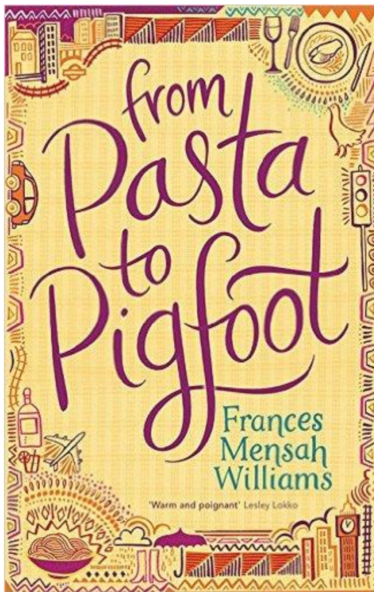
In Search of Cultural Literacy, Not Orthodoxy.

A Review of Frances Mensah Williams' *From Pasta to Pigfoot.*

Written by Pede Hollist, author of the novel So the Path Does Not Die. His short story *Foreign Aid* was shortlisted for the 2013 Caine Prize for African Writing.



"Black is not a colour; it's a state of mind," so Caucasian Wesley from Grenada retorts when Ghana-born and Hampstead-England-raised Faye Bonsu declares his race disqualifies him from lecturing her about the mental colonization of black people by whites. The exchange comes toward the end of "Cultural Collisions," the opening chapter of British-Ghanaian Frances Mensah Williams' *From Pasta to Pigfoot*, a novel that explores another set of permutations on black cultural identity in a praiseworthy balance of message and craft.

Ironically, this achievement to not allow identity politics to overwhelm protagonist Faye's journey of personal growth and search for love, encourages some to classify, and consequently to undersell the novel as romance and chick-lit. To resist the genre categories allows one, for instance, to also understand protagonist Faye as an avatar for the black diasporic writer who belongs to and is influenced by current and residual elements of multiple traditions. Cultural knowledge—people's material possessions, ideas, values, attitudes, and behaviours—their colonizing effects, and the ways to navigate them are at the heart of this novel.

Wesley's assertion that culture should be colour blind parallels current calls in conversations on African literature for academics and publishers to stop essentializing African writers according to race, culture, and other disciplinary and marketing labels. African writers, Taiye Selasie argues, constitute a motley grouping and should have the artistic freedom to write about the ills or successes of the continent and for whom they please. Aminatta Forna pushes this freedom from the limitations of taxonomies even higher. "Literature does not have a country; it seeks the universal," she writes.

To underscore these ideas as aspirational processes rather than ends, Mensah Williams sets her protagonist on a quest for cultural self-awareness by examining opposing strains of black identity during an evening social among a group of British nationals of African and Caribbean heritage. Claiming a Pan-African cultural

identity are Michael, Faye's boyfriend, and his erstwhile roommates, artists Wesley, Jiggy, and Luther, and the latter's wife, Philomena. This group "collides" with Faye whom they view as lacking "cultural credibility." Mensah Williams' sleight-of-language, which links the negative connotations of street cred to cultural credibility, cautions readers from embracing the cultural authenticity proffered by Michael and his friends. Through a carefully constructed plot, Mensah Williams reveals that cultural knowledge is, or eventually becomes hegemonic, a realization the novel suggests individuals must come to in order to achieve personal awareness and liberation.

By the time Wesley makes the claim about blackness as a state of mind, readers have encountered a cast of humans with layered personalities, cross cultural identities, and allegiances that preclude them from uncritically identifying with particular characters and world-views. Faye presents as an insecure young woman desperate for love and, therefore, only vaguely recognizes she has been partitioned into spheres of influence by the men in her life—her big brother William, a playful culturally uncurious sibling; her father Dr. Bonsu, a benevolent patriarch; and her boyfriend, Michael, a self-absorbed Pan-Africanist. Though not likeable, Michael never descends to being despicable. His experience as an isolated boy of Jamaican heritage in an English public school of students with "aristocratic accents," and the story of his overbearing parents whose plans for his future he rejects, provide an explanatory, if not exculpatory, back story for his intense attachment to a Pan-African identity. In fact, the chapter reveals the brand of Pan-Africanism practised by Michael and friends as intolerant and oppressive. Its chief exponent Wesley is judgemental and lacks emotional intelligence. He stares at, lectures, and insults Faye, his friend's girlfriend whom he has known for under thirty minutes. Though he asserts his right to not be defined by race, he denies Faye that same entitlement, insinuating she has been colonized and lacks the appropriate state of mind for a black person.

