

AFRICAN LITERATURE IN THE WORLD

In *African Literature in the World*, Simon Gikandi asks: Why do debates on language continue to inform and haunt African writing? What happened when writing replaced orality as the primary form of creative expression? When, how, and why did the novel come to occupy such a dominant role in African literary history?

This is a comprehensive study of the histories and theories of African literature in the twentieth century and shows how African writers adopted and transformed the English language and its traditions to account for African identities and experiences. Concerned with writing and reading as forms of mediation, Gikandi provides examples of how imaginative works shaped the public sphere in Africa in relation to decolonization and the politics of language. He explores how the emergence of a modern tradition of African writing has generated new forms of criticism in relation to the form of the novel, modernity, and modernism.

SIMON GIKANDI is Class of 1943 University Professor of English at Princeton University. He is a scholar of the literatures of Africa and its diasporas, and postcolonial criticism, and the author of many award-winning books including *Slavery and the Culture of Taste*, winner of the James Russell Lowell Prize.

“This indispensable volume by a preeminent scholar offers fresh ways to think about African writing and literary criticism in the context of world literature. Always alert to the global locations of authors, readers, scholars, and ideas, Simon Gikandi examines the shifting histories of literary genres, questions the limits of postcolonial theory, and reflects on the role of intellectuals in African literary criticism. In the process, he reimagines colonial identity and modernity, and rethinks debates about the language of African literature. The intellectual honesty of this volume rubs off on readers as Gikandi blends cultural history with theory, personal reflections, and close readings.”

*Stephanie Newell, George M. Bodman Professor of English,
Yale University*

“To read Simon Gikandi’s *African Literature in the World* is to bear witness to a master craftsman at work. The modulation of his critical rhythms, the isolation of examples and then the manner of their embedding in larger patterns of significance, and the absolute clarity of his expression deliver to us African literature and literary history as worthy objects of serious scholarly attention. Superb!”

*Ato Quayson, Jean G. and Morris M. Doyle Professor of Interdisciplinary
Studies, Stanford University*

AFRICAN LITERATURE IN THE WORLD

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Princeton University, New Jersey



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*To the memory of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, Mĩcere Mũgo, Henry
Chakava, and Abiola Irele, teachers, mentors, friends, in
remembrance of times past . . .*

*“for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you
gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in.”*

Matthew 25:35

The regeneration of Africa means that a new and unique civilization is soon to be added to the world. The African is not a proletarian in the world of science and art. He has precious creations of his own, of ivory, of copper and of gold, fine plaited willow-ware, and weapons of superior workmanship. Civilization resembles an organic being in its development – it is born, it perishes, and it can propagate itself. More particularly it resembles a plant, it takes root in the teeming earth, and when the seeds fall in other soils, new varieties sprout up. The most essential departure of this new civilization is that it shall be thoroughly spiritual and humanistic – indeed a regeneration moral and eternal!

P. Ka Isaka Seme, “The Regeneration of Africa,” Curtis Medal
Oration, delivered at Columbia University, New York City,
April 5, 1906

Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>page ix</i>
Introduction: African Literature in the World	i
PART I THE CRITICISM OF AFRICAN LITERATURE	
1 This Thing Called Literature . . . What Work Does It Do?	17
2 Provincializing English	29
3 The (De)formation of English	41
4 The Politics of African Literary Criticism	63
5 Africa in Poststructuralism and Postcolonial Criticism	78
6 Orality and the Writing Lesson	94
PART II THE CULTURAL WORK OF THE NOVEL	
7 Realism, Romance, and the Problem of African Literary History	113
8 Romance, Tragedy, and the Narrative of Decolonization	131
9 Transporting Fiction: The Novel in a (Post)Colonial World	146
10 Cultural Translation and the Task of Writing	162
11 <i>Arrow of God</i> : The Novel and the Problem of Modern Time	179
PART III ON MODERNITY/MODERNISM	
12 African Literature and the Colonial Factor	203

viii	<i>Contents</i>	
13	African Literature and Modernity	222
14	Reading the Referent: Postcolonialism and the Writing of Modernity	238
15	On Modernism and Nationalism: The Short African Century	256
16	Africa and the Idea of the Aesthetic	276
	<i>Select Bibliography</i>	291
	<i>Index</i>	301

Acknowledgments

This is a book marked by transitions on many levels – transitions between institutions, forms of criticism, and disciplinary formations. Some of the earliest essays, the ones that bear the signs of literary theory as it took hold at the end of the twentieth century, were written when I was at the University of Michigan with appointments and affiliations with the Department of English Literature and the Program in Comparative Literature. The University of Michigan enabled the flourishing of big humanities programs that crossed disciplinary borders and provided me with the freedom to engage with scholars working on Africa and postcolonial questions in history, anthropology, and African and African American studies. The most recent essays, including previously unpublished materials, were written at Princeton University. Princeton provided me with the spaces and resources I needed to sustain the expansive ambition of my work and to take advantage of the research and teaching opportunities offered by the departments I have been affiliated with – English, Comparative Literature, African American Studies, and the Program in African Studies. The writing of this book would not have been possible without the support of extra-departmental programs at Princeton, most notably the Program in International and Regional Studies (PIIRS). These institutions and programs enabled me to continue to push the limits of the way disciplines have been imagined and constructed and to rethink the idea of literature or English outside its institutional histories and conceptual claims.

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opportunity to think about literature outside the confines of a single language and renewed my belief in the power of the humanities to enhance our quality of life in the midst of technological transformations.

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xi

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