In his essay “How to Write about Africa,” Kenyan writer Binyavanga Wainaina offers the following satirical observation: “Use the word ‘Africa’ or ‘Darkness’ or ‘Safari’ in your title. Subtitles may include the words ‘Zanzibar,’ ‘Masai,’ ‘Zulu,’ ‘Zambezi,’ ‘Congo,’ ‘Nile,’ ‘Big,’ ‘Sky,’ ‘Shadow,’ ‘Drum,’ ‘Sun,’ or ‘Bygone.’ Also useful are words such as ‘Guerillas,’ ‘Timeless,’ ‘Primordial,’ and ‘Tribal’” (91). Historically, in Western-derived literature, Africa is a problematic site. Stereotypical depictions from authors often boil down to portraying “African characters … as primarily ‘primitive’” (Maddy 5). In children’s literature in particular, as Yulisa Amadu Maddy and Donnarae MacCann have shown in their manuscripts, African Images in Juvenile Literature; Apartheid and Racism in South African Children’s Literature, 1985–1995; and Neo-imperialism in Children’s Literature about Africa, much work remains to correct the images that typically represent Africa: “Today’s fictional works for the young extend centuries of mythmaking about Africa as a ‘dark place’” (Neo-imperialism 13). Susan Williams, author of “Ways of Seeing Africa,” echoes this sentiment:

“In the West,” claims Molen Kete Asante in his recent History of Africa, “the ignorance of Africa is palpable, like a monster that invades our brains with disbelief, deception, and disinterest, yet is everywhere around us. We are victims of probably the most uninformed educated people in the world on the subject of Africa.” It is hard to disagree, given many Western assumptions about the nature of life in any African country. (vii)

To this, African studies scholar Osayimwense Osa implores, “The old stereotypes about the continent, as seen through Edgar Rice Burroughs’ Tarzan books and movies based on them, belong to archival studies. Today we need authentic writing about real sociocultural and political situations” (Osa).

Without any sort of misguided attempt to capture “authentic” Africa, the Nigerian-born and British-educated storyteller Atinuke both avoids the typical pitfalls and answers Osa’s call to complicate images of Africa in children’s literature in both of her Early Reader series, Anna Hibiscus and The No. 1 Car Spotter. Both the Anna Hibiscus and the The No. 1 Car Spotter
series are set in contemporary Africa, the \textit{Anna Hibiscus} series on a family compound in a large city, and the \textit{No. 1 Car Spotter} series in a village just off of a main road to a large city. The \textit{Anna Hibiscus} series is about young Anna and her encounters with her world, within the compound, into the busy city outside of the compound’s gates, and later in her travels abroad. The five-book collection is mostly episodic but also tells the larger story, from plan to return, of Anna’s visit to meet her maternal grandmother in Canada. Atinuke’s other protagonist, Oluwalase Babatunde Benson, called “No. 1,” spots cars. His village may be “a poor village, lost in the bush, but a No. 1 road goes right past it” (\textit{The No. 1} 14). While no one in his village can afford their own car, No. 1’s car-spotting hobby is central to the series’ stories as he is able to solve village-based and even national problems with his vast knowledge of automobiles.

Atinuke constructs her series in terms that likely run counter to the imagined Western audience’s schema for the continent. According to Atinuke, “Children in the UK don’t know about the Africa that I come from: middle class, affluent, very modern, very urban Africa” (“Interview”). Drawing from this, Atinuke is able to avoid stereotypical depictions:

Anna Hibiscus lives in Africa. Amazing Africa. She lives in an old white house with balconies and secret staircases. A wonderful house in a beautiful garden inside a big compound. The trees are full of sweet ripe fruit and the flowers are full of sweet juicy nectar because this is Africa, and Africa can be like this. Outside the compound is the city. An amazing city of lagoons and bridges and roads, of skyscrapers and shantytowns. (\textit{Anna Hibiscus} 7)

