



“Dismantling White Supremacy” in the United States: Identity and Racial Politics in Chinelo Okparanta’s Harry Sylvester Bird¹

A conversation with Chinelo Okparanta
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CHINELO OKPARANTA, born in Port Harcourt in 1981, is Associate Professor of English literature and the Director of Swarthmore college Creative Writing program. At the age of ten she emigrated with her family to the United States of America where she has studied and has been living while maintaining contacts with Nigeria.

The year 2013 was particularly important for the Nigerian-American author because it coincided with the period in which the collection of short story *Happiness, Like Water* was published. Mirroring Okparanta’s peculiar position as a transnational and culturally hybrid writer, her imaginative works offer different facets of Nigerian and American society by dealing with issues related to race, migration, culture, gender, politics, LGBTQ rights and environmental pollution. In 2014 *Happiness, Like Water* won the Lambda Literary Award for Lesbian Fiction, was long-listed for the 2013 Frank O’Connor International Short Story Award and was shortlisted for the 2014 New York Public Library Young Lions Fiction Award.

¹ I would like to express my gratitude to Chinelo Okparanta for her time, kindness, and the valuable contribution she is making to the global reception of Nigerian literature.



Her first novel, *Under the Udala Tree* was published in 2015, following the approval in 2014 of the Same-sex Prohibition Act by former Nigerian President—Goodluck Ebele Jonathan. Dialogically linked to some of the thematic concerns that emerge in her short stories such as “America” and “Grace”, *Under the Udala Tree* chronicles the coming of an age of a queer character, Ijeoma, who grows up during a particularly challenging moment of Nigerian history characterized by the outbreak of the Nigeria-Biafran war. As a believer in the fact that fiction can make a change in the world, when addressing queer rights in an interview with Dennis-Benn, Okparanta contended that:

[i]n my stories I attempt to open the discussion on the topic, so as to give a voice to all the Nigerians out there who have been forced to live in hiding. I did worry, after I had written the stories, about how they would be received in Nigeria. I’m not by nature a scandalous person, but I do believe that certain stories need to be told.

The importance of using literary imagination as means to put the world into question has certainly represented one of the motives that has inspired Okparanta in writing her latest fiction. Whereby her first novel *Under the Udala Tree* is set in Nigeria, her second literary work *Harry Sylvester Bird* takes place predominantly in America. Interestingly, Harry Sylvester, besides being a male character, is also white. Revealing the rhetorical artistry and the Nigerian-American author’s apparent ease to deal with uncomfortable issues which are often neglected or hardly spoke about, *Harry Sylvester Bird* tackles the complex dynamics of contemporary politics centred on identity, racial discrimination and intolerance within the United States and beyond. The satirical fictional work humorously and wittily offers a realistic portrait of the “racial lens through which Americans see the world” (Love 2). More precisely, through the viewpoint of the main character, Harry Sylvester Bird, who changes his name into G-Dagw—after acquiring “a new mind and a new body” (Okparanta 148)—Okparanta brings into view how even those individuals who proclaim themselves to be morally innocent and not racist actually often end up reproducing internalized forms of racial discursive practices and attitudes (Yancy 10).

The choice to depict the coming-of-age of a white male character and therefore transcend the “conventional typologies devised by the critics who pigeonhole African writers along geographical, generational, linguistic/political and ethnic lines” (Ogede xii), illustrates Okparanta “structural confidence” and the fact that “she is unafraid of bald foreshadowing” (Edemariam).

Given Okparanta’s endeavoring writing style and rhetorical mastery, it is not surprising that as a Ph.D candidate—born in Italy to Nigerian parents—whose research focus is centred on the analysis of contemporary Nigerian women’s creative work from a womanist and transnational perspective, I was interested in learning more about her peculiar position as a transnational writer and what has inspired her in writing her latest novel *Harry Sylvester Bird*.

Following is the interview with the Nigerian-American author with whom I corresponded over the course of a few days.



