
Article:
Small, A. (2020) Fair trade and distant production: the normalisation of the North in book publishing. Journal of Fair Trade, 2 (1). pp. 13-21. ISSN 2513-9533

10.13169/jfairtrade.2.1.0013

Fair Trade and distant production: the normalisation of the North in book publishing

Audrey Small

Audrey Small is a lecturer in the French department at the University of Sheffield. Her current research areas include publishing in West Africa and the problematic categories related to 'African literature'. She is currently completing a monograph on francophone African publishing and the question of a 'postcolonial library'.

Abstract

This article seeks to articulate some of the major theoretical difficulties raised by associating book publishing with Fair Trade, building on the concept of the 'distant producer' as critiqued by both Frank Trentmann and Matthias Zick Varul. Where these scholars examine the framing of the Fair Trade producer as always being based in the global South, this article explores an instance of a 'distant *Northern* producer' of sorts, with particular reference to the publishing of 'francophone African literature'. The dominance of Northern publishers in this field creates a complex series of 'normalisations of the North', in which Paris is normalised as the centre of cultural production; the French language is normalised as the dominant language of culture; and non-print literatures are marginalised in global cultural production. Specific issues concerning intellectual production and property then may be seen as sitting uneasily alongside traditional models and perceptions of Fair Trade.

Keywords: livre équitable; International Alliance of Independent Publishers; francophone African literature

Where historical overviews of the contemporary concept of Fair Trade refer to individual types of product, they quite accurately cite 'handicrafts' and textiles as the first major group of products to emerge on the market in the 1960s, followed by commodity foodstuffs such as chocolate and coffee in the 1980s,[1] and then efforts to develop fair trade in fashion, music and tourism emerging later. To this day, books are not part of the familiar iconography of 'Fair Trade' for the contemporary consumer; while an image of a cup and saucer or of the outline of a T-shirt in the correctly branded context easily invokes commodities such as coffee and cotton, there is no such immediately identifiable image for a fairly traded book, nor much evidence of consumer concern for, or awareness of, issues of fair trade in the publishing industry. Publishing has always had its own iconography – particularly the colophon, today the publisher's logo but historically that of the printer – which is perhaps understood more in terms of relative prestige than of specific modalities of trade. A certain perception of book publishing as a prestige industry, employing highly skilled and highly educated producers throughout its supply chain, and targeting highly educated consumers with high levels of disposable income, has perhaps contributed towards making book publishing a rare arena for discussions of fair trade.

However, from its inception in 2002 the International Alliance of Independent Publishers has explicitly incorporated the language of 'fair trade' into its work on publishing; from the French *commerce équitable* and the Spanish *comercio justo*, the Alliance created the phrases *livre équitable* and *libro justo*, rendered as 'Fair

1 See for example Eagle L. and Dahl S. (2005). Ethical issues in marketing relationships. In L. Eagle and S. Dahl (Eds). *Marketing Ethics and Society* (pp. 75–99, p. 84). London: Sage; and Nicholls A. and Opal, S. (2005). *Fair Trade: Market-Driven Ethical Consumption* (pp. 19–24). London: Sage.

Trade Book' in English. The Alliance's short definition of this idea on their website deploys some familiar ideas in discussions of fair trade, moving from an overarching idea of 'solidarity' to the specific action of intervention on pricing, via mentions of the 'sharing of costs linked to intellectual and physical production of books', and the importance of 'respecting the publishers' cultural contexts and identities'.[2]

The purpose of this article is not to analyse the work of the Alliance specifically,[3] nor to set out prescriptions on how or whether the idea of fair trade should or should not be applied to book publishing, in any part of the global Souths or Norths. Instead, the focus is on one particular area of contention that brings together longstanding debates in the fields of both fair trade and of francophone African literature, and which allows for an initial appraisal of the idea of fair trade as applied to books: the question of 'production'. To do this, we will take as a starting point the analyses presented by Frank Trentmann and Matthias Zick Varul, with specific reference to the ways they both criticise the construction of a 'distant producer'.[4] This will allow for an exploration of the impacts of distant *production*. The idea of 'distant production', building on what Trentmann and Varul say about the expected 'distant producer' in their examples, further complicates the image of fair trade that they criticise, and could open up new avenues in the debate about fair trade models in a productive way. While the distant producer in the sources analysed by Trentmann and Varul is located in the global South, in my example 'distant production' is occurring in the global North. Seen *from the South*, the book publishing industry may be viewed as an instance of distant production. This de-centring of the North chimes with Trentmann's call for attention to 'a longer and more troubled genealogy of consumption and power'[5] in discussions of fair trade but, as we shall see, does not resolve the multiple problems involved in circumscribing what would constitute fair trade in the trade in print.

