

Teaching AFRICAN LITERATURE TODAY

Edited by Ernest N. Emenyonu

29

Teaching with New Technology

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Multiculturalism

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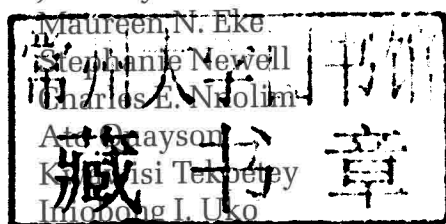
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Teaching African Literature Today 29

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Call for papers

ALT 30 Reflections & Retrospectives in African Literature Today

(Guest editor: Chimalum Nwankwo; e-mail: muonisi@yahoo.com)

This special issue will be devoted to the memory of some leading voices of African Literature in the twentieth century: Bessie Head, Cyprian Ekwensi, Dennis Brutus, Es'kia Mphahlele, Flora Nwapa and T.M. Aluko. The Editor invites scholars to submit original, previously unpublished articles on any of the authors listed above. Essays can focus on particular work/s, contributions of the chosen writer to the development of African Literature, his/her legacies as an African writer. Essays on critical receptions of a chosen writer's *oeuvre*, or particular works are also welcome.

Guidelines for Submission of Articles

The Editor invites submission of articles or proposals for articles on the announced themes of forthcoming issues:

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Submissions will be acknowledged promptly and decisions communicated within six months of the receipt of the paper. Your name and institutional affiliation (with full mailing address and email) should appear on a separate sheet, plus a brief biographical profile of not more than six lines. The editor cannot undertake to return material submitted and contributors are advised to keep a copy of all material sent. Please note that all articles outside the announced themes cannot be considered or acknowledged and that articles should not be submitted via email. Articles should be submitted in the English language.

Length: articles should not exceed 5,000 words

Format: two hard copies plus disk of all articles should be submitted, double-spaced, on one side only of A4 paper, with pages numbered consecutively. Disks may be formatted for PC or AppleMac but please label all files and disks clearly, and save files as Word for Windows or Word for Macintosh.

Style: UK or US spellings, but be consistent. Direct quotations should retain the spelling used in the original source. Check the accuracy of your citations and always give the source, date, and page number in the text and a full reference in the Works Cited at the end of the article. Italicise titles of books or plays. Use single inverted commas throughout except for quotes within quotes which are double. Avoid subtitles or subsection headings within the text.

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Dedication

This issue of
African Literature Today
is dedicated to the memory of
Professor Emmanuel N. Obiechina

Our literary statesman, erudite and most
unassuming mentor; our revered 'Dean of African
Literary Criticism.' You taught us the medium, manner,
and mode. You will live eternally through
the protégés you nurtured consciously and
unconsciously on both sides of the Atlantic,
and by the indelible *footprints* you so richly
left for African Literature on the sands of time.
Farewell!

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Chimalum Nwankwo is Professor of Literature in the Department of English, North Carolina A & T University, Greensboro. A scholar-poet (uniquely known as 'poet of the aerial zone'), versatile and seasoned academic, Chimalum Nwankwo has published widely on African Literature and Criticism in leading journals in the field in Africa, United Kingdom and United States. He has produced five collections of poetry including notably *The Womb in the Heart and Other Poems*, and *Of the Deepest Shadows and the Prisons of Time* (2010).

Eustace Palmer is Professor of English and Coordinator of Africana Studies at Georgia College and State University. One of the pre-eminent pioneer critics of African Literature, Palmer has published over sixty articles and four books on African Literature including a seminal work, *An Introduction to the African Novel* (1972). He is also author of three novels – *A Hanging is Announced*, *Canfira's Travels*, and *A Tale of Three Women*. Eustace Palmer was named Georgia College and State University Distinguished Professor for 2010/2011.

Anna Serafin, an independent scholar, had taught Literature at secondary level for decades in several states in the United States. She has presented papers on African Literature and Film at several international conferences and workshops in the United Kingdom and the United States. Her publications have appeared in *The English Journal*, *The Multicultural Review*, and *African Renaissance*.