And No. 1 explains, “On the continent of Africa, you will find my country” (\textit{The No. 1} 7). In the second book, he tells us: “In my village we do not have television, or even electricity. We do not have shops, or even traffic lights” (\textit{Firebird} 7). As Regan Bardeen notes, “[R]eaders familiar with the region [described in the series] will recognize southern Nigeria and the dry harmattan winds that blow from November through February every year” (qtd. in Cottle 32), or they might deduce that Atinuke is referencing her homeland, Nigeria, in her series. Nonetheless, Atinuke keeps the exact locations vague. After years of deliberation, Atinuke purposely chose not to locate the stories in one particular country in Africa because she wanted “readers to have the sense that this middle-class, affluent, modern, urban lifestyle happens all over Africa, that it isn’t just Nigeria” (Atinuke, “Interview”). To be sure, Anna and No. 1’s Africa is not a monolithic place. Anna’s urban, middle-class lifestyle is not the same as No. 1’s village life, nor are either child’s lifestyles the same as the beggar children’s in the city, nor to Anna’s wealthy friend Tiger Lily’s life, whose very important father has a town car and driver, a swimming pool in his apartment building, and “carpets and Sky television” (\textit{Welcome Home} 79).
Although one might challenge Atinuke’s decision to set Anna and No. 1’s stories in a nonspecific African country, her work diversifies images of Africa in children’s literature and works to dispel Western assumptions about “the dark continent.” For example, when compared to one of the few other Early Reader series set in Africa, Alexander McCall Smith’s Botswana-set Precious Ramotswe series, Atinuke’s refusal to perpetuate the primitive, fairy-tale qualities common in Western-derived children’s literature about Africa is laudable. McCall Smith’s Early Reader series is actually the backstory of the adult protagonist of his popular adult book series, The No. 1 Ladies’ Detective Agency. According to Clare Counihan’s “Detecting Outside History in The No. 1 Ladies’ Detective Agency,” in McCall Smith’s adult-marketed series, “Amidst the fantasy of an African oasis … these texts imply that Botswana exists outside the networks of global exchange as a refuge in the desert of troubled Africa … [depicting] the ‘real’ Botswana as incompatible with modernity (101–02). In other words, the Africa depicted in McCall Smith’s popular series for adults is loving but inaccurate, and the same can be said for McCall Smith’s Early Reader series based on Precious Ramotswe as an eight-year-old budding detective.

In the three-book Early Reader series, Precious practices her deductive reasoning and determines, in the first book, that monkeys are stealing the children’s sweets and not her chubby classmate; uses her fast thinking to enlist her friend’s pet meerkat to help find the family’s missing cow in Book 2; and then finally calls upon her natural instincts to find a trained lion missing from a movie set. The simple, classic mystery format that is common in Early Reader mysteries positions Precious as the great brain of the story, for whom the puzzle pieces fit together to solve a rather low-stakes problem in her community. But as Precious moves about the rural and idyllic—read “primitive”—Botswana of a primarily literary imagination, solving mysteries based on personified animals, it would be hard to argue that McCall Smith’s stories are invoking “real sociocultural and political situations.” To be sure, setting the Precious Ramotswe series in Africa does not make the series any more complex or sophisticated than Early Reader mystery series like Ron Roy’s A to Z Mysteries or David A. Adler’s Cam Jansen Mysteries. For McCall Smith, Africa is just an exotic backdrop for an otherwise typical Early Reader story. Atinuke’s Africa, on the other hand, complicates the typical children’s literature version of Africa because it exists as a complicated presence in the lives of her young protagonists. Through her depiction of Anna and No. 1’s lives in contemporary Nigeria, Atinuke resists the tendency to make Africa apolitical, positioning the Early Reader audience, despite just learning how to read, to already know how to think.

