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RA Reviews' Editorial Voice: Its Digital Platform and Reviews Segment

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Research Africa (RA) (research_africa-editor@duke.edu), has so far successfully managed to construct an expansive scholarly network on and about Africa. RA generated this particular network to create active 'synergies among scholars (not only) at Duke University and (but far) beyond (it) through the vertical (and horizontal) integration of information about Africa...' It has done this in order to, on the one hand, accommodate various academic groups and different stakeholders that have a deep interest in Africa's affairs, and, on the other, to facilitate a set of internal and external connections that would bring diverse groups from within and outside the continent together.

Through RA's formation as an important digital structure, it has proven to be 'a vibrant and vigorous networking tool for the dissemination and production of academic material in Africa.' From the time of its inception, RA has, as a matter of fact, attracted the interest of a cadre of scholars, researchers, publishers, and various stakeholders; they have joined and become part of this new association since all of them have an interest in the exchange of information and the sharing of knowledge production about the continent's developments. RA's, as a critical academic vehicle, invitation remains open to institutions and organizations to be part of this fresh academic arrangement by working with it on various projects. From among the projects that it had on its list was the creation of online academic space for those who wish to review, among others, books, films, and artworks. RA, it should be stated, is quite aware that many other platforms and outlets exist that have either devoted their pages to specific types of reviews or had set aside a special section for book reviews; it, however, felt that - despite the presence of existing platforms in the form of academic journals such as *Journal of Modern African Studies* and popular magazines such as *New African* that focus on African affairs - works published in Africa on this broad theme have been given scant attention by the academic community, and it hopes to bring about a corrective in giving these works more exposure and visibility via the planned reviews and reports.

Since one of RA's aims was to 'facilitate exchange of information on publications, workshops, events and conferences related to Africa,' the review - that may consider books, films, artworks, exhibitions, performances, and many other forms - was considered a significant conduit to display and make known these types of outputs that direct their spotlights on Africa. For this purpose, RA set up the RA Review Team (RART) that intends to manage and monitor this review process; one that would help to showcase productions (i.e. books, films, and artworks) of knowledge associated and related to the continent. In this regard one wish to draw

the reader's attention to the University of North Carolina's (UNC) - at Chapel Hill - Writing Center; the latter issued a handout that had set out writing strategies for a scholar and a researcher who desire to prepare and write reviews.

UNC's Writing Center (2017) listed the following points that the potential reviewer should consider: (a) he/she should give the reader a concise summary of the contents of the book/film/artwork; and it added that the contents should include a relevant description of the topic/theme as well as its overall perspective, argument, or purpose; (b) he/she provides a critical assessment of the work's content, and this means that it expects the reviewer to give his/her impressions of the work. Put slightly differently, he/she should highlight [i] what he/she regards as noteworthy, [ii] whether or not writer, producer or artist was effective or persuasive in presenting his/her work, and [iii] how the work enhanced the reviewer's understanding of the issues that were raised throughout the work. And in rounding off the analysis (c) he/she should suggest whether or not the reader/audience would appreciate the work that he/she reviewed.

Apart from the Writing Center having pointed out the mentioned strategies that one has to address when presenting one's review, others have underscored the importance of these reviews. Zuccala & Van Leeuwen (2011) in their bibliometric study titled 'Book Reviews in Humanities Research Evaluations' pointed out that 'book reviews' – and this implies reviews of other works as well – 'are scholarly and they do play a (critical) role in the scholarly communication system.' Besides this noteworthy remark, these two scholars concluded that the academic community should seriously consider bibliometric research evaluations for both the humanities and social sciences; their rationale for this was based on the fact that it undergirded the relevance of reviews in these two broad areas of inquiry. In a follow-up text, Zuccala & Bod (2012) opined that book reviews should be perceived as 'a mega-citation' with the purpose of alerting the academic community and others of the book's value in a particular discipline and even beyond it. Alongside the argument that reviews be accepted as 'mega-citations,' Zuccala & Bod (2012) made reference to scholars such as Hartley (2006) who fully supported the idea that reviews should be granted institutional recognition since they are rich in content; regrettably, reviews remain a point of academic debate institutionally across the globe, and as such they have not been strongly viewed nor factored in as significant academic inputs. With new platforms such as *RA Reviews* this should, however, change in the years ahead.

Leaving that aside and turning to an online site, Me Angela (2015) stated that reviews benefit both the writing and the reading community. She made a significant remark by stating that, 'Positive (book review) ranking plays into the booksellers' algorithm.' Michael Farlow (2017) stressed that, 'As an author, one of the biggest boosts to the development of readership is from reviews. For most of us that means customer/reader reviews. For those more seasoned authors, the bigger prize is in the form of industry reviews. The most obvious place for reader reviews is on the sites that sell books, especially Amazon.' Farlow (2017) conveyed another important point when he said that reviews of their works undoubtedly stimulated an interest in their works, and they also increased their sales in the market. In line with these observations, Me

Angela (2015) emphasized that, 'More reviews equal more sales for authors and more informed readers.' Another anonymous author (2013) expressed the importance of book reviews more succinctly; he/she commented that, 'Ultimately, what makes a solid book review ... is when I feel what the reviewer felt about the book, that I experience or re-experience the book along with the reviewer.' Immediately after this comment, he/she posed the question: 'Does this always happen?' and he/she confidently answered with a definite 'No.' He/she, however, hastily added: 'But reading a good book review is often as powerful as reading the book itself.'

Now with this assortment of views from a selected few scholars and writers, one has a glimpse and an insight into the reasons why they regard reviews important and relevant; and even though one might not fully agree with the anonymous writer who stated that 'a good book review is often as powerful as reading the book itself,' one cannot deny the fact that such a review would encourage and coerce an individual to get a copy to read what the author had written or watch the documentary that the producer produced or show how the artist captured various images in his/her text/work at an exhibition. RART hopes that the reviews collected for this first issue will stimulate further interest in these books, and these, in turn, inspire others to undertake related research.

RART gathered nine reviews to kick-start this important process for this inaugural issue of *RA Reviews*. Whilst *RA Reviews* do accept the fact that reviews on works related to Africa do appear in Portuguese and other languages continentally, it decided to use English, French, and Arabic as its three working languages; the team, however, will be willing to review this policy if the need arises to also list additional languages. All of this, moreover, depends on how this review process unfolds as the forthcoming issues are planned. Furthermore, RART urges colleagues to write reviews and reports for *RA Reviews* so that various aspects regarding Africa can reach a wide audience, and it also pleads with members of the RA network to help make unidentified publishers and little recognized writers known through this digital platform.

That said and by way of ending this editorial, *RA Reviews* follows a fairly simple structure: The first section consists of two review essays, the second contains three book reviews that are in English, and two that are in Arabic, and the third has reviews of two English documentaries. RART hopes that these reviews will press and cheer on colleagues in African Studies inside and outside Africa to consider contributing reviews to this fresh academic venture for the coming issues. Though RART welcomes as many reviews as possible, it intends to restrict the number to twenty reviews per issue; it will, of course, adjust the policy where necessary depending upon the nature and number of inputs for a particular issue. And lastly, RART looks forward to the readers' active participation and their critical thoughts that would not only help to improve the forthcoming issues but to, more importantly, assist in making Africa, as a continent, and African Studies, as a discipline, substantially visible.

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