Peter Wuteh Vakunta teaches French Literature and Francophone Literature and Cultures at the Defense Language Institute, Presidio of Monterey, California. He has published articles in *Research in African Literatures*, *Journal of African Literature Association* (JALA), *Journal of Midwest Modern Language Association*, and *Translation Review*.

Editorial Article

Half a Century of Teaching African Literature in the Academy

Ernest N. Emenyonu

The theme of this issue of *African Literature Today*, 'Teaching African Literature', was conceived as a tribute to renowned veteran teachers/scholars world-wide who blazed the trail and overcame every obstacle to carve out a pride of place for African literature in the Academy in the second half of the twentieth century. Sixteen of these eminent scholars were identified from the United Kingdom, the United States, Africa, Japan, India, Australia, Germany, Canada, and Sweden. Each was invited on 30 October 2009, to take time to write and submit an article on the experience of teaching African literature at whatever level or geographic location over the years.

The idea was that by reporting their various experiences (what worked and what didn't) in teaching African Literature dating back to the middle of the twentieth century, they would be passing on concrete skills and legacies to younger colleagues in the profession. Their reports would also be indisputable affirmations and validations of the global presence of African literature in the Academy. This would also be an invaluable service to the discipline of African literature. In the same vein, the theme of this issue was envisioned as a logical sequel to the world-wide celebration of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* in 2008. For indeed, *Things Fall Apart* was the catalyst that led to the opening of doors for African Literature in the curriculum of educational systems all over the world. That novel made the literary world take serious notice for the first time, of the emerging voices of imaginative creativity from the continent of Africa. These new voices were 'loaded' with innovative thematic and refreshingly stylistic versatilities that energized and added colour to contemporary World Literature, particularly Anglophone and Francophone literatures.

It was gratifying that of the 16 veteran scholars/teachers of African literature contacted in October 2009, as many as 13 enthusiastically accepted to contribute articles to this volume. However, when the articles were due a year later in October 2010, only one fulfilled his promise. We salute Professor Eustace Palmer for his continued pioneering role and inimitable dedication to the cause of African literature. His pioneering

role has been nothing short of historic, heroic and legendary. His 175-page *Introduction to the African Novel* (1972, Heinemann), was one of the most authoritative early works on the criticism of African Literature. It became an invaluable handbook not only for beginning scholars and critics of African Literature, but also (especially) for teachers inside and outside Africa who greatly needed guidance in the pedagogical approaches to the emerging African creative works. Its publication was timely and helped to shape the nature, tone, direction and dynamics of African literary criticism at a crucial point in time.

The contributors to this volume have stepped in to fill the gaps. They have performed a most laudable rescue mission surpassing all expectations. They have in each of their contributions provided profound insights into the challenges of teaching African literature in various geographic locations, the nature of the learners of African literature, and the impact of African creative works on them as individuals. They have discussed the use of modern technology in the teaching of African literature and the resilient impacts of African Oral Literature on both teachers and learners. The teaching of African literature, like any other major world literature, remains as challenging as it is exciting and rewarding.

In the twenty-first century, there is enough evidence to state that the teaching of African literature in all parts of the world is something that should be advocated for the best interest of posterity in general and the field of contemporary World literature in particular. The case for the literary excellence of African fiction has been sufficiently and incontrovertibly made. In the last two decades of the twentieth century, African creative writers ostensibly immortalized African literature irrevocably in the annals of World literary history with achievements too hard to ignore anymore. In 1986 Wole Soyinka (Nigeria) became the first African to win the Nobel Prize for Literature. He was followed by Naguib Mahfouz (Egypt) in 1988, and three years later, Nadine Gordimer (South Africa) in 1991. This apparently unstoppable winning streak continued into the new millennium with J.M. Coetzee (South Africa) winning the Prize in 2003. And one can state without fear of contradiction that Doris Lessing who won the prize in 2007 has self-acknowledged real and symbolic African roots and influences in her imaginative creativity. That is why in this issue of the journal we have reason to celebrate the teaching of African literature both inside and outside the continent of Africa.