Like other creative authors of Early Readers, Atinuke is pushing the boundaries of the literary category not so much in form—and not just because they offer a welcome level of diversity to the category, though they do—but in her willingness to construct a reader who is interested in knowing about and capable of understanding the complexities of class and
cultural ideology. True, Anna’s adventures are often of the low-stakes variety that is common in Early Readers—going to school for the first time, hiding from getting her hair combed, being blamed for eating the candy her brothers stole. However, they emerge from a more complicated cultural and ideological context that Anna—and readers—must navigate. Anna’s sense of defamiliarization—a more critical examination of the world in which she lives, beginning with her middle-class, multiethnic family—extends to the imagined reader. As Anna wrestles with the ideological tensions that underpin the story’s main conflicts, the reader is also expected to wrestle with her or his own assumptions.

For example, when typical British or American readers meet Anna, her family, and her living arrangements, these newly literate readers are likely to find Anna’s lifestyle unfamiliar, not only in their schema of Africa but also in their own lived experience. Anna lives with “her mother, who is from Canada; her father, who is from Africa; her grandmother and her grandfather; her aunties and her uncles; lots and lots of cousins; and her twin baby brothers, Double and Trouble” (Anna Hibiscus 8). In fact, “[t]here are so many people in Anna Hibiscus’s family that even she cannot count them all” (8). This might be difficult to imagine as it stands in such stark contrast to the idea of the “normal” single-family dwelling of much of the West, of which Atinuke is clearly aware given the way this information is presented to the reader: the narrator is quick to code the family compound as positive, explaining that Anna is lucky because she is “never lonely” (8) and that there are places for Anna to be alone if she chooses to be, to wait “for that exciting moment when her family begins to call—and then a cousin or uncle finds her and her auntyies thank God!” (9). In her article, “Anna Hibiscus: Identity through Home, Family, and Extending Boundaries,” Katherine Cottle explains that sociocultural notions of family in Nigeria provide context for Anna’s story, how singular or nuclear families, and thus the notion of an extended family, are decidedly Western, and not Anna’s experience (35). Even children living in homes with extended family will understand that this is rather uncommon in Western homes. When a notion so basic and “natural” as family and home is made unfamiliar by asserting that Anna’s family compound is in fact perfectly normal, even enviable, the reader is invited to understand that family and home are not static entities.

A bit further into the first story, the reader is introduced to an even more complicated scenario: Anna’s multiethnic family and the ideological differences inherent to Anna’s parents’ different cultural upbringings. A Caucasian woman, Anna’s mother is drawn differently, with paler skin than the other characters (that is, using unshaded black-and-white drawings), often with flyaway hairs escaping her head tie, with only a hint of color, perhaps a sunburn, on her cheeks. Despite her visual differences, Anna’s mother’s is described from the first chapter as an integral part of the family with a close relationship to her sisters-in-law and later by wearing the family garb *cut
from the one same beautiful cloth to show they are all from the one same beautiful family” (Anna Hibiscus 42). The narrator notes that “[e]ven Anna Hibiscus’s mother, who is from Canada, does things the proper African way,” like wearing a suitable swimming costume and “buba and wrappa like the aunties,” pounding yam and cassava in the yard, and cooking and eating food in the traditional way (37). Nonetheless, Anna’s mother’s nostalgia for personal space, the way things were growing up in Canada, drives the conflict of the first episode in the first book. Anna’s mother fondly recalls living in a house with just her and her parents and having “a room all of [her] own” (10). The ideological value system that privileges personal space and prioritizes giving a child her own room and her own bed is exposed here; what would be seen as a good and rather ordinary thing in Western constructions of home and family is redefined and re-examined through a different cultural lens. Anna cannot understand how sleeping alone isn’t a punishment; to her, it is lonely and even a little scary. What’s more, Anna’s cousins and paternal grandmother are likewise perplexed by her mother’s wistfulness: “Nobody likes to sleep alone,’ said Anna Hibiscus’s grandmother” (10), thus reinforcing Anna’s Hibiscus’s perspective as cultural rather than childish folly. Anna reassures her mother, “Don’t worry, Mama … You have all of us now. You will never be alone again’” (10).

