Voices from Twentieth-Century Africa: Griots and Towncriers by Chinweizu

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Voices from Twentieth-Century Africa, a comprehensive, one-volume introduction to African literature, is a spinoff of Chinweizu's (et alia) previous work, Toward the Decolonization of African Literature (1983; see WLT 58:2, p. 313), and a forerunner to the "anthology of 5000 years of Pan-african Literature" promised therein. Based on a pan-African cultural standpoint, a la Okot p'Bitek's cultural revolution, Voices serves as another vehicle for Chinweizu's crusade to: 1) correct the conventional view of African literature as merely a third-rate appendage to or a fledgling offspring of European literature; 2) make African literature less tortuous and more accessible to a wider African readership by freeing it from its "Euromodemist dungeon"; and 3) dismantle the wall between African "obscurantist," academic, "prestigious" (modem) literature and African popular culture.

Because African literature is Euromodemist-centered and of the academy, it is marginalized with a center or nora that is questionable, Chinweizu argues. Voices is therefore a bid to foster an Afrocentric, nonacademic literature and to reintegrate the marginalized folk literature with an already-marginalized "academic" literature. The result of this blend will be a "panorama of African life and experiences," African classics, as authenticated through the African voices of "mastersingers, poets, story tellers, and orators"--the griots and town criers. All this, Chinweizu envisions, will constitute the essential Afrocentric materials for teaching African humanities.

Although Voices earns merit for its scope and aim (there are no other comparable anthologies), it is grossly limited because it lacks a framework for establishing whether or not the marginalized popular and/or academic African literatures have literary merit. The volume's introduction is at best a further defense of "bolekajism," which has been unequivocally articulated in Toward a Decolonization of African Literature. With the publication of Voices, the issues raised in Decolonization become even more pressing: are the measures of what is to be considered good African literature merely those of simplicity, readability, folk-orientedness, and easy comprehension by this new audience which Chinweizu feels should not be obliged "to gnaw through unreadable but prestigious stuff called African literature"?

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