Both Trentmann and Varul locate the producer and the consumer of fair trade goods in certain types of economy. Trentmann's examination of colonial deployments of ideas that connect to contemporary fair trade, such as the British 'Empire Marketing Board' of the interwar period and its campaigns to encourage British consumers to support producers in the distant colonies,[6] shows how ideas of fair trade can be traced much further back in history than the 1960s. Alongside troubling ideas of the relative 'hygiene' of produce from different colonies, Trentmann explores the ways in which '[m]oral consumerism […] could serve imperialist projects' and 'Fair Trade can be said to create a dyadic relationship of carer and dependent'.[7] Varul's contemporary focus, on the other hand, allows him to go further in a striking critique of what he calls a 'romantic commodification'[8] in which a self-defeating type of patronising 'fair trade imagination'[9] ends up undermining efforts to establish truly ethical modes of consumption. Such criticism of fair trade is a familiar one, though many working in the field might respond that the picture is not so bleak, and Varul himself is at pains to emphasise that he does see fair trade as a worthy goal and that his specific examples do not condemn the entire enterprise.

Turning to what Trentmann and Varul say directly about 'producers', the picture nonetheless does seem bleak. Both writers dissect the problems that arise in a simplistic perceptual binary of 'Southern producers and Northern consumers'.[10] In this pre-defined, unequal relationship, 'distant producers' in the global South are

---

2 The short presentation of the Alliance's definition of the 'Fair Trade Book' in English, French and Spanish is available on their website: www.alliance-editeurs.org, along with pdf copies of slightly longer statements on their conception of this term. Useful publications on the Alliance's work include Luc Pinhas' *Éditer dans l'espace francophone* (Paris: Alliance des éditeurs indépendants, 2005), the collective *Des paroles et des actes pour la bibliodiversité* (Paris: Alliance des éditeurs indépendants, 2006), and their journal *Bibliodiversity*.

3 It is also important to note at this stage that the Alliance is by no means the first or only organisation to represent a network of publishers, in the global South or elsewhere. Hans Zell, a seminal source on publishing and book development in Africa, provides an impressive list of 'supportive' organisations on his website: http://www.hanszell.co.uk/links.htm. The range of national and international associations that pre-date the Alliance, and the intensity of their activity, are well known to actors in the field.

4 Trentmann, F. (2007). Before 'fair trade': Empire, free trade, and the moral economies of food in the modern world. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 25(1079–1102), p. 1080; Varul, M.Z. (2008). Consuming the Campesino. *Cultural Studies* 22.5 654–679, p. 661.

5 Trentmann, p. 1080.

6 Trentmann, pp. 1082–1087.

7 Trenmann, p. 1086.

8 Varul, p. 659 and *infra*.

9 Varul, p. 661.

10 Trentmann, p. 1081.

altruistically helped out by 'heroic affluent consumers'[11] in the North. Southern producers may then all too easily be 'exoticised,[12] in Trentmann's terms, or 'commodified' to the extent of becoming 'exhibits of authenticity' in Varul's.[13] Furthermore, the Southern consumer disappears entirely from view in this relationship. In this construction the Southern consumer has no agency whatsoever in choosing whether or not to be 'heroic' in selecting fair trade products; as consumers, they simply do not exist.

The dismaying picture that emerges from some of the conclusions drawn by Trentmann and Varul would seem to suggest that the very *last* thing one should do is look to models of 'fair trade' for ways to think through problems in book publishing. Varul's analysis in particular suggests that the 'fair trade imagination' should be viewed as a cautionary tale rather than as any kind of potentially useful lens. Yet this framing of a singular Southern producer as 'distant', and the total occlusion of any Southern consumer, could give rise to useful new appositions of questions that seem to recur in analyses of both fair trade and francophone African literature. This article examines three instances of the 'normalisation of the North' in order to explore how some of the problems identified by Trentmann and Varul may be reproduced in the book trade, and to propose some initial questions about what a fair trade in book publishing might mean. Examples are limited to 'francophone Africa', a clumsy but evergreen generalisation that groups together very different countries where French may rarely be an individual's first, or only, language but often dominates in print production.