The narrative explores this and other cultural conflicts, beginning with notions of personal space and moving on to what reasonable expectations of children and mothers are. Anna’s mother’s nostalgia engenders a plan to go on a beach holiday with just Anna, her parents, and her twin siblings, Double and Trouble. Anna questions the plan: “[W]ho is going to cook and shop and clean … and everything? Who will take care of Double and Trouble? What about me? Who will I play with?” (Anna Hibiscus 11). The family loads up a canoe with boxes of supplies and sets off on the lagoon that runs alongside the big city until they reach the beach house. But the beach house is a lot of work, dusty and dirty with dead bugs and cobwebs that need to be cleaned out. The boxes need to be unpacked, food needs to be purchased at the market, and the children need to be tended to. And it is hot! As Anna’s parents set up the house, Anna is put in charge of babysitting her toddler brothers. By the time the house is ready and the food is made, Anna’s parents are exhausted and cross. When the babies won’t sleep, Anna’s parents must stay up and tend to them. By the next day, Anna’s father agrees to “fetch aunties quick-quick” (23) in order to get the help they need with the cooking and childcare.

When the aunties arrive, they reassure Anna’s mother, “It is not good to be alone … we have to help each other. A husband and three children is too much for one woman alone” (Anna Hibiscus 25). Western readers might find this as perplexing as questioning the importance of personal space: our expectations of women as mothers—especially in children’s literature—are that they are skilled homemakers who can easily complete multiple tasks. Assuming it is only women who can do the cleaning and childcare also
seems out of line with contemporary notions of family dynamics. But here, when the aunties arrive to help Anna’s mother, the reader is invited to feel a sense of relief, that the proper order—interdependence—has been restored: “That night, everyone was happy” (25). Then the older cousins are sent for to help care for the younger cousins, and the uncles are sent for to help entertain Anna’s father, and finally Anna’s grandmother and grandfather are brought over to help keep the peace. Eventually, the whole family is relocated from the compound to the beach house, and “[a]ll together again, Anna Hibiscus’s family had the happiest holiday they had ever had” (32).

As our focalizer, Anna’s perspective on these events may be a complicated one for Western readers, because Anna’s lifestyle is not Western-oriented. This duality is further explored when Anna’s Auntie Comfort plans a visit to the family compound. Auntie Comfort has lived in the United States for some time, and her visit brings out a number of anxieties in the family, especially for Anna’s grandfather. He wonders, will Auntie Comfort remember how to eat and dress in the proper ways? Will she remember to bring gifts for everyone? Has she maintained her familial identity? As it turns out, Auntie Comfort does remember how to eat and dress in the proper ways and to bring gifts for everyone. In the end, Anna knows that “Auntie Comfort was still a true and proper African lady, both modern and traditional”; even Anna’s grandfather announces, “Our daughter has not only come … she has also remained one of us” (Anna Hibiscus 61).

This is not altogether true. When Auntie Comfort first emerges from the car, she is wearing the “biggest, longest, fullest traditional dress that Anna and the cousins had ever seen. It was a miracle that her head tie had fitted inside the car!” (Anna Hibiscus 55). That Auntie Comfort’s garb is exaggerated and performative—which makes everyone gasp as she exits the car (54)—is not directly stated, though can be inferred. This is echoed in the final scene of this chapter when Auntie Comfort is shown in a string bikini splashing in the ocean. The narrator comments, “Lucky, though, thought Anna Hibiscus … Grandmother and Grandfather don’t come to the beach!” (62). Here Anna’s grandfather’s speculation that Auntie Comfort is still “one of us” is not wrong but is challenged. Certainly, Auntie Comfort’s identity is not straightforward or uncomplicated. Living in the United States has influenced her. She even informs her family that she is now called Yemisi because she wants a more African name. Auntie Comfort/Yemisi is performing an African identity for her North American colleagues, adopting a name that better fits with their ideas of Africa, but she is performing for her Nigerian family, too. In these ways, Atinuke manages to avoid what Marie Linton Umeh laments in depictions of African women:

African writers in their struggle to communicate African norms and values must desist from the tendency to perpetuate misconceptions and hackneyed depictions of African womanhood and must in all
Anna Hibiscus and The No. 1 Car Spotter

justice depict ‘woman’ as a whole person who has the inalienable prerogative to be multi-potential through playing broader, self-fulfilling roles outside the family. (192–93)

Atinuke conveys the complex negotiations involved in inhabiting multiple identities because, while Auntie Comfort is not punished for her liminality, she is not allowed to be entirely open about it, either. Auntie Comfort is many things all at once, none of which are easily defined, and Atinuke does not attempt to.

