

Nigerian Identity Positioned

At the Crossroads: Nigerian Travel Writing and Literary Culture in Yoruba and English by Rebecca Jones. African Articulations 7. Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK: James Currey, an imprint of Boydell & Brewer, 2019. Bibliography. Index. Hardcover, 312 pp., USD\$56.

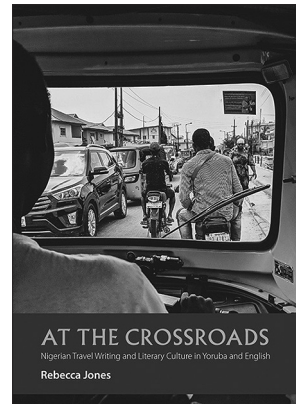
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Audience matters and, in the case of *Literary Journalism Studies*, its readers are presumably most interested in travel writing as a form of literary journalism. This is why it needs to be said first off what Rebecca Jones's *At the Crossroads* does not do. Her book only implicitly deals with the development of travel writing, but it does not address literary travel journalism, in the Yoruba nation, or later Nigeria. Nor does it discuss literary culture from a literary perspective, and questions of literary merit are not raised. Jones is at pains not to judge the writings from her white European perspective.

Travel, for Jones, is the tool to trace the changes in the self-described Yoruba or Nigerian identity. Travel, or movement, leads to encounters which help to establish the boundaries of self and other. Any text that includes travel is used for this purpose, be it travelogues, diaries, poetry, letters, articles in newspapers, fictional texts, or texts intended as travel guides, and, in the last decade, web publications. In this, Jones follows the understanding in parts of the Yoruba region where any narrative was once seen as a journey the storyteller embarked upon and took the listeners with him. For African travel writing, Jones wishes “a reversal of the colonial gaze, rendering Africans the subject of the travel narrative, rather than objects of the traveller’s gaze” (268). This, however, is a challenge, inasmuch as African writers have to maneuver within the genre in its Western manifestations.

The book is chronologically arranged. It was intended to cover Nigeria’s first century from its amalgamation as a colony in 1914 to its centenary in 2014 but extends via an epilogue to 2018 to take in websites and blogs. Jones makes clear that she does not aim at a comprehensive history of southwest Nigerian travel writing but wishes to make connections across literary genres and forms in order to follow up the ever-evolving modes of subjectivity.

When British colonial rule shaped what is now Nigeria, currently the seventh most populous country in the world, they placed 250 ethnic groups and 500 distinct languages within its borders. Yoruba, in the west, is one of the three largest groups and the country’s capital Lagos is within its land. The others are the Islamic Hausa to



the north and Igbo in the east. Nigeria gained independence in 1960 but was torn apart by the Biafran civil war from 1967–70. It took another twenty years before stable democracy was achieved.

Given Nigeria's ethnic heterogeneity, choosing Yoruba writers provides Jones with the opportunity to explore commonalities and difference within Nigeria itself, and to follow the shift from an explicit Yoruba to a less ethnically defined Nigerian perspective. The first writer to be discussed at length is Samuel Ajayi Crowther, a distinguished West African Christian of the nineteenth century. Initially captured as a slave, he later widely traveled present-day Nigeria for missionary work, noting his travels in journals and letters. Crowther's work stands in the tradition of European travel writing, aimed at an audience in Victorian Britain. Later Yoruba authors, such as Nobel Prize-winner Wole Soyinka, decried Crowther's colonial mentality that led him to denounce his African brothers as "backward, heathen, brutish" (44) and focus on cannibalism. Crowther, however, also translated several books of the Bible into Yoruba, thus making both languages part of the beginnings of Yoruba print and literary culture.

In the first three decades of the twentieth century, newspapers played an important role in establishing a Yoruba print tradition. They also served as platforms of travel accounts, often serialized, with new road, rail, and steamer networks connecting Lagos to its hinterland and the southern Nigerian coast. When analyzing these narratives, Jones's main intent is to locate the self-representation and positioning of the writer, as is also the case with Isaac Delano's 1937 *The Soul of Nigeria*: "*The Soul of Nigeria* can be read as co-opting the travel book genre, situating itself within the field of imperial representation of the world, speaking in terms that the British can understand, while retaining an 'authentic' sense of the 'native', positioning the author both inside and outside his or her own culture" (97).

The texts written prior to independence are interrogated as to the extent to which they engender Yoruba-ness or African-ness in differentiation to British colonial imagination, especially as this mindset was intent on uniting very disparate regions. These contested identities show in Delano's own position, where slippages between "Yoruba," "Nigeria," and "Africa" reveal instabilities similar to the way communal identities were perceived in that era.

Chapter four is devoted to the novels of O. D. Fagunwa, written in the late 1940s and 1950s in Yoruba, and one of which, *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons*, was translated by Wole Soyinka. Fagunwa's novels are not set in a particular historical period, unlike more realist narratives in the lead-up to independence. Fictional travel writing of the time depicts a polyglot nation in which Yoruba and Hausa speakers coexist but are unable to understand each other's language.

Post-independence, these fractures in a vastly heterogeneous country broke into the open, when the Igbo region of southeast Nigeria sought to become the independent nation of Biafra. Jones chooses to focus on the unifying efforts post-civil war and has picked, among others, texts written by participants of Nigeria's National Youth Service Corps (NYSC). These narratives point a way towards a multi-ethnic and detribalized Nigeria and are also the first among the selected texts written by women,

thus introducing the gender perspective. They show “ ‘worlds in collision’ mediated through the figure of the unmarried ‘sexually self-determining woman,’ who is punished for her sexuality . . . [they] also seem to dramatize a broader anxiety about the shift from home to the national space, and thus about the meaning and dangers of the nation itself” (178).

For the twenty-first century, Jones turns to tourism journalism and to diasporic travel narratives, written by those born outside Africa and returning to the land of their fathers. Noo Saro-Wiwa’s travelogue, *Looking for Transwonderland* captures both conventional tourism and personal story. A writer for Rough Guides and Lonely Planet, she is also the daughter of activist Ken Saro-Wiwa, who was executed by the military government in 1995. Her travels, although ambivalently, instill in her a new sense of belonging.

The book’s epilogue engages with an online travel writing journal, *Fortunate Traveller*, of which Jones is a cofounder, and which may have been the instigation of her 300-page long, in-depth study of Yoruba and Nigerian identity as expressed in travel writing. *Fortunate Traveller* and other projects, such as “Borders Within,” continue the quest for mapping this highly diverse multi-ethnic nation. The traveler, for Jones, is a liminal figure, standing at the crossroads, able to move between space and cultures, “translating parts of Nigeria, or Nigerians, to each other” (259).