

INTRODUCTION

African Literature in the World

Most of the materials collected here were written at the interstices of the twentieth and twenty-first century in response to the challenge of producing African knowledge in spaces of institutional displacement. With a few exceptions each chapter was conceived as a historical, theoretical, and textual response to ongoing debates on the relevance and transformative power of African literature and culture, which appeared, especially in the last two decades of the twentieth century, to be a disciplinary formation without a home. None of these chapters could be said to have been produced in states of exile or marginality; in fact, they were all written inside privileged American institutions and disseminated in authoritative forums; and yet, no study of Africa in the late twentieth century could escape the shadow of the continent's marginality in Euro-American institutions of knowledge production. From the perspective of African intellectuals, especially those who had been instrumental in building the postcolonial institutions of literary criticism after independence in the 1960s, the source of this marginality was simply the collapse of the African university as the site of decolonial forms of knowledge.

In the 1980s, when institutions of higher education in Africa collapsed because they were not deemed central to global developmental projects sponsored by multilateral organizations, the most influential African scholars found themselves marooned in European and American institutions. They discovered, as Abiola Irele put it aptly in his preface to *The African Imagination*, that they were no longer connected to “an audience constituted by the local community of students and scholars,” and that the flourishing tradition of African writing in the European languages that had been hailed as seminal achievement in African institutions was still “considered a very narrow area of studies in Western universities.”¹ As early as 1973, Wole Soyinka, newly appointed as a visiting fellow at Churchill College, Cambridge, would be surprised to discover that his seminal lectures on literature and society could not count on the support of the

English Department because that department, one of the most influential in the anglophone world, or perhaps “some key individual” did not “believe in any such mythical beast as ‘African Literature’.”² At that time Soyinka was the author of several plays and two novels, a few of which had been incorporated in the curriculum in African high schools and universities. How could African literary and cultural criticism flourish in an age when the only authorized intellectual work was that which served the goals and interests of old colonial arrangements?

By the time I entered the American academy as a graduate student in the 1980s, the idea of whether an African literature existed had been settled in the institutions of knowledge production. The powerful irruption of an African literary tradition in the age of decolonization could not be denied, and influential series devoted to African literature, most notably the Heinemann African Writers Series, were a visible part of the African presence in global literary culture. There were, however, continuing debates on the location of this literature in relation to the disciplines assigned to the study of Africa. There were institutional and interpretative doubts about the place of this literature in the national literature departments (English and French, primarily), or even in Comparative Literature departments, which continued to privilege European languages and literary traditions. For the few scholars of African literature who worked in American institutions, a pressing question was whether African literature could be delinked from the authorized Euro-American discourses that seemed unable to imagine Africa in its plurality as “a geographic place of similar and different experiences.”³ Many critics welcomed the theoretical openings provided by the poststructuralist critique of European reason; however, it was not clear whether this critique had been able to liberate Africa from the prison house of alterity.⁴ Poststructuralism seemed to provide an alternative space outside the compulsory humanism of English or American literary criticism; nonetheless, this new theoretical formation still operated within disciplinary boundaries with deep colonial origins.

Consider this: For most of the 1980s, African literature in the United States tended to be mostly taught or used in social science departments (anthropology, sociology, and history) or in Black Studies departments. Each disciplinary formation promoted a certain idea of Africa: Within the social science disciplines, Africa was connected to American responses to the Cold War. The study of African knowledge and languages could not be separated from the national security projects developed to counter the influence of the former Soviet Union in cultural matters. The umbrella

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organization for African Studies in the United States was the African Studies Association whose vision was often aligned with national security interests. Within this umbrella organization, the disciplines that seemed most relevant were in the social sciences; the humanities and arts in general and African literature in particular had a minimal role in these foreign relations projects. This sense of marginality was the trigger for the break-away group that set up the African Literature Association in 1974. My critique of what I called the social science paradigm can be explained by this history.⁵

Arriving in the United States at the tail end of the Black Aesthetic project of the late 1960s and 1970s, I couldn't escape the influence of Black Studies, which I had encountered as a central feature of the decolonization of the curriculum at the University of Nairobi. Indeed, my academic career was defined by a desire to reconcile English and Black Studies, a critical gesture that saw the bringing together of these two formations as one way of avoiding both the belated Englishness of American New Criticism and the vulgate of colonial Africanism. It was, however, difficult to escape these established forms of critique: Could one escape Englishness in English Studies? And didn't the desire for a unanimous Africa that animated some Black Studies projects not replicate Africanism?

