translated into English. His description of the term, in the context of a continent full of crossings, in his conversation with Sarah Balakrishnan in "Pan-African Legacies, Afropolitan Futures: A Conversation with Achille Mbembe", in *Transition 120* (2016), is worth quoting in some length. It is then "refer[ring] to a way – the many ways – in which Africans, or people of African origin, understand themselves as being part of the world rather than being apart" and "is a name for undertaking a critical reflection on the many ways in which, in fact, there is no world without Africa and there is no Africa that is not part of it" (29). While Mbembe's articulation and approach is more philosophical, as Miriam Pahl (2016) put it: "Afroplitanism 'grew up' online" (77)—and after Taiye Selasi's conceptualisation of it. Among other floating theories, one goes that the concept was birthed from and branches out

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[21] Recent special issues and volumes include *European Journal of English Studies*, 21.2 (2017); *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 28:1 (2016); Eva Rask Knudsen and Ulla Rahbek, *In Search of the Afropolitan* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016); Jennifer Wawrzinek and J. K. S. Makokha (eds), *Negotiating Afropolitanism: Essays on Borders and Spaces in Contemporary African Literature and Folklore* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011).

of its bigger umbrella term cosmopolitanism[22]. Pahl's 2016 essay—an attempt to articulate "Afropolitanism as critical consciousness", and titled thus—argues that "the term itself suggests that 'Afropolitanism' is a form of 'cosmopolitanism', and, in fact, the critique raised against the two phenomena is comparable" (76). To accentuate her argument, she quotes Brian Bwesigye's article, published on the online forum, *This is Africa*, where he warns that Afropolitanism risks developing into a "new single story" (of privileged African emigrants) and "erases African realities from the literary landscape" (76-77). Indeed, critiques of Afropolitanism have tended to echo those of cosmopolitanism. Bill Ashcroft alludes to the latter's associations with "urbanity, sophistication and wealth," and of the ability to "travel freely, to experience and participate in other cultures for long periods" and thus, to be cosmopolitan (76). Read in the context of these judgments,[23] Taiye Selasi's (2005) statements manifest privilege, the seemingly free-flow of movement, and material commercialisation and connections she is oftentimes called out for:

> They (read: we) are Afropolitans—the newest generation of African emigrants, coming soon or collected already at a law firm/chem lab/jazz lounge near you. […] There is at least one place on The African Continent to which we tie our sense of self: be it a nation-state (Ethiopia), a city (Ibadan), or an auntie's kitchen. Then there's the G8 city or two (or three) that we know like the backs of our hands, and the *various institutions that know us for our famed focus*. We are Afropolitans: not citizens, but Africans of the world. (my emphasis; n.p.)

The label Afropolitan has often been attached to Adichie—it is a label she shrugs off—and yet, as Serena Guarracino (2014) argues, "her public persona and her work have been appropriated by the Afropolitan global community" (11). In "All Your Faves are Problematic: A Brief History of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Stanning, and the Trap of #blackgirlma-

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[22] See Anna-Leena Toivanen, "Cosmopolitanism's New Clothes? The Limits of the Concept of Afropolitanism", *European Journal of English Studies*, vol 21, no. 2, 2017: 189–205 (p. 190).

[23] Works such as *Negotiating Afropolitanism: Essays on Borders and Spaces in Contemporary African Literature and Folklore* (2011), and more recently, *In Search of the Afropolitan: Encounters, Conversations, and Contemporary Diasporic African Literature* (2016), and critics such as Simon Gikandi (2011), Chielozona Eze (2014), Amatoritsero Ede (2016), among others, re-appropriate, rescue and resurrect the term from its reductive readings.

gic" (2017), Sisonke Msimang also argues that, in some ways, Adichie "has marked the rise of" Afropolitanism (even if she herself claims not to subscribe to it and explicitly rejects it) (n.p.). Furthermore, in the chapter "Afropolitan Literature as a Minority Discourse in Contemporary African Literature," Razinat Talatu Mohammed writes that although Adichie herself has refused to identify with and be identified by this label, "her novel *Americanah* expounds the ideals of the theory of Afropolitanism" (355). This view is also shared by Caroline Lyle (2018), who considers the novel "a text that perfectly lends itself to the expansion of Selasi's theory of Afropolitan identity and formation" (qtd. in Mohammed 355). But pushing Guarracino's perspective, it can be proposed that Adichie has herself, mostly commercially (at times perhaps unconsciously, unwittingly, or even unwantingly) subscribed to aspects of Afropolitanism by playing into its privileges—and thus the forces flow in both directions. Adichie has become a writer "with a celebrity status similar to that of actors and musicians which is a result of her success as a writer, but also of her own 'marketing'", notes Pahl (79). Conversely, one can also deconstruct how Adichie's celebrity status has *resulted in* her success as a writer—which is something Obi-Young's afore-quoted analysis gestures towards—one that can be quantified in commercial sales, and qualified in critical acclaim, and otherwise.

By Selasi's description, as Krishnan (2018) understands it, the Afropolitan:

> may badge themselves as a citizen of the world, but their daily movements and self-conception remain contingent on their admission to a global system structured around the deterritorialisation of capital. This, in turn, gives the Afropolitan access to a privileged world of flows, beneficiary of a life imbued with what appears to be endless mobility and *the freedom of choice to define one's identity at will*… adopting and discarding identities in the name of liquidity, this reading of Afropolitanism transforms the act of being into another marketplace transaction, mediated by commoditisation like any other (42, my emphasis)

While this formula has its own criticisms, caveats and shortcomings, in Adichie's case —and in the context of her self-fashioning and self-positioning work—it's an appropriate claim. Since her 2012 TEDx talk, "We Should All Be Feminists"—later published as a pock-

etbook-sized essay (Fourth Estate, 2014)—Adichie has become the unsaid spokesperson for all things feminism the world over. As the interviewer Emma Brockes writes in "Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: 'Can people please stop telling me feminism is hot?'" (2017), "The success of *We Should All Be Feminists* has made Adichie as prominent for her feminism as for her novels, to the extent that 'now I get invited to every damned feminist thing in the whole world,'" (n.p.). As Matthew Lecznar notes (2017), "the piece has undergone a remarkable transformation since it was first presented at a TEDx talk in December 2012" (167): its words were sampled by Beyoncé in her hit-single, *Flawless*,[24] and the statement stitched onto T-shirts in Maria Grazia Chiuri's debut collection for Dior at Paris Fashion Week, September 2016.[25] Adichie has also featured in *Vogue* magazine; and earned sponsorships including a high-profile role as the new face of No.7, the in-house cosmetics brand of UK pharmacy chain Boots; and countless appearances on television, radio, and the Internet, alongside literary festivals and graduation speeches, across the world as a public intellectual and global spokeswoman for African feminism and contemporary affairs. "No contemporary author has become as representative of African literature as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Adichie's rise to superstardom is remarkable," notes Krishnan (2018), adding that "photogenic, fashionable, and erudite… Adichie, in her public guise, comes across as a master of the mythologies which surround African literature," she adds (50). It is thus simple to see the full picture—how Adichie's public persona and self-marketing invites "various institutions that know [her] for [her] famed focus"—as Taiye Selasi's Afropolitans apparently do—in increasingly, and globally, visible ways.

Adichie's cultural celebrity is further foregrounded when one factors in her diasporic status. She is a Nigerian novelist who spends sufficient time in the United States, and her seemingly unconscious subscription of Afropolitanism is further cemented through international institutions that have claimed and celebrated her, and whom she has whole-heartedly embraced and endorsed in return. A small, but by no means exhaustive, sample: In 2010, Adichie was included in *The New Yorker*'s "20 Under 40" Fiction Issue, and her short story "Ceiling" was incorporated into the 2011 edition of *The Best American Short Stories*. She was

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[24] Also see: Ben Dandridge-Lemco and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. "Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie On Beyoncé: "Her Type Of Feminism Is Not Mine." *Fader*. Oct. 7, 2016.

[25] See "Dior's Big Statement" by Anindita Ghose (Feb. 24, 2017).

also among *Foreign Policy* magazine's "Top Global Thinkers of 2013", and later on *TIME* magazine's list of "The 100 Most Influential People" in 2015. On the African continent, she was named *New African*'s "100 Most Influential Africans" in 2013, she won the 2008 Future Award, Nigeria: Young Person of the Year category, and also MTV Africa Music Awards 2014: Personality of the Year! As Lecznar (2019) writes, "the 'Adichie brand' has to a large extent been built on the writer's ability to position herself as a distinctly Nigerian and African creative thinker who also exudes global vision and appeal" (40). Arguably, it is this appeal that sets her apart. Of Adichie's "intellectual interventions" he adds: the fact that they are "so widely accessible" to audiences world over shows that she is "prepared to risk the loss of her popularity in order to disseminate her political principles", something that has "arguably tarnished her reputation" (43). While Lecznar's comment on Adichie's accessibility echoes Folarin's, the former is more interested in her dissemination of ideas through digital methods—and the importance of media, and such interconnected mediums, in an increasingly globalised world—than in her "descent/dissent" (Eisenberg 2013) from Achebe.

Graham Huggan's (2001) concept of the "postcolonial exotic", the process of taking literature from the margins and recuperating it for mainstream markets by rewriting the unfamiliar in terms of the familiar and packaging it as new and exotic (22), where, "exoticism describes a particular mode of aesthetic *perception*—one as part of the global commodification of cultural difference, that which renders people, objects and places strange even as it domesticates them, and which effectively manufactures otherness even as it claims to surrender to its immanent mystery" (13, original emphasis), is often cited in postcolonial literature circles. Although Adichie's self-positioning and self-fashioning work as a literary figure, public intellectual and spokesperson is global and digital, and although she herself rejects the marketing label of "Afropolitanism", it would be naïve to assume that Adichie merely caters to the whims and fancies of the West, that is, the market factors of the Global North —the "postcolonial exotic"—without doing so deliberately, and to her own advantage and larger aims. "While Adichie's high profile is the result of her exceptionally engaging writing style, it is also due to her ability to cannily *activate* for her purposes the criteria of 'African literature'", writes Feldner (52, my emphasis). He concludes: "both *affirmation* and rejection are inherent in Adichie's work. She is *aware* that the success of an African novel is often determined by its faithfulness to the expectations for 'African literature', and her work accordingly

at the same time *assents* to and struggles with the market demands for African writers […] Adichie consciously caters to market demands, but not without using her position and high profile to criticise the conditions under which African writers are judged. With her fiction, she exposes and, to some extent, dismantles the exoticising market logic and shows the limitations of a category such as 'African literature'" (58, my emphasis). This conscious, strategic activation, affirmation, awareness, and assent—coupled and paralleled with rejection, exposure, and dismantling—shows how "paratexts" are far from passive in the global literary marketplace. And finally, while Adichie has carved a significant, substantial space for herself and her politics and ideas within the larger international literary landscape, she has also always maintained ties and networks on the African continent, and particularly to her home country, Nigeria. Most of her major works have been republished by Farafina Press[26], the Nigeria-based publishing company and one-time magazine. She has also founded the Farafina Creative Writing Workshop, which is aimed at continental writers[27]—and one is tempted here to think of these home-grown workshops as a foil to the discrimination within the Caine Prize Writers Workshops she faced—and so deftly dismissed in her (meta) fictional short story.

Taking into consideration Adichie's apparent "accessibility" as an African writer, her "arguably tarnished reputation", and "Adichie: the brand"—and to undo and undermine these, at-times, extremely taken-for-granted tag-lines—one can interrogate the inconsistencies and implications of being Adichie in the world (or Selasi's "Africans of the world"). By foregrounding and following in the footsteps of a selection of critical voices in the field, the following section attempts to unpack and understand the contradictions Adichie embodies and the spaces she occupies:

> Writers need to be perceived as authentic in order to be considered "not just . . . *representers* of culture but . . . bona fide cultural *representatives*" (Huggan 26, original emphasis, qtd. in Feldner 51).

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[26] It's noteworthy that her work is now being published in Nigeria by Narrative Landscape Press.

[27] For more on Adichie's 'local' contributions to the continent's literary culture and output, see Kate Haines Wallis. "Exchanges in Nairobi and Lagos: Literary Networks as Alternative Geographies." *Research in African Literatures*, vol 49, no. 1, 2018: 163-186.

> It is the idea of Adichie. Of what she represented. (Folarin 2016; n.p.)

> In other words, Adichie has become a signifier for something larger than herself […] And it was when we began to project our dreams onto her that loving Adichie the symbol—rather than her books—became murky. (Msimang 2017, n.p.)

> When you're a global thought leader whose every eminently quotable clapback makes headlines, but you erase whole bodies of African knowledge and African feminism outside your field, what Africa are you defending? A market? A brand? (Patel, qtd. in Lecznar 2019, 40)

> [W]hen single figures become elevated as spokespeople, the privilege and responsibility of such a position should entail an acknowledgment that one cannot possibly speak to and for all lived experiences. (Fischer 898, qtd. in Lecznar 2019, 44)

> If the story of the institution of African literature suggests that prior to Achebe all that existed was an expectant pause, then with Adichie one might be tempted to perceive a long-deferred moment of exhalation, the messianic conclusion of a decades-long story, seeing African literature to the glorious final act of its teleological development at last. (Krishnan 2018, 51)

"Postcolonial writers/thinkers," Graham Huggan (2001) writes, "are both aware of and resistant to their interpellation as marginal spokespersons, institutionalised cultural commentators and representative (iconic) figures" (26). Poster girl for 21st century African (and global) feminism, prize-winning literary superstar, viral TED talks-giver, MacArthur "Genius", and, more recently, adopted and appropriated as a pop culture celebrity and fashion icon—from Nigeria to the African continent at-large, and having North American to global presences, affiliations and influences—Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie prevails beyond the progenitor-heir relationship she is often narrowly, or incompletely—as "single stories", or stereotypes typically run—perceived through. Additionally, she has willingly embraced her role as a cultural commentator—no longer "marginal", but very much existent in the western metropolis—simultaneously negotiating with and occurring in multiple literary and literal geographies, local and global, Nigerian and pan-African, and across digital platforms and spaces worldwide. An unintended consequence of this specific kind of celebrity has

been the various critiques she has inevitably invited—especially as a woman of colour—including an interrogation of what the seriously damaging side effects of being an elevated spokesperson on essentially all things racial- sexual- and gender-politics can be. It is worth mentioning here, that in the last few years, Adichie has arguably lost this superstar status—and faced entirely new levels of criticism—specifically for her comments against trans women[28] and, more recently, for abusing her power in the publishing industry against younger, queer, trans and non-binary writers such as Akwaeke Emezi, OluTimehin Kukoyi and B Camminga[29]. In this context in particular, Patel's comments around erasure of lived realities and bodies (of knowledge)—to what aim? At what cost?—ring more true than ever before. Some of these conversations fall outside the scope of this thesis, but it's worth highlighting at this stage that a comparative study of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Akwaeke Emezi—specifically on how they've both embraced the tag of "celebrity", albeit very differently and to diametrically opposed ends—would be fruitful in framing further critical debates around 'The One' within African literature.

Furthermore, Patel's and Fishcher's above-quoted arguments, albeit both premised on the question of the "burden of representation", point towards this disconnect between expectation and reality. It is the impossible idea of being the sole-defender and speaker on select issues of identity politics, indeed for and on behalf of a continent or a race and the recognition, or lack thereof, of responsibility this brings. But perhaps most pertinently, it elucidates what it means to place literary idols on pedestals, to expect nothing short of perfection from them, consistently and always, and to pull them back down with unwarranted or disproportionate criticism if they ever happen to falter or fail to meet the (often unreasonably high) standards set for them—and that they are held to. "No *one* novelist can bear the burden of representing a continent," writes Taiye Selasi in *The Guardian* (2015) (my emphasis; n.p.). Among other critiques of Adichie, Yemisi Ogbe's review, "*Americanah* and Other Definitions of Supple Citizenship", in South Africa-based Chimurenga's *Chronic Books Supplement* (2013), is worth quoting from. According to its author:

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[28] See Samantha Schmidt (*The Washington Post*, 2017).

[29] See OluTimehin Kukoyi's essay, "Your Power Ends Where Mine Begins" (*The Republic*, 2021) and Camminga, B. "Disregard and Danger: Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie and the Voices of Trans (and Cis) African Feminists." *The Sociological Review*, vol. 68, no. 4, 2020: 817-833.

> Adichie has got the shape of the Nigerian world wrong. She has also underestimated its size and its complexity. Africa is immeasurable. It is a living, muscular bricolage flexing and expanding backward and forward through all the manifestations of time and space (11)

What does it mean when an individual is expected to—and burdened with the task—live up to speaking for a continent? What does it mean that the West (specifically but not exclusively) filters, funnels, reduces, and simplifies African literature to a single story, a single "accessible" writer—just "the one" per century? In other words, and in this case, what does it mean, as Msimang writes, when we begin to "project our dreams" hopes and desires onto one author—Adichie—making her larger than her written words, her literary output or literary life. Msimang adds, of the celebrity status ascribed to Adichie that while she "has no control over this of course", she has also "walked so confidently into the realm of non-fiction, and has agreed on multiple occasions, to take up the mantle of 'spokesperson', there is an increasing expectation that she is up to the task" and there is a "politics to the adoration". Adichie's appeal aside, there is also adoration at work here. And Ogbe's review seems to echo this: while Adichie has taken up the role of spokesperson—for Nigeria, for Africa—the truth is, she may not always be up to the task, may herself falter, fall short of portraying the full, or accurate picture.

Arguably and ironically, this "idea" of Adichie, of "Adichie the brand"—something bigger than author-self (or her books)—is where she is most an approximation of Achebe. Sitting at the head of the African canon on the global literary landscape, the "Father of African Literature", Achebe, too, in time, became bigger than himself. As did his novel *Things Fall Apart*. There lie shadows where novelists and novels once stood, shadows that have stretched across imaginations and continents—commercialised and contorted, exaggerated versions of their corporeal counterparts. But the quality that makes Adichie most like Achebe also makes her most unlike him: her foray into fashion, gender and race politics, and pop culture is quintessentially a 21st century literary phenomenon—roles of representation she did not inherit from Achebe. More distinctly, as mentioned before, hers is a deliberate embracing of these elevated positions—into fields and spaces beyond the literary. Thus,

the causes and consequences of Achebe and Adichie becoming bigger than themselves, in the 20th and 21st centuries, respectively, could, in some ways, not be more disparate. Furthermore, the picture of the global literary landscape, the space that the African literary canon occupies within it, and literary celebrity culture in the 21st century, predictably and obviously, looks very different from what it did in the previous century. More crucially, the stakes are different now, and Adichie is not fighting the same fight Achebe once was—although arguably in some aspects, it is a continued struggle against stereotypes.

For Krishnan (2018), the marketing label "Afropolitan" and the role of digital media in the current age are what set the 21st century writer apart. She argues that historically, "the constitution and canonisation of African literature, at least in the story most visible in the global literary field, has always relied on a series of totemic figures and mythical moments/ founding moments"—such as the African Writers Series, and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* as its cornerstone—but in the current era, with "the omnipresence of digital technologies, the hyperactive space-time compression of blogs, podcasting, and vodcasting, and the immediacy of social media, the role of the writer-as-star has intensified, amplifying the anxieties, tensions, and ambiguities which attend the dual mandate of the writer as artist and writer as spokesperson as cults of personality, enabled by the speed and spread of digital technologies to proliferate and continually reproduce their own rhetoric to the benefit of a select group of writers with the savvy to manipulate the possibilities of digital space for publicity and amplification" (45). If, in the 20th century, Achebe was a writer, but also a defender and a spokesperson, in the 21st century, Adichie is all of the above but additionally also a star in the world's eye. We have seen how Adichie (mis) uses digital spaces, platforms and institutions to her advantage; how she uses these mediums to "proliferate and continually reproduce [her] own rhetoric"; how she welcomes the global fame and stature; how she invites and embraces opportunities to speak on behalf of a continent, a culture; and how she basks in the adoration afforded to her.

Furthermore, Krishnan argues that the "anxieties which underwrite much of the critical debate" around the term Afropolitan "can be seen as part of a longer history of anxiety around the question of representation in African literature, and particularly the impact of the politics of location with respect to readers, writers, producers, and gatekeepers" (45).

When it comes to African literature, Adichie has been transformed into a larger-than-life figure in the global imaginary. "Implicit here is the constant notion of the dual mandate, that which imbues the literary with a meaning which is never simply about the literary, but rather about larger questions of the continent's place in the world and its image therein," she adds (45). Why, when it comes to African literature, do "paratexts" come into play so often? Why must an African author—arguably *the* current "accessible" African author—have to be more than their literary output, have to foray into fields beyond their fiction? That they are expected to bigger than their books, their literary life, is telling of the world's continued (mis) conception of the African continent—and the expectation from African authors' to cater to this. One can argue that if Achebe set the stage—with the African Writers Series and *Things Fall Apart*—Adichie has been restructuring, reshaping, reconfiguring, and rebelling against, it since. While Achebe and Adichie have both been spokespeople for the African continent, both been at the helm of the continent's literary canon within Africa and in the world at-large—and often beyond the boundaries of the book world—and both been subject to stereotypes and the "dangers of the single story"—this has been through different means and to different ends across the two centuries.

African Literature: Entries and Exits, Distances and Detours

In his review of *Africa39* (2014), Mukoma Wa Ngugi asks us to "understand the aesthetic and political distance African literature has travelled between *Things Fall Apart* and *Africa39*"—and this through the "terms of mourning and melancholy". This is cited here not for Wa Ngugi's analysis of the distance travelled, but for his acknowledgement of it. A Hay Festival and Rainbow Book Club collaborative project that celebrates Port Harcourt's tenure as UNESCO World Book Capital 2014—and it is noteworthy that the 'capital' comes to the African continent, otherwise considered a 'periphery' of publishing—*Africa39* is an anthology of 39 fiction writers of sub-Saharan Africa, and its diaspora, aged under 40.

When Binyavanga Wainaina sent out the call for submissions, he encouraged the "wild, weird, explorers of the imagination" to contribute (n.p.). "Whatever your broadest idea of prose fiction is, you will be considered," he said (n.p.). The collection's broader commitment to inclusion and imagination has led to stories by writers with ties to 22 coun-

tries, 16 of which are in sub-Saharan Africa. Strictly singular, national affiliations give way to pan-African, continental ones, which give way to more multiplicities: Zukiswa Wanner, for example, "represents" Zambia (where she was born), resides in Kenya, and has familial ties with South Africa and Zimbabwe, notes Stephanie Santana (2015), whereas others such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Tope Folarin, and Taiye Selasi dwell across the diaspora. *Africa39* also boasts of its gender balance (22 of the final 39 are women writers), and features former winners of the Caine Prize for African Writing. Altogether, it is an anthology that "refuses to be a thematic container for, or a survey of, new African writing," argues Santana; it is, instead, a text "with many entrances, exits, and detours" (n.p.). Taiye Selasi's words (2015), quoted in an earlier section, come to mind again, where she clarifies that, though the rhetorical strategy of her essay "African Literature Doesn't Exist", she was merely trying to start over—to ask how to (re)fill the container of African literature all over again (Bady and Selasi 156).

Africa39 is an excellent example that marks a tangent from the otherwise linear trajectory African literature supposedly takes: from Chinua Achebe to Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie. It cracks wide open, shakes up, and empties the container—refusing singularity and offering multiple entry- and exit-points, perspectives, lineages and locations. Not only do its varied voices offer a fresh departure from a hitherto heavily commericalised literary legacy of Achebe-Adichie, but they also signal new directions for the future and for framing African Literature. *Africa39* is only one example of the distance African literature has travelled thus far and the (new, varied) directions it's taking. Margaret Busby's *Daughters of Africa* (Pantheon Books, 1992), and more recently, *New Daughters of Africa: An International Anthology of Writing by Women of African Descent* (Myriad Editions, 2019) are other such seminal examples.

In offering alternative pathways, perceptions, and positions, *Africa39* already raises caution and suspicion, of origin-stories often considered as the one and only truth, history or story. It is worth noting, however, that Adichie is included in (and is in fact the first author listed in) this anthology, and while these alternative narratives of, or interventions into, African literature—its histories and trajectories—may not be complete, or wholly free from the shadows of Achebe-Adichie, they are productive starting-points for new beginnings and imaginations. A later section will delve more deeply into the emergence and existence of

other such literary networks, initiatives, and organisations—particularly home grown and "local" to the continent—which offer alternative routes into and roots of conceiving, framing, and understanding African Literature—and the way its canonised and consecrated.

