

BORDERS – AFRICANIST & GLOBAL INTERVIEW

Emmanuel Iduma

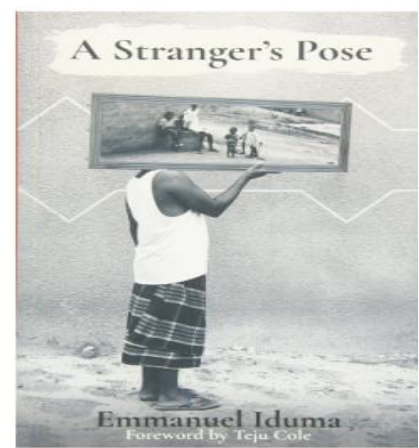
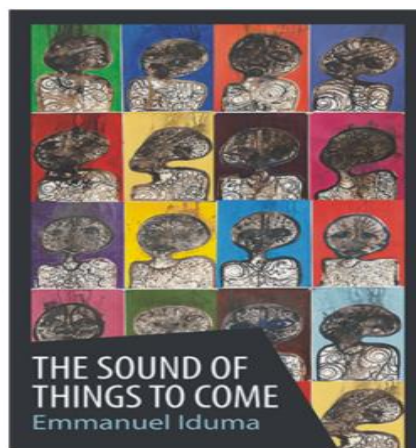
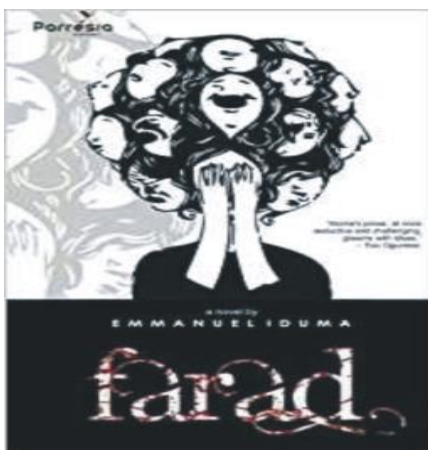


With a youth landmarked by prestigious grants, fellowships, residencies and award nominations for his outstanding contributions to African visual art and fiction writing, the first thirty years of Emmanuel Iduma's life have not been wasted. *Farad*, his first book was published by Nigeria's Parresia, and acquired in the US by *The Mantle* in 2016 which re-titled it *The Sound of Things to Come*. His second book, a travel memoir, with the perfect title, *A Stranger's Pose*, was long-listed for the coveted Ondaatje Prize sponsored by the Royal Society for Literature, UK. I say 'perfect title' because *A Stranger's Pose*, published by Cassava Republic Press, unfolds like a slideshow of brief encounters with strangers from his pilgrim days. 38 photographs and 77 text based vignettes read like lightly spun gold. I was grateful for my own desire simply to look at whatever Iduma silently presented to my gaze. I was grateful not to want to stay those encounters, catch the images, prise them apart with words.

Dakar, Douala, Bamako, Benin, Khartoum, Casablanca, Umuahia in South-East Nigeria. The fragmentary, mosaic appearance of his memories read like ellipses making his pilgrimage through these vast spaces. Always his stance is meditative and was continually surprised by the fact that he wasn't alone at all. Not because of two brief romances we glimpse in rear-view, but because he was travelling as a member of *Invisible Borders*, the collective of photographer-explorers led by Emeka Okereke decorated recently (2018) by the French government with the insignia *Chevalier de L'Ordre Des Arts et Des Lettres*, for his contributions to discourse on Art in Africa and for the global impact of *Invisible Borders*.

The activity of sight is so central to *A Stranger's Pose*, each vignette appears like a quiet call to stand by Iduma's side, to turn my head as he turns his gaze towards the humans and animals of the diverse worlds he enters. At other times, it is Iduma's containment that absorbs my gaze. I see how it holds him at its centre - a gentle restraint on a heart reaching out to touch others. On this road-trip through Africa he befriends briefly- many strangers. Each time the (bus-load of) explorer-photographers enter a new world, take it in, and then begin the process of departure, I watch as Iduma stops to note what his photographer's eyes are seeing as he is leaving and each time it is as if he is imbuing the strangers he has befriended in far away pockets of the world and those who pass him by, with sacredness.

And the book has been praised for this quiet beauty - even sanctity and its uniqueness. Chris Abani, Maaza Mengiste, Tade Ipadeola, Yvonne Owuor are some of the most gifted and prolific men and women writing today who have described the 'lyricism' of *A Stranger's Pose*; its narrative style that 'resists categorization'; its 'ineffable' quality which is yet muscular enough to hold 'tangible wealth' - those precious moments with strangers.