A major change in my engagement with African literature took place in the 1990s when postcolonial criticism emerged as an important conduit for channeling the critique of European reason initiated by poststructuralism. Although postcolonial criticism tended to draw primarily from the literary histories of South Asia and migrant writers in the European or American metropolis, it was not possible to have a discussion of postcoloniality, its discourses and texts, without some engagement with Africa. Despite being surrounded with controversies that I discuss in several chapters, postcolonial criticism would provide scholars of African literature with two theoretically important lines of inquiry: First, it opened a space for undertaking what Edward Said called a contrapuntal reading of literature. A "contrapuntal reading," Said argued with reference to Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, was a means of reading a text "with an understanding of what is involved when an author shows, for instance, that a colonial sugar plantation is seen as important to the process of maintaining a particular style of life in England." It was the kind of reading that took "account of both processes, that of imperialism and that of resistance to it, which can be done by extending our reading of the texts to include what was once forcibly excluded."⁶

Metropolitan institutions of interpretation were more open to these kinds of contrapuntal readings so long as they were centered on English texts. This is how postcolonial criticism came to be associated with the rereading of English texts in relation to imperial geographies: Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* and its relation to Caribbean slave plantations; E. M. Forster's *Passage to India* and the Orientalist trope; the intertextual relation of Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*; Australia as the unconscious of Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*; and impressionism and the Congo in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Some critics worried that contrapuntal readings were not attentive to the genealogies of literatures produced in the colonies themselves or that colonial spaces and writers were being read in a secondary relationship to European texts. My contention, however, is that a rereading of canonical European texts did indeed provide an aperture for postcolonial texts as a crucial part of Englishness itself, a conduit for the entry of the (post)colonial into literature departments. For example, the invocation of Forster would invite Mulk Raj Anand into debates about modernism and this would in turn dilate the boundaries of Bloomsbury and British literature at the beginning of the twentieth century. And it was no longer possible to write about Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* without an engagement with Chinua Achebe's early novels and his denunciation of the Anglo-Polish writer in "An Image of Africa."⁷

Second, a certain poststructuralist concern with the problem of difference was a significant disruption of the universalist claims of literary criticism and European ideas that had underwritten the literary disciplines. While it was not always clear how difference or *Différance* in poststructuralism differed from the discourse of alterity associated with Africanism, a poststructuralist thinking attracted postcolonial intellectuals because it set, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak once put it, "metropolitan accounts askew."⁸ Moreover, postcolonial criticism enabled African critics separated from what Irele described as their "immediate audience" to undertake intellectual work within institutions that considered Africa marginal to the production of knowledge. V. Y. Mudimbe's seminal books from this period used the techniques of structuralism to demonstrate how Africa had been central to the making of modern knowledge through the discourses that had sought to exclude the continent from the logic of Enlightenment.⁹ Similarly, works by feminist scholars such as Ifi Amadiume and Oyèrónkẹ Oyěwùmí used African historical experiences and cosmologies to challenge a range of assumptions about modernity, gender, race, class, sexuality, and even the idea of life itself.¹⁰

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I benefited immensely from these debates, but my scholarship overall tended to focus on literary forms, genres, and theories in which Africa was not so much a central object of analysis but a catalytic for rethinking dominant forms. My work remained that of a Europeanist not an Africanist. So, while I wrote about African writers – and Africa remained the primary referent for my intellectual work – teaching in American universities was a constant reminder of the double bind of African literary criticism: How to think about Africa away from Africa and to put the continent at the center of the institutions of interpretation in places and spaces where it was considered marginal. Was it possible to write about African literature so that it would be intelligible to American audiences without reproducing already existing ideas of Africa either as a place imprisoned in a “savage slot” or as the figure of romantic desires?¹¹