What we talk about when we talk about 'Africa'

> Many movies made by Hollywood have engaged in thought experiments about Africa… These fantasies, white and black, are simplifications. There are fifty-four African countries. What would it mean to dream with these already-existing countries themselves? What would it mean to dream with Mozambique, Sudan, Togo, or Libya, and think about their politics in all their hectic complexities? What would it look like to use that as a narrative frame, even for works of fiction?
>
> The general is where solidarity begins, but the specific is where our lives come into proper view. You can't go to "Africa" fam. Africa is almost twelve million square miles. I want to be particular about being particular about what we are talking about when we talk about Africa. (Cole 2018; n.p.)

In his above-quoted 2018 essay, "On the Blackness of the Panther"—first published on *Medium* and later anthologised in *The Good Immigrant USA* (2019)—Teju Cole writes about how he "began to become African" when he moved from Nigeria to the US in the summer of 1992 and how the US provided and proved to be a "contrast", a relief and a foil, to his hitherto "latent Africanness" (n.p.). (This is a story we've heard before, from other African writers who have made migrations to the West—including Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie.) These discoveries and epiphanies aside, he also writes—and in the same vein as Binyawanga Wainaina, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Taiye Selasi, among others—of the stereotypes and singularities, and the generalisations and misconceptions, about the African continent. "The nations and cities of Africa, as they are now, are each so consumed with the complexity of being their distinct selves from day to day that they cannot take on the thankless task of also being Hollywood's "Africa," he writes (n.p.). Cole's essay is wide-ranging—featuring everything from the human exhibits at the World Fairs of the 19th century to the comic books featuring the Black Panther and the identity category, Blackness—but his argument

and agenda are focussed and "particular": It is the distinction—and the distance, the distortion—between the imagined "Africa" and the real, physical Africa. "Truth is not stranger than fiction, but it is more specific, more contradictory, more hectic, more layered. "Africa" —vague or composite—cannot hope to match the complexity or interest of any actual place in Africa," he writes (n.p.). This contradiction—the simultaneous emptiness and saturatedness—with which the continent is understood and received is centuries old: Africa is the familiar-yet-exotic, the authentic-yet-beyond-belief.

In the *Critique of Black Reason* (2017), Achille Mbembe argues that:

> For a long time, in the Western imagination, Africa was an unknown land. But that hardly prevented philosophers, naturalists, geographers, missionaries, writers, or really anyone at all from making pronouncements about one or another aspect of its geography, or about the lives, habits, and customs of its inhabitants. Despite the flood of information to which we now have access and the number of academic studies at our disposal, it remains unclear whether the will to ignorance has disappeared, not to mention the age-old disposition that consists in making pronouncements on subjects about which one knows little or nothing. (70)

Africa, Mbembe argues, "has been subject to a curious doubling in which it is both that geography about which almost nothing is known—or can be known—and simultaneously that geography only knowable through the interlocution of the global North and its band of ignorant experts, 'a geographic location and a region of the world about which almost nothing is known but which is described with an apparent authority, the authority of fiction'" (Mbembe 71, qtd. in Krishnan 2018, 59). For Krishnan, Mbembe's choice of words, emphasising the 'authority of fiction', "are no mere rhetorical gloss"—but rather "speak directly to the ways in which fictional renderings of the continent have always shaped and continue to shape the ways in which it is viewed outside of its boundaries" (59). In other words, from early on, African literature was assimilated and subsumed into anthropological and ethnographical frameworks and discourses. Later, these frameworks of reading took the form of the "overdetermined paradigm of writing back", and, more recently, to reductive debates about representation, among other criticisms of poverty porn—and pandering to

Western publishing institutions and forces, adds Krishnan. (4). Hence, African literature has been long defined by "a series of uneasy relationships with the market dynamics of the publishing industry and public perception, resulting in a mode of canonisation which is inevitably political in its consequences and which produces broader implications for the formation of the geopolitical topographies through which Africa and the world emerge", she concludes (4).

This phrase, "the authority of fiction", is worth focussing on—and not just when it comes to the larger commercial category of African Literature in current times, but also the Caine Prize for African Writing, which will form the focus of the following chapter. For Mbembe, and for others, fictional representations and renderings of the continent have been subject to a doubling and distortion: far from the "authentic" truth, stretched and subject to gross exaggeration. The image and imagery of Africa through this "authority of fiction"—through canonised stories—is persistently and unfortunately never a close approximation of the continent and its physical realities and stories. It's either incompletely or reductively represented, or bloated and twisted into a misrepresentation. In other words: it's either Adichie's "danger of a single story" or Hollywood's "Africa". Either way, this is due to issues around perception and publishing that Krishnan raises above.

To return to Teju Cole's text: "At least once a day, I think: 'another world is possible.' There's life yet in our dreams. The pan-African political project is still alive. The memory of whatever was good in the Bandung Conference or the Organization of the African Unity still makes the heart race. Flashes of common cause among the Darker Nations can be illuminating and sustaining," Cole adds (n.p.). "But "Africa" as a trope and a trap, backdrop and background, interests me ever less" (n.p.). For him, both Blackness and Africa are "multifarous", "generative", "capacious", "dissenting" (n.p.). And while 'common causes' and coming together can be productive and filled with possibilities, in Africa's case, these commonalities have been distorted and disfigured into generalisations and reductions—and the danger of single stories. As he notes, there are fifty-four, *very real* African countries: What would it mean to use these realities and their politics as starting-points, as foundation stones, even for our fictions and dreams? African fictions, Africa in fiction, in imagination has travelled too far from the truth. Cole calls for a return to that which is already-existing, to truths

and particulars that are more specific and layered, complex and contradictory, as starting-points for new beginnings, futures and dreams. He asks for an acknowledgment of already-present historical and contemporary realities—and for a sense of grounded-ness in understanding and imagining (fictional) topographies of the continent. It is arguable that Cole's framework is a little limited—and yet, although he foregoes continental impulses and gross exaggerations in favour of national visions and particular realities, it is also a step in the direction of specifics. For him, the Pan-African project is still alive and full of potential. Existing histories, realities, and stories are brimming with truths and energies, too. Perhaps researchers can take cues from his ways of imagining and championing existing political differences—and translating these into aesthetic spaces. Instead of focussing on the background—and backdrop—of Africa as trope, why not focus on the process of foregrounding: women's stories, queer stories, speculative stories, experimental stories. Can we, as Cole recommends, "be particular about being particular about what we are talking about when we talk about Africa"—and about stories from, and of, the continent that are canonised, consecrated and prized? (n.p.). Can we dream with grounded-ness and rooted-ness—with eyes to the sky—instead of regurgitating stories, and indeed, ways of storytelling, of the past?

Ultimately, Cole's essay is as much about *possibility* as it is about specificity—writing as he does about other worlds, other lives, and other dreams. For all its apparent limitations along national lines and continental borders, it lies on the brink of possibility and potential. In the context of such critical debates around 'African literature', Chapter Three then moves towards the Caine Prize for African Writing. It charts the Caine Prize for African Writing's inception and inner workings (including its colonial connections—and how it has inherited the Booker Prize's legacy and geography); its impact and influence on the field of African literature globally; the various critiques and controversies it has faced, including those that reproduce stereotypical ways of storytelling; and, finally, offers circumventions, digressions, and new directions for future prize administrators and participating writers. The chapter also interrogates the Caine Prize for African Writing's curious positioning as a prizing institution for African writing in English that was born in, and is based in, the UK—and is therefore tainted with the residues of colonial violence and visions—and simultaneously undermines its two-decade-long significance and status within the field of prizes for African writing; that is, its position as a prize that's not quite European, not quite African. Addition-

ally, it traces the discrepancies and hypocrites within the prize, which claims and commits to represent—and reward writing from—the African continent as a whole, but, in practice and truth, has been continually and increasingly biased and tilted towards prizing limited writers and writing. The Caine Prize for African Writing—arguably the most-criticised yet most-prestigious (British) literary prize for African writing and literary right-of-passage for African writers—is victim to the same "curious doubling" and "authority of fiction" as contemporary African literature at-large (Mbembe 71). Taken together, Chapter Two and Chapter Three illuminate the manifold ways in which both Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and the Caine Prize for African Writing have inadvertently come to represent the opposite of what they claim to be committed to: thus often reinforcing dangerous and reductive notions of 'African literature' as a concept and category and working agains the very issues they seek to rectify.

Chapter Three

The Caine Prize for 'African' Writing:

A Continental Reading and Rewarding

"African novelists may write about Africa, about African experiences, but they seem to be glancing over their shoulder at foreigners who will read them. Whether they like it or not, they have accepted the role of interpreter, interpreting Africa to their readers."

—JM Coetzee, Elizabeth Costello

"The Caine Prize is just one prize. It cannot be everything to everyone."

—Dr. Ainehi Edoro, founder of BrittlePaper

It is not uncommon for literary prizes in particular, and literary institutions in general, to have multiple origin stories, multiple motivations and founding mottos, or multiple beginnings—including false starts. Where—and more significantly, why—a prize is born is political; it has consequences for the literary landscape at-large. When looking back on, and tracing the inherited legacy and history of a prize—its incipient moments and roots—years or decades later, the route one takes can often lead down differing or divergent paths. Things aren't always the way they appear—and the Caine Prize for African Writing is no exception.

Inception and Inner Workings

Founded in 1999 and first awarded the following year, The Caine Prize for African Writing—which is now just over two decades old—was named to mark the memory of Sir Michael Caine, former chairman of Booker plc, and, for nearly twenty-five years, also of the Booker Prize management committee, alongside his role as chairman of the 'Africa 95' arts festival in Europe and Africa in 1995. In their preface to the anthology celebrating the 10th anniversary of the Caine Prize for African Writing (2009), Jonathan Taylor OBE[30], the first chair, and Nick Elam, the first administrator, note that as a philanthropist, businessman and literary administrator, Sir Michael Caine had long been laying down plans for a prize designed for the "recognition of the worth of African writing in English [...] by bringing it to a wider audience" (6-7). After his death, his widow, the British LibDem MEP, Baroness Emma Nicholson, with the support of friends and family, set up the £10,000 prize to be awarded annually to a short story by an African writer.

The Caine Prize for African Writing was originally founded "to encourage the growing recognition of the worth of African writing in English, its richness and diversity, by bringing it to a wider audience," as the website claims (caineprize.com), and currently declares itself as thus:

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[30] The first chair of the Caine Prize for African Writing, Jonathan Taylor was a member of the SOAS Governing Body from 1988 to 2005, serving as Chairman for the last six of those years. Since 2001, he has been chairman of the Booker Prize Foundation, which awards the Booker Prize for Fiction, the UK's most prestigious literary honour. He is also chair of the trustees of the International Prize for Arabic Fiction (caineprize.com).

> The AKO Caine Prize for African Writing[31] is a registered charity whose aim is to bring African writing to a wider audience using our annual literary award. In addition to administering the Prize, we work to connect readers with African writers through a series of public events, as well as helping emerging writers in Africa to enter the world of mainstream publishing through the annual Caine Prize writers' workshop which takes place in a different African country each year. (caineprize.com) (n.p).

For The Caine Prize for African Writing, "an African writer" was taken to mean "someone who is a national of an African country, or who has a parent who is African by birth or nationality". In other words, "the Prize is awarded to a short story by an African writer published in English, whether they reside in Africa or elsewhere[32]" (caineprize.com) (n.p.). And yet, the Caine Prize for "African Writing"—for "an African writer", is "not an African prize, but British," writes Dobrota Pucherová, in her 2012 article, "'A Continent Learns to Tell its Story at Last': Notes on the Caine Prize". Famously described and dubbed as "the African Booker"—as has been established earlier—and financially funded as it is primarily by British alongside some US and African charities, including the Booker Prize Foundation, the Commonwealth Foundation, the Miles Morland Foundation, and The Oppenheimer Memorial Trust[33], Pucherová—among the Prize's earliest and most explicit of critics—postulates that "as a British prize for African writing, the Caine is unavoidably imbricated in the troubled history of postcolonial literatures in English, of which the primary site of evaluation and legitimation has been the West"(13). In a 2015 interview with Nick Mulgrew for *Mail & Guardian*, Lizzy Attree, the Prize's first director[34], defends the "African-

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[31] Since 2020, the Prize has been called the 'AKO Caine Prize for African Writing' to reflect its new donor, the AKO Foundation.

[32] In the past, the Prize's website has suggested 'an African writer' to be "someone who was born in Africa, or who is a national of an African country, or whose parents are African, and whose work has reflected African sensibilities"—but the phrase 'African sensibilities' was withdrawn from this description in 2012 (caineprize.com).

[33] For a full list of donors, see caineprize.com. Since 2020, which marked twenty years of the Caine Prize for African Writing, the AKO Foundation has been the primary donor of the Prize—and the this is reflected in the change in name to 'AKO Caine Prize for African Writing'.

[34] Nick Elam was the first administrator, followed by Lizzy Atree, who took over the role in 2011—and was promoted to director in 2014.

ness" of the Caine Prize for African Writing and speaks out against such charges of "window dressing for dysfunctional literary systems across the continent" and of not being "completely of Africa in the sense that it's foreign-run" that Mulgrew raises during the course of the interview (n.p.).. For Attree, "prizes are often "external" bodies"' in other words, "prizes are additional… but their ability to champion particular authors and texts can feed back into local industry," she clarifies (n.p.)

As an institution of the Booker Prize Foundation, and with the popular nomenclature of the "African Booker", the now-AKO Caine Prize for African Writing "has not only inherited the positive but also the negative capital of the Booker", writes Doseline Kiguru (2016a), scholar of African literatures and literary prizes such as the Caine Prize for African Writing and the Commonwealth Writers' Prize (168). It "not only benefit[s] from the symbolic capital of the Booker but from the financial support from both the Booker and the Commonwealth foundations, too", she adds in her article, "Prizing African Literature: Creating a Literary Taste" (168). To better understand the importance and implications of the AKO Caine Prize for African Writing for the present-day post-colonial literary industry, it is imperative to first position it within its larger legacy and London-based location. It can be argued that the Prize is politically and post-colonially problematic. If its home is in Britain, and its financial ancestor (and mother prize) is the Booker Prize Foundation, how does this frame the personality, identity and history of the Caine Prize for African Writing? Furthermore, how can the post-imperial metropolis, and the writing it helps produce and reward, be positioned and perceived as the host city, and the hegemonic source of "charity",[35] for the Caine Prize for African Writing—within what Sarah Brouillette (2007) terms the "global literary marketplace"—which, alongside other prizes such as the Commonwealth Writers' Prize, celebrates emerging writers from a continent—several of whose countries were previously part of the British Empire?

What Cynthia Ozick (2012) writes in *The New York Times* of the then-Baileys Prize for Women's Fiction (and now Women's Prize for Fiction) can be applied to the origins of the Caine Prize for African Writing: "The Orange Prize, then, was not born into an innocent

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[35]The AKO Caine Prize for African Writing is a registered charity whose aim is to bring African writing to a wider audience using our annual literary award.

republic of letters" (n.p.). Ozick is, of course, referring to the dearth, or complete non-existence, of female authors on literary prize lists, in particular the Booker Prize for Fiction long- and shortlists, but one can appropriate her idea of "innocence" to trace the birth—scandalous at best, questionable at worst—of the case in point, the Caine Prize for African Writing, and additionally, to question neo-colonial institutions which are propelled by, and have a penchant for, prizing stories based, not on literary value, but their origins, identity, and geography; in other words, on where they come from.

The Booker Prize's corporate connections being intertwined with a long history of economic and colonial oppression in the Caribbean Islands is no secret. Numerous critics including Richard Todd (*Consuming Fictions*, 1996), Graham Huggan (*The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins,* 2001), Luke Strongman (*The Booker Prize and the Legacy of Empire*, 2002), James F. English (*The Economy of Prestige*, 2005) and Sandra Ponzanesi (*The Postcolonial Cultural Industry: Icons, Markets, Mythologies*, 2014) have all addressed and unravelled the evils of the Booker Prize's colonial and historical connections in some capacity—as has chapter one of this thesis. But, in order to draw out and dissect the relationship between the Caine Prize for African Writing and the Booker Prize, it is worth briefly recapping a short history of the latter's origins here. The Booker Prize for Fiction was founded in 1968 when Booker McConnell Ltd announced a £5,000 prize for fiction to a British or Commonwealth author. As explored earlier, Graham Huggan (2001) has described the Booker McConnell firm, which was formed in 1834—and which was originally the main funding body for the Booker Prize for Fiction—as "a leading multinational agribusiness conglomerate [set up to] provide distributional services on the sugar-estates of Demerara (now Guyana)", one that "achieved rapid prosperity under a harsh colonial regime" (106–07). It was precisely this history of colonial domination and exploitation associated with the Booker name that prompted the 1972 Booker Prize-winning author John Berger to protest against Booker McConnell's involvement in the Caribbean by donating half of his prize money to the British Black Panther Movement, as was stated in the introduction. The Booker's deep-running history of exploitation and its "eager[ness] to downplay its nineteenth-century colonial past" also demonstrates "a history in contradiction with its current reputation as a postcolonial literary patron," adds Huggan (106). It comes as little surprise, then, that the primary and most

powerful point of critique of the Caine Prize for African Writing, or the "African Booker", comes, similarly, from within its own birthplace and being.

In "The Caine Prize and the Impossibility of 'New' African Writing" (2013), two-time judge and professor at Georgetown University, Samantha Pinto pre-empts Dobrota Pucherová (2012) and Doseline Kiguru's (2016a; 2016b) observations about the Prize's complicated and controversial colonial history and legacy:

> Its inception was marked by, perhaps surprisingly, [Binyavanga] Wainainaian exhortations (albeit not in the satiric mode) of broadening the global representation—and reputation—of Africa as more than "the West's continued pre-occupation with Africa's wars and famines" (Pinto 141)
>
> This overwhelming concern with perception—more particularly, perceptions of Africa by the Western World—haunts the Caine Prize's history and the writing and reception of twenty-first century African literature. It particularly marks the critical ambivalence with which African writers and postcolonial critics have received the Prize both as a practical reward to be pursued in the face of minimal continental support for African writing, and a double-edged gift from the "bloody colonizers", as [Binyavanga] Wainaina refers to the Caine Prize committee in his 2011 memoir, *One Day I Will Write About This Place* (188), one given in exchange for compromised readings of African struggle and trauma. (Pinto 141)

In his famous Twitter "Caineversation", Binyavanga Wainaina, himself a Caine Prize for African Writing recipient, tweets of this "gift" as: the "certificate of England" (@BinyavangaW Oct 13, 2014). There is a sense in which Pinto's point of view on this "double-edged gift" breaks down the binary that, according to gift theorist Mark Osteen (2002), forms the backbone of interpretations of gift practices:

> In one camp are those adhering to what Aafke Komte dubs the "moral cement" approach. These theorists emphasize the unifying effects of gift giving, gifts' capacity to forge or solidify social bonds. In the other camp are those who stress the ways gifts

> can be used to acquire and exercise power; these writers emphasise inequality and social disintegration. (17)

When one considers the Caine Prize for African Writing as a (post) colonial gift, it is clear that the two approaches—of solidifying social bonds and social disintegration—are not diametrically opposed. What is disguised as Aafke Komte's "moral cement approach" is layered with acts of neocolonial power acquisition and asymmetry. In an attempt to acknowledge the contributions made by the Caine Prize for African Writing in the field of contemporary African literature, and to rescue it from the danger of the "single [origin] story", it is worth quoting Aaron Bady's blog, *Zunguzungu,* in a short digression here. After the ten-year anniversary of the Caine Prize, at a time when it was riddled with external controversies and internal crises, Bady (2011) wrote that, "a decade in, [The Caine Prize for African Writing] has become one of the more important institutions by which new African writing gets an international audience, an especially important function ever since Heinemann discontinued the African Writers Series" (n.p.). If one thinks purely in terms of the Prize's contributions to the field of publishing, the idea of the Caine Prize for African Writing as descending from —or altogether replacing—the African Writers Series perhaps becomes a better origin story than that of the Booker legacy. Indeed, the 2017 writing workshop, which was hosted in Tanzania, heralded new co-publishers for the annual anthology across eight countries in the Horn and East Africa, including Huza Press, *Kwani?*, FEMRITE, Jacana, and others—alongside the original UK publisher, New International[36]. The Caine Prize for African Writing has also supported local presses and held symbiotic relationships with local literary institutions—and by doing so, provided the socio-economic bandwidth for publishing where it may otherwise not exist. In turn, stories published in new and upcoming print and digital literary magazines on the continent have been submitted for, and also shortlisted by the Prize. Caine Prize for African Writing-shortlisted writers, winners and workshop attendees

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[36] The complete current list of co-publishers: The stories written at Caine Prize workshops are published annually alongside the Prize's shortlisted stories by New Internationalist in the UK, Interlink in the US and publishers in seven African countries including, Jacana Media (South Africa), Lantern Books (Nigeria), Kwani? (Kenya), Sub-Saharan Publishers (Ghana), FEMRITE (Uganda), Gadsden Publishers (Zambia), 'amaBooks (Zimbabwe), Huza Press (Rwanda), Mkuki na Nyota (Tanzania) and Redsea Cultural Foundation (Somaliland, Somalia, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sudan, South Sudan and UAE). New Internationalist provides the print ready PDF to all the African co-publishers free of charge. Caine Prize anthologies are available from the publishers direct or from the Africa Book Centre, African Books Collective or Amazon (caineprize.com).

have also featured heavily across some of the most celebrated short story anthologies—including pan-African and diasporic contributors—such as *Africa39* and *The Granta Book of the African Short Story.*[37] Returning to Heinemann, it is also worth mentioning Stella Orakwue's tongue-in-cheek essay, "What price the Caine Prize?", published in *New African* in 2001, following the announcement of Helon Habila's Caine Prize for African Writing win for the short story, "Love Poems". While she is largely critical of the Prize—"Why is there such a grand prize for a single short story?" she asks, among other questions—it is her closing comments which are worth drawing attention to for the purposes of this argument: she writes, "it's ironic that Heinemann, [Chinua] Achebe's publishers, and the company at the forefront of publishing, promoting and backing African literature and writers for nearly two generations, never thought of creating a prize to showcase all its hard work. And now others are in the limelight. So, why not the Heinemann Prize for the African Novel? And why not the Guinness Prize for the West African Novel? We drink enough of it" (n.p.). While Orakwue's wish for the Heinemann Prize for the African Novel never did come true, a number of Africa-born and based literary prizes have proliferated since her essay, which was written when the Caine Prize for African Writing was still in its early years.

Funding aside, the Prize's rules of entrance and eligibility have also engendered critique; eligibility, after all, is based on exclusivity—and rules are characteristically exclusionary. In the midst of much critique, the then-director, Lizzy Attree, clarifies the rules in her article, "The Caine Prize and Contemporary African Writing" (2013). "The content of the stories is *de facto* African," she writes, "as the prize is for African Writing and the authors are limited to those 'born in Africa, a national of an African country, or whose parents are African, [and those] whose work has reflected an African sensibility'" (n.p.). As I stated earlier, different writers have their own sense of what "Africanness" is and how to write about Africa, or indeed any other subject they choose" (39). I am interested here in Attree's use of the phrase "*de facto* African" and her use of the word "limited". Madhu Krishnan (2014), too, notes this usage: "more damningly, the prize *restricts* itself to works published in English, or available (in published format) in English translation, a pragmatic decision with far-reaching and often troubling implications for the shaping of African writing on a world stage"

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[37] See the blog post, "Africa39 and Caine Prize Authors", by Lizzy Attree (caineprize.com) and Petina Gappah's *Financial Times review* of *The Granta Book of the African Short Story*, which is curated with a critical introduction by Helon Habila.

