

BOOK REVIEW

Caroline Davis. *African Literature and the CIA: Networks of Authorship and Publishing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. 110 pages. Bibliography. \$17.99. Paper. ISBN: 978-1108725545.

African Literature and the CIA by Caroline Davis examines the influence of the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) on the African literary landscape during the decolonization period by tracing emergent networks of cultural and literary production in the 1960s. The book explores how the careers of three African authors, Wole Soyinka, Nat Nakasa, and Bessie Head, were shaped by programs supported by the CIA. Davis shows that the CIA used the Fairfield Foundation in New York and the Congress of Cultural Freedom in Paris to carry out its covert operation in Africa. While disclosing the hidden networks of the CIA, the book also assesses the effects that this covert operation had on African literature in the decolonial era. Beside exposing the CIA's canonization of African literature in 1960s, Davis' study illuminates "the politics of visibility of African literature" by showing how foreign power and money came to shape the literary terrain in Africa in the "second scramble for Africa's cultural freedom" (9). The CIA-African program was fundamentally a publishing program funding several literary and political magazines, but the case study here focuses on *The Transition Center* in London, *The Classic* in Johannesburg, South Africa, and *The New African*.

The book is divided into four chapters, the first chapter narrowing in on literary publishing in Africa in the decolonial era, Chapter Two on Wole Soyinka and the *Transition Center*, the third chapter on Nat Nakasa and *The Classic*, and Chapter Four on Bessie Head and *The New African*.

In Chapter One, Davis argues that the CIA's secret operation in Africa had two goals: (1) it aimed at producing African intellectuals who leaned toward the US by offering them funding "with no strings attached" (16), and (2) it represented an act of American imperialism that infiltrated existing literary and journalistic groups for cultural and symbolic capital. The program saw an increase in literary works from Africa to the metropolises, as American and local African publishers rose to challenge the British market monopoly. The chapter further posits that the CIA's main purpose was production of anti-communist propaganda through African authors

who rose to global recognition, hence limiting communist influence in the continent.

The next chapter narrates Wole Soyinka's affiliation with the CIA since the 1960s, while he was an editor of *Black Orpheus*. He had become one of the leading Anglophone writers though the Transcription Center in London, which was funded by the CIA. His CIA support was revealed in 1965 and 1967, when he was imprisoned over his involvement with Nigeria's post-election violence and the Biafra war. To protect the reputation of the CIA, the Congress of Cultural Freedom and the Fairfield Foundation campaigned for his release. Whereas Soyinka himself and some scholars dispute any connection between his global rise to fame and CIA support, this study discloses how the CIA's secret financial infiltration managed his visibility and reputation (31).

In another case study, Chapter Three suggests that the South African Nat Nakasa's rapid rise was catalyzed by his connection to the CIA, which began while he was the editor of *The Classic*. Amid state censorship, he struggled to maintain *The Classic*, which he had established with funding from the Fairfield Foundation to publish "work of African writers with cause to fight for" (49). Nakasa's magazine faced distribution challenges, both locally and internationally, which disappointed him; he was later awarded the Nieman fellowship at Harvard University with help from the executive director of the Fairfield Foundation. Unfortunately, his arrival in the US was met with several life blows that led to his untimely demise. It was revealed in 1965 that the apartment he died in belonged to the very person who had helped him secure the Nieman fellowship. Some scholars believe that he was caught in between CIA secrecy and its anti-communist operation, and a left-wing activist enlisted to destabilize the communist regime in South Africa.

Chapter Four zeros in on another South African exile, Bessie Head, who became a "stateless refugee" in modern-day Botswana (67). Her work lacked an international appeal because she was considered a "displaced outsider," disconnected from readers in Africa. The chapter charts her early writing between 1962 and 1972, with an eye on the impact that international publishers and audiences had on her work. Davis explores the conditions that these publishers imposed on her work and her reaction to them, showing her peripheral connection to the Congress of Cultural Freedom through *The New African* magazine, which was anonymously funded by the CIA. Before its ban and closure in 1969, the magazine and its authors had struggled since 1966, when the CIA funding had ceased. Head managed to gain a connection to the US-based Simon & Schuster, which published her novel *Rain Clouds* in 1968. Her second novel, *Maru*, was published by the UK-based publisher Gollancz in 1971 and was also published in the US by McCall in the same year. Head benefitted from CIA funding, though she lacked the direct connection and patronage that some of her contemporaries enjoyed.

In conclusion, this book shows how the CIA infiltrated the African literary sphere to establish an elite association of writers and intellectuals with close ties to the US, with the intention of spinning Africa away from the

influence of the Soviet Union. This cultural infiltration greatly altered the direction of Africa's literary publishing, and hence the overall landscape of postcolonial African literature. By 1967, literary publishing in Africa had the CIA firmly at its core.

The book's strength lies in the detailed archival material which the author cites to support her arguments, and the fact that it is a short book that can be read in one sitting. This book is a useful resource for scholars and graduate students researching African literature, cultural studies, and post-colonial and decolonial studies, as well as those in literary studies and political science.

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