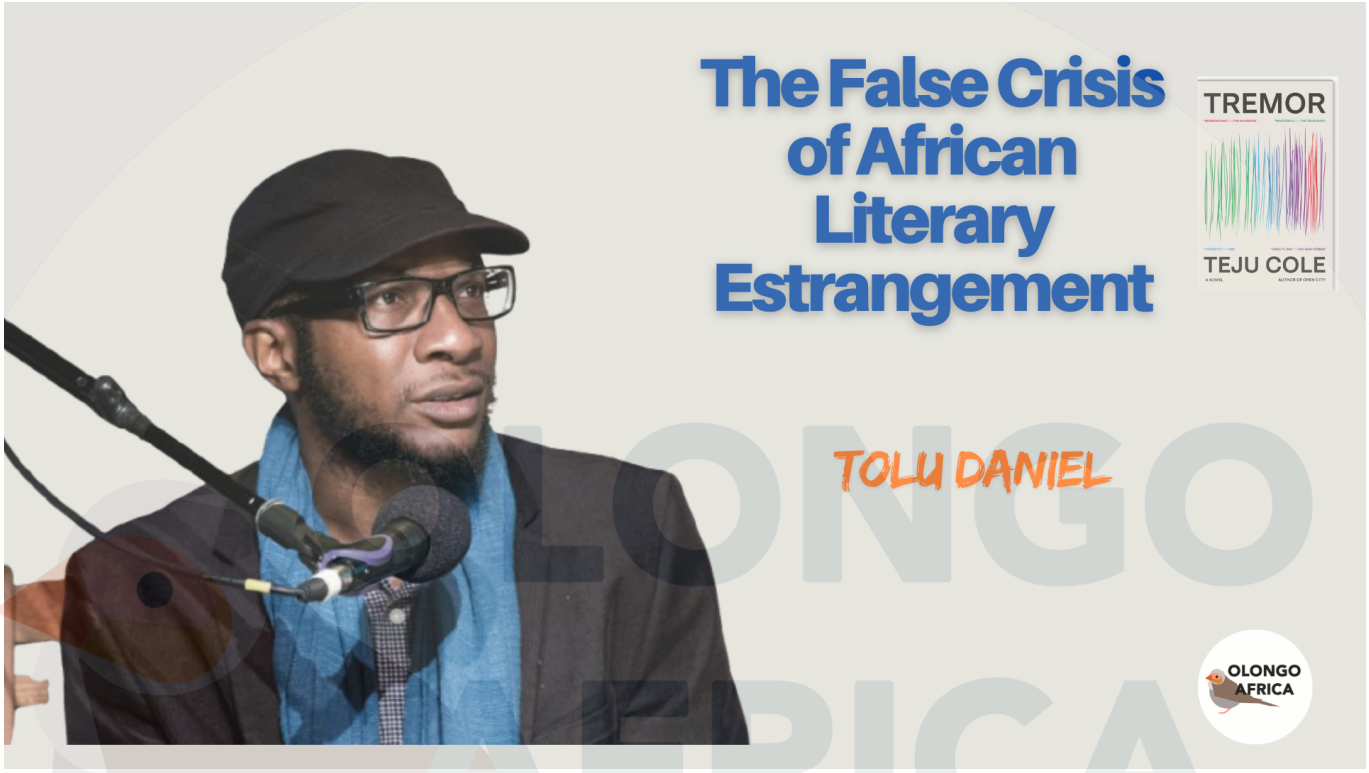
The False Crisis of African Literary Estrangement

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It has become fashionable, in the last decade, to lament what some critics see as the estrangement of contemporary African literature from the continent it supposedly serves. This claim, which recurs with tedious regularity in festival panels, online debates, and academic essays alike, insists that African writers today have turned their gaze too decisively outward: toward the West, its prizes, its publishing infrastructure, and its audiences. The critique imagines a lost golden era when African writers wrote to the continent, for the continent, against Europe and the west. This discourse of alienation insists that contemporary African fiction, especially that produced by diasporic writers, suffers from a dangerous worldliness, one that separates it from African realities and responsibilities.