The title of this Editorial Article is adapted from the title of a historic literary celebration at Syracuse University, New York, October 14-16, 2010. A valedictory symposium entitled '50 Years of African Literature in the Academy' was organized by the University in honour of the retiring renowned William Safire Professor of Modern Letters, Prof. M.J.C. Echeruo, one of the most formidable 'founding fathers' in the field of the criticism and teaching of African literature. If this journal had a 'Congressional Medal of Honor' for the year 2010, it would incontestably

go to Syracuse University. Instead of the all-too-familiar convention of honouring a retiring famous professor with a valedictory speech/lecture given by him followed by a dinner or cocktail, Syracuse University chose (most wisely) to assemble a team of scholars to reflect, theorize and philosophize on the half a century of African Literature in the Academy. It was a grand success. What did not come out as forcefully and emphatically as it should have, was the place or role of Professor Echeruo in the '50 Years of African literature in the Academy'.

M.J.C. Echeruo has made towering contributions in the establishment of an indelible identity for African literature as a significant literary canon in the Academy, and the herculean trail blazing task of charting a road map for its successful inclusion in the literature curriculum of tertiary institutions inside and outside Africa. The incredible amount of resources he has put at the disposal of young scholars in African literature as well as his relentless mentoring of budding African creative artists remain impossible to be sufficiently described or documented in so short a space. Whenever a ground-breaking literary phenomenon was contemplated in the years that he was in the Nigerian university system, Professor Echeruo was invited to shape and structure it and design its future direction. This was the case when he was invited in 1979 to give the maiden edition of the pan-Igbo annual lecture series known today as 'The Ahiajoku Lecture' held in November every year. His lecture, 'A Matter of Identity' served to define the purpose, objectives, and goals of the annual lecture conceived broadly to identify and define the Igbo contributions to world civilization. Similarly, when the Imo State government of Nigeria (his home state) decided to found a university, they tapped Professor Echeruo as its foundation vice-chancellor. In these and other similar intellectual endeavors, he always found a way to carve a major place for African literary studies!

The Syracuse Symposium attracted a galaxy of high profile authorities on African Literature – Abiola Irele, Biodun Jeifo, Micere Githae Mugo, Obiora Udechukwu, Kenneth Harrow, Tejumola Olaniyan, Lokangaka Lasambe, Anthonia Kalu, Maik Nwosu, Obi Nwakanma, and a host of others from within and outside the United States. And to bridge the gap between the 'yesterdays' and 'todays' in African creative writing, the major keynote speaker was the indomitable, sparkling and vibrant new voice – the author of *Half of a Yellow Sun* – Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. However, the cynosure of all eyes at the forum was the elder statesman, the inimitable literary scholar, critic and teacher, Prof. Emmanuel Obiechina.

I stayed very close to Professor Obiechina for the two days of the symposium. He had been for me, like for many others of my generation, a willing mentor at all times, the imperceptible voice and hand that guided and motivated every inch of the way. He chaired plenary sessions at the symposium, led discussions when he was not chairing and was surrounded even during tea breaks by bubbling young scholars seeking to get

a close view of him, hear him tell them directly the rich literary theories they had been reading from his books. Professor Obiechina had time for everybody at the symposium. All of us were woken up two weeks later with the shocking news of his death! He had e-mailed most of us at the end of the symposium to indicate that he had a new e-mail address. He requested each one of us to respond to that e-mail address so that he would be sure it reached us. Most did. I was reliably informed that the last thing he did on that fateful night in November 2010, was to read through his e-mails.

In a short memorial tribute I recalled his ubiquitous mesmeric presence at the Syracuse Symposium in these words:

Only 'yesterday,' it seems, we were together at Syracuse and shared the bounty of your wit and wisdom surrounded by eminent scholars of the Academy. And when the Symposium was over, you told me about your recent trip to Nigeria (returning the day before the Symposium) for the historic induction into the first-ever Nigerian Academy of Letters' *Hall of Fame*. It was an honor no one deserved better although you tried to play it down. You taught us the literary medium, the manner and mode of its criticism; you groomed us in the craft and tenderly pampered us even as we groped about the way trying to emulate your wit and wisdom ... You will live eternally through the protégés you have nurtured on both sides of the Atlantic ...