In North America, perhaps more than in Europe, finding a way around Africanism was a challenge partly because this discourse and its idiom came from both a negative and affirmative direction: From the negative side, the whole project of African Studies was built on the Hegelian idea of African lack – that the continent had been locked out of modern time and was primed for development through the patronage of the West. From the positive side, especially in schools of Afro-Centrism, Africa had a surplus of history, an affirmative culture, and could be the point of origin of civilization itself. I tried to avoid Africanism simply by refusing to deal with Africa either in its pure phenomenality, which certain ideologies of blackness were promoting, or within the social science paradigm authorized by African Studies programs. I wrote about African writers but not the institution or canon of African letters. My goal was to understand the continent in relation to other spaces, paradigms, and ideologies – Englishness, diaspora, and comparative literature.

This book, then, is a gathering of reflections that deployed the name and figure of Africa in rethinking the categories that have shaped intellectual debates in modernity and its afterlife. The first part of the book contains mostly previously unpublished essays revolving around the criticism of African Literature. As I argue in Chapter 1, my understanding of African literary history cannot be separated from anxieties and expectations rooted in late colonialism and the promise of decoloniality. Born in the last years of British colonialism in a “protected village,” I have only vague traces and dim remembrances of the violence of that period – the watch towers, the security guards, villagers returning from incarceration in detention camps, and, most poignantly, my grandmother and mother mourning a dead husband and father and an uncle who had been killed in what they called

“the troubles.” I do recall the melancholic songs of young men repatriated from the farms and towns where they had sought work, victims of the colonial government’s efforts to contain radical nationalism.

Nevertheless, my deepest and long-lasting memories are those of the books that my father, a school master, would read to us in the stillness of the night after the bugles had announced the beginning of the night curfew. These books contained the seeds of my own sentimental education into English and Englishness. Initially written as my first “Editor’s Column” on assuming the editorship of the *PMLA*, the official journal of the Modern Language Association, the first chapter is an overture, an opening to my coming into this thing called literature and of the intersection of writing, reading, and thinking in the making of (post)colonial subjects.

Given my background as a child of empire in one of the few settler colonies in Africa, the question of English has been more than an academic exercise. As is well known, the production of literature in colonial languages was seen by the elites as a necessary step in the quest for decoloniality. In Kenya, for example, the attainment of independence was heralded as the teleological moment in which both the defeat and triumph of English and Englishness would be revealed. The common assumption then was that decolonization represented the defeat of English as the handmaiden of empire; the hope was that in the hands of an emergent generation of African writers, the colonial language would be nationalized and become the vehicle for decolonial aspirations. In fact, as I show in Chapters 2 and 3 decolonization had always been a surreptitious fight for either the right to the colonial language or a reaction against it as the form in which the African mind continued to be colonized.¹²

These two chapters up the question of English as an essential but problematic part of the genealogy of imaginative writing in Africa within a number of contexts: I start with the globalization of English and its expansive power. Why is it that of all the major languages of the world English has come to occupy an unquestioned position, the conduit to modernity and modernization, and indeed global citizenship? In Chapter 2, I complicate the narrative of English as hegemonic and compulsory by focusing on what Aamir R. Mufti has aptly called “*the cultural system of English*.”¹³ I probe this system further in Chapter 3 where I start with the so-called language question debate, a long-running argument among African writers on the status and function of the English language in the making of African letters. I see this debate not simply as a feud on language use but the symptom of a deep anxiety about what it has meant to

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produce a literature intended to signal autonomy in the language of the former colonizer.