(135; my emphasis). In this regard, it it is noteworthy that Bushra al-Fadil's 2017 Caine Prize for African Writing-winning short story, "The Story of the Girl Whose Birds Flew Away", translated from Arabic by Max Shmookler, was the first time a translated work was awarded the prestigious prize in almost two decades of its existence (in such cases, the award is divided 70%-30%). Dobrota Pucherová (2012), meanwhile, reads the acceptance of Internet publications—following Binyavanga Wainaina's 2002 win and consequent complaint about the impracticality of print-only submissions from the continent—as more inclusive and "reflecting the significance of electronic publishing for a continent with poor publishing infrastructure" (14). Writing the following year, Attree announced that, "since February 2, 2012[38], this unnecessarily limiting category ["African sensibility"] was eliminated" (39), but this has done little to lend total transparency to the Prize's expectations and criteria for evaluation. Madhu Krishnan (2014) further writes of this tension between the need for African literature to be somehow identifiably "African" and the simultaneous impossibility of doing just that: "Like the continent itself, the idea of 'an African sensibility' both alludes to a sense of closure while simultaneously defying any single statement of being or unified interpretation. It is this quality of the impossible, the multiple and the ever-shifting which the ambiguous wording captures, existing under erasure to open up the possibility of becoming otherwise" (146). This struggle over the guidelines is symptomatic of broader questions regarding the reading and understanding of the African literature—the commercial identity of the continental category—as she finds, and as was argued and assessed in the previous chapter; it is simultaneously too specific so as to be indefinable.

The Prize stipulates a set of rules, as all prizes do, but rarely have rules been called into question as routinely, and a prize been reprimanded as relentlessly, as the Caine Prize for African Writing. I will discuss the critiques and controversies that have plagued the Prize in a later section of this chapter, but, for now, it's worth noting that, generally-speaking, critics of the Caine Prize for "African Writing" have doubted the "Africannness" of shortlisted authors, winners, and stories, and over the years, even displayed serious displeasure at the increasing nominations and inclusions of writers and stories from the African diaspora. This is despite the fact that, ironically enough, there have been instances where African authors have not been eligible for African literary prizes—as will be discussed with regards to the

[38] Since 2014, shortlisted writers each receive a cash award of £500.

Nigeria Prize for Literature later in this chapter. More problematically, however, some winning stories of the Caine Prize for African Writing have been contested on grounds of their being both—either "too African" or "not African enough".

> Generalizing about Africa as a continental unit is always treacherous, but for those who did, the view of the field in the late 1990s was gloomy. At "The Time of the Writer"—two conferences of African writers held in 1997 and '98, in Djibouti and South Africa—there was no celebratory talk of renaissance, literary or otherwise; despite the end of Apartheid, Africa as a whole was not an optimistic panorama; as Pius Adesanmi would summarize the conference for Research in African Literatures, in 2000, the "frightening realities on the continent" were still the "simulacra of revolution that have yielded the most grueling absurdities like one-party states." Writers were under siege, like the continent as a whole: the beautyful ones were (still) not yet born. (Bady 2016, n.p.)

> That the Prize seeks to combat monolithic readings of the continent is, of course, admirable. That it must, in reiterating the struggle to do so, repeat the very "old" terms of African writing's misapprehension (and inevitably fall into those old forms of writing) is the unfortunate, if understandable, circumstance of critically reading contemporary African literature. (Pinto 2013, 141)

The continental reading and rewarding impulse when it comes to the Caine Prize for "African" Writing has always caused more harm than it has been helpful in tackling long-standing and self-perpetuating stereotypes and preconceived notions about the Africa continent—its writers and stories. This is also why this thesis considers it imperative to refer to the Prize by its complete name: the Caine Prize for African Writing. And the shorthand, "Caine Prize", while seemingly crisp and convenient-sounding, does not offer the full picture; the nomenclature "Caine"—alluding to Sir Michael Caine and his Booker legacy and history—is, arguably, as, if not more, problematic than the phrase "African Writing"—and this thesis uses the full name of the Prize to reiterate its repercussions for and on contemporary African literature. Before tackling head-on the Prize's pandora's box of controversies

and critiques, the next section showcases its contributions to the field of African literature at-large.

Impact, Importance and Influence

"It's hard to tell the story of contemporary African literature without talking about the Caine Prize for African Writing," writes Aaron Bady (2016), reflecting on "Africa's top prize", in his essay for *Literary Hub*, titled "Is the Caine Prize for Emergent African Writing, or the Best African Writing?". "It's the biggest and most prominent prize for African Literature—or at least the best publicized—and in the 17 years of its existence, what it means to say "African Literature" has changed quite dramatically, a transformation the Caine Prize has in part reflected, and in part helped to produce," he adds. (n.p.) Bady traces the emergence, evolution and prominence of the Caine Prize for African Writing seventeen years after its inception at the turn of the century, in 1999—and I will spend some time discussing his essay in-depth shortly. In the meantime, writing from around the same period of the prize's existence, Doseline Kiguru (2016a) similarly claims that the positions of The Caine Prize for African Writing and the Commonwealth Writers' Prize in the global literary marketplace "ha[ve] greatly contributed to the canonisation of contemporary African literature and in this way made a substantial contribution to sustaining and influencing particular cultural images, both locally and globally" (161-162). She also adds that the short story form was presented as a transitional genre used by early career writers to gain global visibility in the literary marketplace—and argues that the "launch of the Caine Prize for African Writing four years after the Commonwealth Short Story Prize acted to cement the role of the award body as an important institution of literary production and consumption (ibid). Indeed, the authors of Caine-Prize for African Writing-winning short stories have gone on to write and publish their debut novels, often using their winning stories—either thematically, or as a form of visibility—as springboards for full-length works of fiction. A sample: NoViolet Bulawayo's 2009 winning short story "Hitting Budapest" forms the first chapter of her debut novel, *We Need New Names* (2013). With it, she became the first African woman to be shortlisted for the Booker Prize in over thirty years. Brian Chikwava's 2004 winning short story, "Seventh Street Alchemy", led him to his first novel, *Harare North* (2009). And similarly, Tope Folarin, who won in 2013 with "Miracle", went on to write his debut novel, *A Particular Kind of Black Man* (2019), in the same vein. Very early winners of the Caine Prize for African

Writing, including Leila Aboulela and Helon Habila, have taken similar paths—with their wins speeding their route to global publishing success and setting the trend (but also the benchmark) for future winners of the Prize. Alongside advocating for the short story genre, both institutions—the Caine Prize for African Writing and the Commonwealth Writer's Prize—also award "published and unpublished works and take part in other book production initiatives such as funding and participating in creative writing programmes, encouraging literary publishing on the continent by providing co-publishing agreements with local institutions as well as providing links with international publishers for winning writers," Kiguru (2016b) adds (7). As the Prize website reveals, stories written at Caine Prize workshops are co-published annually alongside the Prize's shortlisted stories by New Internationalist in the UK, Interlink in the US and several publishers on the African continent. Some of the other pan-African, intra-continental literary initiatives and networks the Caine Prize for African Writing holds relationships with—including the Mabati Cornell Kiswahili Prize for African Literature (founded by Lizzy Attree, and therefore, once considered a 'sister prize')—will be discussed later in this chapter.

Literary critics and commentators of the Prize have been making similar claims as Bady (2016)—that is, "it's hard to tell the story of contemporary African literature without talking about the Caine Prize for African Writing"—charting the Prize's position, prominence and prestige within the global African literary marketplace, all along. "In six short years the Caine Prize for African writing has emerged as Africa's most important literary award and a springboard for modern African voices," wrote Kitty Llewellyn in *The New York Times* in 2006. "In the 12 years of its existence, the Caine Prize for African writing has become "Africa's leading literary award", wrote Pucherová (2012). She then notes the Prize's effect in terms of exposure both on and outside the African continent: "The prize has kick-started the career of its winners by providing them with a global visibility leading to publishing contracts with British or American publishers. The impact of this on the writers' careers must be seen in light of the dismal situation in African publishing and book market that is, outside South Africa, poor or non-existent," she adds, highlighting the publishing boost the Caine Prize for African Writing has offered to the book business on the African continent and across the African diaspora (13-14). Fast forward to almost two decades into the Prize's existence, and academic Nathan Suhr-Sytsma notes—in "The Geography of Prestige: Prizes,

Nigerian Writers, and World Literature" (2018)— that, by "building on the cachet of the Booker Prize by inviting 1991 Booker winner to chair its first judging panel", the Caine Prize for African Writing had, from the very beginning, "made itself an inescapable part of the machinery for selecting and publicizing early career writers of anglophone African fiction" (1094). I am interested in his use of the word "inescapable" here, and will return to it in the next section, which discusses and deals with the critiques and controversies that surround the Prize. Thereafter, Suhr-Sytsma proceeds to pinpoint the positionality of the Caine Prize amongst a (scarce, but still shining) constellation of prizes for African literature—specifically those born and based on the African continent—and charts its peculiar and exceptional rise to prominence, what he refers to as its "outsized influence":

> [The Caine Prize for African Writing] has become even more important with the discontinuation of other major literary prizes for African writers, including the Noma Award for Publishing in Africa in 2009 and the Commonwealth Writers' [Book] Prize in 2011. There are some prizes with a similar pan-African remit and larger award amounts, such as the Wole Soyinka Prize for Literature in Africa (first awarded in 2006) and the 9mobile Prize for Literature (formerly Etisalat Prize for Literature, first awarded in 2013), both based in Lagos, Nigeria. Yet the Caine Prize commands a terrain between these continent-based prizes, which attract limited attention outside Africa… due partly to its ties to the London publishing scene and partly to the "dynamic canonization" afforded by an annual prize, the Caine Prize has a catalytic effect on African writers' reputations and careers outside their countries of origin. As a result, it exerts an outsized influence on discussions about an emerging canon of twenty-first-century African literature. (1094)

On the one hand, the Caine Prize for African Writing has an "outsized influence" in the African prize industry because other prizes, although pan-African in scope, have fallen short of their duties—or become defunct for various reasons. As former director Lizzy Attree (2013) also writes, "one major loss for African publishing in recent years has been the demise of the Noma Award for Publishing in Africa, which has not accepted entries since 2010". Established in 1979, it honoured African writers for over thirty years—"the award was made annually to an African writer for a book published by an autonomous African publisher on the continent"—and she would be keen to see it revived, "perhaps in a new

form," she adds (40). Sandra Ponzanesi (2011) also notes that, when still existent, the Noma Award had "very little visibility on a global scale and within the internationalization of literature it barely manage[d] to compete with other ventures that more rapidly hurl African literature into the limelight" (1149). Nana Wilson-Tagoe (2005) similarly laments the loss of (a part of) another pan-African prize: The Macmillan Prize for African Writing. Originally focussed on prizing unpublished children's and adult fiction, she notes that "the idea of rewarding a winning manuscript and publishing it at the same time was itself so new it seemed poised to impact positively on the publication of fiction in Africa" (59). Like the impact of the Caine Prize for African Writing on publishing illustrated above, the Macmillan Prize for African Writing had the potential to propel the production of African literature. But while the competition for children's literature still runs, the prize for awarding adult fiction was unable to live up to the challenges: "publishers may be philanthropic but they are not charities, and when Picador (with whom Macmillan had teamed up to publish the adult fiction) could not judge the viability of the venture we lost a vibrant new outlet for producing and publishing fiction in Africa," Wilson-Tagoe adds (59). In other words, the model for the Macmillan Prize for African Writing was proved unsuccessful—and the loss of other prizes is, for better or for worse, the Caine Prize for African Writing's gain.

To return to Suhr-Sytsma (2018), then—and how the Caine Prize for African Writing "exerts an outsized influence on discussions about an emerging canon of twenty-first-century African literature" (1094)—an exceptional example of this growing canon is *The Granta Book of the African Short Story*, curated with a critical introduction by Helon Habila, (himself a former Caine Prize recipient in 2001). In her 2011 *Financial Times* review of this anthology, which was published shortly after the Prize marked its tenth anniversary, Petina Gappah gives credit where it is due:

> The anthology testifies to the depth of talent on the continent and in its diaspora; it also testifies to the strength and influence of the London-based Caine Prize for African Writing. As Habila observes, almost half of the writers here (including Habila himself) have come to prominence either by winning or being shortlisted for the award […] It is no coincidence that the Caine writers are among the best known from Africa. This raises the perennial question of the nature of African literary pro-

> duction that has preoccupied the continent's critics and thinkers since the first African writers were published in the west. (n.p.)

In the passages quoted above, Kiguru (2016) calculates the Prize's "substantial contribution to sustaining and influencing particular cultural images", Pucherová (2012) notices its power of "visibility", Suhr-Sytsma (2018) notes the "catalytic effect on African writers' reputations and careers" and Gappah (2011) argues that "Caine writers are among the best known from Africa". Across the period of a decade—the second decade of the existence of the Caine Prize for African Writing—all four critics also acknowledge the role of the Prize in the production—and not just promotion—of African writers and African writing on a local and global scale. Writing in *BrittlePaper* following the the 20th year of the Prize, Delphin Mugo argues—in an essay titled "The AKO Caine Prize for African Writing is a Literary Institution Built to Last" (2020)—that from its inception, the Prize has "contributed to fostering the global visibility of African literature" (n.p.). He is quick to add that this is "not to say that African literature was ever in obscurity"; after all, Ben Okri had won the Booker Prize for Fiction less than a decade ago and Nadine Gordimer was now a Nobel Prize recipient, he notes. "But the Caine Prize changed something fundamental about the African literary scene. It provided an outlet for new writers seeking a global audience" and has also "become a barometer of literary trends" he adds (n.p.). As the title suggests, Mugo alerts readers and critics to the longevity of the Prize, charting its sustained successes over two decades: after all "20 years is enough time for a cultural organization to lose public interest either by not keeping up with technological shifts or with the spirit of the times". (n.p.)—as we have seen above with other African literary prizes. And yet, the Caine Prize for African Writing "has remained relevant because of its mandate of inclusion and diversity," he writes. Why?

> Its objective of "encouraging as many diverse voices as possible in the republic of African writing" has enabled it to evolve with the times. By investing in writers through workshops, embracing web culture by accepting entries from online platforms, and "encouraging more entries translated from the plethora of languages spoken and written in Africa," the prize has showed itself to be adaptable to new challenges. In keeping with its openness to constantly evolving, the prize changed its name to The AKO Caine Prize to recognize the support of a new donor. (n.p.)

I will return to Delphin Mugo's claim, that the [AKO] Caine Prize for African Writing is a "literary institution built to last" in a later section, which discusses the landmark moment of the Prize's 20th—its coming of age and its charting of new directions. For the time being, whether it is through the annual Caine Prize co-published anthologies—which include the workshopped stories—or through the shortlisted and winning writers' post-prize career trajectories—from a single short story to a full-length work of fiction or memoir—the impact, importance and influence of the Caine Prize on African writing, globally, are clear to see. Furthermore, its role as a mechanism for the production, dissemination, and reception of African literature, on the continent and abroad, is, in some ways, irrefutable. Thus, those who celebrate its existence and prominence outweigh its critics. A quick overview of various academics' standpoints on the Caine Prize for African Writing—Nana Wilson-Tagoe (2005), Dobrota Pucherová (2012); Samantha Pinto (2013); Madhu Krishnan (2014); Doseline Kiguru (2016a; 2016b); and Shirin Edwin (2016)—reveals that their arguments, while critical—or, at the very least, suspicious of the Prize's standing in the field of African literature—almost always conclude in an acknowledgment, if not outright celebration, of the validation and visibility it affords new generations of African writers—and thus, of its consequences on and contributions to a growing canon of African writing. While the overarching trend and theme in the discourse about the Caine Prize for African Writing has been one of critique, ranging on the spectrum between subtle and stark, ultimately commentators succumb to praising the Prize in one way or another. Madhu Krishnan (2014) captures this tension:

> Set in a context of increasing stratification, both of the global production of knowledge and of economic power, the prize has been described as simultaneously necessary for the growing transnational profile of African literature and debilitating in its inadvertent fostering of a certain 'aesthetic of suffering', to use Helon Habila's phrase, in global African writing. (136)

Krishnan's assertion—that the Caine Prize has been widely described as "necessary"—is reminiscent of Suhr-Sytsma's (2018) argument that it has "made itself an inescapable part of the machinery", which was quoted earlier on (1094). And yet, while the former alludes to the way in which the Prize has been perceived and received—and put on a pedestal—the latter alerts us that there is also some self-fashioning at work on the part of the Prize. The

manner in which the Prize has portrayed itself publicly—that is, its self-publicity and self-congratulatory antics—has, in turn, led to outsiders and observers affording it the privileged status it has accumulated over two decades. Representatives of the Prize, too, have, rather unsurprisingly and unreservedly, spoken up and in support of the Caine Prize for African Writing—and its achievements in the areas of literary production, publication and prizing—over the years. As former director, Lizzy Attree, has defended it on numerous charges on numerous occasions (2013; 2015)—through tweets, interviews, and panel discussions at Caine Prize ceremonies and events. In an interview with Nick Mulgrew in 2015, "Caine Prize gets The Sack", following the 16th Caine Prize for African Writing ceremony, where Namwali Serpell took home £10,000 for her short story, "The Sack", she says:

> Attree: The prize and the anthology together act as a showcase, a snapshot produced every year of current writing in Africa, and this is a brilliant platform for writers to become better known and more widely read. [. . .] the Caine Prize [. . .] is still one of the only prizes that recognises short stories with such a large financial reward, and so it remains important for that reason. The prize can make a significant difference to a writer's career, offering time to write and the opportunity to travel and make links with agents and publishers in Europe and the US. So I don't see a huge number of drawbacks. (n.p.)

Thus, like Kiguru (2016a; 2016b), Pucherová (2012), Suhr-Sytsma (2018), and Gappah (2011), she focuses on the fact that Caine Prize-associated writers "become better known and more widely read", gain access to publishing deals, and ultimately go home with a big pot of money with which to boost and build their writing careers. And while these definitely don't seem like reputation-destroying drawbacks, the Prize has been plagued by, and consequently had to defend its continent-wide nomenclature—for "African" writing—over and over again. Writing in "The Caine Prize and Contemporary African Writing" (2013)—a direct critical response to Dobrota Pucherová's critique in the preceding year in ""A Continent Learns to Tell its Story at Last": Notes on the Caine Prize" (2012)—Attree clarifies the Prize's position on and perception of the term "African" writing which is so integral to its identity. "The prize does not pretend to know what Africa is," she writes, "but it is very interested in the question and the ways in which one can answer it. It is also interested in African writing on any subject and particularly in how representations of Africa can be

translated into different genres, styles, and formats" (45). In the article, she acknowledges the critiques made against the Prize—and even welcomes them as a path towards constructive change and towards creating what the future of "what African writing *can be*" (45; my emphasis).

> So to say, "What is Africa?" does not mean that you know the answer, but that you love the question. Winners of the Caine Prize have generated an auto-critique; only they can really judge what the prize has achieved, how they feel about winning such a prize, the significance of the prize in their lives, and what effect it has had on their writing. The standard of writing seems to demand a standard of criticism to match its daring, incisive imagination/imaginary of what African writing can be. It is the novels that Caine Prize winners go on to write (if they choose to) and the critical writing they produce about each other's work to which readers should look when attempting to discover *how* to appreciate writing about and from Africa. (45)

In the same year, this sense of possibility and a new pathway of imagining, would be heard in Taiye Selasi's (2013) afore-mentioned lecture, "African Literature Doesn't Exist"—which she later reflects on in an interview with Aaron Bady (2015)—and asks: "If we didn't know what African literature was, if it did not exist *a priori*, what would we put in that container? What do we want it to be?" (Bady and Selasi 156). Commemorating a decade since the Prize was born, in the anthology *Ten Years of the Caine Prize for African Writing* (2009), Jonathan Taylor, Chairman of the Council of the Caine Prize, and Nick Elam, the then-administrator, note in the Preface that the "winners and shortlisted candidates have seen their careers immeasurably enhanced, typically by attracting the interest of leading literary agents, and having their books published by mainstream publishers, and winning further prizes with them" (6). The then-Deputy Chair of the Council of the Caine Prize for African Writing, Ellah Allfrey, in an article titled, "All Hail the African Renaissance" (2011), also agrees that the Prize "has allowed a generation of writers to blossom—not least by granting access to what can sometimes be a closed industry and, importantly, by awarding a decent sum of money with which to buy time to write" (n.p.). Former judge, Nana Wilson-Tagoe (2005), notes that the "focus on the short story and [the Prize's] willingness to accept journal and Internet publications has inspired a boom in an art form that has links with age-old tra-

ditions of storytelling in Africa and seems particularly suited to the pace of contemporary living" (59). One can argue that, as spokespersons of a prize, Attree, Taylor, Elam, Allfrey, and Wilson-Tagoe feel compelled—even obliged—to speak in favour of the Prize's successes and contributions—and their words, arguably tinged with bias, must be taken with a pinch of salt. Instead, it is perhaps worth doing as Attree (2013) suggests in the above-quoted passage—"only [winners] can really judge what the prize has achieved"—and turning to the Caine Prize for African Writing winning- and shortlisted-writers themselves (45).

In an interview published in *New Nigerian Newspapers* in 2008—later blogged and archived in 2010—Binyavanga Wainaina, the 2002 Caine Prize winner, speaks candidly about how the winning the award transformed and shaped the trajectory of his writing career thereon:

> Until I won the Caine prize nobody in Kenya was interested in the fact that I wrote fiction, except my friends. Nobody cared. Of course, being in an ex-colonial country, when you win something from abroad they regard you more. […] It is a shame on our country to get foreign legitimacy before one's work could be appreciated. I would never been able to found *Kwani?* if I hadn't won the Caine prize because I would not be taken serious in Kenya" (Wainaina n.p.).

The 2013 winner, Tope Folarin, in his interview with *This is Africa,* highlights the significance of the award industry, especially for new and up-and-coming writers. He says: "Winning the Caine Prize changed everything. This sounds like a cliché, I know, but in my case it is true. For example, before I won the Caine Prize I was looking for an agent, and I was still struggling to get my work published. The morning after I won the prize I had a number of offers in my inbox, from both agents and publishers. In addition, the Caine expanded my audience dramatically" (n.p.) Similarly, Namwali Serpell, in a 2015 interview with Lilly Kroll in *Africa in Words*, speaks of the "diversity" marked by her win that year: "It means a great deal to me. I feel honored and encouraged and the prize will give momentum to my writing career. I am also very happy to represent Zambian writing and a more experimental form. The more diverse the prize becomes, the less strange it will seem to maintain the insanely broad term, "African Writing"" (Kroll and Serpell n.p.). And in Kitty

Llewellyn's afore-mentioned *The New York Times* article (2006), Doreen Baingaina—a Caine Prize finalist in 2004, 2005, and 2021—speaking more generally, is quoted saying that the Caine Prize "is the first step to changing people's perceptions about African writing" (n.p.). On the surface, all of these—alongside others—seem like linear success stories: win the Caine Prize for African Writing and the world is yours. To reiterate Binyavanga Wainaina: it is the first step.

As Doseline Kiguru (2016a) writes about African authors' "political and economic dependency" on the west, and promoting James F English's notion of "positive patronage", which "allows the growth of literature from the less known areas" (168; 171): "It is important for African writers to be able to seize these opportunities provided by international literary award institutions and, despite the patronage, tell their stories", she adds, before concluding that (albeit with certain caveats) "hopefully, after getting the required [western] legitimation, these writers can then move on to write about the continent without the shadow of the patronizing empire or of the international prize" (171). Indeed, Caine Prize for African Writing winners such as Binyavanga Wainaina ("Discovering Home", 2002) and Namwali Serpell ("The Sack", 2015), among others, have embraced this "positive patronage". While the former used his winnings to found and fund *Kwani?*—a Kenyan literary journal which published Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor, and whose "Weight of Whispers" won the Caine Prize for African Writing in the following year in 2003—and thus recycled and concentrated his resources into an East African literary publication, the latter divided hers. In what she referred to as her "long over-due act of mutiny" on *Africa in Words* (qtd. in Primorac 2015, n.p.), the first Zambian recipient of the Prize cut up her £10,000 pie made of prize money and shared an equal slice with each of her fellow shortlisted writers. Wainaina and Serpell have both answered the call of English's "positive patronage" in exceptional ways and it is easy to see how these are success stories—reflecting on and reiterating the role of the Caine Prize for African Writing for their careers.