There are two important problems that should be dealt with as preliminaries. Firstly, publishing is a complex business anywhere in the world, and formal FLO certification would present a serious challenge to any publishing enterprise. Alex Nicholls and Charlotte Opal have pointed out that the process of Fair Trade certification is better adapted to some products than others, arguing that some are so 'diverse in terms of production techniques and specifications' that it would be 'nearly impossible to devise and audit certification standards' to suit.[14] This would certainly apply to the process of producing a book, where compliance with fair trade certification rules would surely need to be demonstrated on every aspect, from the sourcing of paper and the selection of printer, to fair reward for the writer of the book, via attention to copyright and distribution contracts. In a search for a good example to highlight the uniqueness of the book industry, one study of publishing in the USA contrasted it with 'selling cornflakes'[15] to support a special case for book publishing. This highlights one area of complexity in thinking through questions of 'production' in print literature: a special case is often made for books, for an array of cultural, educational, political and social reasons. Furthermore, complex questions of the value attached to individual roles in the production of a book are permanently in play. How illustrators and translators are rewarded, or even credited, in the physical presentation of a book has been a particular source of contention,[16] and a particularly knotty problem is how 'fair trade' publishing would settle on models for the role of the publisher in the 'production' of literature.

Secondly, the dangers in seeking to apply ideas of fair trade – certainly if seen in the terms that Varul attacks – to literary production are amplified in the context of the publishing of African literature. Given the focus on basic commodities in the early decades of fair trade referred to at the start of this article, and the resulting perception of 'fair trade' as perhaps applicable to certain types of product and even certain types of society, as suggested by both Trentmann and Varul, the risk is of an insulting implication that a literary work can be reduced to having the cultural significance and longevity of a teabag or a banana. The potentially racist implications of the latter example are particularly clear. It must therefore be clear in any discussion of fair trade as applied to literature, or any art form, that the focus is on modes of production in the publishing industry and structures of trade in the book industry more widely, rather than on literature itself. We should heed Makhily

11 Trentmann, p. 1098.
12 Trentmann, p. 1081, p. 1086.
13 Varul, p. 667, p. 668.
14 Nicholls, A. and Opal, C. (2005). *Fair Trade: Market-Driven Ethical Consumption*. London: Sage (p. 24). Their discussion of the difficulty in finding reliable ways to certify fair trade (pp. 127–150) also raises complex questions about the applicability of such industry standards to aesthetic and artistic work.
15 Greco, A.N., Rodríguez, C.E. and Wharton, R.M. (2007). *The Culture and Commerce of Publishing in the 21st Century* (p. 29). Stanford: Stanford University Press.
16 The seminal text on the position of translators is Venuti, L. (1995). *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation.* London: Routledge.

Gassama's warning not to 'étudier l'Afrique comme l'on étudierait un mammifère' ['study Africa as one would study a mammal'],[17] and carefully delineate precisely what any idea of 'fair trade' might apply to.

Distant production and the 'normalisation of the North'

One vital point to take from Gassama's warning is that there is no single model of publishing that applies to the entire continent: studies of 'publishing in Africa' over the last sixty years have both highlighted shared challenges and demonstrated areas of great contrast. In terms of understanding how fair trade and book publishing may connect, looking to elements of colonial history could be instructive or a potential blind alley. For example, the creation of East African Educational Publishers in Nairobi in the 1960s could not have been replicated in Conakry, where colonial rule, decolonisation and then relations with the former coloniser all took a radically different shape.[18] Any number of contrasts between modern-day Guinea and Kenya are possible, from blunt population statistics to the different functioning of markets for print in their major international African languages (such as Kiswahili or Pulaar). Colonial history may also be of little concern to contemporary publishers, who may be more focused on decisions taken at the national level over who accesses the school textbook market, or how the establishment of print on demand publishing (for francophone countries, particularly by the French publisher L'Harmattan) affects their work.