Because it is her stated project to complicate Africa, Atinuke must negotiate the ideological gap between her content and her readers. Anna’s naïveté, due in part to her age, her secluded and middle-class life, and her developing notion of Western life through her Auntie Comfort as well as her Canadian mother and grandmother’s perspectives, works to bridge this schematic gap. But there are no easy answers to the contradictions depicted in this series, especially not those related to class. According to Atinuke,

I don’t think that one can live in Nigeria or write about Nigeria or even Africa and ignore the great difference between the poor and the middle class. Even the poor and the middle class is such an enormous leap. I think certainly in the UK it’s easier to ignore those issues because we live in a much more segregated way. Even though there is poverty in the UK, there are areas that are poor and then there are areas that are middle class and areas that are wealthy. … But in Nigeria and in African those people are on the same street together. (“Interview”)

Through her privileged lifestyle, Anna is allowed to be somewhat removed from concerns about social class. True, outside of her gated compound is the busy, noisy city, but inside the gate is the quiet routine of her safe family that Anna is encouraged to remain within. But “Anna Hibiscus was bored of this quiet. She was bored of playing with her cousins; bored of housework with her mother; bored of listening quietly to her Grandmother and Grandfather” (Anna Hibiscus 68). This is because Anna has come to know the young people selling oranges, vegetables, and matches, frying plantains, and plaiting hair for money outside of the gate. The kids shout and scream and laugh and talk to people, which Anna finds enticing. So Anna fills a basket with fruit from within the compound, fat, juicy fresh fruit, and sells it like she sees the street kids doing. Of course, Anna’s fruit sells quickly; her competitor’s fruit is dusty and small and “orange-brown,” for theirs had traveled along long, bumpy, polluted roads and then shriveled in the sun in dirty markets (73). Although the money she makes excites Anna, she is quickly made to see the big picture. Anna’s father and uncles look worried when they return home from work, noting that the young people selling outside of the gate appear to be in “some kind of trouble” (74):
Anna understands what she has done, that by selling her own fruit for folly she has taken away the livelihood of the other children. Her grandfather reiterates the mistake, telling her, “People will be hungry tonight, Anna, because of what you have done” (75). The next day, Anna’s grandfather instructs Anna to bring her basket, then tells the other children that today Anna will work for them, running back and forth to the hot and crowded market to refill their baskets with fruit to sell. Afterward, her grandfather is clear with Anna, that she is not to work because the hard work is being done for her: “You are a lucky girl. You have a father and mother who work for you. Even I, when I was young, I worked hard for you: for our beautiful big white house, for our garden where you can play and pick fruit any time you like” (71).

Labor and poverty are positioned a bit differently for No. 1. Atinuke’s inspiration for The No. 1 Car Spotter series is light-hearted enough, stemming from “a photograph [her] father emailed to her from Nigeria, which showed a family sitting in the back of a Toyota Corolla pickup truck. Except the front of the pickup had been removed and the back of the pickup was being pulled by six cows. And I wrote the story of how that came to happen, and that’s how the No. 1 was born” (“Interview”). Like Anna, No. 1’s experience also challenges the Western status quo, mostly because of the remote and disconnected village that he lives in, without cell phones or computers—without electricity, even—and without, ironically enough, any working cars. While No. 1 and his grandfather have cultivated the ability to identify a car by the sound of its engines even before they can see its shape, the only car in the village is an abandoned Toyota Corolla that is beyond repair. In certain ways, No. 1’s village is more reflective of typical depictions of Africa in children’s literature: remote, dusty, under-developed. But in no way is No. 1’s village set in a timeless, fairy-tale bubble, either. No. 1 is very aware of what other places have, even the towns and cities that are near him—a mere car ride away, but to which he has never been. As No. 1 watches the Mercedes and Suzukis and Toyotas zoom past his village, he fantasizes about their wealth and city lives; he even aspires to have the same, telling his friends, “And when I pass you in my big car, listening to my big stereo, on my way from one big city to the other, I will honk my horn and wave to you” (Firebird 13). To be sure, the limitations of living in a remote village are not romanticized here.