In 1994 I was asked by the Imo State Government in Nigeria to introduce Professor Obiechina as the Ahiajoku Lecturer of the year. Part of my introduction had this to say:

His fertile erudition has given birth to countless scholarly works on African Literature, scores of original articles in learned journals all over the world, public lectures in arenas stretching from Nigeria to Europe, North America, Asia, Latin American and the West Indies ... If a topic is important in Commonwealth Literature; if a topic is crucial in African Literature, it cannot be completely so until Emmanuel Obiechina has spoken or written about it, and when he does, it immediately confers respectability and authenticity to that particular point of view ... Professor Emmanuel Obiechina is to all who know him – all who have read him, and all who have experienced the vibrancy of his mind and intellect, truly the teachers' Teacher, the scholars' Scholar, the professors' Professor, the critics' Critic, the writers' Writer and the authors' Author ... It is impossible to adequately introduce Professor Emmanuel Obiechina. It is impossible for me to describe in words, the dignity of this man, his intellect and the depth of his vision as a literary scholar, a philosopher and a humanist ...

It is for these reasons and many more that this issue of *African Literature Today* on 'Teaching African Literature' is deservedly dedicated to the memory of Professor Emmanuel Obiechina.

'There goes Emmanuel Obiechina ...
there never was, and never will be *another* like him.'
Farewell!!

Contents

Notes on Contributors	xi
EDITORIAL ARTICLE	
Half a century of teaching African Literature in the Academy <i>Ernest N. Emenyonu</i>	xiii
ARTICLES	
Teaching Ben Okri's <i>The Famished Road</i> & Syl Cheney-Coker's <i>The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar</i> <i>Eustace Palmer</i>	1
What Has Criticism Got To Do With It?: Teaching Theory & Criticism in African Literary Studies <i>Charles Nnolim</i>	20
Teaching African Literature in an Era of Technology: A Case Study of Coppin State University <i>Blessing Diala-Ogamba</i>	27
Teaching African Literature Online in America: A University of Michigan-Flint Initiative <i>Patricia Thornton Emenyonu</i>	40
Teaching African Literature in an Age of Multiculturalism <i>Helen Chukwuma</i>	63
Challenges & Prospects of Teaching Oral Literature in Africa: A Teacher's Perspective <i>Mark Ighile</i>	71
Teaching & Reading Doris Lessing's 'The Anthheap' <i>Anne Serafin</i>	80

The Francophone Novel of Africa & the Caribbean: A Teacher's Perspective <i>Peter Wuteh Vakunta</i>	88
Teaching about Africa through Literature, Film & Music <i>Isaac V. Joslin</i>	101
Teaching African Oral Literature: A Nigerian Perspective <i>Godini G. Darah</i>	111
Teaching African Literature without Redaction & Stasis <i>Chimalum Nwankwo</i>	124
REVIEWS	
Obi Nwakanma: <i>Christopher Okigbo, 1930-67: Thirsting for Sunlight</i> (Lalage Bown)	134
Roger Field: <i>Alex la Guma: A Literary & Political Biography</i> (Geoff Davis)	141
Ewald Mengel, Michela Borzaga & Karin Orantes (eds): <i>Trauma, Memory & Narrative in South Africa: Interviews</i> (Yvette Hutchison)	143
Malika Ndlovu: <i>Invisible Earthquake: A woman's journal through stillbirth</i> & Fiona Zerbst: <i>Oleander</i> (Pia Thielmann)	146
Helen Moffett: <i>Strange Fruit</i> (Dominique Hecq)	150
John Conteh-Morgan & Irene Assiba d'Almeida: <i>The Original Explosion That Created Worlds: Essays on Werewere Liking's Art & Writings</i> (Gilbert Doho)	152

Teaching Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* & Syl Cheney-Coker's *The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar*