It is vital to understand which elements of the past and present of any country are in fact important in shaping an idea of what a 'fair trade' in publishing might look like. In the francophone African book trade, the dominant position of French publishers was established in the colonial period, and continues to this day. There are many reasons for this structural reality, just one of which is the way world trade policy relates to different parts of the book industry. The long and complex history of international trade agreements would be one vital area where expertise from fair trade specialists working with African publishers could shed light on which aspects of these agreements have the greatest impact on the book trade, and what lessons from the past are available. For example, Joseph E. Stiglitz and Andrew Charlton point to the limited role and marginal 'bargaining power' that 'developing countries' had in the early post-war years when the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) was established. (Oddly, Stiglitz and Charlton do not mention the fact that many 'developing countries' were still colonised, a factor that may have somewhat affected their freedom of manoeuvre.) There is little reason to think that the incorporation of 'the right of developing countries to impose quantitative and other restrictions to protect their infant industries'[19] was agreed upon with any thought of book publishing, as so few African countries had independent commercial publishing houses in the early post-war period. Publishing in the North was normal. The focus in major trade talks was on larger markets, where we could also note that those fair trade icons of agricultural produce and textiles were in fact excluded from the GATT and covered by separate agreements. Much of the energy in favour of protecting an infant *publishing* industry seems to have been diverted into the establishment of the Florence Agreement on the Importation of Educational, Scientific and Cultural Materials (1950), which is largely concerned with eliminating import and export charges, and the Universal Copyright Convention (1952). Both of these led to substantial debate on whether they actually resulted in a level playing field for African producers of intellectual property.

One might be forgiven for thinking that no such level playing field emerged. Luc Pinhas has observed that UNESCO research showing that Africa produced 1.4% of book titles published worldwide in 1960 – that great year of African independences – was still valid at the close of the twentieth century.[20] This is despite the huge

17 Gassama, M. (1978). *Kuma : Interrogation sur la littérature nègre de langue française* (p. 19). Dakar-Abidjan: NEA.

18 On the history of East African educational publishers see, for example, Chakava, H. (1988). A Decade of Publishing in Kenya. 1977–1987. One Man's Involvement. In *African Book Publishing Record*, 4.14, 235–241; and Chakava, H. (1996). *Publishing in Africa – One Man's Perspective*, Bellagio Studies in Publishing, 6. Cambridge, MA: Bellagio Publishing Network and Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers. Kamau, K. and Mitambo, K. (Eds) (2016). The festschrift *Coming of Age: Strides in African Publishing. Essays in Honour of Dr. Henry Chakava at 70.* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers) also contains many useful essays on more contemporary issues in publishing in Kenya and elsewhere. On the consequences of the rapid French withdrawal from Guinea in 1958, see Diallo, A.M. (1995). La Guinée et la Francophonie. In *L'Éducateur* 15–16 (1993), 36–38; and Kaba, L. (1995). *Lettre à un ami sur la politique et le bon usage du pouvoir.* Paris: Présence Africaine (pp. 65–69).

19 Stiglitz, J.E. and Charlton, A. (2005). *Fair Trade for All: How Trade can Promote Development.* Oxford: Oxford University Press (p. 43).

20 Pinhas, L. (2005). *Éditer dans l'espace francophone.* Paris: Alliance des éditeurs indépendants (p. 74).

growth in population, in the formal education sector and in African print literature itself. Global trade policies in their widest form certainly contribute to the overall economic context for African publishers, but more specific policies – set at the international and national levels – also have a major impact. For African publishers themselves, the more immediate policy question centres upon how the market for school books is organised, and they are unanimous in emphasising the importance of the school market in the financial viability of the publishing industry in any given nation.[21] In his study of the school market for UNESCO in 2003, Jean-Pierre Leguéré makes a direct link between a 'marché confisqué' [confiscated market] in educational publishing that favours foreign publishers and the survival of local publishers, and indeed to that of African literature itself.[22] Moussa Samba has recently referred to the situation as a 'mainmise' [stranglehold] and to the *Hachette livre* company as '« mercenaires » de l'édition' ['mercenaries' of publishing].[23] Hélène Kloeckner, in turn, estimated that while the school market represented between 75% and 90% of the overall book market in Africa, just 1% of these books were produced in Africa.[24] There is little reason to imagine that this proportion has changed a great deal this century. More recently, two scholars who regularly attend the annual *Salon du livre de Paris*[25] reported that while African books were available, the number of titles published in France outnumbered those published in Africa to the extent of representing a 'monopole littéraire [dans lequel] on pourrait en effet concevoir que les littératures africaines sont encore et toujours une « affaire du Nord »'[26] [a literary monopoly [in which] one could indeed think that African literatures are still 'the North's business'].