In the first book of the series, when No. 1’s grandmother is sick, the family does not have enough money to pay for a doctor and medicine for her: “The money did not reach” (The No. 1 92). The rhythm of the village is
thrown off by No. 1’s grandmother’s absence: No. 1’s sister struggles to herd the goats alone without her mother, who is at the grandmother’s bedside, and the aunties must work the fields with babies on their backs without the grandmother to watch the children and then return home early to make food for everyone. The village is helpless in the face of what is actually a very curable illness. The only solution is to send for No. 1’s father, who has left the village. According to Cottle, “studies in Nigeria have found that extended families and ‘continued maintenance of linkages between members of the same kin group’ are credited with a higher economic status and success” (33). Unlike Anna’s family, who can afford to live together in a compound, many of the men and even some women have left No. 1’s village to work in the city and send money back when they can. Communication with those that have left the village is spotty at best; it is the taxi driver who often passes the village on his way to and from the city that the family dispatches to find No. 1’s father to help them. But the taxi driver cannot find him for No. 1’s father no longer works as a gardener for a rich man in the city (93). While No. 1’s father does return home to the village, which is celebrated as a good sign, he must finally report that he has been unemployed for a month: “Since then I have been applicant. I have been going from one place to another. They all say the same thing. No job. No job. No job. Olori mi, I have no money for doctor” (97).

The matter is resolved when a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) man offers No. 1 and his sister wheelbarrows, “to improve village life” (The No. 1 100), and No. 1’s father starts a business hauling goods. Within days the taxi man brings an envelope of money to No. 1’s mother, enough for transport to the medical center and medical care. Grandmother returns healthy soon after, and order is restored to the village. But the frustration remains: the basic needs of the community members are not being met. In fact, a sense of “two steps forward and one step back” occurs throughout the series. For every windfall of money—from an electric idea, new business plan, or reward—there is a loss that needs to be recovered. When No. 1 realizes that the cart he created from the broken-down Toyota Corolla in the first book can be used to carry people over the temporarily flooded road in the second book—at “forty naira per person” (Firebird 50)—the windfall goes to replace some goats that a leopard had eaten earlier in the story. When No. 1 is given reward money for trying to stop a car thief, and later more money for discovering a car-stealing ring in the third book, the money goes to replace a broken palm-oil press and to pay for No. 1’s uncle’s hospital bills. Also, while No. 1 has great ideas, they don’t always work right away; they are often no match for more powerful forces like nature and modernity. It is as if No. 1 has potentially lucrative ideas, but not until he negociates these ideas. The No. 1 car spotter, the person who is educated and aware of the world outside of the traditional village but also fully entrenched in the values of his traditional village, succeeds when he balances the past and the future.
Unlike Anna—and many of the Western readers of Atinuke’s Early Reader series—who learns about poverty second-hand, No. 1’s skills are those that allow his community to survive the limitations of poverty. His efforts contribute to his village’s economy in meaningful ways, while Anna’s efforts are usually less substantive. For example, in *Hooray for Anna Hibiscus*, Anna wants to ride on the ferry across the lagoon to see “the other side of the city” (91). Cousin Wonderful asks Anna, “What can there be to see? It can only be more houses like this. More people like us” (91). Even Anna’s auntsies are discouraging, reminding her, “The people there are poor. It is not a good place. The other side of the city has nothing to do with you” (93). Anna’s grandfather makes it clearer for Anna: “It is not bad [to be poor]. It is not wrong. But it is not easy to be very poor” (94). Anna’s mother adds: “It is not easy to look at poverty either” (94). But the family acquiesces, letting her go and see so that she can know about poverty, but only so that she can see how lucky she is (95). Anna, unfortunately, dresses for the occasion in her smartest Sunday attire, and as a result Anna stands out on the overloaded and dirty ferry and quickly soils her dress and loses a shoe besides.

