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<https://sites.duke.edu/researchafrica/ra-reviews/volume-1-issue-2-september-2017/>

RA Reviews' Editorial Voice: Reviewing Works, Moving Ahead

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1. *RA Reviews' Moving Ahead*

RA Reviews, as an ambitious academic platform, was established in June 2017; but, like other new kids on the competitive academic block, it is an aspirant digital publication that is slowly finding its way into the cosmic world. *RA Reviews* does so with the following thoughts in mind: (a) to be able to keep up with the intellectual challenges of producing reasonably respectable reviews online; (b) to offer stimulating short and long appraisals of, among others, books, films, documentaries, and works of art; (c) to spark scholarly debates about recent – and in some cases earlier - evaluated works, (d) to whet the appetite of academics, researchers, artists, producers, and others that have an intimate relations with the African continent, and (d) to remain a viable virtual review platform on Africa as *RA Reviews* Team (RART) produces each issue in the years ahead.

2. Its Traction and Production

Even though it is somewhat too early to reach definitive thoughts about *RA Reviews'* reach globally, RART is of the opinion that despite its fresh presence it might not as yet have gained adequate global traction as it wished but it is certainly moving in that direction. This is based on the interest that has been shown by members of the Research Africa network with whom the first issue was shared. Nonetheless, what this editorial wants to emphasize is the fact that RART maintains realistic academic awareness and it tries its best conform to its projected principles with the fervent hope that *RA Reviews* will gradually gain regular readers as it makes its way into the digital arena. RART has committed itself to produce this virtual venture in and on time thrice a year. For the current year, as the reader would have observed that the first issue appeared in June, and that one was followed by the current September issue that will be followed up by a third issue by the end of December. As from 2018, this arrangement will slightly change as soon *RA Reviews* enters its second volume; so instead of it appearing during the mentioned months, it will be issued at the end of April, August, and December.

3. Its Challenges

When RART launched its first issue *RA Reviews* only managed to solicit nine reviews; in its editorial, however, it stated that it would cap the number of reviews if it received fifteen for an issue. This may, however, be attributed to a few predictable factors; some of which are the following: (a) established publishers and well-known producers that have been involved in

publishing and producing publications/productions related to Africa are still unaware of this digital site; (b) scholars, academics, and researchers, like the publishers, are also still not acquainted with *RA Reviews*' digital presence; (d) the status of book and other related reviews, according to the current accreditation systems, is still not considered an acceptably worthwhile academic activity, and as a consequence scholars avoid spending their energies in something that is marginally worthwhile, and (e) RART has not as yet created a pool of reviewers that may be able to assist in making a qualitative difference to this platform.

4. An Intellectual Exchange Platform

It is in the light of these challenges, *RA Reviews*, along with its sister platforms, wish to see itself as an intellectual exchange platform; one that creates spatial opportunities for individuals to review all sorts of texts, films, and works of art that relate to Africa and its peoples. RART therefore considers the review process as a critical, important, and key academic task that many should partake in so that their evaluations and assessments may encourage emerging (African) scholars to observe the nature of robust academic engagements regarding Africa. For the record, RART has adopted a policy that welcomes debates between the authors and the reviewers. This can take different forms; the one may take the form of a one-to-one discussion between the author and the reviewer, and the other may take the one-to-many format. The last-mentioned format targets the author who engages with more than two or more reviewers regarding his/her work. The idea for this type of engagement is also twofold: the first is to give added value to the book/film/work of art, and the second is to provide ample space for both authors and reviewers to enter in a stimulating debate.

Perhaps it should be stated that whilst the reviewer – based upon his/her expertise - has the license to evaluate a book, a film, or work of art, the author/artist/producer too has the right to reply, disagree and offer counter arguments. This is what creates a rigorous and vibrant intellectual community within a discipline. Regarding the reviewer-author debate, RART draws everyone's attention to *H-Net Reviews* – an online review journal (est.1994) - policy when it stipulated relevant rules for its reviewers to by and large act professionally; it stated that, "Whether the evaluation of a work is favorable or unfavorable, reviewers should express criticism in courteous, temperate, and constructive terms," and it categorically made the point that, "Reviewers are responsible for presenting a fair and balanced review and for treating authors with respect." In addition to this pertinent advice to its reviewers and a point that RART underscores and embraced, it also encourage the authors, whose books were reviewed on this site, to enter into dialogue with their reviewers; they should do so via a process that would "... develop (and maintain) ... professional norms ... (at all times)" (see <http://www.h-net.org/reviews>). RART, which is in full agreement with these sentiments, wishes to stress that if authors and reviewers maintain a healthy relationship despite the criticisms through exchange of ideas, then this would indeed bode well for future scholarship that bases itself on the adage: 'one (amicably) agrees to disagree'.

5. Writing a Review

On this note, it might be appropriate to return to the task of 'how to write a review'; here information will be drawn from other sources other than those that were referred to in the previous editorial. *H-Net Reviews* that was quoted earlier underscored that, "Reviews should go beyond description to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the work, paying attention to the

use of sources, methodology, organization, and presentation. Evaluation should consider the work's stated purpose.” And since it also welcomed reviews of software and other related multimedia material it pointed out to its potential reviewers that they should “pay attention to user friendliness, appropriate audience, organization, and presentation”. (It added that) “In the age of rapid technological change, the software's longevity should also be kept in mind.” Apart from making reference to these, it also spurred reviewers on to undertake reviews that cover, among others, “...museums, exhibits, websites, films, videos, and concerts...”

In the first issue of *RA Reviews* two films were included and RART awaits many more reviews on these in the future. What is important, however, as highlighted by *H-Net Reviews* is the fact that these should not appear as mere announcements or forms of advertorial; they like other reviews should be descriptive but also critical. So when reviewing history museums, music concerts, or art exhibitions, then the evaluation, which is decidedly descriptive, should take into account a few points into account; if it is an exhibition then it should, for example, consider the artist's background, his/her presentation, and his/her exhibits' context.

And since one has to distinguish between descriptive reviews from critical ones then the following, as recorded on Dalhousie University's site (https://cdn.dal.ca/content/dam/dalhousie/pdf/library/CoreSkills/Book_Reviews.pdf), should be borne in mind: (a) by and large descriptive reviews provide ‘essential information about a book’ and when pursuing this task the reviewer should describe and expose its contents “by stating the perceived aims and purposes of the author, and by quoting striking passages from the text”, and (b) “critical reviews (generally) describe and (specifically) evaluate the book, in terms of accepted literary and historical standards”, and that these types of reviews are usually accompanied by textual evidence.

The site, however, directed the reviewer to the fact that his/she should “understand the author's purpose (in writing the text or producing the documentary), and how the component parts of the work contribute to that purpose, but also knowledge of the author: his/her nationality, time period, other works etc”; and in addition to these, it expects the reviewer to understand “the art form and how it functions”. It, moreover, correctly observed that if the reviewer overlooks the context, then he/she would have no historical or literary standard to base his/her evaluation upon. Besides these, the site listed guidelines when writing a review of biography, historical text, and a work of fiction.

6. Wrapping Up

In wrapping up this editorial, it will be noted that for this issue RART managed to secure thirteen reviews; seven of which are book reviews, two review essays, one response to a book review, one report review, one journal review, and one film review. From among these RART secured three reviews in Arabic: one book review, one essay review, and another response to a previous review. Hopefully in the forthcoming issues RART will be able to solicit support from colleagues and others to also contribute to *RA Reviews*.

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