This suggestion of a 'literary monopoly' raises three key issues of vital cultural, economic, social and political importance. There are further issues, which will become apparent in the discussion below, but the three 'normalisations of the North' examined here seem to be the most immediate ones that connect fair trade and book publishing.

The first consequence of the dominance of French publishing houses in francophone African print literature is that the North – in this instance France, and specifically Paris – becomes normalised as the centre of creative activity. While the intellectual work of production (that of the writer) and the physical work of production (such as that of the printer) might be carried out anywhere in the world, a final 'production' – perhaps in a theatrical sense – takes place in Paris. Book launches, press conferences and participation in festivals and key events like *Paris Livre*, all seen as vital parts of the ceremony of publication, add to this sense of cultural performance. Paris is also inscribed into the physical book itself: in contemporary book design, the publisher is always assured a cover position and also a mention in the 'front matter' where the reader has a second opportunity to register the name and location of the publisher. (In contrast, detail on where a book was printed and bound is relegated to the 'back matter' inside the book, as information of lesser importance.) The ever-multiplying colophons of Parisian publishing houses on the covers of African books reinforce the perception that the North is the 'normal' place for African writing to be published.

The current catalogues of two of the major Paris-based publishers active in African markets, as mentioned by Hélène Kloeckner, provide an idea of the scale of Parisian publishing of African writing, and of the scale of Northern competition faced by African publishers. In 2018, Hachette, France's largest publisher, announced more than seventeen thousand *nouveautés* [new titles], while Éditions L'Harmattan had nearly eleven thousand titles solely in the 'Afrique sub-saharienne' section on its website. In the same year the print catalogue for Nouvelles Editions Africaines du Sénégal, Senegal's leading publishing house, contained fewer than a hundred titles.

---

21 See, for example, Arlindo dos Santos, J. (2006). L'accès au livre et à la lecture : le cas de l'Angola. In *Des Paroles et des actes pour la bibliodiversité.* Paris: Alliance des éditeurs indépendants (pp. 85–91); Sylla, O. (2007). *Le Livre en Côte d'Ivoire*. Paris: L'Harmattan (pp. 19–22; pp. 79–88).

22 Leguéré, J.-P. (2003). *Approvisionnement en livres scolaires : vers plus de transparence. Afrique francophone*. Paris: UNESCO (p. 22).

23 Samba, M. (2018). L'édition au service de la culture, de la formation, de la recherche et du développement durable en Afrique : Plaidoyer pour une véritable formation des éditeurs africains. In M. Samba (Ed.) *Actes du Colloque International à l'occasion de la célébration du Cinquantenaire de l'EBAD. Les sciences de l'information documentaire au service de la recherche, de la formation, de l'intégration et du développement durable* (pp. 193–200 ; p. 195). Dakar: Editions de l'EBAD.

24 Kloeckner, H. (2003). À quand une édition scolaire africaine ? *Africultures* 57, pp. 71–85, p. 71.

25 This major book fair and forum for discussions of publishing, which rivals the Frankfurt Book Fair and prides itself on the numbers of international participants, was renamed simply 'Livre Paris' in 2016.

26 Reboul, A. and Thierry, R. (2013). 33e Salon du livre de Paris : l'édition africaine du centre vers les 'marges' (1e partie). Émergences, affirmations, perspectives. *Africultures*, http://www.africultures.com/php/index.php?nav=article&no=11479.