But to invoke this critique so often is to render it tone-deaf, an unthinking performance of critical seriousness. It collapses the rich diversity of African literary expression into a narrow moral demand: proximity to home, proximity to the nation, proximity to the continent's physical and cultural landscape. It suggests that an African writer's legitimacy depends on the thickness of local vernaculars in their prose, the frequency of their home visits, and the degree to which their work performs a recognizable fidelity to African social and political concerns.

Teju Cole's *Tremor* is one of the most elegant refutations of this exhausted dichotomy in recent memory, a novel that reimagines the cosmopolitan Black subject not as a figure of detachment, but as one whose movements chart unofficial cartographies of violence, memory, and inheritance. It is a book that writes outward and inward at once, that listens to the world and the continent in the same breath. In doing so, it exposes the poverty of the conversation around African literary belonging, and gestures toward a more capacious, more ethically rigorous way of thinking about African writing in the 21st century.

At first glance, *Tremor* might appear to confirm the critic's suspicion: here is a novel by a Nigerian-American writer, set largely in Massachusetts, following the life of Tunde, a photography professor whose days are filled with lectures on Western art history, concerts of European classical music, and dinners with friends from various corners of the global North. But to read it this way is to mistake setting for preoccupation, and geography for epistemology.

What *Tremor* actually offers is a relentless meditation on the afterlives of empire and the image economies through which violence circulates, both in the past and in the digital now. Cole's protagonist cannot look at a Renaissance painting without seeing the Black figure consigned to the margins, cannot contemplate Western humanism without attending to the bodies excluded from its definition. In one of the novel's recurring gestures, Tunde turns to European art — Velázquez's *Las Meninas*, for instance — and lingers not on the central figures but on the Black pageboy in the background, the figure both present and unregarded. This is not a passing observation. It is a practice of seeing, of reading African presence within the supposedly universal archive of Western culture.

This is writing back, not to a nation-state, but to history itself.

And it is not confined to the Western archive either. In *Tremor*, Tunde reflects on the violence embedded in African objects—colonial-era masks, looted bronzes, the theft of African cultural patrimony. Cole refuses the easy binary of African victim and European oppressor. He invites us to see complicity not just in institutions, but in personal proximity: in the fact that African scholarship, curation, and even bodily presence have been woven into imperial systems. This is what it means to write inward: to trouble one's own inheritance, to attend to the violences that reside within the ancestral as well as the imperial.

This is not a gesture unique to Cole, though his rendering of it is perhaps the most sophisticated in recent African fiction. Other writers accused of "writing away" from the continent have been engaged in precisely these kinds of double movements.

Take NoViolet Bulawayo's *Glory*, for instance. A novel that, on the surface, seems to borrow Orwell's Animal Farm template to satirize Zimbabwe's postcolonial authoritarianism, it was widely praised in mainstream Western literary outlets for its boldness and ingenuity. Yet in her review of the book on Africa Is a Country, Farah Bakaari argued that while *Glory* is a "fierce, furious novel," it sometimes wavers under the weight of its fable form, vacillating between satire, melodrama, and tragedy, and occasionally conceding to a Western gaze. Bakaari's deeper critique is not of Bulawayo's intentions, but of the novel's struggle to balance aesthetic form and political responsibility — and of Western critics' failure to read the novel within African literary traditions, reducing it instead to a clever Orwellian homage. These anxieties about form, address, and global legibility are precisely the pressures contemporary African writers navigate.

This anxiety about form and address, about the uneasy negotiation between political witness and global legibility, is not unique to *Glory*. Similar tensions surfaced around Taiye Selasi's *Ghana Must Go*, though in different terms. Upon its release, *Ghana Must Go* was met with both acclaim and hesitation — especially among African literary commentators who questioned the novel's preoccupation with a wealthy, transnational Ghanaian-Nigerian family scattered across Boston, Lagos, Accra, and London. Some critics and readers suggested that the novel's cosmopolitanism risked detachment, that its affluent, mobile characters were too removed from the everyday textures of African life to speak to or for the continent.

And yet, this critique too often mistakes the novel's thematic concerns. Selasi's narrative is not a flight from African realities but an examination of how the legacies of colonialism, migration, and

class fracture intimacy within African families, and how those fractures reverberate across generations and continents. The novel stages African modernity as a condition of dispersal and migratory grief, where home is at once longed for and contested. In this way, *Ghana Must Go* performs its own negotiation with the burdens of literary expectation: refusing to produce familiar tropes of African suffering or nationalist belonging, and instead charting the ambivalent, often lonely, inheritance of postcolonial elites.