As soon as she steps off of the ferry she sees “a beggar girl holding her hands out for coins. Her hair was ragged and matted into dusty, dirty clumps. She had no legs” (*Hooray* 102). Although the beggar girl calls out to her for help, Anna has no money for her. Anna moves away with her family into “[o]ne-room houses made of old, rotting wood and rusty, corrugated iron patched with cardboard boxes. Among them were big piles of rotting rubbish. The sound of babies crying and people shouting filled the air” (103). Soon Anna is sent back outside and finds naked and rag-clothed children walking all over the rubbish pile, picking things out and eating them (105). Anna is dumbfounded, and all she can think is that she hoped that none of them would notice that she doesn’t have to eat rubbish and has pretty dresses (105). Anna sees a girl with one flip-flop, so Anna offers her one remaining shoe so that the girl has a pair. Despite only wearing ragged grey underwear, the girl happily skips away. Anna then gives her Sunday best dress to one of the naked children, and then her hair ribbons to the girl with no legs, who looks at Anna with wide eyes and whispers, “God bless you!” (109). Despite being left only wearing her underwear, Anna happily makes the trek home with her family who praises her for her generosity.

Similarly, in book 5, *Welcome Home Anna Hibiscus*, Anna and her wealthy friend Tiger Lily give beggars money from Tiger Lily’s limo’s window. It is a particularly overwhelming scene, even to Anna; once Anna gives a few coins to one child, other beggars swarm the car, reaching their arms in and banging on the windows (77). When Anna gives away Tiger Lily’s money to a mother with a sick, crying baby, money that Tiger Lily had planned to spend on an iPod, the two girls are left in contemplation: “They did not talk. They were thinking of all the faces, all the mothers and children...
and babies. The people they helped and those they had not been able to help” (79). When Tiger Lily breaks the silence, she asks if they can play at Anna’s house, instead—“With all of the cousins. It was so much fun!” (79)—quickly shifting the mood. After Tiger Lily leaves that evening, the cousins are busy wishing they were rich like Tiger Lily. But Anna is conflicted, because the rich people she had seen at Tiger Lily’s house were serious and cold. Anna determines she does not want to be poor, either: “I do not want to be sick and hungry and frightened” (81). Anna realizes, “I am happy to be myself” (81). While this exclamation is an oversimplification of emotions often found in children’s books, it is also complicated given the cultural context. Poverty is visceral for Anna. She is protected from, but also a part of, a community that includes poverty in ways that are ugly and confrontational. While not unique to Africa, this treatment of poverty in an Early Reader is certainly unusual.

The money that Anna distributes out a car window stands in stark contrast to how money is treated in No. 1’s village, where money is a fleeting thing used merely for those items and services they cannot grow on their own, like shoes and school supplies and medicine, rather than for collecting. There is no sense of the village striving for success in the Western sense of getting rich, though the village’s poverty is often juxtaposed against city wealth. And No. 1 is not a part of a system where others are doing work for him. Poverty is not just ugly and hard; it’s a part of his day-to-day life. As in the Anna series, poverty is a direct part of the conversation, politicized even amidst No. 1’s lighthearted stories. Take for example a long conversation between No. 1 and a university professor. The professor drives a Firebird—the only one in the country—a car that No. 1 adores most of all. Grandfather teaches the wealthy, Western-educated professor about the sense of community among the poor, where “[o]ne person’s problem is always everybody’s problem” (Car Thief 45). The professor realizes that when cars get stolen from No. 1’s neighbor’s akara stand, it is more than the car owner who suffers, as people refuse to eat at the stand because of a danger to their property. In turn, the family does not have money to send Coca-Cola, No. 1’s best friend, to school. And, if he does not go to school, he “will not become a rich man and live in a fine house and drive his own car. He will push a wheelbarrow full of soft drinks for the rest of his life” (44). No. 1’s grandfather explains to the professor that the poor do not suffer alone: “Everybody suffers from poverty. From the loss of teachers and doctors who could have saved lives, leaders and inventors who could have made lives better” (46).