The comparison is not like for like, for many reasons. For example, titles by African authors or aimed at African markets are only a small part of Hachette's range, and France's population is more than four times that of Senegal. Such blunt statistics are only worth so much, but unless a consumer takes into account all manner of caveats – a simple example being the relative population sizes of Senegal and France – the 'shop window' public presentation of website and catalogue reinforce the idea that the North is the centre of the African book trade. This situation has all kinds of complex cultural ramifications that there is not space for here. Recent research by Claire Ducourneau, for example, has underlined how this Northern centre, particularly via the prestige of certain publishing houses and the award of high-profile literary prizes, retains a certain power of cultural 'consecration' that accrues persistently to the North.[27]

Overall, by dint of their overweening power, presence and prestige, Parisian publishers seem to have Adam Smith's 'absolute advantage' in occupying a kind of naturalised space of creative production. 'Africa', in turn, is normalised as a space that does not produce high-status goods or very much by way of intellectual property. This returns us to the highly problematic ideas of fair trade discussed by Varul. While his arguments may in places be overstated – for example, that a consumer might be daft enough to 'imagine themself as *guerrillero*'[28] on selecting a 'fair trade' branded coffee with an image of Che Guevara on the packet – there are clear resonances for book publishing in his analysis. Varul asserts that certain uses and misuses of what he calls the 'fair trade imagination' mean that 'Third World intellectuality' is 'systematically denied' and the notion of the fair trade producer becomes limited to 'simple manual labour power'.[29] This is indeed a danger in the current dominance of the North in African publishing. The relative rarity of titles published even in major 'francophone' cultural centres such as Abidjan and Dakar, mentioned by the researchers who visited the *Salon du Livre* and easily deduced in a comparison of publishers' catalogues, is a longstanding fact of publishing life that can be confirmed by a glance through any bibliography of or about francophone African literature. But it embeds a perception of the North as the centre of intellectual production, while also making 'Africa' a singular space rather than a vastly diverse continent. The repercussions for African writers, who risk becoming a kind of 'exotic producer' if seen predominantly through the distorting lens of distant production in the North and its literary institutions, have been an important question in discussions of African literature in European languages for decades.[30] Varul's warning of the dangers of 'romantic commodification' hits the nail on the head.

Furthermore, Varul uses a striking image that is well-known to any reader of African literature to describe the image of fair trade producer countries in the marketing literature he attacks: 'Joseph-Conrad-Land'.[31] This invokes Chinua Achebe's description of Conrad as racist in his presentation of Africa and Africans in *Heart of Darkness*. Achebe's position has been endlessly debated, but a point of interest for our purposes is that his essay opens precisely with an account of meeting a man on an American university campus who is surprised to hear that Achebe teaches African literature, as 'he never had thought of Africa as having that kind of stuff, you know.'[32] Achebe dates this encounter to 1974, but it can still be asked today if traces of that attitude might still exist, enabled, in part, by current patterns in the creation and circulation of knowledge. Here we can turn again to the criticisms of 'fair trade' put forward by Trentmann and Varul. Trentmann argues that a key difficulty in perceptions of fair trade is that they are built on 'uneven cultural representations'[33] and that part of the fair trade approach 'all too easily envisages a Northern consumer and a Southern producer.'[34] This connects to Varul's argument that an impact of this imbalance is that 'the authentic fair trade producer

27 Ducourneau, C. (2017). *La Fabrique des classiques africains.* Paris: CNRS Editions.
28 Varul, p. 661.
29 Varul, p. 661. Varul does not problematise the phrase 'Third World'.
30 See, for example, Huggan, G. (2008). *Interdisciplinary Measures: Literature and the Future of Postcolonial Studies*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press (pp. 106–108).
31 Varul, p. 661.
32 Achebe, C. (1988). An Image of Africa: racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness. In *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays.* Oxford: Heinemann (p. 1).
33 Trentmann, p. 1081.
34 Trentmann, p. 1086.

remains solely a *producer* without ever becoming a full member of the global *consumer* society.'[35] Again, it is important to look carefully at their arguments; both writers are focussed on variants of 'fair trade' marketing, which do not necessarily reflect the views of a thoughtful consumer. The consumer – whether Northern or Southern or impossible to connect to either identity – may well be a good deal more aware of 'being marketed at' than Trentmann and Varul perhaps give them credit for. But we can note that inaccurate and damaging perceptions of Africa, such as Achebe's encounter, are not limited to egregious marketing of 'fair trade' produce and producers.