While the language debate has tended to be a lightning rod in African literary criticism, few writers and critics involved in the debate questioned the institution of criticism and its efficacy. Chapter 4 is a case study of the role literary criticism came to play in the adumbration of the contours of African writing as embodied in the work of Abiola Irele, perhaps the most dominant figure in African literary critical studies in the second half of the twentieth century. My concern in this chapter is how Irele, working within three distinct cultural formations – the English, the French, and the Yoruba – turned to literary criticism as both a quest for a tradition and a critique of traditionalism. As I argue in this chapter, Irele's critical work reflects the antinomies that would come to define African literary history itself. Beginning his career at the University of Ibadan in the triumphant moment of decolonization, Irele was conscious of what he considered to be the alienated situation of the African as a formerly colonized subject; yet, following on the footsteps of F. R. Leavis, the Cambridge University literary critic, he posited criticism as the site where writers, critics, and readers met, brought together by shared traditions and sensibilities. However, later in his career Irele found that although he was working in some of the most prestigious American institutions, he could not turn to literary criticism to overcome the gap between his critical claims and an African audience from which he had been separated.

One of the significant, and largely positive, consequences of the expatriation or exile of African knowledge was that it was taking place in the same period when literary studies in American universities was being unsettled by European (mainly French) theory. I discuss this unsettling in Chapter 5 where I show how the poststructuralist deconstruction of European systems of thought from within led intellectuals to rethink the location of Africa in global conceptual systems.¹⁴ Poststructuralism raised the possibility of thinking about Africa otherwise. At the same time, however, the question of referents and audiences remained an unresolved source of tension. There seemed to be a bifurcation between creative writing, which continued to assume an African referent and audience, and the criticism of this literature ensconced in Euro-American institutions. African literary studies often seemed distanced from African histories and social structures. In this context, the question of orality and oral literature, which I discuss in Chapter 6, was central to a rethinking of the identity of African literature and its history. Taking off from Eileen Julien's work on orality and the African novel, I push the question of orality further by

exploring how, in the hands of what I call vernacular intellectuals, the oral imagination was inseparable from writing.¹⁵ Writing enabled orality to enter the colonial public sphere; conversely, literature needed orality in order to assert its African identity.

The second part of the book revolves around cultures of the novel. When, how, and why did the novel, a genre without deep roots in African cultures and literary traditions, come to occupy such a dominant role in African literary history? My basic assumption is that although the novel might appear to be the most alien of literary genres in Africa, it was the one that emerged at the moment when the literary was summoned to serve the project of decolonization. Arriving late in the colonial period, the novel created new parameters for the African imagination and provided an opening for thinking about colonial modernity and its postcolonial consequences. My primary concern here is how the sociality of the novel came to be defined by two ostensibly contradictory functions: On one hand, the novel attracted African elites in the late colonial period because they assumed that the genre would best register the tragedy of colonization, notably its cultural deracination, its destruction of subjects, and its denial of African agency. On the other hand, the novel was often asked to help African subjects imagine a future beyond colonialism. As I show in Chapters 7 and 8, realism, romance, and tragedy went hand in hand as novelists negotiated the lived experience of African subjects under colonialism and the desire for a postcolonial world yet to come.

The fact that the novel was an imported genre also meant that African writers who used it needed to signal its function in contexts that were far removed from the European experiences and ideas that had generated the emergence of the genre in the first place. In Chapter 9 I reflect on how the genre traveled and thrived outside its European setting. A central claim here is that contrary to the diffusionist theories of the novel favored by critics such as Franco Moretti, postcolonial writers in general assumed that the novel would inevitably be forced to adapt to local circumstances and hence remain a genre that was simultaneously local and universal.¹⁶ In Chapter 10, I establish an explicit connection between novelistic discourse and the project of cultural translation. In order for novels to perform significant cultural work, writers had to make African idioms and speech forms intelligible to outsiders without reaffirming the forms of colonial knowledge.

Ultimately, African novelistic discourses needed to find forms for negotiating one of the key ironies of decolonization, namely the fact that far from representing a new time the independent nation was imprisoned in

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the very temporality that it sought to overcome. What kind of narrative did “arrested decolonization” need or demand?¹⁷ I address this question in Chapter 11 where I propose that the narrative of decolonization is an example of what Hannah Arendt described as the time between the “no longer and not yet.”¹⁸ Using Achebe’s *Arrow of God*, I reflect on the novel as a mode of mediating a temporality that is simultaneously the past and the present, concurrently preoccupied with the teleology of the time ushered in by colonialism and aware of the limits of linearity.

