

Edwige DRO

## Identity Politics

### On Being an African Writer

So much has been written about what it means to be or not to be an African writer that I wonder if I'm not simply adding more meat to the stew here. But since too much meat has never spoiled the stew, but rather has always signified and signaled great wealth—at least in my part of the world—I will add more meat. And how apt it is that even as I am writing about the richness of the stew—whether that is a real stew or the metaphorical stew that is African literature we are celebrating the win of our new Nobel Prize for Literature, Abdulrazat Gurnah.

I totally identify as being an African writer I'm an African writer because I'm a citizen of an African country. Some might say that if we go by that logic, then I should also identify as an Ivorian writer. Well, no, it doesn't work that way because Côte d'Ivoire has not always been what it is today. From 1919 to August 5, 1960: the Eve of Independence, Côte d'Ivoire went up an extra 318 miles to the northern city of Bobo-Dioulasso; on August 6, 1960: it was decided that Bobo-Dioulasso would belong to Burkina Faso, then known as the Upper Volta.

I'm also from the Mandé tribe and this tribe encompasses the populations from the West of what is today Côte d'Ivoire but also those from the southern and eastern parts of the nation known today as Mali and Guinea. In Côte d'Ivoire today, classifications are made on the Mandé tribe itself, those from the north and those from the south. I belong to the Mandé of the south and as such, I'm connected to the Krou tribe in Liberia. And considering the proponent of the *Black is King* rhetoric, my ethnic group, *the Yacouba*, is connected to one of Jacob's 12<sup>th</sup> tribe.

With all that history, I cannot afford to just be a “generic” Ivorian because the country Côte d'Ivoire is a colonial invention, and just because the Organization of the African Unity decided in 1963 to keep all the borders as drawn by the colonial powers. That does not mean that I need to embrace a nationalism that does not speak to me.

However, it is not because I'm an African writer that I'm going to: speak for the whole continent of 56 countries, if we include Haiti—I cannot even speak for the whole of Côte d'Ivoire; speak on matters others perceive to be African issues.

Here I'm going to speak about the controversies that have plagued the term “African writer,” specifically from the viewpoint of conversations happening in Côte d'Ivoire. I'm choosing this viewpoint because I have noticed that the argument always revolves around what the West is saying about us, “African writers,” “African literature” and *tout cela*. And I personally have never been interested in focusing on what the West is saying about us, for the simple reason that when we care so much about what others say, it is because there is something about us that we haven't resolved. So I'm interested in what we haven't resolved.

When I use the term ‘African writer,’ I will be talking about the writer who holds citizenship from one of the African countries.

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ICPL and the International Writing Program Panel Series, October 15, 2021

Edwige Dro (Côte d'Ivoire), Dominika Słowik (Poland); Muthi Nhlema (Malawi)

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We, as African writers, say that the West wants us to write on themes that they perceive as African. Books that touch on issues of polygamy, abusive fathers, genocide, a war or two are touted in the West as representing real Africa. Yet what is the situation in our various countries? Read any book blurb published today in Côte d'Ivoire: it will always speak of how a particular book is exposing the ills of society, how the writer wants to alert his/her readers, educate them, sensitize them!

From 1934 when Bernard Dadié published his first piece of work, *Les villes*, and Ivorian literature as we know, it was born, till today the function of literature has been:

- To expose the ills of society
- To alert, educate and sensitize readers

And woe the writer who does not fit into or want to fit into that mold. Some have tried, with great success, but the predominant pressure is for literature as education.

I wonder if that has everything to do with the lack of infrastructures like publishing houses, bookstores, libraries. For a population of some 23 million, there are 20 public libraries in the whole country, some of which are libraries in name only. A consequence of all this is the production of educational literature. In fact, all the publishing houses in the country heavily rely on producing educational materials because literature exists to educate, expose the ill in society, point fingers... And so, the art of storytelling is lost.

In light of all that, I can't but be an African writer and an African literary activist who instead of exposing the ills of my society, glorifies its richness through the stories I choose to tell, the stories I choose to translate, the Frenches and the Englishes I choose to write in—and encourage others to write in. Because at the rate at which we are going, the stew is about to lack meat altogether.

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