As seen from comments by its administrators and judges, perhaps the quality for which the Caine Prize for African Writing is most prized, and on which it most prides itself, is the launching of "emerging" writers' careers. Lizzy Attree (2015) herself has referred to it as "both a reward for excellence in literature as well as a development tool" (n.p.). To further

illustrate this point, in his blog post published on the Caine Prize website—"Caine Prize Judges' Series: Judging the Caine"—the 2018 judge Ahmed Rajab writes of the eligible entries that he was "torn by the inclusion of fairly established authors in the same basket as the relatively new ones" (n.p.). He shares that he really had no cause for worry, for, as it transpired, his fellow judges all took the same stance—to give preference to emerging writers. "It was not a case of penalising success," Rajab adds; "yet the world would be an unfair place if established success is allowed to crowd out new talent. The operative word is "emerging" rather than young," he writes (n.p.). Rajab's fellow judges were not the only ones with this opinion; there seems to be consensus regarding the value of this choice in observations from other academics and critics too. Dobrota Pucherová (2012) notes that the Prize has "tended to award early career writers" and "kick-started the careers of its winners by providing them with global visibility leading to publishing contracts" (14); Doseline Kiguru (2016b) alerts that the award has "acted as a bridge for the transition from short stories to novels, from upcoming writers to global household names" (204). Thus, for Pucherová the encouragement of young writers is a key characteristic of the Caine Prize for African Writing, and for Kiguru, it can mark a substantial step in the journey of a writer's life. Aaron Bady's afore-mentioned thought-provoking *Literary Hub* essay (2016) makes similar statements about writers going from "obscurity" to visibility, and of the Prize's tendency of prioritising "emerging" over "established" writers:

> The prize marks the transition from relative obscurity [. . .] into relative success: they each, shortly, became a writer with a *book*. [. . .] The list of winners tells the same, uniform story of How to Become an African Writer: write some stories, win the Caine Prize, then publish a novel.
>
> [. . .]
>
> In "emerging markets", writers lack the connections and material conditions to succeed, so the Caine Prize gives them a boost at a key moment in their development, allowing them to establish themselves and their careers to take off. [. . .] Established African novelists do not, as a rule, win the Caine Prize; it is a prize designed for and aimed at writers in a stage of *emergence*. (emphasis in original; n.p.)

For Bady, "what it means to say 'African Literature' has changed quite dramatically, a transformation the Caine Prize has in part reflected, and in part helped to produce" (n.p.). And this, for him, is more evident on a case-by-case basis, on an individual writer level. "Few of the people that the prize has recognized and celebrated had, at the time they were selected by the Caine judges, achieved much public recognition. The prize tends to change that" (n.p.). He is quick to add that while "the Caine Prize, in short, is an important institution in promoting African writers," it is "not to say that we would never have heard of Brian Chikwava, Segun Afolabi, Mary Watson, or Monica Arac de Nyeko if they hadn't won the Caine Prize" (n.p.).. And yet, for all these writers:

> the prize marks the transition from relative obscurity—having published a few scattered short pieces, here and there—into relative success: they each, shortly, became a writer with a *book*. Obviously, they wrote the books themselves—and this is, of course, the main thing—but it was the Caine that helped these books be recognizable as African *literature*, and to make them marketable as such. (n.p.)

He concludes that, for individual writers, the Prize can have "very concrete results"—leading to agents and publishers, time and money—all benefits and comforts a writer desires. It also has a less obvious effect: "it *recognizes* writers for whom recognition can be difficult to come by," he adds (n.p.; emphasis in original). But this is not the complete picture—and Bady is critical of conferring this status on the Caine Prize for African Writing—and indeed, on any single prize. Such individual success stories aside, he finds that when considered collectively—as an institution—there is more cause for concern and the Caine Prize for African Writing opens itself up to all kinds of critiques and controversies. He thinks it is ironical that what is arguably Africa's top prize rewards and celebrates "potential and promise rather than accomplishment and arrival" and, in doing so, implicitly codifies African literature as one yet to come into its own. "In this way, by drawing annual attention to African literature only, always, and still, as a story of *transition,* the Caine Prize contributes to making that the endless single story of the literature," he writes (n.p.).

My—and Bady's—argument here is not to simply state that the Caine Prize for African Writing is unimportant, nor is it designed to underestimate or undermine its integral

importance to, and influence on, contemporary African literature and its canon—far from it. It is, instead, to ask: at what cost? And to pinpoint that, because the success stories spun about the Caine Prize for African Writing often tend to overshadow its shortcomings, a partial picture emerges—one that privileges the narrative about the influence and impact of the Prize over that of its inadvertent consequences, and one that creates a hierarchy of African literary prizes, where a British prize for African writing emerges—and remains—on top. And for this reason, there remain unaddressed, unanswered (and new) questions that plague the Prize cycle each year. No prize is without criticism—from the Nobel Prize for Literature to the Booker Prize for Fiction, as was discussed and revealed in chapter one—but, what does it mean when, even in the wake of its twentieth anniversary, the Caine Prize for African Writing has never entirely managed to evade or erase certain concerns or charges against its continental impulse and identity first from its earliest days. Why must western legitimation still be a pre-requisite for global success for African writers? For example, even when the conversation about the Prize's positive influence on the publishing industry is charted on the coordinates of the continent, and even though its linkages with the "global literary marketplace" are evident, it is increasingly clear that the Africa-based institutions and initiatives the Prize comes into contact with cannot be read entirely in isolation—innocent of western funding and forces—as seen in the short story "Jumping Monkey Hill" by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in the preceding chapter. Consequently, we arrive at the literary traffic on the pan-African plane via a transit located in the geography of the "Global North". More significantly, does the Caine Prize for African Writing succumb to a sort of stereotype of its own —a formula for "How to Become an African Writer", as Bady says—staging Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's 2009 TedX talk, "Danger of a Single Story", and functioning similarly to the tendency Binyavanga Wainaina satirises in his 2005 *Granta* essay, "How to Write about Africa"? As Aaron Bady attests above: "it's hard to tell the story of contemporary African literature without talking about the Caine Prize for African Writing" (n.p.).. But what if the story is skewed? These questions will resurface in the next section of this chapter—which reckons with the major critiques and controversies that have consistently circled the Caine Prize for African Writing over many years—but, for the moment, they are here to signal that the accomplishments and affluence of the Prize are not beyond questioning and undermining.

Critiques and Controversies

"How can one prize possibly claim to assess the literary output of a continent of over 991 million people and its diaspora?" asks Ellah Wakatama Allfrey—current chair and former deputy chair of the council of the Caine Prize for African Writing—in a series of questions about the "The Winning Qualities of the Caine Prize" (2010), shortly after the 2010 shortlist was announced (n.p.):

> Is there any such thing as an "African writer"? Does the very existence of the prize encourage a continued inclination to ghettoisation of these writers and their work? Surely we've come far enough that Africans no longer need (if they ever have) the special consideration this categorisation implies?
>
> But even if I could persuade myself to accept the idea of an "African writer", although three of the five judges are Africans, this is a prize decided in England, awarded in Oxford for work written in English. There are no stories translated from French or Arabic. And what about Shona, Twi, Hausa, Chewa, Lingala, Swahili or Afrikaans?
>
> Reading the 116 stories in the last few months, I haven't been able to let go of these questions. Even as I committed myself to the task, it was impossible to shrug off the idea that the only unifying factor here remains fundamentally troubling. (n.p.)

She then comes to the conclusion—and solution—that one way to contend with these questions around the continental impulse and identity of the Prize is to acknowledge that it permits the judges "the freedom to dismiss that unifying criterion [the African origins of the writers]"; to take it as a given and to judge the stories in their own right. While this gestures towards a judging process that is based purely on literary merit, it fails to account for questions of authority, power asymmetry, and "authenticity" that continue to orbit the Prize as an arbiter of African literary value and taste. After all, "the African literary text", in such circuits of creation, consumption, commercialisation, and canonisation "is always received as more than just a text", writes Madhu Krishnan (2014, 2). As Timothy Brennan (1997) ar-

gues, the "geographical banners" of affiliation and aesthetic—banners that accompany the tendency to manipulate and market postcolonial writers in the west—make it near-impossible to read texts from postcolonial countries merely at face-value. These banners, he claims, are a "kind of literary passport that identifies the artist as being from a region of underdevelopment and pain" (38)—the "banners" come with the baggage of geography and genealogy— and such debates are a useful starting-point in interrogating the identity of the Caine Prize for "African Writing". In order to set the scene around issues of authenticity and "Africanness", and before diving head-first into the doubts and controversies that circle the Caine Prize and its position within the field of global African literatures, it is worth dwelling on, and engaging with, Cóilín Parsons'—2015 judge—blogpost published on the Prize's website. In speaking about the twin burdens of representation and responsibility, Parsons raises similar concerns as Allfrey, among others, does. He writes:

> While one author might be able to rest easy in the knowledge that she can only mistakenly be called on to represent an entire continent (as, no doubt, the winner will), a literary prize with 'African Writing' in its name carries a substantial burden of responsibility. The Caine Prize has, of course, become a lightning rod for questions of representation and responsibility—can or does it represent Africa? Can any prize claim to encompass such a diverse continent? Why should a prize awarded in the UK be the premier prize for writing in Africa? Does this or that winning story offer a new narrative for Africa or traffic in clichés? These are questions that treat of the Caine Prize as an institution, as a monolithic arbiter of what is good in literary Africa (n.p.).

Parson stages these set of questions, interrogating the Prize's inception and identity alongside the inevitable cost and consequences of claiming one literary prize as the "monolithic arbiter" of literary value of an entire continent. It's a mistake, he says, for one prize to be weighted (and thus burdened) with such levels of expectations of representation and responsibility, and for the Caine Prize for African Writing to, in turn, offload these onto the winning writer and winning work each year. The error is, he rightly argues, in "*assuming* and sometimes *demanding* that each story be a proxy for African Writing and each author an image of the African Writer" (n.p.; emphasis mine). Parsons' questions and concerns about the elevated status of the Caine Prize for African Writing, and its state of expectations, are not

new or original. But, as he says, these are questions worth raising and repeating:

> In one sense, that expectation is not unreal, given the title of the prize, but who demands that the winner of the National Book Award in the US define 'American Writing', or the winner of the Man Booker 'International Writing?' While writers from the Global North are seen as simply writers, unmarked and universal, those from the Global South are restricted to being representatives of their types—Indian or African or South American above all else. They become impossibly responsible for a whole people, state, or continent. When critics take the Caine Prize stories to represent African writing or Africa tout court, or even a 'western' view of African writing, they assume that such a project is unproblematically possible in a way that essentialises Africa. The argument is an old one, but it is worth repeating, for although this and all other prizes are marked by many and varied responsibilities, standing in for all of Africa is not one of those. (n.p.)

But, it is not only critics of the Caine Prize who make these assumptions about authenticity, responsibility, and representation—and it is not always without just cause or reason that they do. Nick Mulgrew (2015) speaks from the considered perspective that "perhaps it would be cynical to argue, as other critics have done, that the Caine Prize is *trying* to be the West's gatekeepers of African literature, because of a lack of robust literary engagement in some African countries, it *inadvertently* functions as one"—thus speaking to the dearth of literary prizes and initiatives on the continent (n.p.; my emphasis). Mulgrew thus offloads some of the blame—of gatekeeping and prizing—that the Caine Prize has almost single-handedly borne thus far within the circuit of literary prize cultures and pinpoints instead the lacunae of literary institutions on the continent. While there may have been some truth to his claim in 2015—compared to western publishing forces and institutions of literary legitimisation, the African continent was, arguably, then, still slow to catch up—Binyavanga Wainaina, the 2002 recipient of the Caine Prize for African Writing, reveals, through another unusual format, his famous Caine Prize Twitter "rant", that this may not not necessarily be the case—or the complete state of affairs on the continent. For him, it's a matter of perspective and privilege—and the power the Caine Prize yields is not exactly passive. Quoted on *Books Live: Sunday Times* in 2014, he says:

> dear Caine Prize, DO NOT EVER, claim a central space in our literature. U r good,

> but we are not best employee certificate program. [sic]
>
> Dear Caine Prize, u made nothing, produced nothing, distributed nothing. U give a Prize of cash money and publicity. That is it. [sic] (n.p.)

This Twitter "rant" can be traced back a few weeks, to a 2014 *This is Africa* interview with Chiagozie Nwonwu:

> I give the Caine Prize its due credit, but it just isn't our institution. [. . .] What is happening is you people are allowing the Caine Prize to receive funding and build itself as a brand and make money and people's career there in London while the vast majority of these [homegrown] institutions are vastly underfunded and vastly *ungrown,* and they are the ones who create the ground that is building these new writers [. . .] We need to focus on how we can grow our own ecosystem. (n.p.; original emphasis)

Wainaina's is a clarion call to bring the conversation back to the continent—and its homegrown literary institutions and organisations. It is telling that "Kwani?" translates to "so what?"; and, so what?, Wainaina asks. One can win the Caine Prize for African Writing—and so what, then what? Wainaina instead chooses to commend the work of Africa-based publishing initiatives such as the Nigerian press Cassava Republic, the annual Farafina writing workshop (Nigeria), and local literary magazines such as *Saraba* and *Jalada*. This local, home-grown ecosystem, once emerging, is only growing. In 2018, the Jalada Mobile Literary and Arts Festival, a cross between a traditional festival and a literary bus tour—which was awarded the nAnA (new Art new Audiences) grant by the British Council and conceptualized in collaboration with Africa Writes (Royal African Society, UK), Jalada Africa Trust (Kenya), Huza Press (Rwanda), and a host of cultural institutions on the continent—with its foreign funding, and east African grounding (mapping five countries in the region), became the first-ever travelling literary festival on the continent—one that embodies intra- and inter-continental literary traffic. Also worth mentioning here are The Huza Press Prize for Fiction (established by Louise Umutoni, founder of Rwanda's first publishing house, Huza Press), The Writivism Short Story Prize (also an annual literary festival—and administered by the Uganda-based Center for African Cultural Excellence (CACE)), the Short Story Day Africa Prize (whose sponsors include The Miles Morland Foundation, The Goethe-Institut, and several South African writers), and the NOMMO awards (announced and administered by

the African Speculative Fiction Society). Alongside such prizes and writing initiatives, in the summer of 2021, *The New York Times* also published an essay documenting "the new magazines and journals shaping Africa's literary scene"—listing *Lolwe* and *Doek* among other digital publications. While some of these institutions undoubtedly have foreign financial support, Wainaina's larger concern, in my opinion, is to de-centralise and decolonise the discussion of literary prizes and African literature from the Caine Prize for African Writing—that "monolithic arbiter" (Parsons 2015; n.p.)—especially when one literary prize in particular prospers at the expense of others. Sandra Ponzanesi (2011), too, notes that "when positioned in the old imperial centres, in alliance with the capitalist centres of the new global order, literary prizes [such as the Caine Prize] manage to either overrule or overshadow the more localized enterprises, though the latter are more in keeping with a sustainable development of literature" (1149). In other words, privileging the Caine Prize for African Writing offers a partial view of the African literary landscape and sidelines several, albeit nascent, initiatives and networks on the African continent itself. According to Wainaina, one should focus their efforts and energies on growing—investing, but also promoting and highlighting—the African literary ecosystem. One way to do so is to dismiss the "central space" the Caine Prize for African Writing continues to occupy in conversations about the creation, canonisation, and celebration of contemporary African literature on the continent and across the diaspora within western media and academia—and to foreground, instead, local and Africa-based institutions hitherto on the fringes and peripheries of their discussion and vision.

Although the Caine Prize for African Writing may not necessarily be the one to be blamed for this imbalance in perceptions and priorities towards local prizes and literary institutions, the cultural status that the Caine Prize has acquired over the course of two decades allows it to enjoy this privileged position within the hierarchy of prizes. And this is what Nick Mulgrew (2015), quoted above, perhaps means when he speaks of the "inadvertent" functioning of the Caine Prize for African Writing, and what prominent African literary blogger Ikhide Ikheloa similarly refers to as its "unintended consequences", when he writes: "The creation of a Prize for 'African writing' may have created the unintended effect of breeding writers willing to stereotype Africa for glory" (2012, n.p.).

It is noteworthy that all these afore-raised assumptions, expectations, and consequences—around issues of canonicity, authenticity, "Africanness", and the continental category, Caine Prize for "African Writing"—arise, first and foremost, from the Prize's nomenclature. Because it refers to itself as a prize "for African Writing" it lends itself to criticisms about these continental claims. To reiterate: "How can one prize possibly claim to assess the literary output of a continent of over 991 million people and its diaspora?" asks Ellah Allfrey, in *The Guardian (*2010; n.p.). "While one author might be able to rest easy in the knowledge that she can only mistakenly be called on to represent an entire continent (as, no doubt, the winner will), a literary prize with 'African Writing' in its name carries a substantial burden of responsibility […] can or does it represent Africa? Can any prize claim to encompass such a diverse continent?" asks judge Cóilín Parsons, again, in 2015 on the Caine Prize blog (n.p.). In the following year, Aaron Bady (2016) remarks that, although prizes such as the Booker Prize for Fiction and the Commonwealth Writers' Prize afford African writers international attention, what the Caine Prize for African Writing has in common with them is the usage of "the continental adjective, without any serious effort at a continental scope" (n.p.).

Furthermore, former winners such as Segun Afolabi ("Monday Morning", 2005)—UK-based son of Nigerian diplomats who grew up across many continents—and Olufemi Terry from Sierra Leone ("Stickfighting Days", 2010)—who grew up in Nigeria, the UK, and the Ivory Coast, holds a degree in journalism from New York and lives in Cape Town—feel that "African writer" is "a label for those in the West to lump vastly different people together", and that it is "unhelpful" to view African writers as a unique grouping of their own: "there is a danger in seeking authenticity in African writing", respectively, as Pucherová writes (2012, 22). Finally, former judge, Samantha Pinto (2013) speaks from a similar position, and summarises it best, stating that "critics, and even some of [the Prize's] own winners (and judges), could and do note its many potential failings along 'old' lines: rewarding the 'diminished' form of the short story over the novel, reinforcing stereotypes of struggle and racism in its shortlisted choices and winners, and privileging success in the West over institution-building in Africa itself" (142-143).

As mentioned earlier, it is also telling that, often, when referring to the Prize, merely the shorthand "Caine Prize" is used—thus deliberately disguising, or dismissing, the problematic second-half of its name: "for African Writing". Is the Caine Prize for African Writing really reflective of 54 countries? A quick survey of its 20-year-plus history reveals that a handful of countries (including Nigeria, South Africa, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Uganda) have been privileged—in terms of entries, and therefore, shortlists and winners—either due to factors beyond the Prize's control, such as poor publishing infrastructures in certain countries, or due to the English-language entry barrier for eligible short stories (including those in translation). As Ranka Primorac writes in "Acts of Mutiny: The Caine Prize and 'African Literature'" (2015): "it is not only authors, but entire African national canons that can be designated as, in effect, not being 'African enough', while others—privileged among them are Nigeria, Kenya and South Africa—are often allowed to stand in metonymically for the transnational concept of 'African literature' itself"—thus gesturing to not only the imbalanced state of production of literature, but also the state of perception and reception of literature from the continent (n.p.). Due to these inequalities on the literary landscape on the continent itself, which are in turn reflected in the range of entires and the Caine Prize for African Writing shortlists and winners, numerous critics on social media and blogs have cheekily quipped that the Prize should be renamed as the "Caine Prize for Nigerian Writing", or the "Caine Prize for Diasporic Writing", to more accurately represent and reflect its roster of winners and shortlisted writers.

In 2021, the Caine Prize for African Writing announced that the Ethiopian-American writer Meron Hadero had been awarded the Prize for her short story "The Street Sweep", published in *ZYZZYVA* (2018), thus making it "the first time an Ethiopian writer has won since the Prize's inception in 2000". Reporting the 2021 shortlist announcement in *BrittlePaper*, Chukwuebuka Ibeh writes that, while the shortlist includes three previously shortlisted writers—Doreen Baingana (Uganda) twice shortlisted in 2004 and 2005; Meron Hadero (Ethiopia) in 2019; and Remy Ngamije (Namibia) in just the preceding year of the Prize—"in an extremely rare occurrence and for the very first time in a really long while, there is no Nigerian or South African (otherwise Caine Prize favorites) on the list" (2021). Similarly, as mentioned earlier, Namwali Serpell, in a 2015 interview with Lilly Kroll, spoke of the diversity marked by her win in 2015 as the first Zambian writer to win: "I am also

very happy to represent Zambian writing and a more experimental form. The more diverse the prize becomes, the less strange it will seem to maintain the insanely broad term, 'African Writing'" (n.p.). In an article in *The Guardian* (2015), published to celebrate the Caine Prize nominees in that year, she also adds: "Putting aside the grotesque abstraction necessary to consider an entire continent and its literary output as whole entities, the premise of the question [to name their 'hero of African literature']—that literature is a kind of arena in which gladiators wield words like weapons and fight for some kind of glory (the glory of Africa?) is quite odd" (n.p.). Interestingly and similarly enough, she is also cautious and critical of the intrinsically competitive nature of literary prizes—the ability to pit art against art—à la Sartre, among others. And yet, these are anomalies in the history of the Caine Prize for African Writing, which has often had a majority of Nigerian/South African/Kenyan writers on its shortlists in over twenty years—and which, despite gesturing to such a "grotesque abstraction" as "African Writing" does not accurately, or fully, encompass it. Beyond national boundaries, and beyond being the first Zambian writer to win the Caine Prize for African Writing—thus taking on the burden of representation in a geographical sense—Serpell, perhaps more significantly, gestures to questions of genre too. With and through her experimental and playful prizewinning short story, "The Sack", she is calling for diversity within the geographical scope of the prize, but also with regards to genre. It's not a stretch to assume that Serpell was aware of the accusations made against the Caine Prize until then—and its apparent privileging of a certain type of story. In this context, her win was, in more ways than one, an anomaly in the history of the prize.

Every major prize has its defining, or direction-changing moments, and here, it is worth zooming in on the prizing years 2015-2016, which marked a specific shift in the implied identity of the Caine Prize for African Writing—from a Prize for emergent African writers to one for established African writers. Segun Afolabi, whose short story, "Monday Morning" was shortlisted and won the 2005 Caine Prize for African Writing, was shortlisted again in 2015 for "The Folded Leaf". At the time, writing on *This is Africa*, Bwesigye bwa Mwesigire suggests that that shortlist represented the Caine Prize's own "coming of age"—that the Prize had moved on from focussing on spotlighting new and previously unknown talent to focussing on awarding the best short story. His reasoning was not unfounded, for it was also how the Caine Prize for African Writing's own press release relayed the news: "In a

sign of the established calibre to be found in African writing and as the Caine Prize *matures* in its sixteenth year, the shortlist includes one past winner and two previously shortlisted writers" (qtd. in bwa Mwesigire; my emphasis; n.p.). To elucidate his point further, he quotes a former winner of the Caine Prize, E.C Osondu, who was among the first to question the shortlist: "I find it kind of strange that one of the shortlisted writers is a former winner of the prize. So is he going to win and un-win the prize? Past winner and now shortlisted? I have always seen the prize as a kind of door-opener—if you will—you win and move on to publish your books and leave room for other up and coming writers," he says. And while he acknowledges that nowhere in the rules of entrance and eligibility does it state that past winners are prohibited from re-entering, "there is an unwritten protocol to literary prizes. This prize is over ten years old why has no past winner won again nor have they been on the short list?" he asks (qtd. in Mwesigire 2015; n.p.).

The following year, in 2016, Tope Folarin, winner in 2013 for "Miracle", was shortlisted again for his short story "Genesis"—prompting the blogpost on Writerphilic, "We Need New Caines", a pun on the title of the Caine Prize for African Writing winner, NoViolet Bulawayo's novel, *We Need New Names* (n.p.). Thus, Mwesigire concludes that, the Prize is "coming of age and ready to take on an identity it was meant to, but probably could not earlier on because there were not many seasoned African writers as there are now." He also adds that there are a number of continent-based prizes for emerging writers since the Caine Prize for African Writing's inception fifteen-odd years ago, and "so one may say that the Caine Prize does not have to be the discoverer of new talent anymore". In my 2017 interview with Dr. Ainehi Edoro, the founder of *BrittlePaper*—"Celebrating Online African Literature with The BrittlePaper Literary Awards"—conducted after the announcement of this new arrival on the prize landscape, we discuss the backstory of the prize, its broadening of old literary institutions through its digital bent, and the burden on prizes to keep up with the changing life and times of African literature (MULOSIGE n.p.). When asked what the arrival of new prizes such as the BrittlePaper Literary Awards, among others, meant for a literary landscape long dominated by conversations around (especially, but not exclusively) the Caine Prize for African Writing, Edoro said that "the Caine Prize was a game changer when it was first inaugurated in 2000… but the prize is straining under the burden of a rapidly changing literary landscape" (n.p.). This is precisely why we need more prizes "to address aspects of

the African literary institution that the Caine doesn't speak to," she clarifies. For her, the BrittlePaper Literary Awards is one such attempt. "Instead of criticising the Caine Prize for not adequately taking into account the ways that the digital context is shaping African writing, we decided to set up a prize that fills that gap. I like to remind people that the Caine Prize is just one prize. It cannot be everything to everyone," she adds (n.p). Thus, it cannot be everything to everyone—to emerging *and* established writers. Interestingly enough, the Caine Prize for African Writing, too, is aware of this. While it "aims to be Africa's leading literary award"—and arguably is—"of course, no one institution can act as the gatekeeper of African literature," says former director Lizzy Attree (Mulgrew and Attree 2015, n.p.).