If I seem to focus on the novel more than other genres, it is also because of a particular interest in modernity as a central problematic in African imaginative work. The novel and modernity were born in Europe at the same time; in Africa they met their possibilities and limits, the subject of the third part of the book. Modernity did not, however, enter African fiction as the form in which colonial logic was expressed against a so-called traditional world. One of the great ironies of the work of producing a modern literature in Africa is that this was a phenomenon that could not be separated from colonial institutions, ideas, and practices. I establish the conditions that enabled this literature in Chapter 12 where I discuss the fashioning of African subjects as writers and the overdetermining power of colonial institutions in the invention of African literature. In Chapter 13, I turn my attention to the variety of forms in which the figure of the modern was represented in works that were not explicitly about modernity. The obvious examples here are Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, but one could also add Flora Nwapa’s *Efuru* and Elechi Amadi’s *The Concubine* to this list. These are novels where the referents are obviously precolonial while the ideas and the forms are about the nature and meaning of the modern. Chapter 14 discusses what at one point seemed to me to be the tension between, on one hand, the experience and discourse of modernity and, on the other hand, postcolonial criticism as an alternative to regimens of interpretation tied to the history of colonialism and cultural nationalism. A central concern in this chapter is what happens when we read African literary texts themselves as forms of theoretical intervention.

The question of modernity in Africa cannot be separated from the discourse of Africanism that I discussed earlier in this introduction. As I have argued elsewhere, Africa has always been marked as the other of the West and in this otherness it has been deemed the unmodern subject associated with a figure – fetishism – that is emblematic of the irrational.¹⁹ This is the central assumption in the discourse of the Enlightenment where fetishism is associated with an unmodern blackness. The same assumption was at play when European modernism incorporated African figures – including those derided

as fetishes in Enlightenment discourses – as part of its quest for a desire outside modern rationality. Africa has always been part of the modern; modernism is part of the identity of the continent. Nevertheless, for reasons that I discuss in Chapter 15, the idea of a modern or contemporary art in Africa does not always sit well with the institutions of criticism and interpretation. This chapter, which originated as a comprehensive review of *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945–1994*, a landmark exhibition of African art curated by Okwui Enwezor in 2002, examines the denial of a modern African art, one with deep connections to global modernism, as a dynamic form that is indispensable to the African imagination in the twentieth century.

Modernism did not rescue African discourses from the stigma of the unmodern; what it did was foreground and expose what Terry Eagleton has called “the aesthetic ideology,” the category that allows us to gain access to “certain central questions of modern European thought – to light up . . . a range of wider social, political and ethical issues.”²⁰ Chapter 16 marks a return to a problem that continues to inspire and haunt the study of Africa in modernity and modernism – what is the role of the aesthetic in the constitution of African imaginaries? While my starting point in this chapter is the problematic relationship between the African subject and some dominant European ideas about blackness and Africanness, I’m keen to understand how literature and art came to function as a play of forms, styles, or affects that made the African imagination itself a mode of thought. This chapter also takes up debates about *Négritude* as one of the most important aesthetic ideologies that emerged in the twentieth century to counter the image of Africa in the European imagination. Here I focus on the debates surrounding *Négritude* to call attention to how African writers saw literature as a venue and method for challenging particular European ideas about Africa and to question nationalist desires for a unanimous African identity. It is not by accident that the literature of decolonization tended to take the form of a romantic or nostalgic yearning for a pure African represented by the figure of the mother, as was the case in Camara Laye’s *L’Enfant noir* (1953), or a satirical rejection of idealized identities such as Yambo Ouologuem’s *Le Devoir de violence* (1968).

The affirmation and contestation of *Négritude* ultimately leads to the question that has come to shape the history of African literature in the twenty-first century: What happens to African imaginaries when they have overflowed geographical boundaries and established historical time frames and African worlds have become global outside the gaze of empire and nation? Most of the essays collected here were written in what has come to