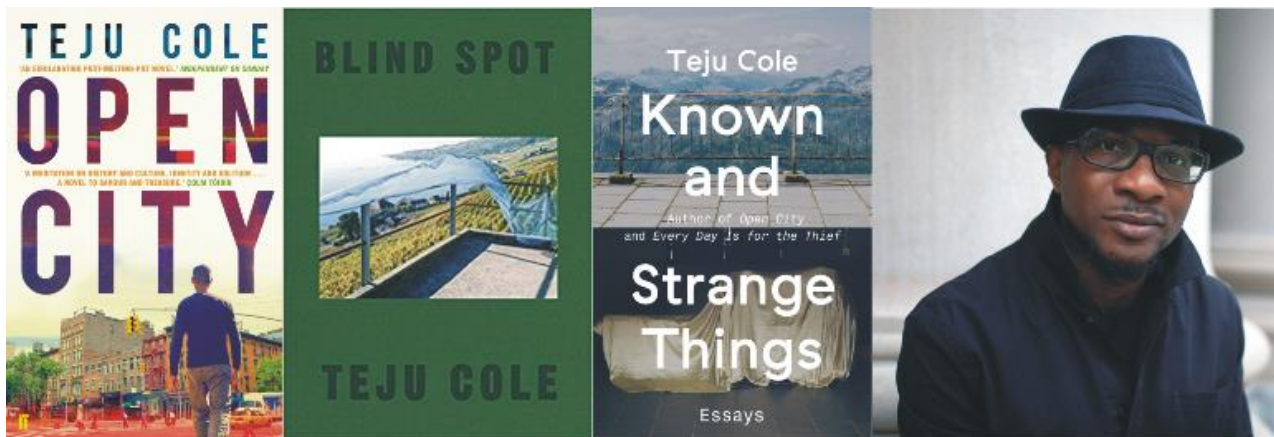


Teju Cole wrote the now famous *Open City*. Like him, you too are a great scholar. It's hard to miss references to literary works throughout your text; evocations contextualise your thoughts or texture and colour your frames. I agree with Teju though that your writing is 'free of the starchiness of undigested scholarship'. I also agree with his foreword which is pure praise.

How did you feel when you first read it? Any stand out parts? Were there any comments he made that took you aback?

My gratitude to him when I read it was immense, and continues to be. For the foreword, in the first place. But also the extent to which he has affirmed our kinship. I imagine our conversation as ongoing.

To what extent if any was *A Stranger's Pose* inspired by *Open City*?



*Teju Cole
Writer, Photographer
& Art Historian*

There were other books of his, in fact, that inspired me to finish mine. One was the collection of essays, *Known and Strange Things*, and the book in which he paired texts and images, *Blind Spot*. In both cases, it was the commitment to clarity, but also to opacity—the resolved and the irresolvable—that seemed to me most admirable.

Teju Cole's *Julian* is fictional. You are the central character of *A Stranger's Pose* which is your memoir. But both central characters are travellers. Yours is a motorised road-trip across Africa, while Julian is a *flâneur* who walks New York City on foot.

Share the story of your work with Invisible Borders with us. How did it all begin?

I had just completed my studies at the Nigerian Law School. I needed a vocation that could validate my decision not to practice law. At the time I'd followed the work of *Invisible Borders* for two years. And so, after an email inquiry to Emeka Okereke, I was asked to share my writing samples. What followed was an invitation to participate in the third edition of the road trip. Things really took off from there.

Share one or two major high points from your road trips with Invisible Borders and one or two of the most frustrating or harrowing challenges which you and your friends experienced.

I did a fair amount of documentation of my travels with the organization, and for the sake of space I'll like to simply point readers to the blog posts on the *Invisible Borders* website, from my travels in 2012, 2014, and 2016. It might be the best way to ensure that my impressions of those weeks on the road are relayed with the same immediacy of feeling, perhaps cogency, as when they were experienced.



*Abraham Oghobase
Photographer*

I am a subscriber to your blog *A Sum of Encounters* which features profile essays on Nigerian artists based in Nigeria and the United States. Thank you for sharing the blog with me. The posts are beautifully written and rich in information about each artist. I particularly enjoyed the feature on Abraham Oghobase. You were awarded a Creative Capital/Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant to do this.

Tell us about this grant, how it works and about the envisaged outcomes of the collaboration.

It's a well-known grant in the art writing community-I first heard about it from my teachers at the School of Visual Arts who had won it. As such it was a real honor to be offered it. I was given the freedom to develop the blog as I'd proposed: my idea was to write narrative essays on the life and work of Nigerian artists, based in Nigeria or the United States, informed by time spent at their studios or houses, or after lengthy consideration of their bodies of work. My goal was to do this within the course of a year.

What I'm most proud of, after eight of those essays, is how the project have taught me to practice narrative as criticism. To consider experience as the entry point to reflection on art, and as a model for art criticism as a genre of literature.

I'd like to keep going with the project, in some way, over the next year or two. I'm now working on two additional essays in this series, and then I'll consider what next steps to take. I'm propelled by the notion that the artist is in the world, working out what it means to feel and see.