Aaron Bady (2016) raises similar concerns—about the Prize's evolving identity from the discoverer and supporter of "emergent" writing to "established" writing—in the crux of his aforementioned article, "Is the Caine Prize for Emergent African Writing, or the Best African Writing?". While Mwesigire (2015) positions the Prize within a literary landscape proliferating with new prizes, Bady (2016) focuses on the short story form: "the story of the Caine Prize for African Writing is about writers at a very particular moment in their development, about writers who are constrained by *under*-development, and to fetishize—in strangely Rostow-ian terms—the moment of 'takeoff'", he writes. "It is about writers in obscurity becoming celebrated, about making that jump. It makes sense, then, that the prize focuses on short stories […] Established African novelists do not, as a rule, win the Caine Prize; it is a prize designed for and aimed at writers in a stage of *emergence*." He then leaves readers with a set of questions regarding the state of African literature at-large—and the Caine Prize's continued role within it: "Yet if "African literature" is having a renaissance, does it need a prize for emerging writers? What happens to the Caine Prize after African literature has emerged? If "African Literature" is no longer a field to be helped through its transitions, but has become a body of work that stands on its own two feet, does the prize need to evolve?" (Bady 2016, n.p.)

Since the period of 2015-2016, when former winners and shortlisted writers appeared on shortlists again, the Caine Prize for African Writing has, from 2019, again awarded more writers who have been previously shortlisted, or already held publishing deals for full-length works of fiction. Nigerian writer Lesley Nneka Arimah won the 2019 Caine Prize

for African Writing for her short story entitled, "Skinned", published in McSweeney's *Quarterly Concern* (Issue 53 2018). At the time of her win, she had been previously shortlisted for the Prize two years prior and also published a short story collection, *What It Means When A Man Falls From The Sky*. In 2020, the Nigerian-British writer, Irenosen Okojie, took home the Prize for her short story, "Grace Jones", originally published in her short story collection, *Nudibranch*, published by Dialogue Books in the UK. The 2021 winner, the Ethiopian-American writer Meron Hadero, has also been shortlisted before—and writers she shared the 2021 shortlist with have similarly been shortlisted previously, as noted earlier. In some sense, it's easy to see how the Caine Prize for African Writing has "evolved" or "come of age"—by consecrating writers from within its own canon, not unlike the Golden Booker Prize. Furthermore, writing of the Caine Prize for African Writing's "coming of age" on *Africa in Words* in 2021—over five years after Mwesigire (2015)—Doseline Kiguru also highlights the links, connections and networks the Prize has fostered with distribution, publishing and writers' platforms and considers its wide material life on the continent, as well as that of its short stories (n.p.).

But what are the consequences of this kind of canon-creation, where the same set of writers are spotlighted and rewarded, again and again, and often at the cost of other, already relatively-unknown writers being obscured or overshadowed? Writing about judging African literature in pan-commonwealth and pan-African competitions, Nana Wilson-Tagoe (2005) notes: "The [Commonwealth Writers'] prize had no ambitions about constructing a Commonwealth canon, yet as the serious discussions progressed regional books often revealed similar concerns and anxieties that struck a common cord and could coalesce into a general 'Commonwealth' or world theme" (59)—and this is reminiscent of Nick Mulgrew's (2015) observation of the "inadvertent" functioning of the Caine Prize and Ikhide Ikheloa's (2012) observation of the Prize's "unintended consequences"—both quoted earlier. I will return to the thematic aspects and consequences of the Caine Prize for African Writing winning and shortlisted stories—one of the most controversial criticisms levelled against the Prize in its two-decade-long history—but, for the time being, it's worth at least raising the question of the process of canonisation and consecration the Prize affords and allows—albeit inadvertently or unintentionally.

In conclusion, for Bady (2016), the Caine Prize for African Writing is "trying to do two irreconcilably different things". He further expands: "If it wants to foster new and "emerging" African writers—to help unknowns become knowns […] can it also claim to reward and celebrate the *best* writers from the African continent? If its winners are the best *unknown and emerging* writers, does this qualifier mean they are not the best, full stop?" (n.p.). What is the Caine Prize for African Writing *for*—the continental category, "African writing", aside? If a Prize is unsure of its identity and intentions—does it identify emerging writers or established writers?—does this not naturally expose it to further criticism? In some ways, these are questions only the Prize itself can address and answer—through its future sets of shortlisted writers and winners—but, in tracking the trajectory of the Prize's journey and history, one can note the changes that commenced fifteen years after its inception, normally a period of time long enough to, forgive the pun, *establish* one's identity. Is the Caine Prize for African Writing headed in a different direction? If so, to what end? And more significantly, is this change of path intentional on the part of the Prize, or another one of its "unintended consequences"?

In my interview with Namwali Serpell, "Playing with the Book: Namwali Serpell on the 'Great Zambian Novel'", published in *Wasafiri* in 2020, the former winner, too, speaks of the "mishmash model" of the Caine Prize for African Writing (47)—those "two irreconcilably different things" Bady (2016) mentions above—and her thoughts are worth quoting at some length here:

> Serpell: If your model is discovering talent on the continent, then I think the Caine Prize workshops really do intend to do that. And they do. The Caine Prize anthologies publish the shortlisted stories but also the workshop stories. And the workshop stories are sometimes people's first publication. So that aspect of it makes sense to me. But the structure of the prize otherwise doesn't make sense. Instead of investing in workshops, we're going to give one person this much money for the 'quality' of their story—and part of how we're vetting that quality is that the story must've already been published elsewhere. And it's like who are those gatekeepers? They're Western, mostly. There's like five journals on the continent that would nominate a story that would win a Caine Prize. There's a mismatch between 'Is it for the best sto-

> ry?' or 'Is it for the undiscovered story?'—which are slightly different things. 'Best' carries with it this history and this weight of what kind of story we expect from Africa. (Goyal and Serpell 47)

As the first Zambian ever, and the only Zambian, on a strong shortlist populated with writers from literary superpowers such as Nigeria and South Africa, Namwali Serpell made history by winning the Caine Prize for African Writing in 2015 for her short story, "The Sack". But, for Ranka Primorac (2015), writing on *Africa in Words*, "Serpell made history by a further, more radical intervention": by splitting her prize money between the shortlisted writers (n.p.). In her winning speech, she said "she wanted to reconfigure the competitive structure of the prize (which, for her, had unwelcome resonances with American Idol), and that she would be sharing the prize money equally with the other four participants. She is the first prize winner to have done this. It was, for her, a long-overdue 'act of mutiny', she said" (n.p.). In my above-mentioned *Wasafiri* interview with Serpell (2020), she also speaks of this "sense of patronage that sometimes feels literally patronising" that becomes clear when one is nominated for a prize such as the Caine Prize for African Writing (47):

> Serpell: I found it really strange that when I was nominated in 2010 and again in 2015, the exact same set of neocolonial—slash just colonial—aspects to the prize were evident. Five years apart, we were still saying the same things, we were still all being sent to the supposed centre of Empire in London. So when I split the prize in 2015, that was really what I was trying to push back against. Whenever I questioned these things, the response would be, 'Well, that's where the money is. And we can't ruffle the feathers of the people giving us the money.' So I basically wanted to be like, you know what? I have a job, I don't need the money. And so I'm going to try and show you that it doesn't have to be this way. That sense that we must be grateful because we're being 'launched'? I don't know, I find it quite condescending. There's also a kind of NGO-ism about it. I don't know how else to put it. (Goyal and Serpell 47)

Caine Prize for African Writing-winning writers such as Namwali Serpell and Binyavanga Wainaina, speaking from the perspective of winners, have generated an auto-critique of the Prize. Serpell's thoughts on the Prize as patronising and condescending, neocolonial and NGO-like, are reminiscent of, as Samantha Pinto (2013) argues, "the critical ambivalence with which African writers and postcolonial critics have received the Prize both as a

practical reward to be pursued in the face of minimal continental support for African writing, and a double-edged gift from the "bloody colonizers," as Wainaina refers to the Caine Prize committee in his 2011 memoir, *One Day I Will Write About This Place*, one given in exchange for compromised readings of African struggle and trauma"(141-142). As he writes in his 2011 memoir, following on from his Caine Prize-winning story, "Discovering Home":

> I am online all day and all night. Baba complains about the bills. An uncle is sent to speak to me. He had this new machine. It can take cheap alcohol and seal it in small sachets. "You talk well," he tells me. "You can do sales and marketing and make some money."
>
> I am about to say yes when the e-mail from the bloody colonizers comes.
>
> Dear Caine Prize Shortlisted Guy, called Binya .. .vanga. Do you want to come to England, and have dinner in the House of Lords, and do readings, and to the Bodleian Library for a dinner of many courses, with wine, and all of London's literati? At this dinner, you will find out if Baroness Somebody Important will give you fifteen thousand dollars in cash, and even if she doesn't, you should come because being shortlisted and having dinner at the House of Lords and such is like a big deal, a really big deal. Will you come?
>
> Oh yes. I go.
>
> I win the Caine Prize, and cry, bad snotty tears, and come back with some money. A group of writers and I start a magazine called *Kwani?*—which means so what? *(*189)

It's a big deal, a really big deal. The notion of the Caine Prize for African Writing as a "double-edged gift"—one that offers money and celebrity, but one that is simultanously neocolonial in nature—is saturated both in Serpell's speech and Wainaina's memoir. While some things have changed since[39]—the ceremonies in the last couple of years have taken place at SOAS, University of London, or online-only due to the Covid-19 pandemic, for example—the inherent NGO-ism of the Prize, its inner machinery and motto, its role as arbit-

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[39] As Sandra Ponzanesi notes (2011), the Caine Prize for African Writing was, in fact, first awarded at the Zimbabwe International Book Fair 2000 in Harare, and in 2001 at the Nairobi Book Fair. In following years, winner began to be announced at a dinner in Oxford in July, to which the shortlisted candidates are all invited (1147).

er of value and and provider of visibility to African writers, remains unchanged within the prize industry and the contemporary African literary landscape. Ellah P Wakatama, who became Chair of the AKO Caine Prize for African Writing in 2020—when the AKO Foundation came onboard as sponsor and this led to the change in nomenclature—tells me in an interview on *Wasafiri*'s website, that the phrase "neo-colonial" is one she tries to avoid. In the conversation, she addresses some of the criticisms Serpell raises above regarding the philanthropic and NGO-like nature of the Prize:

> Indeed, any definition of Africa's current cultural heritage that centers itself on the colonial experience (as if that is the only thing that defines us) is one that I am not interested in. And yes, we acknowledge that we are a Prize based in Britain. But Africans are everywhere—we have and we always have travelled, sojourned and settled away from home. We have 'sister' Prizes based on the Continent and I would hope that we are seen as working together […] Support for the Arts, and for literature in particular, has to be philanthropic, there is no money to be made in the award for a Prize. My own role, for example, is unpaid. What we do (our donors, our trustees, our advisory council members) is based on a belief that this work can make a difference, can help shape our culture—so it is philanthropy and that is to be celebrated. But it doesn't have to be patronising. As to Namwali's comment regarding 'NGO-ism'—we are working hard to ensure that our writers, across all our programmes, are respected and feel that the Prize is working for them. We are nothing without their work, their talent. And as our staff and board develops to reflect the faces of the Continent, I hope this is something that will become a criticism of the past. (Goyal and Wakatama n.p.)

Marking twenty years of the prize, looking to the past and future of the Caine Prize for African Writing, Ellah P Wakatama is aware of the criticisms that have circled the Prize thus far—and aware that she has changes to make. We are nothing without the writers' work, their talent, she says of those associated with the Caine Prize for African Writing. Arguably, the Prize is nothing without its critics, too—and, no doubt, these critiques should sit at the centre of, and serve as catalysts, for change. If winning writers itself find the process of prize-giving, and the prizing institution itself, patronising and condescending—resorting to "acts of mutiny" and cutting satire to express their misgivings towards it—then the prob-

lems with the Prize, its neocolonial and NGO-like nature, run deeper than a mere celebration of writers, writing and the arts and culture. Twenty years is plenty of time for a Prize to make changes to its machinery, motto and manifesto—especially if the Prize has been unable to shake off some of its earliest criticisms. And yet, as the 2015 winner Serpell says, five years later, in 2020: "I found it really strange that when I was nominated in 2010 and again in 2015, the exact same set of neocolonial—slash just colonial—aspects to the prize were evident" (Goyal and Serpell 47).

While a prize with the stature such as the Caine Prize for African Writing may have inadvertent effects or unintended consequences, it is evident that the Prize is not entirely oblivious to these criticisms either. In this regard, it is arguable that its changes or actions in response to various critiques, controversies, and scandals—not unlike the Nobel Prize for Literature or the Booker Prize for Fiction—have been surface-level and cosmetic—and not entirely in good faith or to generate serious change. Beyond the prize-giving ceremony itself, which has made writers uncomfortable—and despite the Prize's continued connections with Africa-based literary institutions and publishers—its identity and inner workings have a ripple effect on, and for, the larger global African literary landscape. In the same *Wasafiri* interview (2020), Namwali Serpell adds:

> The prize is just a really odd mishmash, I think, of different values and part of it is that different lenses, different standards are applied to literature from different places. So the 'authentic' Zambian-ness of my novel will be more important to some people than its quality as a literary artefact. Whereas an American novel—let's say I publish my first American novel—how authentic it was as a depiction might be less important to people than what kind of literary qualities it had. And I don't know which is the better system. I know that they're both really hard to arbitrate—authenticity and quality—but I also know that they're different and I don't know why those lenses are applied the way that they are to literatures from certain places. (Goyal and Serpell 47)

With Serpell's words, this section comes full circle, returning to the issues of the Caine Prize for "African Writing" with regards to rewarding authenticity versus quality raised earlier in the chapter—by Ellah Allfrey (2010), Coilin Parsons (2015), Aaron Bady (2016), and others. While the above answer, and these ideas around "Zambian-ness" and "American-ness", were prompted by my observation that Namwali Serpell, winner of the

Caine Prize for "African" Writing was also anthologised in the *Best American Stories* (2009)—thus already questioning and complicating, if not also undermining, this assumed "African-ness"—they help to foreground larger issues around how texts from the African continent, or the Global South more generally, are often (mis)read, received, and misinterpreted. As stated earlier, "the African literary text", in such literary circuits "is always received as more than just a text", as Madhu Krishnan declares (2014, 2). Further, as Nathan Suhr-Sytsma writes (2018), Krishnan also "notes the persistent tension between the necessity for African writing to be 'identifiable as African' in order to garner a global readership and the impossibility of 'identify[ing] a text as simply African because such a singular ascription does not exist'" (1098). This leads me to perhaps the most controversial claim made about the Caine Prize for African Writing—one it has consistently and increasingly encountered each year, particularly post its tenth anniversary, and which it has been unable to entirely refute, resolve, or get rid off: that it peddles in "poverty porn", or a certain Caine Prize "aesthetic of suffering". This charge of the Caine Prize for African Writing promoting and prizing a certain type of story, or the existence of a "Caine genre", is not unlike the idea of "a Booker book" as several critics (Levin 2014; Squires 2016; Marsden 2021) have claimed—and as was addressed in some capacity in chapter one.

The ways in which the years 2015-2016 have been particularly noteworthy in the history of the Caine Prize for African Writing, ways which prompted Bwesigye bwa Mwesigire (2015) to ask, repeatedly about "offsetting the continental-diaspora deficit" and about the consequences of re-shortlisting the same set of writers—thus alluding to issues of African-ness, authenticity and canonicity—the year 2011 was, arguably, all the more significant in addressing and questioning what the phrase "African Writing" in the Prize's name stands for. The five shortlisted stories are published on the Caine Prize website each year, and each year, the stories are debated on social media and among bloggers and readers of African literature. Among the most prominent of bloggers are Ikhide R. Ikheloa (xokigbo.com) and Aaron Bady (who then blogged as "zunguzungu")—and the 2011 shortlist, which included NoViolet Bulawayo's short story, "Hitting Budapest", caused some serious concern about the state of "African Writing". At the time, Ikheloa and Bady, alongside other bloggers, all agreed that that the 2011 Caine Prize shortlist featured stories that "traffic in the familiar genre of Africa-poverty- pornography," functioning only as "an obligatory excuse for the

parade of affect-inducing spectacles which are the story's *real* reason for existing", notes Attree (2013, 44). Focusing, in particular, on "Hitting Budapest"—which includes street children, broken homes and foreign aid—and which wound up emerging as the winner, she adds that "seven of the bloggers expressed disappointment that NoViolet Bulawayo conforms to the stereotypes expected of African writers, accusing her of exactly the kind of writing that Wainaina lampoons in his *Granta* article" (44). Indeed, as Ikhide R. Ikheloa writes in the blogpost, "The 2011 Caine Prize: How Not to Write About Africa" (2012):

> The good news is that the Caine Prize is here to stay. The bad news is that someone is going to win the Caine Prize this year. This is a shame; having read the stories on the short-list I conclude that a successful African writer must be clinically depressed, chronicling in excruciating detail, every open sore of Africa, apologies to Wole Soyinka. The creation of a Prize for "African writing" may have created the unintended effect of breeding writers willing to stereotype Africa for glory. (Ikheloa n.p.)

He then proceeds to summarise the shortlisted stories, each of which apparently bear and breed a stereotype:

> Zimbabwe's NoViolet Bulawayo has a fly-ridden piece, *Hitting Budapest*, about a roaming band of urchins, one of them impregnated by her grandfather – at age ten. Uganda's Beatrice Lamwaka features, *Butterfly Dreams*, a pathetic story about a child soldier. Lamwaka apologetically documents Africans' otherness by italicizing and explaining every Ugandan word – *layibi*, *tipu*, *opobo*, *malakwang,* etc. Enough said. South Africa's Tim Keegan's *What Molly Knew*, is a plodding tale about an interracial marriage gone awry filled with gunshots and ingredients that make for an African howler. Botswana's Lauri Kubuitsile fires a volley of wretchedness in *In the Spirit of McPhineas Lata,* portraying the men of Botswana as drunken simpletons. South Africa's David Medalie almost rescues the prize from the murk with *The Mistress's Dog,* an affecting tale involving a well-fed dog, (what a concept, Africa without kwashiorkor!). (n.p.)
>
> And lays his bets on who will take home the Prize, or rather, who won't:

> Medalie may not get the Caine Prize. His story is not African enough. No rapists, no murderers, no poverty. Why, there is a cell phone in the story. Shame on Medalie. Besides Medalie, Bulawayo would be my pick for the prize. She sure can write, unfortunately her muse insists on sniffing around Africa's sewers. (n.p.)

He finally concludes that "it is as if these writers read Wainaina and misunderstood his sarcasm and rage as the bible on how to write. Wainaina, tell them it ain't so…" (2012). Little did NoViolet Bulawayo, or the administrators of the Caine Prize for African Writing know, but these accusations were only the beginning. The following year, Dobrota Pucherová (2012) would write that "the Caine Prize markets certain authors as authentic representatives of something called 'Africa,' providing authentic access to the 'African experience,' and analyse[s] its implications for African writing, publishing, and cultural identity" (14). For her, "these tendencies may be seen as encoded in the phrase "African sensibilities" on the Caine website [and the judges'] comments often echo the kind of "anthropological criticism" that used to be applied to African literature by western critics in the 1960s and 1970s. It is a tendency to regard African literature as a more or less transparent window onto verifiable events, and African authors as "gatekeepers to a presumed authentic access" (Brouillette 25), interpreters of the lands they represent," she argues (16). In her article, she observes that that the "Africa" in Caine Prize short stories is a continent devastated by poverty and corruption, war and genocide, disease and more are part of everyday realities. "Their protagonists are typically people living on the margins of society—refugees, exiles, emigrants, prisoners, or street children—whose African identity is often ambivalent, subject to negotiation and under threat" (20). Among the tendencies she identifies are to set the scene for such stories in "historical backgrounds such as the Rwanda genocide, the Abacha dictatorship, Zimbabwe of the late 1990s or post-apartheid South Africa," to name a few (20). Writing in direct response to her, Attree defends these accusations by clarifying that the content of the stories is "*de facto* African" solely because the prize is specifically for African writing and due to the eligibility of authors, which has been referenced earlier, but, at the same time, writers are welcome to interpret this sense of "Africanness" as per their own free will (39). As mentioned earlier, in the same article she goes on to add that since February 2, 2012, "this unnecessarily limiting category was eliminated, not only because it is impossible to define what an "African

sensibility" is, but because it could also potentially predetermine content to such an extent that an African author writing about California, for example, as Chris Abani does in his novel *The Virgin of Flames*, could be deemed to be ineligible if it were not for his/her African origins (41). While Attree (2013, 2015) may defend the charges against "poverty porn" and a certain Caine Prize "type" of story—and a single reading of NoViolet Bulawayo's short story "Hitting Budapest" shows that these accusations are in fact unfair and unfounded—it is also telling that the phrase "African sensibilities" was removed in the immediate aftermath of the 2011 shortlist—and the controversies and critiques it generated around Bulawayo's winning short story, "Hitting Budapest". One can argue that this was a positive step on the part of the Prize—for the terminology "African sensibilities" is, indeed, an "unnecessarily limiting category"; and yet, the timing is curious. The question remains: has the Prize inadvertently, through its identity and terminology, perpetuated—and indeed prized—a "type" of African story?

Critics have continued to make an example out of NoViolet Bulawayo's winning short story, "Hitting Budapest", and later, her debut novel, *We Need New Names* (2013), which the Nigerian novelist Helon Habila (himself a winner in 2001) reviews for the *The Guardian.* He opens his review with a recollection of attending a Caine Prize seminar, featuring a discussion on the state of new fiction coming out of Africa. Here, one of the panellists, he remembers, accused the new writers of "performing Africa" for the world. "To perform Africa… is to inundate one's writing with images and symbols and allusions that evoke, to borrow a phrase from Aristotle, pity and fear, but not in a real tragic sense, more in a CNN, western-media-coverage-of-Africa, poverty-porn sense. We are talking child soldiers, genocide, child prostitution, female genital mutilation, political violence, police brutality, dictatorships, predatory preachers, dead bodies on the roadside. The result, for the reader, isn't always catharsis, as Aristotle suggested, but its direct opposite: a sort of creeping horror that leads to a desensitisation to the reality being represented," he writes (n.p.). He then notes—and shows—how Bulawayo's novel, in his mind, proceeds to "perform Africa". *We Need New Names* features "fraudulent preachers and is partly set in a soul-crushing ghetto called Paradise, somewhere in Zimbabwe. Yes, there is a dead body hanging from a tree; there is Aids—the narrator's father is dying of it; there is political violence (pro-Mugabe partisans attacking white folk and expelling them from their homes and chanting "Africa for Africans!"); there are street children—from the ranks of whom the narrator, Darling, finally emerges and es-

capes to America and a better life. Did I mention that one of the children, 10- or 12-year-old Chipo, is pregnant after being raped by her grandfather?" he writes. For Habila, here, "there is a palpable anxiety to cover every "African" topic; almost as if the writer had a checklist made from the morning's news on Africa" (n.p.). His piece poses the question: is the new writing a fair representation of the existential realities of Africa, or merely a "Caine-prize aesthetic that has emerged in a vacuum created by the judges and the publishers and the agents over the years, and which has begun to perpetuate itself?" After all, "writing is an incestuous business: style feeds on style, especially if that particular style has proven itself capable of winning prizes and book deals and celebrity" he concludes. While Habila's —and others'—attack on Bulawayo is far from fair or deserved, his concern about the "Caine-prize aesthetic" has cropped up repeatedly in debates in recent years.