Eustace Palmer

Ben Okri's prize-winning novel *The Famished Road* and Syl Cheney-Coker's *The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar* are, without doubt, among the most challenging works of African literature to teach. The reasons for this are not far to seek. First, there is the enormous bulk of both novels. In an age when teachers complain about the attention span of students and most novels run for no more than about three hundred pages, the teaching of works, which, in the case of *The Last Harmattan* runs for almost four hundred pages of extremely concentrated and even poetic prose and, in the case of *The Famished Road*, goes on for almost five hundred pages of repetitive events, must surely pose special problems. The second reason is a rather simple and mundane one: that of availability. This is particularly relevant to Cheney-Coker's novel, since *The Famished Road* is generally available in Anchor Books paperback. Both works have, of course, become classics of African literature, but classics of African literature, which need to feature in courses on African literature, do not necessarily have the kind of perennial and universal appeal that would make publishers (largely Western ones), who always have an eye on their bottom line, wish to continue publishing them after the first printing runs out. Cheney-Coker's *The Last Harmattan* seems to have suffered that fate. The third reason is the preponderance in both novels of elements of magical realism and the use of the supernatural and the fantastic which seems to strain the credibility of many readers. It is the purpose of this paper to throw out a few tentative hints that might facilitate the teaching of both works and make the exercise ultimately rewarding. These hints result from teaching these novels in courses here in the United States over a number of years.

The first suggestion I would like to make is that both these novels ought to be taught at the graduate level and several sessions should be devoted to each. The sheer bulk of both works might create some daunting challenges at the undergraduate level, and they both raise theoretical issues that can only be fully appreciated and thoroughly discussed at the graduate level. Concepts of realism and postmodernity can, of course, be

2 Teaching Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*

handled at the undergraduate level, but they are surely discussed much more rewardingly at the graduate level, and both novels raise these issues in large measure.

It is very tempting to see both these novels as 'postmodern' works, therefore the starting point of the discussion should revolve around the extent to which Okri and Cheney-Coker were postmodern in intention; one of my graduate students, fresh from exposure to contemporary critical theories, exclaimed that *The Famished Road* was undoubtedly 'post-modern.' Of course, one cannot discuss postmodernism in isolation from modernism, since postmodernism was a reaction to modernism, in the sense that it continued, sometimes to an extreme as Abrams and Harpham have said, the countertraditional experiments of modernism, but also sought ways to break away from some modernist forms, particularly the 'elitism' of modernist 'high art' and thereby have recourse to 'mass culture' forms in films, television, newspaper cartoons and popular music. According to Abrams and Geoffrey Harpham, 'many of the works of postmodern literature ... so blend literary genres, cultural and stylistic levels, the serious and the playful, that they resist classification according to traditional literary rubrics' (203).

With this definition in mind, to what extent can one say that *The Famished Road* and *The Last Harmattan* are postmodern? The basis for the suggestion is that they both rely very heavily on the use of the supernatural and the magical and *The Famished Road*, in particular, is narrated by an 'abiku' child, a child supposedly from the spirit world. Both novelists, according to some critics, do so because they wish to break away from the modernist Eurocentric narrative of history. It would mean that writers like Okri and Cheney-Coker were consciously reacting against modernism and all that it implies. However, we must be aware that modernism and all the literary and artistic baggage that it involved may not have the same resonance for African writers that it does for Western writers; African writers are dealing with a completely different set of issues and not with the cataclysmic breakdown of society and values that modernism involved. They would not therefore necessarily have to explore postmodernist techniques as a reaction to modernism. It is therefore rather simplistic to label their works as 'postmodern.' John Hawley, for instance, says, 'the significance of an abiku narrator ... is that it moves African literature closer to the postmodern movement' (31). He does realize that there may be problems in regarding some African writers as postmodernists, but he insists that such a label would be helpful because these writers do two things that are typical of postmodernist writing: 'they resist the European master narrative of history' and 'they are markedly experimental in their narration, carrying into their fiction many of the postmodern literary characteristics' (35-36). Maggi Phillips suggests that *The Famished Road* is the expression of a genuine 'third world consciousness' and thus implies that Okri's main concern was