Aminat Emma Badmus: I would like to know if you have always written and why?

Chinelo Okparanta: I tried to write small storybooks as a child, with rubber bands holding the pages together. Later at the age of ten or eleven, I wrote an essay that won a Boston city-wide contest. I continued to write both essays and stories as a high school student, and also later at university, but at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, I began focusing on fiction. I find that writing gives me the quiet time and the space to process the world in a thoughtful way.

Aminat Emma Badmus: What role has literature played in your life? Can you remember the first book you read?

Chinelo Okparanta: Literature has been super important to me. In the words of James Baldwin, "You think your pain and your heartbreak are unprecedented in the history of the world, but then you read. It was books that taught me that the things that tormented me most were the very things that connected me with all the people who were alive, who had ever been alive." Literature also allows us to question the status quo, to question accepted norms, to talk about issues and to change minds.

Aminat Emma Badmus: Do you believe that creative writing has the power to truly change the state of things?

Chinelo Okparanta: Definitely, I believe that creative writing can change things. Art, in general, inspires change. But real change is often very slow and unable to be measured, at least at first. It often starts in a person's mind—a very slight recognition or shift. It takes a while to be visible, takes a while for an entire culture to shift mindsets, but it does happen. History shows us this.

Aminat Emma Badmus: When reading your biography, I have come to learn that you travelled to America when you were ten years old. Hence, I may assume that for you the US has come to be much a home the same way Nigeria is. How have you managed to deal with your double identity and sense of belonging?

Chinelo Okparanta: I simply exist as a person who comes from Nigeria and is naturalized, and has spent many decades, in the US. I don't deny any aspects of my identity, the positives as well as the not so positive.

Aminat Emma Badmus: I think it is really brave of you to choose to represent a white male character who grew up in a prevalently racist family environment in which the idea of White supremacy was highly promoted and considered the norm. Has it been difficult to take on such perspective in the process of writing the novel? Why choose to narrate the story from such a stance?



Chinelo Okparanta: The character of Harry simply came to me, and having studied the history of appropriation in contemporary American fiction, and having followed the discussions surrounding that topic, it seemed fine for me to subvert the conversation by way of Harry. With Harry, I wanted to play with the idea of a young man who imagines himself to be so non-racist, such a good liberal ally, that he winds up making himself the center of the racial justice conversation in appalling ways. Basically, Harry is so persistently self-centered that he gets in his own way where his desire for being non-racist is concerned. It was interesting walking the line of writing such a character—I was simultaneously making sure that I did not position myself as a connoisseur of white culture while still making sure to demonstrate this particular white character’s blindsidedness where his being a true ally was concerned. I wrote the book as a satire in order to make it clear that Harry is simply the fictional representation of a system that attempts to make society more racially just but only winds up digging its heels into its own racist ways—which sometimes seems to be the way things systemically are in the US.

Aminat Emma Badmus: How did you come up with the names “Harry Sylvester Bird” and “G-Dawg”?

Chinelo Okparanta: The names came to me from nowhere as I wrote the book, and I found them fitting for the novel. Harry Sylvester Bird, particularly, draws to mind Sylvester the cat and Tweety bird, both from *Looney Tunes*, which highlights the satirical bent of the novel.

Aminat Emma Badmus: When reading *Harry Sylvester Bird*, I was surprised at how still deeply implanted are certain prejudices about Africans. I am curious to know if you feel that in America Africans and immigrants, in general, are still perceived through the distorted lens of stereotypes.

Chinelo Okparanta: Africans in America are certainly perceived with the lens that I have portrayed them in *Harry Sylvester Bird*. I know this because I have lived in America and endured similar repeated situations to those portrayed in *Harry Sylvester Bird*. I also move within communities of other Africans and immigrants, and our experiences are very similar.

Aminat Emma Badmus: An aspect that I have managed to notice when reading *Harry Sylvester Bird* is that, similarly to the short story “America” which is part of the collection *Happiness, Like Water*, tackles environmental issues while encouraging—though creative imagination—to actively do something to change the state of things. Do you consider yourself and your writing as actively engaged in environmentalism?