Writing on the Caine Prize blog in 2015, chair of judges, Zoe Wicomb says of the shortlist—and the writers' choice of child narrators and "poverty porn":

> The Caine Prize has of late been roundly criticized for favouring child narrators, the charge being that their perspectives contribute to the infantilization of Africa. This year's judging panel has failed to heed the warning; perversely, we have allowed three child narrators on the shortlist. Moreover, all three tell stories of impoverishment, the nasty addictive ingredient, we are told, that converts so readily into 'poverty porn'. Have we then deliberately chosen to perpetuate the parlous condition in which the representation of African writing is said to find itself? If child narrators are accused of trading in pornographic sentimentality, our three chosen ones deftly sidestep such charges. (n.p.)

Wicomb adds that: "Yes, the stories ('Flying' ,'The Folded Leaf' ,'Space') deal with poverty and disadvantage, but literary value is, of course, not based on content." For her, poverty, in these stories, "is not presented as a *single* meaning, begging bowl in hand; instead, meaning proliferates as we are prompted to infer the unspoken: that which lies just beyond what can be seen, or what can be heard, said, or done under social restrictions and conventional morality (—or, in western words, beyond what-Maisie-knew)" (n.p.; my emphasis). I want to hold onto Wicomb's use of the word "single" and the idea of "what lies just beyond". Indeed, these stories—as Bulawayo's did in 2011 and as Makena Onjerika's "Fanta Blackcurrant"

did in 2018—speak of poverty, but what lies beyond—and to what end? To revisit and repurpose the name of the East African journal *Kwani?*: so what? One can argue that the critiques against Bulawayo's winning short story have had a gendered and biased aspect to them; big, male authors and bloggers within the field of African literature have take it upon themselves to accuse the author of pandering to western stereotypes. Perhaps they are missing the point. "Hitting Budapest" (and the novel, *We Need New Names*) is a playful, satirical, tricksy and clever story—arguably intentionally provocative and playing with (western) readers' expectations around Africa: that is, what African fiction and fictional characters *should* look like or be. Instead, Bulawayo, like Serpell, works in the crevices and shadows—taking stereotypes and tropes into other forms and worlds. Taking this into consideration—and in the context of Teju Cole's essay quoted in the previous chapter—it would be rewarding to read Bulawayo's work (from her winning short story to her novel) as expanding the possibilities of existing realities, using exaggeration and personification—tools intrinsic to satire—and not as abusing or distorting realities.

In this larger critical context, Habila's notion of a "Caine-prize aesthetic" encapsulates Pucherová's (2012) argument that "the [Caine] Prize participates in a system of postcolonial knowledge industry that both values and marginalizes postcolonial texts" (13). Ikhide (2012) too writes that "aided by some needy "African" writers, Africa is being portrayed as an issues-laden continent that is best viewed on a fly-infested canvas" (n.p.). Yet, there are some outliers, and critics have also highlighted the ways in which writers are aware of their position within, and their articulation of, "Africa"—and "African" writing. It is useful here to mention Graham Huggan (2001), who shifts the focus from the institution to the individual: "third-world writers are not only subject to but also actively manipulate exoticist codes of cultural representation in their work for their own ends, while choosing complicity with exoticist aesthetics and self-commodification," he writes (32). While critical of the Caine Prize machinery, Pucherová (2012) agrees—and concedes that "the postcolonial author has emerged as a profoundly complicit and compromised figure whose authority rests, however uncomfortably, in the nature of his connection to the specificity of a given political location [and who] consciously deploy[s] aesthetics of postcolonial migrancy attractive to their Anglo-American readers" (3–4; 19). As Samantha Pinto also writes in 2013 of her judging experience: "One writer even hilariously said to me that s/he knew s/he had a good shot that year, since the Caine Prize was notoriously awarded to stories from children's perspect-

ives (144).

On the one hand, Pinto acknowledges Dobrota Pucherová's work as "the most trenchant postcolonial academic critique yet, condemning literary prize culture itself as the kind of taste-making institutions that force Western aesthetic and thematic expectations on non-Western literature, creating African literature as 'an exotic commodity'" (22); and on the other, she writes that "the writing represented by the Caine Prize frequently performs both sides of Wainaina's acerbic how to/how not to write about Africa coin—the old and the new, as well as the impossibility of disentangling one from the other—giving us a sense of the "ordinary" within the often overplayed contexts that make a story recognizable as "African" to the West (143). Can the Caine Prize for African Writing short stories be, at once, rooted in reality—and actively "choosing complicity" (Huggan 32)—as, arguably, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's short story, "Jumping Monkey Hill", and her larger literary project and persona do? Can both truths exist at once? Acute poverty, war, Aids, child soldiers… these are all "African" realities as much as love stories, queer stories, and speculative stories—as we saw in the previous chapter, and particularly through the examples of Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie's short fiction, "Jumping Monkey Hill", and Teju Cole's essay commentary, "On the Blackness of the Panther". Is it possible that these writers are merely perceiving, penning, and portraying their reality, not merely "performing Africa"? For Pinto (2013), here are "two sometimes conflicting lessons: attempting to control and police readership of African literature is a perpetually losing battle, and attempting to circulate more and different stories from Africa can potentially reshape, if not totally fix, the discourse surrounding African literature's reception (143). Similarly, as another former judge, Wilson-Tagoe writes in 2005—of Western literary prizes that may (or may not)"encourage African writers to pander to a particular Western vision of Africa as a world in crisis"—that a continent such as Africa, in "dire need of creative writers to tell its various stories", should maybe "take such a risk if this would stimulate creative voices in the first place". She adds: "It seems to me that for every false voice that 'misrepresents' Africa in a story there will be others who will explore its struggles and dilemmas with sensitivity and vision" (60). In other words, Pinto and Wilson-Tagoe emphasise that we need more stories, more and multiple stories, and stories to correct the misconceptions—just as "we need more names" and "we need more Caines". The global literary marketplace needs to broaden its assumptions and

expectations of "African writing" and unburden the term of its existing stereotypes and preconceived notions. "In awarding the 1994 [Commonwealth Writers'] regional prize to Lindsey Collen's *The Rape of Sita,* a novel set in Mauritius," writes Nana Wilson-Tagoe (2005), "our panel felt it was extending the *known boundaries* of African literature in the same way as Collen herself had transcended boundaries by exploring violation, oppression and resistance within the intersecting cultures of India, Africa and Europe in Mauritius" (58; emphasis mine). It's worth mentioning that these "known boundaries" can be geographical or genre-related, thematic or territorial—or simply of one's narrow mind, full of false presumptions and prejudices—and the Caine Prize for African Writing would benefit from crossing them from time to time.

As Bernardine Evaristo, 2012 judge, writes in the inaugural Caine Prize blogpost of her hopes for the future of African literature:

> I'm looking for stories about Africa that enlarge our concept of the continent beyond the familiar images that dominate the media: War-torn Africa, Starving Africa, Corrupt Africa—in short: The Tragic Continent […] we are all aware of these negative realities, and some African writers have written great novels along these lines (as was necessary, crucial), isn't it time now to move on? Or rather, for other kinds of African novels to be internationally celebrated. What other aspects of this most heterogeneous of continents are being explored through the imaginations of writers?
>
> I'm looking forward to the time when the concept of 'African literature' also cannot be defined; when it equates to infinite possibilities… (n.p.)

When Samantha Pinto (2013) wrote that Caine Prize short stories "frequently perform both sides of Wainaina's acerbic how to/how not to write about Africa coin" (143), she gestured towards both realities being true and existing side by side. But what if we move on from these old prescriptions and perceptions—whether serious or sarcastic—what, then, do the infinite possibilities hold for "African writing", especially in the aftermath of the 20th anniversary of the Caine Prize—and its coming of age as a prizing institution? As Evaristo evokes, and in the spirit of "moving on" and "infinite possibilities", the following section

speaks to different directions.

Circumventions and Digressions: In Different Directions

As seen in the preceding sections of this chapter, the Caine Prize for African Writing has hitherto, in its twenty year history, often functioned in extremes—it has always been caught out for doing too much or too little. For example, it has arguably rewarded a disproportionate number of Nigerian writers, or writers in the diaspora, and has increasingly had the tendency to repeatedly shortlist the same set of writers—including, at times, even previous winners of the prize, such as Tope Folarin and Segun Afolabi. On the flip side, it has recognised too few short stories in translation—as mentioned earlier, Bushra al-Fadil's 2017 Caine Prize-winning short story, "The Story of the Girl Whose Birds Flew Away", translated from Arabic by Max Shmookler, was the first time a translated work was awarded—and too few North African writers (2021 was the first time an Ethiopian writer had won since the Prize's inception in 2000). Furthermore, the identities of the Caine Prize for African Writing and of "African literature" and "African writer" have been inextricably interlinked—they are, somehow symbiotic, and feed into and define one another—and the Caine Prize has been considered an unspoken literary right-of-passage for writers. On the global scale, the Caine Prize for African Writing has become a synecdoche for African literary prizes in the same manner as, one could argue, "new Nigerian writing" has become a synecdoche for contemporary African literature at-large. In other words, both tell a "single story"—a partial, incomplete, narrow story—of African writing. It is not an exaggeration, then, to state that the Caine Prize for African Writing has become the *Things Fall Apart* of literary prizes for the African continent: a reduction, a point of fixed origin, a single prizing story—one whose reputation leads to lazy assumptions and dangerous stereotypes about the state of contemporary African literatures. Some of these aforementioned trends and tendencies in prizing—alongside the Prize's position, on a pedestal among the hierarchy of prizes for African literature—have already been covered and interrogated in previous sections of this chapter.

In her column for *BrittlePaper,* Petina Gappah (2017) picks up these critical pieces in her role as "a literary agony aunt" of sorts. When Obi from Ibadan writes in to say, "Dear

Tete Petina, Once again I'm not on the Caine Prize shortlist", it prompts Gappah to recall her "own Caine adventure" (or, rather, misadventure). She offers hope to Obi—and other such emerging writers:

> It also helped enormously that a very kind friend said to me: "You know, you don't need the Caine Prize". This was an entirely new idea for me: that I could be a published writer without ever having been 'Caine-anointed.' At that time [2008], the Caine was so dominant in conversations about who got published that it seemed like a revolutionary, even sacrilegious idea, that really, we might all want to win the Caine, but no one truly *needed* it. (n.p.; original emphasis)

Here, although the format used is playful and light-hearted, Gappah has managed to make a big, bold statement. Whilst acknowledging that the Caine Prize has come to be worshipped by new African writers—after all, it's a "sacrilegious idea" to feel otherwise, she writes—among and across continental and global African literary circles, she simultaneously de-mystifies the heightened aura and attraction surrounding it. Although appealing—achingly desirable even—it is not *actually* a requirement, or a rite of passage, for publication—one does not *need* to be "Caine-annointed"—as Gappah attests. Here it is noteworthy that Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Aminatta Forna, Taiye Selasi, Teju Cole, and indeed Petina Gappah—arguably some of the most well-known 21st century African writers globally—have bypassed the "African Booker", or Caine Prize for African Writing, and enjoyed successes and careers in the West, or Global North, regardless. Therefore, one way to circumvent the Caine Prize for African Writing is for writers to push it off the pedestal it has been hitherto placed on; one might *want* to win the Prize—for the apparent and real prestige, platform, and publishing deals it affords—but one does not *need* it as a stepping-stone to success. On the one hand, winning, or simply being associated with the Caine Prize for African Writing, is seemingly a shortcut route to success; but on the other hand, as Gappah gestures through her column, it is not the *only* route to success. Indeed, the Caine Prize has launched writers' careers, catapulting them to new levels of visibility and celebrity, but surely, it is easy to see that the canon of African writing goes beyond, and stretches bigger, than these 20-odd prize-winning writers and their work. Gappah's, then, is a clarion call for writers to actively refrain from affording the Prize this elevated status—and, by extension, perhaps, to avoid writing actively and intentionally or unconsciously and inadvertently, solely

for the Caine Prize—and its assumed expectations, definitions, and preferences of, and for, the shape of "African" writing.

Zooming out from the role of individual writers in decentralising the Caine Prize for African Writing to the larger literary prize landscape, as Bwesigye bwa Mwesigire references in his 2015 *This is Africa* article—"The Caine is About the Story, Not the Writer: On the Shortlisting of a Former Winner"—and as Dr. Ainehi Edoro, founder of *BrittlePaper*, clarifies in my aforementioned 2017 interview with her ("Celebrating Online African Literature with The BrittlePaper Literary Awards")—conducted after the announcement of the BrittlePaper Literary Awards—continent-based prizes are cropping up. As mentioned earlier, Edoro admits that at the time it arrived, the Caine Prize for African Writing had novelty—addressing lacunae within the field of literary prizes and African writing—but, over time, and against the context of a changing world, this is no longer the case. It is worth quickly repeating here that the Caine Prize for African Writing is, arguably, straining not just in a literary landscape that is changing, but it is itself also shapeshifting in terms of its identity and personality over the years, as we have seen. This is precisely why we need more prizes "to address aspects of the African literary institution that the Caine doesn't speak to"—such as literatures in African languages or literature in other genres—Edoro clarifies (n.p.). For her, the BrittlePaper Literary Awards is one such attempt. "Instead of criticising the Caine Prize for not adequately taking into account the ways that the digital context is shaping African writing, we decided to set up a prize that fills that gap. I like to remind people that the Caine Prize is just one prize. It cannot be everything to everyone," she adds (n.p.). Interestingly and ironically enough, this is precisely the case—that the Caine Prize for African Writing does, indeed, mean "everything to everyone"—as Petina Gappah argues above. While it is harder to shake off its accrued and ascribed status as Africa's top literary prize, perhaps it is easier to point out its shortcomings or gaps—or, as Edoro suggests, admit that one prize cannot be everything and do everything and, indeed, *prize everything.*

Similarly, as Bwesigye bwa Mwesigire (2015) says, "it seems to me that the [Caine] prize, after fifteen years, is coming of age and ready to take on an identity it was meant to… There are a number of prizes for emerging writers on the continent at present, so one may say that the Caine Prize does not have to be the discoverer of new talent anymore" (n.p.).

For him, this could be a new beginning for the Caine Prize for African Writing—one in which it uses its earned prestige to support smaller prizes, but also one in which it is moving on to newer pastures of prizing: "To indulge a little, the Writivism Short Story Prize, an initiative supported by many former Caine Prize winners and shortlistees (NoViolet Bulawayo and EC Osondu sit on the Writivism Board of Trustees) is one of those that focus entirely on the emerging writer, based on the African continent," he writes (n.p.). He then lists some more prominent prizes on the continent—a list by no means exhaustive, and one that is only growing each year. The Etisalat Prize for African Literature (for the best first-time published African fiction writer (in English); the Brunel University African Poetry Prize (for African poets who are yet to publish a full-length poetry book); the Mabati-Cornell Kiswahili Prize for African Literature, a sister prize of the Caine Prize for African Writing, for unpublished manuscripts or books in Kiswahili, across genres; the Golden Boabab Prize (for African writers of children and young adult short stories); the Sillerman First Book Prize for African Poets (for full-length unpublished poetry manuscripts or self-published poetry collections); and the Jalada Prize for Literature, the Writivism Short Story Prize, Short Story Day Africa Prize, to name but a few (bwa Mwesigire 2015, n.p.). On the one hand, this is a long list of continent-based literary prizes—some of which attempt to fill the geographical, genre-related or linguistic gaps beyond the Caine Prize's scope—and one can argue that, in this context of such a constellation of prizes, the over-privileging of the Caine Prize is certainly unnecessary. Furthermore, writing of the Caine Prize for African Writing's "coming of age" on *Africa in Words* in 2021—over five years after Mwesigire (2015)—Doseline Kiguru also highlights the various relationships and networks the Prize has fostered through distribution, co-publishing deals and writers' platforms—and considers its material life and presence on the African continent. She writes: "coming of age in our entry to the new decade of the 2020s, which has seen marked uncertainties and demands for shifts in the literary marketplace, questions of how the London-based Caine's considerable influence will itself evolve in the changing networks of literary value and funding, and related economies of cultural capital, production and reception across the continent, remain to be seen" (n.p.). With newer and newer prizes on the continent, some with larger pots of prize money or broader rules of entrance and eligibility, why is the Caine Prize for African Writing still considered the most prestigious, the premier prize for African writing—besides its London-location and twenty-year-long history? Is it too soon to tell, to trace the trajectory of these nascent prizes in the

context of a literary landscape historically known for its literary prizes to either become redundant or defunct, mostly due to financial reasons (such as the Noma Award for Publishing in Africa), or to never quite take off (such as the Macmillan Prize for African Writing for adult fiction)? In the aftermath of its twentieth anniversary, is the Caine Prize for African Writing "straining under the burden of a rapidly changing literary landscape"—as Dr. Edoro diagnosed in 2017—or struggling due to an internal existential and identity crisis; or will it continue to hold its own as Africa's top literary prize—often at the cost of new and homegrown prizes on the continent?

In my aforementioned *Wasafiri* 2020 interview with Ellah P Wakatama, who is current Chair of the AKO Caine Prize for African Writing, the conversation looks to the past and future of the Prize. Speaking from her then-newly-appointed role as chair about the identity and longevity of the Prize and responding to long-standing critiques, controversies, and charges levelled against it, she says:

> Ellah P Wakatama: The Prize is in the challenging position of having helped shape a literary movement through the careers it has launched and celebrated in its first twenty years. We are no longer the only Prize for short stories by writers from African countries or of African descent. For me the main strategic challenge is to ensure that we remain relevant, that we continue contributing to the amplification of these voices and that we grow within our mission in terms of expanding our activities to include editorial support for writers and with more activities in partnership with literary organisations on the Continent. (Goyal and Wakatama n.p.)

What is immediately evident is Wakatama's awareness of the larger literary prize landscape, and through her admission, that the Caine Prize must continue to "remain relevant"—indeed that there are challenges ahead and the Prize must rise to these accordingly—shows that any literary prize must continue to do the work, to change with the times, to remain alert to its unique position (all the more precarious for being on a pedestal) within the literary world. One can also argue that by admitting that the Prize is in a "challenging position" *precisely* because of it "having helped shape a literary movement", she also alludes to the twin burdens of responsibility and representation that accompany the Prize's premier

and prominent position within African literary prize cultures (n.p.). In the same interview, I note that, over the years, the Caine Prize for African Writing has increasingly gained the reputation of being a literary rite-of-passage of sorts for new African writers (one can be "Caine-anointed", as Petina Gappah notes above) but it has simultaneously also been accused of telling a single story of prizing—or a limited story of what rewarding writing from a continent can look like and be; of the stories pandering to western stereotypes of reading and writing the continent; and has also been called out for its failure to represent the region fully and freely—whether geographically, thematically, or linguistically. And yet, several scandals galore and mechanisms of gatekeeping aside, over two decades later, the Caine Prize still seems to stand on a pedestal—prestigious and tall as Africa's foremost prize. The proliferation of newer prizes on the African continent, and the attacks made against the Caine Prize, have, arguably, been feeble attempts to displace it from its top position, and yet, as its own Chair admits, the Prize finds itself in a "challenging position". How, then will it continue to "remain relevant" and hold its own? I asked Wakatama (2020):

> Ellah P Wakatama: There are now a handful of important and influential Prizes that work towards the same goals as us… We have to work hard to continue to be relevant and we cannot rest on the past success of the Prize. For me this is about a constant reminder that we are here for the writers and for the readers. It is a kind of gatekeeping—yes. But that's how culture works, that's how canons are formed. (Goyal and Wakatama n.p.)

Twenty years is a long time to earn a reputation and the reputation—good, bad, and ugly—of the Caine Prize for African Writing certainly precedes it. It is interesting that, at such a significant moment in the Prize's history and trajectory, Wakatama speaks only of the "past success of the Prize"—and how it cannot totally rely on it or fall back on it going forward. Perhaps the Prize would benefit more from not just taking these successes for granted, but instead also using the anniversary as a moment of introspection about its identity and impact in terms of "African" writing. While it need not be a Prize that is everything for everyone—thus leaving room for self-growth but also the growth of the larger literary prize culture—it perhaps ought to ask what it truly *is*—for itself but also for the larger field of "African writing".

In an attempt to steer the conversation in a different direction, one that circumvents the Caine Prize for African Writing, it is worth digressing, and doing as Isidore Diala does in "The Nigeria Prize for Literature and Current Nigerian Writing: Politics, Process, and Price of Literary Legitimation" (2021), and ask:

> How does an African prize for African literature negotiate these critical challenges for which the Caine Prize has been critiqued? And are there viable African prizes for African literature with both the economic and symbolic capital to provide an authoritative view on artistic excellence in African writing? (Diala 39)

In this article, he uses the Nigeria Prize for Literature as an example—established in 2004 by Nigeria Liquefied Natural Gas (NLNG), the sixteen-year-old prize is for $100,000—to eventually "underscore its distinctive vision of Nigerian literature by locating it in the circuit of comparable prizes, especially the Caine Prize" (36). The establishment of the Nigeria Prize for Literature in 2004, he argues, was a "major turning point in the history of literary awards in Nigeria"—especially at a time when, by the 1990s, sponsorship for prizes support by association of the Nigerian authors (ANA) was on the decline (40). Furthermore, the "substantial material reward the prize offers and the announcement of the winner or perhaps even organization of the award ceremony on October 9 to coincide with the key historical event of the NLNG's first launching of its cargo of gas on that date have understandably drawn comparisons with the Nobel Prize in Literature with a material reward of $1.1 million and a tradition of announcing its laureate annually in early October," he adds—thus referring to it as the "African Nobel" (40). Over the years, the Prize has also "risen in its symbolic value from its initial focus on revamping the quality of publishing in the country to become arguably the most powerful cultural institution for validating a Nigerian/African view on artistic excellence" (37).

A cursory glance, and already the similarities (and differences) between the Nigeria Prize for Literature and the Caine Prize for African Writing are clear: while the former is the "African Nobel", the latter is the "African Booker"; while the former has undergone a change in its identity from focussing on "revamping the quality of publishing" to "validating

a Nigerian/African view on artistic excellence" the latter has, looking in from the outside, undergone a change in its identity from focussing on a prize for "emerging" writers to a prize for "established" writers, as argued earlier. Both are also among the oldest, longest-running literary prizes for Nigerian/African writing. But the Nigeria Prize for Literature is more akin the Caine Prize for African Writing than is immediately evident.

"For the first six years of the competition," notes Isidore Diala, "eligibility was restricted further to only writers of Nigerian origin resident in the country"—thus making a "Nigerian" prize for not *all* Nigerian writers (42). Over time, as Nathan Suhr-Sytsma (2018) writes, this changed—and the NLNG "gestured toward geographic scales other than the national: it broadened the ambitions of the prize by opening it to the worldwide diaspora, provided that they continue to identify as "Nigerians" (1110). It has also undergone its own set of scandals, such as the inaugural non-award in 2004, and again in 2011, alongside allusions to its unethical business practices[40], not unlike the Booker Prize for Fiction—and, very early on, in Odia Ofeimun's view, the NLNG Prize was "Not Yet the Nigerian Prize" (qtd. in Suhr-Sytsma 1110). This is reminiscent of the Caine Prize for African Writing being undermined and mocked, over time, as the Caine Prize for Nigerian/ Diasporic Writing—thus alluding to the question, what, and for whom, is the Caine Prize? Returning to the critiques and controversies around the Prize promoting and prizing a certain "type" of Caine Prize short story, the NLNG Prize, too, "by encouraging the production of literature with explicit Nigerian content," in turn, "encourages focus on especially topical events that help to locate a work of art in time and place," writes Diala (51). "In this regard, the success that works dealing with the Niger delta insurgency or Boko Haram terrorism have achieved in the Nigeria Prize for Literature competitions is revealing," he adds (51). Here, one remembers the allegations of the presence of "poverty porn" and child narrators in Caine Prize -shortlisted and -winning stories. And finally, turning to yet another big moment in the history of the Caine Prize for African Writing—Namwali Serpell's "act of mutiny", where the split the prize money with her fellow shortlisted writers—Nathan Suhr-Sytsma (2018) has—also cited critics of the Nigeria Prize for Literature and noted the implications of awarding such a large sum of money to one writer, suggesting instead the more impactful ethos of the Etisal-

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[40] For example, in "The Trouble with the Nigeria Prize for Literature" (2012), published on *Africa is a Country*, Justin Scott asks: "To what extent has NLNG used the illusion of corporate philanthropy to clear its name in the eyes of the public writ large?" (n.p.).

at Prize for Literature's (now renamed the 9mobile Prize for Literature) of purchasing 500 copies of each shortlisted book (1115)—and thus truly supporting the local publishing industry. In his 2013 interview with *BrittlePaper*, Ikhide Ikheloa also speaks at-length about similar issues regarding the Nigeria Prize for Literature. For him, while it is "not the same prize that was started a few years back"—and has changed with the times and responded fairly well to feedback—and while it is "richly endowed", it is still "struggling for stature and identity" (n.p.). If Suhr-Sytsma takes issue with the idea of the winner-takes-all (a lot) attitude, Ikheloa is concerned with the quality of the prize-winning work, asking if they are deserving of such a large sum of money. "Having said that," he adds, "$100,000 for a literary work in Nigeria's literary climate is absurd […] Bestowing that much money on a mediocre work diminishes the prize and ironically, Nigerian literature" (n.p.).