The narrative further distances readers from the chapter's brand of Pan-Africanism because, for the most part, it stereotypes blackness: as behaviour—warm embraces and loud voices; as physical features—Philomena's blue-sheened black skin, wide hips and curvy body, Luther's dreadlocks and the men's lilting, musical, or strong accents; as clothes—red caftans, and African print shirts; as an exotic space—a room with no sofas or armchairs but "piles of brightly coloured soft cushions …covered with small squares of kente cloth" and blaring reggae music; and as cuisine—plantain chips, pigfoot, ackee and Jamaican rum. Yet the mixed-race relationship between Faye's brother William and his girlfriend Lucinda, a "stunning blonde beauty," hovers in the background as a functional probability, a hint of intercultural literacy. William, in fact, dismisses Michael's Pan-Africanist ideas as "pseudo-intellectual garbage." In short, the opening chapter presents cultural identity as existing in a range, multiple and motile, shared but not necessarily homogeneous.

Culture's dynamism, its ebb and flow, underscores the treatment of race, identity, and belonging in the section of the novel which chronicles Faye's return to Ghana,

ostensibly in search of cultural authenticity. That quest actually recedes into the background and is replaced by the on-again, off-again romance between Faye and Rocky. Through this relationship, Ghana is revealed as a country in transition, full of sharp contrasts and unevenness. Accra—with its cosmopolitan mix of Africans, Europeans, Asians, upscale restaurants, shops, and residential communities—is juxtaposed with rural Ntriso, the birth and burial place of Faye's mother, with its more homogeneous Ashanti inhabitants whose current practices stem from ancient cultural rites. Yet, the novel's largely middle-class characters inhabit and navigate between multiple cultural spaces. British businessman Stuart from Liverpool, head of a bank with all the overtones of global financial capitalism, loves his work, Ghanaian women and food in near-equal proportions; Rocky, his assistant, has lived in America; Uncle Kodjo works with Ashanti artisans to help them market their crafts in the more formal city economy. Martha the maid represents those whose life experiences straddle the rural and urban; Edwin and JB symbolize an emergent segment of Ghanaian millennials with a transnational, even if misguided, outlook.

Unlike the Pan-Africanists of the opening chapter, the main characters of the section of the story set in Ghana do not present as tyrannical in their attachment to their world-views. They function more as interpellators of culture. Accordingly, Faye's most important lesson from the return home is not that she is Ghanaian, African, or Pan-African, but that as a PA with aspirations to become an interior designer, she must remake herself; seek liberation from the men and the ideologies that had colonized her life. Towards the end of the novel, she articulates this awakening as follows: "eating all the pasta in the world doesn't make you white, any more than eating all the pigfoot in the market can make you black." Cultural knowledge, as the metaphor of the title suggests, is like food, an acquired taste; changing or breaking it requires consciously transgressing received ways of knowing and doing; of developing a taste for pasta and pigfoot and in that process recognizing neither is intrinsically more satisfying than the other.

The novel embraces an artistic ethic that transcends political imperatives and, taken in total, provides a moral basis for those who inhabit multiple cultural spaces to not be intimidated by cultural rhetoric and other ideologies; to push beyond them to new ways of thinking, seeing, and doing. In this regard, Mensah Williams continues a trend evident in the works and outlook of other writers of the African diaspora: to delink themselves and their characters from received cultural knowledge, literary practices, and classification tags; to distinguish themselves by their individual aesthetic choices and practices, and, in that process, reveal the social usefulness of literature in its search for or construction of the universal.

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