There are two further vital areas where the 'normalisation of the North' in book publishing has a very damaging effect; those of language and of print itself. Here some of the particularly intractable problems of a fair trade in African literature become clear, even in the work of the International Alliance of Independent Publishers.

The 'language question' in francophone literature is a vast area of debate, which cannot be covered in detail here.[36] Limiting our scope to the idea of the 'normalisation of the North', it is clear that the dominance of French publishers continues to normalise the prominence of the French language in African literatures. Texts published in African languages in Paris, or even in bilingual editions, form a vanishingly small minority. This fits with a commercial logic for French publishers of targeting the largest and richest global market for print publications, but it has important economic and cultural consequences for the publishing industry in 'francophone' African countries. As Seydou Nourou Ndiaye, founder of Éditions Papyrus and member of the International Alliance of Independent Publishers, has pointed out, in some African countries 'la langue de l'édition n'est pas celle du peuple'[37] [the language of publishing is not that of the people]. This normalisation of French as the language of publishing risks feeding into a perception of French as the language of literature itself: a completely alien monolingualism may be normalised in the domain of print and the term 'literature' may become understood as solely 'francophone'. In 'francophone' Africa there is a real danger, particularly among new readers and younger readers, that 'literature' is perceived as something in print, in French and 'in Paris', truly 'une affaire du Nord', rather than something relevant to their lives and open to their influence and participation.

In Ndiaye's precision of expression in referencing the language of *publishing*, we can also infer a comment on the un-published. As an activist, poet and publisher working regularly across multiple languages, Ndiaye is very conscious that non-print literatures can all too easily be marginalised or entirely excluded from discussions of 'literature' if print literature is normalised as somehow the sole literature, or the 'most important' one, and other literatures are treated as mere adjuncts. This is the third 'normalisation' enabled by the dominance of the North: that of print literature itself. For instance, it is commonplace in international scholarship on African literatures to make a distinction between 'modern' and 'traditional' literatures, the 'modern' being print-published in European languages and the 'traditional' covering a massive range of cultural texts in African languages.[38] This creates a peculiar idea that literatures in African languages are somehow 'not modern', when it would be more accurate to see them as vital sources of creative energy and of constant transformation. If an opposition to 'the North' is needed, a more balanced way of presenting the contrast would be to point to the relative underdevelopment of oral literatures in the contemporary North. The Northern domination of the 'shop window' presentation of African literatures, however, leaves little space for non-print literatures, or for the creative mixing of languages, forms and genres that do not fit any particular mould. The ways that digital publishing may break these moulds, for example, receives too little attention in studies of publishing.

35 Varul, pp. 662–663; emphasis in the original.
36 Two very insightful overviews of the range of debates around 'francophonie' can be found in Little, R. (2001). World Literature in French; or Is Francophonie frankly phoney? *European Review*, 9, 421–436; and Milhaud, O. (2006). Post-Francophonie? In *EspacesTemps* https://www.espacestemps.net/articles/post-francophonie/.
37 Seck Guèye, A. (2014, August). Seydou Nourou Ndiaye, éditeur et militant des langues africaines. « Nous avons réussi la prouesse d'écouler les 1000 exemplaires du livre de Thuram en moins de deux mois. » *Le Témoin Hebdomadaire d'Informations Générales*, *1175*(7–13), 4.
38 Ruth Finnegan's classic analysis gives an example of the range of literatures suggested by the term 'oral literatures'. See Finnegan, R. (1970). *Oral Literature in Africa*. Oxford: Clarendon Press (pp. 1–15 and *infra*).

Conclusion

These three 'normalisations of the North' – those of the 'location of publishing' (to adapt Homi Bhabha's famous title), of language and of print itself – together create a context in which it is very difficult to spot anything approaching 'fairness' in the contemporary book trade in francophone Africa. This is where the Alliance's invocation of 'fair trade' could be transformative. Their consultative model, which involves discussion – and, crucially, *decision-making* – among a range of African book professionals, places the desires and needs of the Southern consumer centre-stage, and is debated by experts who know their market intimately. Members of the Alliance select titles that are of interest to their readerships; set retail prices and sizes of print run likely to suit their markets; and bring their expertise to bear on many other aspects of book production.[39] A striking example of the latter is the change to the cover of the Alliance's 2008 edition of Véronique Tadjo's *L'Ombre d'Imana. Voyages jusqu'au bout du Rwanda*, originally published in France in 2000. According to Florence Bianchi, the original cover was judged unsuitable for 'African markets' by the Alliance members and changed to one that was more 'adapté' [appropriate].[40] This raises multiple questions: for example, for which market the original cover *was* judged suitable – is this a case of the exclusion of the Southern consumer? – but also how the Alliance came to a new decision, with publishers representing eight different African countries involved in this particular co-edition, from Tunisia to Rwanda. Such discussions serve to highlight the fact that African markets are not uniform, an aspect of the book trade that is much less likely to be acknowledged in a model of distant production.