All this aside, the severest criticism of the Nigeria Prize for Literature—a criticism that mostly starkly reveals its position within the circuit of literary prizes, particularly with respect to the Caine Prize for African Writing—is the question of its insularity—thus foregoing international prestige. As Isidore Diala charts, the initial monetary value of $20,000 was raised two years after in 2006 to $30,000. In 2008, it was increased further to $50,000 and then to $100,000 in 2011, making it higher in monetary value than the Booker (£50,000) and Caine and Commonwealth Prizes (£10,000) (41). And yet, he writes, "the relative international anonymity of the Nigeria Prize for Literature, even in the circuit of comparable prizes, perhaps is testament to the well-known fact that the prestige of a prize in awarding value is not necessarily determined by its monetary value" (41). He quotes Obi Nwakanma, who regards the Nigeria Prize for Literature as rather "too insular to carry the kind of international weight that should honor contemporary Nigerian writing" (and who suggests the internationalization of the search for judges as a resolution (qtd. in Diala 49). Adding to this criticism, he himself writes that "there is the real danger of a prize that self-consciously conceives itself as challenging well-known patterns of imperial control of the symbolic economies (seen as complicit with Western hegemony) tending toward narrow-minded nationalism" (51)—through the awarding of works thematically, authentically and intrinsically "Nigerian" in nature—and adds that "part of that danger is the deployment of the prize to valorize conformist writers, while pushing further to the margins apparently dissenting voices" (51)—

a trend that is opposite to the one seen in prizes such as the Nobel Prize for Literature, which tends to reward political dissidence when it comes to writers from the Global South.

Obi Nwakanma and Isidore Diala are not alone in thinking this, and in the latter's 2021 interview with the well-known Nigerian novelist, Elnathan John ("Literary Prizes Belong to the Power Structure"), the writer—who himself has been perennially shortlisted by the Caine Prize for African Writing, but never won—makes similar arguments and his thoughts are worth quoting as some length:

> Elnathan John: I think that the Nigeria Prize for Literature must get out of the hands of its founders. It is too firmly situated in the hands of its founders and what it has done is that it has *provincialized* the prize so that even though it gives a hundred thousand dollars, it is not highly respected outside Nigeria.
>
> […]
>
> I think that the Nigeria Prize for Literature with all of its money must focus on the books themselves […] How far can we take these books? Where can these books be found? What can we do for publicity for these books? They must have partnerships with other institutions across the continent. This is the only prize that is called the Nigeria Prize for Literature. If it is *the* Nigeria Prize for Literature, how can we liaise with people outside Nigeria? Let's even start with West Africa. How can we liaise with institutions in West Africa to take the winners on a reading tour?
>
> […]
>
> The Nigerian Prize for Literature has to have legitimacy. Money is not enough. Legitimacy is not something you can buy with money. It has to prove itself. It has to prove its worth in the space that is literature so that tomorrow we can say: "That person won the Nigeria Prize for Literature or was shortlisted for the Nigeria Prize for Literature," and it can mean something outside Nigeria. (Diala and John 128-129; emphasis mine)

Here, Elnathan John makes some powerful and thought-provoking points—offering the Caine Prize for African Writing (or the "African Booker") and the Booker Prize for Fiction as models—from focussing on promoting the Nigeria Prize for Literature-winning books themselves; to building networks and connections with organisations and audiences outside Nigeria; and noting that the Prize has to prove itself, beyond the absurdly large and alluring prize money, as an organisation that has legitimacy, and is therefore considered a taste-maker of literature. If the Caine Prize for African Writing is too broad, too vague, too arbitrary and abstract in its scope—as Aaron Bady (2016) argues: it uses "the continental adjective, without any serious effort at a continental scope"—the Nigeria Prize for Literature is too inward-looking, insular and provincial. Both prizes are prescriptive—awarding what African writing is or isn't and what Nigerian writing is or isn't—and both have a mishmash motto—is it for emerging and supporting new writing (and therefore publishing) or is it for excellence and established writers? One redeeming factor of the NLNG Prize, for Isidore Diala, is that "while offering a prize sufficiently attractive to Nigerian writers in the West," it "helps regulate their self-conception, audiences, and constituencies and thus continues to help consolidate their allegiance to the Nigerian tradition" (57). While, on the one hand, this seemingly keeps writers in check and prevents them from pandering to western stereotypes and market demands—as, arguably, the Caine Prize for African Writing encourages—on the other hand, it also reveals and underlying sense of insularity, that impending 'danger of the single story' as discussed in the cases of Chinua Achebe and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. In other words, would this 'allegiance' cause a return to that aforementioned Achebe-Adichie model, which in turn leads to palimpsestic perceptions of 'African literature' in the global marketplace and canon? Yet, as *the* Nigeria Prize for Literature, it must be more and do more—"it must mean something outside Nigeria", as John says (128)—and perhaps this is the biggest and most common criticism for literary prizes on the continent, whether relatively old or new. In other words, if a national prize on the African continent conceives itself as the "African Nobel", it must rise to the occasion if it must compete with other prizes for African writing—first and foremost the "African Booker", or the Caine Prize for African Writing.

This is but one example of rising—potentially rival—prizes on the continent, ones that not only question and threaten how the Caine Prize for African Writing can continue to remain relevant in a literary landscape proliferating with new, local, continent-based prizes, but that also gesture to a decentralisation and decolonisation in conversations about the poli-

tics of literary prizes, particularly what it means when the premier prize for African writing is a British prize. Such smaller prizes—arguably with lesser legitimacy, but founded with the aim of filling current lacunae in more prestigious prizes such as the Caine Prize for African Writing—raise important issues of western legitimacy, authenticity, "Africanness", canonisation and celebration of contemporary African literature. Nathan Suhr-Sytsma (2018) is talking about the global dissemination, circulation, and canonisation of African literature as a concept and industry—particularly by way of literary prizes—when he writes: "it would be a mistake, then, to attribute mobility only to writers consecrated in the Global North. Africa-based writers often touch the world by way of less expected itineraries" (1114). It would be a mistake, too, to attribute value to writers only consecrated by the Caine Prize for African Writing, or indeed, any one literary prize, on or outside the African continent—for there is a deep danger in this too.

Conclusions, and Cues for the Future

"I was 22 when I got nominated for the 2014 Caine Prize for African Writing," opens Efemia Chela's blog post for the Caine Prize for African Writing website, titled "An Unexpected Prize", and published three years later (n.p.). She would not win that year, which, she writes, her "immature mind took as a kind of rejection". She would, however, go on to run Short Story Day Africa's social media, work on the *Migrations* anthology, and join *The Johannesburg Review of Books* as Contributing Editor, among other things.

> In the end The Caine Prize wasn't what I thought it would be. I erroneously thought only winning the big prize could make me a real writer but it isn't about what happens in Oxford (beautiful as the Bodleian library may be). What made me a writer was what I did afterwards—scribbling away, keeping my creative channels open, talking about African writing with other enthusiasts, and gorging myself on life. I had thought there was only one way to be a writer. It took me a while to realise the real prize that I had been given was the knowledge that there are a several paths, up, down and roundabout that can lead to you to producing great writing, getting involved in meaningful projects and finding a literary family along the way. (n.p.)

Efemia Chela's epiphany—that there is no *one* way to be a writer—and her erroneous belief—that *only* winning the Caine Prize for African Writing would make her a "real" writer—is at the heart of the conversations around the hierarchisation of African literary prizes, the Caine Prize's heightened status within it, and the canonisation of African literature through such mechanisms of rewarding and gatekeeping. Her essay and experience are testament to the fact that there is no single, linear route to success and that the Caine Prize for African Writing does not have to be the sole and unsaid literary rite-of-passage it is often considered to be. "When people talk about the good things that the Caine Prize does for African writing, they tend to tell the story the way I've told it, as the story of individual writers, individual achievements [. . .] If we go beyond the individual level, the Caine Prize is a more problematic entity," writes Aaron Bady in his aforementioned 2016 essay, published on *Literary Hub* (n.p.). Taking this notion one step further, I would also argue that, if the story of the Caine Prize for African Writing is often told through individual successes, perhaps it would also be productive to chart the Prize's history and legacy, and its impact and influence, through those individual voices who have had "roundabout" routes to success, or who have bypassed or circumvented the Caine Prize for African Writing altogether—despite coming into contact with it in some capacity. Whether it is Namwali Serpell's "act of mutiny", who split the prize money with her fellow shortlisted writers, or Binyavanga Wainaina, who used his prize money to set up the literary journal *Kwani?*, or indeed Efemia Chela, who was shortlisted and then took alternate paths to success—all of these examples can be taken as moments of dissent and digression, moments where individual voices, successful or not, use their positions to undermine the influence the Prize exerts on the field of contemporary African literature. Individual voices, when singing to the same tune, can form a chorus—one that is loud enough to reverberate across the literary landscape—and the Caine Prize for African Writing would do well to keep its ear to the ground.

Following the twentieth anniversary of the Caine Prize for African Writing, arguably a landmark moment of reflection and introspection, the Prize must come to terms with its internal existential crisis and also combat external pressures and forces, faced due to the proliferation of local literary prizes on the continent and the changing times. Over the years, several critics and well-wishers of the Caine Prize for African Writing have offered feedback and tips for the future. In 2012, blogger Ikhide Ikheloa suggested that the Prize "review the

shortlists and winners since its inception, and put structures in place that ensure a more rounded set of offerings each year" and also that "it would be interesting to do a study of the places of abode of all the shortlisted writers since inception" (n.p.), especially in light of diasporic writers being accused of not being "African enough" of deserving the Prize, or what Bwesigye bwa Mwesigire refers to as "offsetting the continental-diaspora deficit" in his *This is Africa* article in 2014 (n.p.). Naturally, various Caine Prize judges and administrators have also shared their thoughts on how to best keep the Prize prominent and relevant—which is, arguably, in the Prize's best interest. Ghazi Gheblawi, 2017 Caine Prize judge, writing in his blog post, "A Feast of African Literature" acknowledges that the "Caine Prize has been at the forefront of a renaissance in African literature, and it wasn't accidental that the Prize was a manifestation of the resurgence of African culture, art and literature that began with the turn of the new millennium, which reflected the vigour and enthusiasm of the new generation of African writers to break old boundaries and explore new ideas, styles and themes". And yet, he writes, "the next challenge for African literature will be to make it accessible to be read by everyone in the continent regardless of language. And as the Caine Prize reaches its second decade of promoting and celebrating African writing it will be integral for the mission of the Prize to invest in the future of inter-African translation projects to bring African writers closer together" (n.p.). Gheblawi speaks along linguistic lines—and the Mabati Cornell Kiswahili Prize for African Literature goes some way in filling this gap. But as chair, Dr Delia Jarrett-Macauley, writes in another blog post, "The Caine Prize for African Writing: A Vision for the Future" (2018): while the "Caine Prize, like any organisation, is a living thing—breathing, evolving and keeping a watchful gaze on its environment, it is also a "historical fact that this is a London-based organisation, necessarily under pressure to engage with the cultural, political, economic and social questions that arise from its stated aim to celebrate contemporary African writing, and it needs to continue to develop modes of analysis—whether to be applied to questions of race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexuality or religion—which are non-essentialist and worthy of the complexities of contemporary African writing"—thus speaking to larger issues (n.p.).. Former director, Lizzy Attree's (2013) suggestion is also worth attending to, where she says that it's worth looking to the careers of former Caine Prize winners—the places the prize takes them, but also the places they choose to travel to through their work—to get a fuller picture of contemporary African writing (45).

The Caine Prize for African Writing, albeit inadvertently, asks of its authors and texts, "Where do [you] come from?", thus allotting "African literature" a geography-based banner and, in Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie's (2009) words, a "single story" of prizing. If, however, following Trinh Minh-ha (2011), we juxtapose "Where do we come from?" with the question "Where do we go?", we mediate between multiple worlds, and see writers, texts, and characters challenging citizenships and circumventing continental borders (13). Nathan Suhr-Systsma (2018) offers a fresh perspective, and a productive way of re-thinking and re-mapping, one that this project also aligns itself with: "The literary geography of the Caine Prize is best represented, then, not as a unidirectional flow—whether of white British judgment of African writers or of African fiction being exported to the Global North—but as circuits of exchange among the UK, the United States, and various locations on the African continent where English is an official language" (1109). The conversation then oscillates between fixity and fluidity, is grounded and gives way to multiple geographies. The conversation, then, is one of connections beyond continental cartographies; one that is neither deliberately diasporic nor ethnically essentialist; and one of places and stories lost and found. After all, as former winner and 2014 judge, Helon Habila writes in his blogpost, "Tradition and the African Writer", published on the Caine Prize website: "even though less and less emphasis should be laid on the word 'African', and more and more on whether a story is good or not, still, we must remember at the bottom of it lies a certain tradition. The "literature" of Africa predates and supersedes the invention of Africa." Perhaps the greatest, most productive lesson to be learnt is this: let the literature lead the way, let the short stories speak for themselves—not as synecdoches, or as spokespersons for a whole continent, but simply as what they are: literary texts.

*

By way of an ending, it is worth revisiting a small selection of moments from Binyavanga Wainaina's satirical essay, "How to Write About Africa" (*Granta* 2005):

> In your text, treat Africa as if it were one country… Don't get bogged down with precise descriptions. Africa is big: fifty-four countries, 900 million people who are too busy starving and dying and warring and emigrating to read your book.
>
> [..]
>
> Taboo subjects: ordinary domestic scenes, love between Africans (unless a death is involved), references to African writers or intellectuals, mention of school-going children who are not suffering from yaws or Ebola fever or female genital mutilation.
>
> […]
>
> Remember, any work you submit in which people look filthy and miserable will be referred to as the 'real Africa', and you want that on your dust jacket. Do not feel queasy about this: you are trying to help them to get aid from the West.
>
> […]
>
> When your main character is in a desert or jungle living with indigenous peoples (anybody short) it is okay to mention that Africa has been severely depopulated by Aids and War (use caps). (n.p.)

In the passage quoted above, the late Kenyan writer Wainaina offers writerly wisdom—using his particular brand of thought-provoking satire to subvert the stereotypes used by journalists and novelists when capturing the African continent. Arguably a "how *not* to" guide, full of active verbs, the essay appears, at first, to be prescriptive; it seems like Wainaina is not just prescribing a particular narrative of Africa—or rather, how to avoid it—but also giving permission to the writer. Over the years, Wainaina's essay has led to several pseudo, or copy-cat, versions—and other writers have taken it upon themselves to offer prescriptions and permission.

Sofia Samatar's essay, "Black and African Writers Don't Need Instructions from Ben Okri" (*The Guardian*, 2014), written in response to Ben Okri's essay, "A Mental Tyranny is Keeping Black Writers from Greatness"—published in the same paper three days prior—asks: "if, as Okri insists, "we must not let anyone define what we write," why should black and African writers listen to Ben Okri? For Samatar, Black and African writing does indeed need freedom, as Okri writes (n.p.). But it also needs freedom "from the repetition of tired complaints and the issuing of dusty and ineffective prescriptions," she concludes (n.p.). Sim-

ilarly, in his introduction to Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi's "Great Ugandan novel", *Kintu* (Transit Books, 2017), excerpted on *Literary Hub*, Aaron Bady writes, in a tone and style eerily reminiscent of Wainaina:

> If you must write about Africa, then you write about dictators, ethnography, and war; these are the sorts of stories that confirm what people already "know" about Africa. And if you must write about Uganda, then you place a white character in the middle of the action. You write about Africans who have left Africa and migrated to the United States or Europe. You write about the legacies of colonialism. If you can't make Europe the hero of the story—and these days, you can't—then you can at least make Europe the villain. (Bady n.p.)

In one way or another, whether literally or ironically, all these writers give out prescriptions and permission for how one ought to write about Africa, or what an African writer ought to write. In "The Novelist as Teacher", collected in his book, *Hopes and Impediments* (originally published in 1988), Chinua Achebe writes that "… no self-respecting writer will take dictation from his audience. He must remain free to disagree with his society and go into rebellion against it if need be" (42). Decades later, Wole Talabi's short story, "Wednesday's Story" —shortlisted for the 2018 Caine Prize for African Writing and originally published in *Lightspeed* Magazine (2016)—a meta-fictional and multi-layered short story, which is a meditation on, and which studies the mechanics of, the art of storytelling (and writing), channels Achebe's rebellious spirit. As I write in my *Africa in Words* review of "Wednesday's Story" (2018), from the opening itself, the story's narrator and author both reject pre-determined and prescriptive ways of storytelling: "My story has a strange shape to it […] it bunches up in places and twists upon itself in ways that no good story *should*," writes Talabi (1)—hence urging the reader and receiver of the story to abandon all expectations and rules of reading (emphasis mine; n.p.).

On first glance, this is the story of Wednesday, a female spirit-thing who inserts herself into Solomon Grundy's story in order to save his dying wife—and the resultant repercussions of her rule-breaking, her rebelliousness, as it were. Talabi's story stages the question—what makes a good story?—then shows us how there is no straightforward answer. In-

stead, Talabi takes the story form and slices it all up; in doing so, he playfully points his creative compass at its own literariness and constructed-ness. For example, Wednesday's story has multiple beginnings—while one way in is through intertextuality ("one of them, appropriately enough, is another story", Wednesday says), another opens with the "darkness of mind"—presumably writer's block—and many middles ("in some middles of this story"; "in some other middles of this story"; "in at least one middle of this story") (2). It is studded with children's rhymes and fables and plot digressions ("I am sorry; this is not the story of the Iroko-man is it?") (6). Furthermore, Wednesday also foregoes linear narratives for circular time streams: ("the story will happen, is happening, has already happened"; "Wait. I'm sorry, I've already told you how this story ends, haven't I?"). As the author, Talabi too uses his own 'power to enter the spaces between stories' in order to untangle and understand issues of ownership and inheritance and authorship and intervention of stories. On the one hand, "Wednesday's Story" can be read as an ode to oral traditions of storytelling; and on the other, it can be used to ask questions about the relationship between aesthetics and authority ("This story is badly shaped, but it is uniquely my story, and the burden of its telling is and always will be mine to bear," confesses Wednesday quite early into her story), or even to ask: How does one tell a "dark, dark story, full of pain and suffering"?) (1).

When Wednesday uses the time stone in a last resort act to alter Solomon Grundy's 'dark, dark story', she unwittingly breaks the 'author's law'—thus 'perpetrating an abomination by attempting to amend the timestream, by trying to change the story'. It's not long before she realises this: 'This is the thing about stories, regardless of who tells them or how they are told: Every story is created by someone—the author and the finisher of its characters' fates. Authors do not like their stories changed.' "In the end," I write:

> Talabi's work brings about a different, more disciplinary set of issues that authors and critics grapple with daily. What is an 'African' short story? Who tells it—and how is it told? Indeed, what is a Caine Prize [for African Writing] short story? These questions have attached themselves to contemporary 'African literature' *ad nauseam*. Talabi's story about stopping time and stopping death is a refreshing reminder that the author is very much alive—and that, when it comes to stories, he prefers possibilities, often otherworldly, to prescriptions. (Goyal 2018c; n.p.)

What if, instead of asking, "What is an 'African', indeed a Caine Prize for African Writing short story?", or prescribing what such a story *should* look like, one moves on, and looks to the possibilities—the many worlds and the many Africas of these stories?

Conclusion

Let's Tell This Story Properly[41]

"Perhaps we should decide how seriously to take any one of them [literary prizes] based on whether it seeks to start a conversation or to end one."

– Garth Risk Hallberg, *The Millions*

[41] Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi (2014).

In her essay on *Wasafiri*'s website, titled "Of Gods and Awards" (2019)—on winning and judging the Commonwealth Writers' Prize—Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi writes:

> The mind is a warped thing.
>
> When I still lived in Uganda, before any prize came my way, before I was published and I wrote in darkness, I looked at the phenomenon of literary prizes in a somewhat peculiar way. The whole thing seemed like a modern-day Egwugwu phenomenon in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, where elders descended and disappeared into the Egwugwu house, the one that faced the forest, the one whose outside was cleaned and painted by women who were forbidden to see inside—not even ask what happened there. Then, after a while, spirits, magnificent and awesome, stepped out. Looking back now, I cannot tell you how the two are connected. Perhaps my imagination was coloured by longing and envy. There was an insurmountable distance between those prizes and me. It could have been the way that prizes transformed recipients and suddenly they began to shine.
>
> Then I came to Britain and my mind updated itself. Still, the process of judging big literary prizes like the Commonwealth Writers' Prize seemed extremely secretive and sacrosanct. I imagined judges flying in from their regions into some mysterious place in Somerset, then converging in a castle and descending into a (Victorian) vault. There, surrounded by vast shelves of huge, ancient books, the judges donned heavy dark cloaks and were sworn to secrecy and impartiality by drinking some nasty concoction from a chalice. They then sat at a round marble table with burning incense in the middle, piles of books in front of each of them. Then a voice said that they would not emerge into sunlight until they had compiled the shortlist, the regional winners, and the global winner.
>
> There is nothing spiritual or reverent about prizes, not judging them, not receiving them. The idea that after the announcement *And the winner is* … a writer transforms into this incredibly talented, clever, shiny author they were not the day before, lies in the eyes of the beholder. Here is the problem. (n.p.)

A Ugandan novelist, Makumbi was winner of the Kwani Manuscript Project in 2013 for *Kintu*. The following year, she was long-listed for the Etisalat Prize for the same novel, and also emerged as overall winner of the 2014 Commonwealth Short Story Prize for "Lets Tell This Story Properly". In March 2018 she was one of eight writers to be awarded the prestigious Windham-Campbell Prize (fiction), winning $165,000. With this, Makumbi became the seventh African writer honoured by the Prize, following wins by South Africans Zoe Wicomb, in fiction, and Johnny Steinberg, in nonfiction, in 2013; Sierra Leonean-Scottish Aminatta Forna, in fiction, in 2014; and Nigerians Teju Cole and Helon Habila and South African Ivan Vladislavic, all in fiction, in 2015. Otosirieze Obi-Young, reporting for *BrittlePaper* (2018) writes that, "in her citation, Makumbi was chosen for how she, in her novel *Kintu,* "opens up a bold and innovatory vista in African letters, encompassing ancient wounds that disquiet the present, and offering the restitution to be found in memory and ritual"—and charts "*new possibilities* for the future of the African novel" (n.p.; my emphasis). Most recently, in 2021, she also won the Jhalak Prize: Book of the Year by a Writer of Colour for her second novel, *The First Woman*. But before this slew of prizes, before she was even published at all, she "wrote in darkness"—not unlike the protagonist we met in Wole Talabi's metafictional story, "Wednesday's Story", in the preceding chapter—who says of the many beginnings of her story, that one of these stories opened with the "darkness of mind" (n.p.). Among other things, through this short passage from her playful and perceptive essay about prize cultures—their lustre and spiritual nature, or lack thereof—Makumbi says so much. She highlights gender disparities, gestures to the canonical text of African literature, and attempts to grapple with the inexplicable (magical?) transformation that prizes bring about for writers. Most significantly, however, she destabilises ideas around canonicity, authority, and celebrity as this thesis has attempted to do in its exploration of publishing and prize cultures in the global literary marketplace—and particularly in western academia and media. At first, Makumbi is on the outside looking in; there is considerable distance between her and the world of glamorous prizes and this distorts her ideas about the world of prizes —exaggerates it and gives it an ethereal quality. "It could have been the way that prizes transformed recipients and suddenly they began to shine," she writes. It is this sense of suddenness, coupled with overnight success, that's worth pondering over. As Makumbi mentions, and as discussed with the example of Bernardine Evaristo's Booker Prize win in an

early chapter, such apparent 'transformations' are but illusions. And while prizes offer immediate success, visibility, and celebrity, they simultaneously also often undermine and overshadow years of writers' work—thus gaining more power and prestige than is perhaps due. In this regard, it is noteworthy that Anna Auguscik (2013) writes similarly of prize-winning books themselves, and, in particular, a Booker Prize winner: "In fact, a book which was awarded the Booker is not the same book it was before it was thus distinguished. Instead it becomes a Booker book," she claims (15). According to Auguscik, the Booker Prize is not awarded to the "best novel", but it 'creates a "best novel"'(15). This sense of *creation* of a prizewinning work is pertinent—adding a layer of paratext to the aesthetic value of the text itself. Ultimately, though, this "transformation" that takes place after the announcement *And the winner is…*—when "a writer transforms into this incredibly talented, clever, shiny author they were not the day before"—clarifies Makumbi, "lies in the eyes of the beholder". In other words, it's all a matter of perception. To come full circle, then, and to re-evoke the protagonist we met in Jen Calleja's short story, "Literary Quartet" (2020), who says that if she won the prize, it wouldn't mean anything to her, but one can't stop it meaning something to everyone else (31). To reiterate, Makumbi's essay offers clarity in the context of the flashing, blinding light often shed on prizewinning writers—arguing, instead, to turn our attention to the work itself, underneath the patina of prizes.