The larger stories of both Anna Hibiscus and No. 1 Car Spotter are about the young protagonists’ ever-expanding worlds, namely the class and cultural systems in which they are a part. What results are Early Readers that do what Roberta Seelinger Trites argues is more common in adolescent literature than children’s. According to Trites, “Children’s literature often affirms the child’s sense of self and his or her own personal power,”
whereas in adolescent literature, the teenaged characters “must learn about
the social forces that have made them what they are” (3). While Anna is
a naïve character, protected as she is by her family’s privileged existence
in a lush, walled-off family compound; and while No. 1 is, too, watched
over, chastised, and even comforted by his whole village, their journeys
intrinsically involve their increasing awareness of the social systems—class
and culture especially—that underpin their family’s behaviors and values.
Anna, for example, journeys from the safety of her family’s compound to
the busy streets and the crowded neighborhoods beyond the compound
walls, to Canada and back, only to find that her home is a more com-
licated place than she had originally known. This is especially apparent
when Anna returns from her trip to visit her grandmother in Canada and
becomes increasingly aware that not everyone fully understands her any-
more. Upon her return, Anna has forgotten how loud her family is and that
her grandfather looks small and old. Anna’s grandfather notes that Anna,
though, “looks good and fat” (Welcome Home 10). These external changes
reflect her internal change: an awareness that culture defines life and val-
ues, and that “other” ways are not inherently wrong. The narrator explains
that Anna “had been afraid to go to Canada, where everything as new and
strange. She had not guessed that coming home would be difficult too”
(14). Anna notes that before the trip, she had not understood Canada, but
now her family does not understand her. Later she is reassured that “her
family no longer understood her in every way. But they still loved her” (20).
No. 1, too, is fully aware that any sort of disruption—leopards, floods,
ilness, crime—can dislocate the rhythm of his village. And at any time he
might be enlisted to help. His home is not unsafe, but it is variable, depen-
dent, and limited. Whereas many children’s books begin and end in a safe
and comfortable home, No. 1’s is much less stable, not through anyone’s
fault, but because of the contemporary social conditions of modern Nigeria.
No. 1’s grandfather complains that in the old days, the village’s men, who
have all left to earn money in the city, could have rebuilt the broken wagon
that transports goods to the market. Mama adds, “Before—before our vil-
lage was so full of women … we could have carried everything to market on
our heads” (The No. 1 22). In any case, the village has changed, and these
changes affect No. 1 in real ways, where advice from an elder is not enough
to solve the problems in his life.
What’s interesting in Atinuke’s Early Readers is how she both acknowl-
edges the tension in Anna and No. 1’s worlds and leaves it unresolved,
where more typical Early Readers will rush to simplify these complexities.
Both Anna and No. 1 must navigate their own cultural identity amidst a
place that is torn between the past and the present, wealth and poverty, tech-
nology and storytelling. Unlike many other Early Readers that remain in a
comforting space, Atinuke’s books are designed to be about the unfamiliar,
to expose readers to ideas—culture, dress, lifestyles—that are unlike their
own, even as Atinuke caters to the perceived needs of the newly independent
Western reader. Atinuke says that cultural difference is all over, even in small countries like Nigeria, so that plurality in language and custom is common. Because of this, Atinuke doesn’t try to depict “authentic” Nigeria, refusing to totalize and quantify the “truth” of a diverse nation on a diverse continent. Combined, Anna’s and No. 1’s stories are meant to complicate Africa for Western readers, though they goes beyond that. Atinuke’s perception of the imagined child reader is one who, like Anna and No. 1, cannot ignore class and ideological difference, injustice, and inequity.

Works Cited


