

# **What is Africa to me now?**

## **The continent and its literary diasporas**

International conference

University of Liège, Belgium, 21-23 March 2013

The work of writers of African heritage, whether they hail from the “old” or the “new” diaspora, has been known for its exceptional vigour and originality, and has unsurprisingly attracted the attention of scholars from all over the world. In recent years, however, criticism focusing on the production of artists from the old diaspora, either African American or Caribbean, has often examined these authors’ displaced identity in the Americas or in Europe at the expense of their African heritage and their perception of it. Even analyses of contemporary literary texts centring on the slave trade have more readily discussed writers’ representation of history than their engagement with Africa *per se* – the latter topic having seemingly lost the prominence that it once enjoyed in scholarly circles, as writers themselves appear to have less frequently chosen to place the continent of their ancestors at the centre of their fiction and poetry. Yet, in many cases, this African dimension still seems to play a significant role in the overall assessment and understanding of their works, and is therefore worthy of renewed critical attention.

African cultures and settings cannot be said to suffer comparable neglect in recent discussions of works by writers of the new diaspora, a category that broadly encompasses those who were born on the continent but left it either as children or as young adults. However, perhaps because these diasporic artists provide the bulk of the canon of contemporary African literatures, their perception of the continent of their birth has rarely been assessed through the lens of their geographical position, many critics preferring instead to emphasize globalizing trends or, conversely, to position diasporic artists, such as third-generation Nigerian writers, as the unproblematic heirs to the strategies of historical and cultural retrieval implemented by older Africa-based authors. Even though recent efforts have been made to circumscribe the specificity of the new diaspora’s artistic perceptions of Africa, the question still remains under-explored.

Taking our cue from Countee Cullen’s famous line – included in his 1925 poem “Heritage” – we would like to invite participants in this conference to address the diverse critical blind spots surrounding the representation of, and engagement with, Africa in the works of contemporary writers and artists from the old and the new diasporas. The questions and topics that could be addressed (either through close readings or theoretical contributions) include, but are not limited to:

- How is Africa represented in the diasporic imagination? Is it usually metaphorized or romanticized? Or, on the contrary, does it tend to be depicted in a realistic mode? Is the continent viewed as being trapped in a past marked by slavery and exploitation, or as being marred by a present of poverty and corruption? Do some diasporic artists unwillingly contribute to the perpetuation of stereotypes about Africa as a monolithic whole?

- Is Africa still relevant to the artists of the old diaspora? Does it still shape their creative minds? Is “African diaspora” a pertinent discursive category when discussing Caribbean or African American artists?
- Conversely, is the concept of “African diaspora” established enough to provide a valid critical framework in the case of the new diaspora? Do diasporic artists from North, South, East and West Africa have a common external vantage point from which to appraise the country or continent of their birth? Or, on the contrary, does their geographical location seal their common estrangement from Africa?
- What are the differences or parallels in the representations of Africa found in the works of artists of the old and new diasporas on the one hand, and those who are based in Africa on the other?
- What is the role played by gender, class, generation and/or race in the way diasporic writers perceive the culture and the land of their ancestors?
- Are categories that include references to the African continent rather empowering or limiting? How so?
- What is the role played by academics, journalists, facilitators and publishers in the dissemination of the artistic production of the old and new diasporas? To what extent do these actors encourage strategies of (self-)exoticization? Do they favour selective canonization?
- How do new technologies, particularly the internet, shape the dialogue between artists of the old and new diasporas, and those residing in Africa? Are distinctions between writers based on the continent and overseas still relevant in the twenty-first century?
- What, if anything, does Africa expect from its diasporic writers? Are these artists entitled to criticize the continent they originate from, or are they expected to treat it with special consideration? In other words, do diasporic artists have any particular ethical duty?

We welcome proposals within the field of literature, but also film, music and visual arts. Abstracts for 20-minute papers should be about 200 words, and panel descriptions for 90-minute sessions about 700 words (overall description of the panel in about 100 words, plus three individual abstracts of about 200 words). Non-Anglophone and comparative approaches are most welcome, but all papers will be delivered in English.

Proposals should be sent by 15 July 2012 to [africatomenow@gmail.com](mailto:africatomenow@gmail.com). A response will reach you by 15 August 2012. The latest information about the event is available on the conference website at <http://www.L3.ulg.ac.be/africatomenow>

The conference is organized under the auspices of the postcolonial studies research group CEREP (<http://www.cerep.ulg.ac.be>).

Convenors: Bénédicte Ledent and Daria Tunca