In his 2021 interview with Isidore Diala, "Literary Prizes Belong to the Power Structure", the Nigerian novelist Elnathan John talks about satirising literary prizes in his book, *Be(com)ing Nigerian*, where, as the interviewer notes, he writes that "every prize is just a variation on the "Roforofo Prize for African Fiction" (126). For John, there seems to be an "unhealthy obsession" with literary prizes and with immediacy—which in turn fuels celebrity—and what he refers to as the "fast-food nature of things: Is it hot? Is it hot from the oven?" (127). He continues: "Every book now wants to print 'Winner of so and so prize' on the cover, and so I said maybe I could print my own 'Roforofo Prize for Fiction' on the cover since everybody must have a prize to be taken seriously" (127). As the thesis has shown, this preoccupation with prizes does exist—and often to the writer's and their work's detriment. It is noteworthy that John has himself been thrice shortlisted for the Caine Prize for African Writing (in 2013, 2015, 2016)—and the fictitious Roforofo Prize for African Fiction is arguably a mockery of the former. Like Namwali Serpell, then, it is writers who have won prizes in exceptional cases, or been repeatedly shunned by prizes, who offer the most constructive

and clear-sighted critiques of prize cultures. Whether one is touched by the world of prizes, or continually excluded from it, it is their experience with the larger prize circuit and culture that, for better or for worse, continues to define their career. Using Bernardine Evaristo's Booker Prize win as his example, John then proceeds to talk about the magical, transformational quality of prizes that Makumbi also describes in her above-quoted essay—and this is worth inserting here in some detail.

> This is a woman who is sixty, who has written some eight novels. People are only hearing of her name now. People are only trying to look at her work now. This is a person who has been writing for the past thirty years. But a bunch of people sat down in London and said, *"We put this crown on your head," and all of a sudden we are awake* to the great work she has done yet she was not hidden all this while. She was in British literature all along. But she was unnoticed because there was no huge crown on her head. It hasn't changed the fact that she already wrote great novels; the prize didn't change that. She already had written great novels before that but we are only considering her as being worthy of a big BBC interview now, a big CNN interview now, because somebody put a crown on her head. So this is the problem. The publicity is good for sales, but only a tiny percentage of people will ever get a prize. And what does this do for our literature, if all of the books that are being reviewed are the hot new books and the books that have won prizes? What of the rest, the vast majority of books that fall in the middle? That's why maybe we create our prizes for them. Perhaps I can start charging for it, my "Roforofo Prize." (127-128; emphasis mine)

While John's humorous and humbling comments aim to question the nature of 21st century literary cultures at-large—from publishing to reviewing and prizing—his main focus is on celebrity and visibility within the literary industry. He asks similar questions this thesis set out to stage, namely: who is prized, and why; who is worthy, and of what?; who gets the crown bestowed on their head—and at what cost? While he attacks the culture around prizes—its perils, its pitfalls—he also acknowledges that, because of the way things already are, and because of the prestigious position prizes occupy within the literary landscape, writers cannot afford to do without—thus proposing to set up his own prize. In other words, there are too many writers, too many stories—most of which fall between the cracks. Leading prizes in the literary field continue to limit their scope and vision through their exclu-

sionary practices whilst also continuing to hold value. The question remains: how can prizes become more inclusive and open, and how can they alter their practices to better reflect a changing literary landscape?

Writing in an article for the *New York Times,* "Whom or What Are Literary Prizes For?" (2013), Jennifer Szalai says similarly of literary prizes: how they "sometimes seem to function like parents whose approval we crave as well as spurn", to such contradictions within and complaints about prize cultures, and the sense of celebrity and immediacy amid a crowded culture:

> The complaints are as common as they are contradictory: Prizes are awarded to tepid, undemanding best sellers everyone reads; prizes are awarded to obscure, abstruse books no one reads. They are awarded to the right authors, but for the wrong work… They are awarded to the wrong authors for the wrong work… They are withheld from the right authors for the right work… Sometimes the grousing has the whiff of sour grapes. "Prize X has never been awarded to Philip Roth." "Prize Y has never been awarded to me."
>
> For writers, a prize can mean money—not always small potatoes, though the likely candidates for the bulging Nobel purse (a million dollars, more or less) have probably established themselves beyond the penurious point of starving artists already. The more contested currency is recognition, in scarce supply for those who write literature these days, as books struggle to cut through the glut of our crowded culture […] A literary prize can act as a kind of megablurb, one that blares, "If you read only one book this year, you'd better make it this one!"
>
> This element of scarcity is crucial. Literary awards have always generated quibbles and controversies, but the prizes loom larger as other outlets for prestige have seen their fortunes wither […] There may be a profusion of new reviews online, but how many command the kind of centripetal authority of a big literary prize? (n.p.)

It is Szalai's use of the phrase 'centripetal authority' that I'd like to focus on in furthering the discussion around prizes— that is, the ways in which writers move or tend to move towards a 'centre'—with prizes at the centre and apex of the literary industry, and in particular, Eurocentric and Anglo-centric prizes which continue to remain at the centre of discourses

around prize cultures. In chapter six—"Not Your Typical Book Award: News Ways of Thinking About Literary Awards"—of her monograph, *Prizing Scottishness* (2021), Stevie Marsden reveals that, as it stands, according to our current understandings of literary awards culture, certain prizes exist which currently hold, and will continue to hold, a pinnacle status within the hierarchy of literary awards (145). This is what James F. English has called as the "single-winner axiom" of the Nobel Prize—one which underlies all of the prize economy—and also the Booker Prize as the "prize of prizes" (62). It is noteworthy that these assertions precede the Nobel Prize's "biggest scandal ever" in 2018, the Booker Prize's "biggest-rule-change-ever" in 2014, and also the latter's 50th anniversary, which, as has been argued in Chapter One, was a missed opportunity. Marsden rightly argues that "such an assertion [would] seem almost hyperbolic in its absolutism" now. (147) She further quotes Beth Driscoll (2014) on the hierarchies and rivalries between awards; Driscoll states that "the hierarchy of prizes is always in dispute and never finally settled" (qtd. in Marsden 147). For Marsden, though, English's "single-winner axiom" is "not only continually destabilised and undermined by joint winners, cancelled prizes, and refused and shared prizes"—as shown in Chapter One in particular—"but it also greatly limits how literary awards can be understood" (147). She adds that "this approach emphasises a top-down power dynamic of prize culture which implies a small number of awards maintain control over arbitrating literary and publishing culture" and therefore our current understandings of prize cultures are based largely on "proceedings of an exceptional few as opposed to being informed by the more ordinary singularities of literary awards" (127).

As we have seen throughout the course of this thesis, the Nobel Prize for Literature, the Booker Prize, and the Caine prize for African Writing all "command the kind of centripetal authority of a big literary prize"—whether they are over a century old, over half a century old, or just over twenty-years-old, respectively (Szalai n.p.). In the wake of these anniversaries and missed opportunities, rule changes and scandals—in the context of the 21st century, and particularly the past decade, which has seen a further proliferation of prizes—however, these major literary prizes have found themselves increasingly contested, whether through competitive or corrective prizes in the field, or their own mistakes and wrongdoings. As this thesis has shown, their cosmetic corrective measures—largely focussed on what is on trend and more often than not, merely reactive to the media—can no longer serve as the sole means to get them from one prize year to the next. Nascent and new literary prizes are

making interventions on the literary landscape every year—and this trio of prizes must continue to remain relevant, or else risk their places on the pedestals they were hitherto placed upon. In other words, because these three prizes are seemingly one-of-a-kind—atop of the hierarchy of prizes—there is the sense that they are untouchable and will remain so forever. As it stands, according to Marsden, our current understandings of major literary prizes such as the Nobel Prize for Literature and the Booker Prize are the way they are because these prizes are "used as archetypes, as opposed to exceptions" of literary prize culture (162). She quotes English, who writes that "each prize that achieves a premier position in a particular field, and that becomes, however contestably, the 'Nobel' of that field, produces a host of imitators with various legitimating claims of similitude and difference" (qtd. in Marsden 162). She herself also argues against using the Booker Prize as "the model for prize culture *en masse*" because "such a comparison assumes a level playing field which, as this study proposes, does not exist" (163).

Similarly, what Stephen M. Levin (2014) says of the Booker Prize's "exceptionalism" can also be applied to the Nobel Prize and, particularly, the Caine Prize for African Writing. He writes that, one the one hand, it might seem difficult to claim that the Booker is exceptional in what it does—after all, the field is full of prizes, and the notion of awarding the "best novel" is not unique to the Booker. The only thing that sets it apart is the evocation of the Commonwealth, particularly in its early years and through its early association with a colonial corporation, thereby giving the impression of a global prize—administered from the ex-heart of the Empire (483):

> These very conditions of the prize's genesis, however, ensure that any discussion of the Booker Prize necessarily entails as well a consideration of the larger field of world literature and the historical development of global fiction. The Booker, then, suggests the paradoxical condition of being both singularity and prototype.
>
> […]
>
> Clearly, the Booker must be understood as an ambivalent practice that straddles both connotations of the aesthetic: it contributes to the formation of an ideal type—the Commonwealth or global novel—but it also renders this type into a palimpsest by subjecting it to repeated iterations within the literary system itself. (Levin 483; 487)

The main argument of Marsden's monograph (2021) is an advice against adding to the prestige and power of major prizes such as the Nobel Prize and the Booker Prize—particularly as the power that these prizes have been imbued with is, as she writes, and as this thesis has shown, not "inherent to the prize, but is perpetuated, orchestrated and managed by prize organisers and industry and media commentators" (147)—by using them as *the* models for the literary prize landscape at-large. At this point, it's worth circling back to the title and subtitle of the thesis: Awarding 'Africa': the politics of literary prizes. As mentioned in the introduction, the thesis opens with a survey of literary prize history and situates the sphere of prizes within the literary landscape—that is, it looks to the politics (but also ethics and aesthetics) of literary prize cultures—before turning its focus on questions around awarding contemporary African writing in English—moving consciously from the subtitle to the main title of the thesis. While this structural design seemingly foregrounds the global, before moving towards the particular in terms of prizes, questions around awarding 'Africa' and questions about the state of contemporary African writing are the overarching focus of the thesis, which in turn attempts to breakdown these binaries: of the global and the particular, of European and African prizes, of centre and periphery. In taking this structural approach, it highlights the existence of global networks and connections, exploring how the Caine Prize for African Writing as a not-quite-European, not-quite-African prize straddles in the liminal spaces between and beyond the apparent centre/periphery binary. The thesis argues against reductive ways of reading and awarding writing from /of / by / about 'Africa'—and argues against a reading where big, old, European prizes unidirectionally filter and feed into our understandings of the Caine Prize for African Writing. Things are are not as derivative or prescriptive. In fact, the thesis seeks to show how the Caine Prize for African Writing—or, indeed, prizes of varying sizes and statures, and from various locations—can inform and cause interventions within the debate around 'bigger' prizes. In other words, it seeks to change the direction of the debate through a new method of comparative study. Through its ironic interventions about awarding 'Africa'—including exploring colonial beginnings and legacies—it seeks to create a space for, and centre, African writing, publishing, and prizing within literary landscape. What new pathways of thinking can the Caine Prize for African Writing offer for the Booker Prize for Fiction and the Nobel Prize for Literature? Indeed, what can Africa-based prizes teach the Caine Prize for African Writing? In placing the Caine Prize for African Writing, which is premier within the field of African literatures,

beside the Booker Prize for Fiction (and the Nobel Prize for Literature)—in terms of geography and genealogy—this thesis has attempted to destabilise and dismantle their individual positions in the field. Alongside this, by zooming in on the three prizes' big anniversaries and bigger scandals, the missed opportunities and rule changes, it has further undermined and underscored their hitherto privileged positions within the hierarchy of prizes—arguing for an approach where one prize does not serve as a model for other prizes, but, instead, where prizes learn and grow from each other.

It has also argued that the three prizes have faced several setbacks and shortcomings over the years—and in exploring and exposing the mechanics, politics, and aesthetics of these major literary prizes, it is clear that, this trio of prizes cannot continue to remain relevant and important—high up in the hierarchy, high up on a pedestal—in the face of further critique and controversy unless they imagine new manifestos, futures, and ways of prizing literatures. It is noteworthy that there exists a competition among prizes: each prize tweaking its eligibility, or copying another prize, in order to gain the best financial support from sponsors—and to become *the* prize on the literary landscape. Competition aside, criticisms of literary prize culture also tend to run across all prizes—large and small—based on eligibility and nationality, (lack of) translation and the dominance of the English language, and of pandering to stereotypes and thematic prototypes. In this respect, 50 years later, how can—if at all—the three prizes discussed here stand out and maintain their position and prestige? Furthermore, how can prizes frame writers and their work, and map the literary world, more diversely and inclusively—without succumbing to stereotypes and calls for authenticity? Can prizes *truly* reward quality, instead of faking claims of "inclusivity"? How can prizes be conceived—or re-incarnated—constructively? Prizes are born and die, become redundant and defunct, year after year. In this context, how do we create a literary prize culture that has longevity—and is sustainable, not short-lived—and one which, over time, helps, not hinders, the literary landscape? What if prizes, especially big prizes, decided to reward the entire short- or long-list—and divide the money between all nominated writers? What if a sum of money was reinvested in mentoring and supporting new writers through writing and publishing initiatives? What if prizes framed the narrative around the nominated writers each year in terms of the quality of the work, not the identity of the writer? What if the media refrained from clickbait headlines, which often focus on false "diversity" and women "dominating" prize lists, and instead celebrated the books themselves? Para-textual elements

such as reviews and prizes always surround the work itself. But in the 21st century literary landscape, where reading culture is so performative and media-driven, the para-text is just noise. The work is the thing. It always has been. And that's what we should aim to prize.

In his *Guardian* essay, "My fellow authors are too busy chasing prizes to write about what matters" (2017), Amit Chaudhuri writes that "there are at least two reasons why almost every anglophone novelist feels compelled to get as near the Booker prize as they can. The first is because it looms over them and follows them around in the way Guy de Maupassant said the Eiffel Tower follows you everywhere when you're in Paris. 'To escape the Eiffel Tower,' Maupassant suggested, 'you have to go inside it'. Similarly, the main reason for a novelist wanting to win the Booker prize is to no longer be under any obligation to win it, and to be able to get on with their job: writing, and thinking about writing." The other reason is that the Booker prize is most literary publishers' primary marketing tool, he notes. For Chaudhuri, "the idea that a 'book of the year' can be assessed annually by a bunch of people—judges who have to read almost a book a day—is absurd, as is the idea that this is any way of honouring a writer. A writer will be judged over time, by their oeuvre, and by readers and other writers who have continued to find new meaning in their writing." He clarifies that he is not saying that the Booker Prize should not exist, but that "it requires an alternative, and the alternative isn't another prize. It has to do instead with writers reclaiming agency" within the publishing industry. Speaking in agreement with Chaudhuri—and about his essay—novelist Mohsin Hamid says in an interview in *Mint Lounge* (Goyal 2017) that Chaudhuri's "central point is that what we need is a robust conversation around books, around literature, around what's happening with the form, what's happening with language—and that we can be distracted from that conversation if we focus only on prizes." He adds: "I think that prizes have a potentially positive role in that they bring readers to books, and when one has the good fortune of being shortlisted for a prize or winner of a prize then that's something that one appreciates […] we mustn't mistake a conversation about the prize as a solution for the deeper issue of a rigorous conversation about books and literature […] No one prize can take the place of that conversation." Chaudhuri closes his essay with the claim that the reason very few critique the Booker Prize is because "they will be accused of sour grapes or speaking inappropriately". And yet, such questions need "to be raised, and expressed with pertinence. Only rarely is silence a useful riposte."

On the flip side to Amit Chaudhuri's statement quoted above, that the Booker Prize "requires an alternative, and the alternative isn't another prize" (2017 n.p.)—and to play devil's advocate—I wish to evoke the essay, "What Are Literary Prizes For?", published on Republic of Consciousness Prize (for small presses) website (2021). Based on interviews with prize experts and small presses owners, the piece discusses the the role of prizes in literary culture—and comes to the conclusions that submissions should be cheaper and easier, entry criteria should be fairer, and, most significantly, that small publishers believe we need more prizes. "The presses we spoke to were also unanimous on this issue. With fresh new awards coming onto the British literary scene each year, you might expect a little scepticism, a little prize fatigue, to be creeping in," the essay argues. And yet, publishers made the case that we actually need more prizes: prizes for older first-time writers, prizes to support a specific type of writing or writer, "an English Book Prize", one that helps "redefine what English means, in all its 21st century expressions". The essay further reveals that, "rather than one or two dominant awards with massive cash payouts, publishers favour a more diverse array of prizes, with power, influence and money dispersed among them". In conclusion, "the book award can be a powerful lever of intervention in the market". And, such institutions are "capable of what the author Amit Chaudhuri [2014] describes as literary activism: challenging—even changing—the traditional ways in which books are sold, marketed, evaluated or canonised. If the organisations we interviewed are anything to go by, prizes are seizing the lever, and pulling on it hard".

Speaking in the East African—and indeed African—context, Bwesigye Bwa Mwesigire's essay, "What is Literary Activism? (Or Who keeps the housekeepers' house?)" (2021), opens with Tolu Ogunlesi's (2009) question: "who exactly are the proper "gatekeepers" of [the] African literary tradition and production?" (qtd. in Bwa Mwesigire 10). He then answers:

> The work that the people who start literary prizes and ensure they have all-African judges' panels, the entrepreneurs who are starting bookselling start-ups using their savings from pocket money, the folk opening the doors to their houses to book clubs dedicated to discussing African books, the writers who have become festival curators because they do not like how European-curated events treat Black literatures, the

> writers who donate time and other resources to facilitate creative writing workshops for their less established colleagues, and other literary activists are not gatekeepers. Literary activism is *not* gatekeeping. (Bwa Mwesigire 10-11; emphasis mine)

For him, the "language of gatekeeping insofar as literary activism is concerned is problematic" (11). What is the basis of this metaphor of gatekeeping? he asks. "A gatekeeper controls access. To 'gate' if we use the word as a verb, is to confine" (11). He then extends the metaphor:

> A gate normally leads into a compound, I guess they call it a garden, for me, where I come from, a garden is where food grows, not grass and flowers, but you get what I mean. Inside the gate, is not just a house, we have the servants' quarters, right? Then the main house. And of course, a gate rarely appears out of the blue. It is part of a gated community. There are other gates around. It speaks volumes about the nature of the literary sphere for which the metaphor of gatekeeping makes sense.
>
> […]
>
> I want to *redirect our gaze* within this compound, even inside the main house, to those who keep it running, but are really never seen.
>
> […]
>
> Come to think about it. How many of us are at least inside the gate, but not in the main house, you know, in the garden, say even in the servants' quarters? Some of us are in the ghettos. Others are not even in the area code.
>
> […]
>
> So: what are literary activists doing? Since it is not gatekeeping, not gate / door-opening, what then is it? They are building *alternative houses*. (11-12; emphasis mine)

In her winning speech at the prize-giving ceremony, Lesley Nneka Arimah, the 20th winner of the Caine Prize for African Writing said: "We African writers must centre the African gaze. We must centre the Nigerian gaze, the Cameroonian gaze, the Ethiopean gaze, the Kenyan gaze. We need to be writing to and for each other, and we also need to

play" (qtd. in Goyal and Arimah 2019). In his above-quoted essay, Bwa Mwesigire further goes on to write about the the "Western Publishing Industrial Complex", the role of literary activists on the African continent and beyond, and his own work with Writivism (which is a portmanteau of 'writing' and activism'). As he writes and shows, the redirecting of gaze—or, what Arimah refers to as the "centring the African gaze"—and the building of alternative houses has begun, as seen through the work of Bwa Mwesigire himself, alongside Doreen Straus on African Literary NGOs (2013) and Kate Wallis on East African literary networks (2018), among others. It is not mere imitation or replication: "Literary activists are not building a second Europe. They are not necessarily replicating, or even imitating the Western Publishing Industrial Complex" (Bwa Mwesigire 13). Instead, he writes, "as literary activists and academics based on and/or from the African continent, we must imagine, create, and study *a new human* to use Fanon's words" (14; emphasis mine). Taking a leaf from Bwa Mwesigire's work, the Caine Prize for African Writing would do well to imagine new stories, new ways of awarding "Africa", and finding new forms and futures of "African writing". Beyond mere imitation or replication, major agents within the field of literary prizes would benefit from redirecting gazes and building alternative houses, indeed, rooms of their own.

Given that these prizes—and their politics—are so interconnected and imbricated, given that prizes are not *only* good or *only* bad, but both, and given the overwhelming evidence of their existing representational politics, the takeaway from this thesis isn't one of offering up straightforward solutions. Prizes revise themselves to differentiate from each other—but their representational politics are evident in these revisions. Instead, prizes should strive to not just stand out or stand apart, but to do better—to attempt to rid themselves of their inherent inequalities and exclusionary politics. Prizes are competitive and repetitive but not dialogic enough; they are imitating and one-upping each other, but not talking to and learning from each other. Any solution researchers and prize administrators devise is going to find these repetitive exclusionary performance and practices. The real work is to keep the channels of conversation and interrogation open—and to then act upon these aims and agendas. The thesis does not seek to find solutions for the future of prize cultures; it hopes to ask all the right questions about the politics and ethics of prizes and to open up debates in new and nuanced ways. Instead of idealising a utopia where such representational politics are completely erased, it hopes to travel in the direction of the place where exceptionalism gets revised. From one prize year to the following, it is about prizes moving beyond prizing

the first Black female writer, the first Zambian writer, the first work in translation—and for patting themselves on the back for doing so—and instead, of creating a culture where such news headlines are not considered exceptions.

Ellah P Wakatama says: "Too much talking. We've got work to do." (qtd. in Goyal and Wakatama 2020 n.p.). On the contrary, it is crucial to keep talking about prizes and their politics—to tell the story properly. No one prize can take the place of the conversation around writers and books. The work is the thing, the rest is often just noise or distraction. But there needs to be a conversation, and constructive critique, especially of major prizes in the field, who, through their status within the literary field, confer literary value and dictate literary taste, kickstart careers and canonise works, and, intrinsically and powerfully create visibility and celebrity—all leading to consequences on reading, publishing, and prizing cultures. When left uncriticised, prizes remain high and mighty—often unattainable and untouchable. And as researchers and critics, it is our duty to hold them accountable when they fail to reward literature for literature's sake—thereby failing to fulfil their purpose. The thesis asks for a constant process of interrogation—to keep the critical conversation going from the outside as much as from within the prizes' markers. It calls for action on the part of prize administrators, funders, and judges—to imagine new possibilities for the ways in which we prize literatures. It hopes to re-energise the ways in which we talk about prizes, the ways in which we talk about 'African literature', and the ways in which we talk about our consumption and circulation of contemporary literature, so that, in turn, these conversation may re-energise actions—and serve as catalysts for change.

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