As noted at the start of this essay, the Alliance is, in many ways, not new, and may often be just one of many national and international associations a publisher participates in. It seems, however, to be the first association of its kind to explicitly foreground the terminology of fair trade, and this merits attention. A 'fairer trade' involving a greater diversity of book professionals from the South making decisions in the processes of book production and distribution could undermine the 'romantic commodification' criticised by Varul. The 'fixed identities' and 'aesthetic backcloth'[41] he perceives in a faulty model of fair trade could be pushed aside, and the questions of 'agency, authenticity, and material culture'[42] raised by Trentmann at the end of his analysis could come to the fore.

The Alliance's lead in attaching the concept of fair trade to book publishing raises a fascinating set of questions, though it can offer no instant resolution to the longstanding normalisation of the North. Critics could point out that the Alliance is itself based in Paris; publishes on a traditional print model and in major 'international' languages such as French[43]; and has acknowledged the support of the *Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie*[44], which has long attracted concern that 'beneath the surface of a seemingly cultural concept, political imperatives generate much of the momentum behind the idea of francophonie.'[45] Establishing precisely what fair trade publishing would involve for African countries should draw first and foremost on the knowledge and experience of African publishers and other book professionals, while also seeking to privilege the voice of the 'Southern consumer', who seems to vanish so entirely from the perception of fair trade discussed by Trentmann and Varul.

Yet the range of questions raised by the Alliance's deployment of the idea of fair trade in book publishing – only some of which have been discussed here – could serve to highlight the unequal relationships examined by Trentmann and Varul, and to initiate a debate on the ways in which ideas of fair trade as applied to book

39 See Quinqueton, T. (2007). L'Autre Mondialisation de l'Édition. *Esprit*, *5*, 46–53.

40 Bianchi, F. (2008). L'interculturel en bibliothèque : état des lieux, problématique, enjeux'. Bulletin des bibliothèques de France, 6, 105–106. Her full report is available here: http://bbf.enssib.fr/consulter/bbf-2008-06-0105-014. Tadjo's bestselling *L'Ombre d'Imana. Voyages jusqu'au bout du Rwanda* was originally published by Editions Actes Sud (Paris, 2000).

41 Varul, p. 668.

42 Trentmann, p. 1097.

43 There are limits to this line of criticism: while the Alliance has established 'language networks' in three European languages that have a colonial history in Africa, there are also networks of publishers working in Arabic and Farsi, each of which has its own unique history and constituency.

44 See, for example, the back cover of the 2007 launch catalogue of the Alliance's 'Terres solidaires' series, available here: https://issuu.com/alliance_des_editeurs/docs/catalogue_terres_solidaires. This collection included Tadjo's *L'Ombre d'Imana*, cited above.

45 Hargreaves, A.G. and McKinney, M. (1997). Introduction: The post(-)colonial problematic in contemporary France. In A.G. Hargreaves and M. McKinney (Ed.). *Post-colonial Cultures in France* (p. 3). London and New York: Routledge.

publishing may be of service in opposing the damaging inaccuracies that these scholars examine. The 'distant production' of books is a problem for publishers in 'francophone Africa' that is not replicated identically in all 'francophone African' countries, in other African countries or in other parts of the South. Yet expertise about fair trade could prove productive in answering fundamental questions that have yet to be treated by international trade mechanisms, the publishing industry, assorted literary institutions and international scholarship. The concept of 'fair trade' is constructed and interpreted in both local and global cultures, including being constructed in print, as here. The Alliance's choice to specifically invoke the notion of 'fair trade' therefore raises important questions for readers and for scholars, and perhaps more widely for questions of fair trade in the arts.