Chinelo Okparanta: Yes, definitely. If the state of the environment today doesn't frighten you, then I don't know what will. It certainly frightens me and is always on my mind, and for this reason, I'm sure, it is present in my work.

Aminat Emma Badmus: I found the protagonist ambiguous. On the one hand, I appreciated his effort to understand black people and all the implications associated with race in America. On the other, I could not help but wonder why, despite him being more self-conscious about racial related forms of discrimination and microaggressions, still he persisted in reproducing a biased attitude towards Africans.

Chinelo Okparanta: Isn't this often the way it is in real life? If you are a person of color, then I know you have been on the receiving end of people like Harry, who are socially conscious and yet still guilty of this reproduction that you mention.

Aminat Emma Badmus: Another episode that I found interesting, while reading the book, is when G-dawg and Maryam are in Ghana and they come across a group of African kids who are joyfully playing. Apart from defining as "exotic" these group of children, another disturbing thing that G-dawg does is having a picture taken of himself with these kids thus, in a certain way, dehumanizing them. Furthermore, he says "To have so little [...], and yet be happy. It's always amazed me how people in Africa can be so happy with so little. We should all aim to be this way" (Okparanta 265) Can you offer your thoughts on his words?

Chinelo Okparanta: I don't want my thoughts on this section of the novel to get in the way of my readers' interpretation of it, so I won't offer too much in terms of my thoughts on his words. But I will say that G-Dawg's comment here is a good conversation starter for readers of the novel. His comment potentially raises many questions. For instance, do they really have so little? If so, why? In what sense? What happened to their wealth? Are they really happy with so little? If so, happy in what ways? What does it mean for G-Dawg to perceive them as happy? What's at stake for him in this perception? These are some questions that come to mind, but there are many more that could be discussed.

Aminat Emma Badmus: In *Harry Sylvester Bird*, you have included queer love. How important is it for you to include Queer characters in your literary production?

Chinelo Okparanta: Queer characters are part of the world and including them in my literature is not a chore. It comes naturally, as they are also a natural part of society. Unfortunately, like Chevy, Harry's mom, many people wind up hiding the fact of their queerness because some societies make hiding necessary.



Aminat Emma Badmus: Prominent figures of African sexuality studies, such as Msibi, contend that the problem with the term 'queer' is that it carries "a heavy load of [W]estern history" (107) which does not incorporate the evolution of African sexual politics. Do you agree? Are the terms 'homosexual' and 'queer' still foreign to Nigerians?

Chinelo Okparanta: I can't speak for all Nigerians. I can only speak for myself, and I can say that those words are not foreign to me or to the Nigerians I know. I don't see a problem with the word "queer." Many words carry a load of Western history but we still use them freely—and we should. The world is only getting smaller. The same way that the West sometimes also uses some non-Western words freely. If we want a word that incorporates the evolution of African sexual politics, we can always create the word. No one is stopping us from creating that word.

Aminat Emma Badmus: It is often thought that because you are Nigerian, then you should be writing principally about Africa and Africans. Do you think that African writers find themselves artistically "confined" on which topic to deal with?

Chinelo Okparanta: Yes. I know writers who write about Africa and Africans because it's what we are supposed to do. They limit themselves to writing about themselves because we are expected to stay in our lane, essentially. This expectation implies that we have no meaningful insights to offer the world beyond our own narratives.

Also, many writers are afraid of being accused of cultural appropriation. I am too. But I've also been interested in ways to move beyond the basic appropriation discussion—ways to subvert the appropriation narrative or even make that conversation null. Ways to balance issues of power out in literature a bit more. It makes sense that writer would be afraid of being accused of appropriation given history. But this fear is demonstrative of a sort of creative silencing too. So, I'm just interested in how to navigate that issue in unexpected and unusual ways.

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