Both *Glory* and *Ghana Must Go*, in their different registers, point to a broader conversation about what African fiction is asked to be, for whom it is asked to speak, and how it is asked to perform. The demand that African novels must be locally situated, morally pedagogical, and easily legible to Western literary tastemakers recurs in the critical reception of works that attempt to stretch, disrupt, or reconfigure these expectations. It is precisely this conversation that Teju Cole's *Tremor* enters, not by rejecting the outward gaze or cosmopolitan reference points, but by showing how the African experience has always been entangled with global histories of violence, image-making, and complicity.

What these writers — Cole, Bulawayo, Selasi — share is not a disregard for the continent but a refusal to perform a narrow, sentimental fidelity to it. They understand that Africa does not exist in isolation, that its histories, violences, and desires have always been entangled with the rest of the world. To write about Europe's museums is, in a sense, to write about Africa's stolen artifacts. To write about photography's complicity in colonial violence is to write about the African body as image and spectacle. To write about elite African families in Boston or Accra is to write about the structural legacies of empire and global capitalism that make such transnational lives possible and fraught.

The question, then, is not whether these writers are writing back, but to whom, and through what structures of address. The demand that African writers be legible first and foremost to the continent is a form of literary provincialism disguised as radical critique. It ignores the fact that African literatures have always been cosmopolitan: Chinua Achebe read Joyce and Conrad as closely as Igbo folktales; Wole Soyinka drew from Shakespeare and Euripides as much as from Yoruba cosmology. The contemporary insistence on a literary nationalism, a nativist authenticity, betrays a failure to grasp the historical conditions of African modernity itself.

In *Tremor*, Teju Cole makes this point not through polemic, but through form. The novel refuses the neat arc of plot-driven fiction, opting instead for a fugue-like structure of essays, meditations, and fragmented scenes. One of the most striking moments in *Tremor* occurs in chapter seven, when Cole pays quiet homage to Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* as he turns his attention to the city. Calvino's book, a catalogue of imaginary cities narrated to Kublai Khan, is itself a meditation on cities as metaphors for memory, longing, and impermanence. What is remarkable about this chapter is that it follows one in which Cole assembles a chorus of voices, a kind of palimpsest of the city's sounds, textures, and presences. The rendering is purposefully ambiguous, such that the reader might transpose the city he describes onto another entirely. In this ambiguity lies one of the novel's core assertions: that cities, like histories, refuse to remain fixed, and that the labor of writing is, in part, a labor of tracking these elusive, overlapping echoes. It is as if the form itself refuses containment, enacting the very restlessness it describes.

And in this restlessness, Cole stages what has become a defining politics of attention in his work: to the image, to history, to the minor figure at the edge of the frame, to the half-remembered soundscape of Lagos radio. *Tremor*, like *Open City* before it, refuses the consolations of rootedness or the seductions of easy cosmopolitanism. It is a novel that writes from Africa, through Africa, and beyond Africa — not in pursuit of escape, but in pursuit of a truer, more ungovernable belonging. In both books, Cole imagines the cosmopolitan Black subject as an uneasy, vigilant figure, marked by

migration, colonial inheritance, and the persistent labor of remembering. Characters like Julius and Tunde drift through cities thick with history's debris, mapping unofficial cartographies of Black life and absence. Their restlessness, their attention to silences and minor violences, positions them not as witnesses at a distance, but as implicated observers, heirs to both violence and beauty. *Tremor*, then, is not a departure from Cole's project but a deepening of it — extending his meditation on art, empire, and the ethics of looking into new temporal and geographic territories.

The terms of African literary belonging, this essay would argue, are not settled by proximity to Lagos or Johannesburg, nor by the density of pidgin in a novel's dialogue. They are settled by the rigor with which a writer accounts for their inheritances, and the seriousness with which they trouble the borders of nation, race, and history. Cole, Bulawayo, Selasi, and their contemporaries are doing precisely that. The critical conversation would do well to catch up.

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