ARTNEWS

British Journal of Photography

Apart from *A Sum of Encounters*, you've contributed essays to prestigious magazines, journals such as Chimurenga, Guernica, ARTNews, British Journal of

Photography and to artists's books by notable international artists including Nigeria's Victor Ehikhamenor.

If you were to stop and reflect, which hat do you believe you wear more comfortably: your art writer's hat or your hat as a travel writer?

I'm inclined to work with a commitment to range, rather than with hierarchies. When I started writing about art about seven years ago, I didn't think I was an art writer, only a writer interested in art. It helped that I'd completed a novel before joining *Invisible Borders*—I was, as such, a writer being immersed in visual art, learning how to see the world. I think, however, that having studied Art Criticism, my writing became focused on art writing. My goal for my writing, as we speak, is to free myself from any prescriptive tendencies I might have acquired. To work as a writer writ large, and learn from each project—essay, short story, nonfiction book, novel—what it requires. Some might take years to complete; I must learn patience.



Victor Ehikhamenor
Visual artist, Writer & Photographer,



Peju Alatise
Artist, Poet and Writer



Qudus Onikeku
Dancer and Performer

It's great to learn that Nana Oforiatta Ayim is curating Ghana's inaugural Pavilion at the Venice Biennale this year, 2019. But we beat Ghana to it. In 2017, you went to the 2017 Venice Biennale with Qudus Onikeku, the talented dancer (trained as a circus performer!); Victor Ehikhamenor and Peju Alatise, both international, award-winning visual artists. Your quartet hosted Nigeria's first ever Pavilion. You served as associate curator and also as the project scribe didn't you?

Our country is blessed with talented artists. Why did it take so long for Nigeria to host a Pavilion at the world's foremost Biennale?

The curator of the exhibition was Adenrele Sonariwo, and I was associate curator-so it wasn't a quartet, per se. The commissioner of the pavilion was Godwin Obaseki, the Edo State governor. There were other actors, as well: a Steering Committee, and a team of project managers and communication experts. Several factors, I think. Notably that it takes a lot of resources to pull off an exhibition of that magnitude, and the easiest way to get it done is for it to be funded by government. And we know the story of political will when it comes to funding cultural production in Nigeria.



*Governor Godwin Obaseki of Edo State,
Commissioner of Nigeria Pavillion at Venice Biennale 2017*

What were the selection or nomination criteria for this first set of exhibitors?

The artists that presented work in the Biennale are at the height of their powers, making what we can describe as mid-career work. It was important to us to work with artists who understood the value of the exhibition, and who saw their contribution as part of a larger conversation-that of the nature of time in relation to Nigeria, and how artistic output could be seen as a marker of such time.

The challenges you faced preparing to go to Venice to represent your country. Share some of them with us.

The main challenge was funding, which meant that we spent a shorter amount of time planning the exhibition. It's remarkable to think of what we achieved in such short time.

What was the reception like to the various exhibitions your group staged in the Pavilion? Tell us for example about the kinds of audiences you had each day.

The exhibition was received well. One standout moment, for me, was when Qudus Onikeku performed a day after the opening. It was in the first gallery of the space we used and, although we hadn't formally put out word of the performance, the space was crowded. It was an indication of how quickly word had spread about our pavilion, and the measure of solidarity being expressed with us.

Saraba, the online literary magazine with its headquarters here in Lagos, was founded by you and Dami Ajayi, the well-known psychiatrist and poet. In the ten years since inception, it has garnered a worldwide following and deserved renown.



Emmanuel Iduma
Co-Founder/Editor, Saraba

Dami Ajayi
Co-Founder/Editor, Saraba

Talk to us about Saraba's wonderful work promoting emerging African writers: how do you go about promoting them?

To date, we have published over 300 writers, whether in our magazine issues, chapbooks, or special issues. Our main motivation is to give writers at the outset of their careers opportunity to have their work featured in a prominent literary magazine. The promotion, as a result, is really this opportunity—the exposure to editorial rigour, for instance. And, each issue is carefully produced, and distributed to several thousand supporters.

What are two of your most recent successes? I mean the Saraba projects that have garnered the most attention.

Our first print issue in 2017. And, following from the Manuscript Project we organized, the publication of T J Benson's *We Won't Fade into Darkness*, one of the shortlisted fiction manuscripts.

And what have been the greatest challenges to your growth?

The magazine has largely been distributed free of charge, digitally, for 10 years. We've been seeking opportunities to grow the magazine financially. I wouldn't call it a challenge to growth, but a matter we intend to resolve.

Finally, tell us about your life as an expatriate (or are you an exile?) in the US. When did you leave Nigeria?

And if it's not too personal, why did you leave?

I left Nigeria in 2013, to study for a masters degree. Exile is not a word I'll use, since I maintain ties to Nigeria. I return as frequently as I can. My family is here. I enjoy being here.

What are your future plans?

I'm working on my next book.



Host, Olatoun Gabi-Williams