

4. Sheila S. Walker, "Women in the Harrist Movement," in Bennetta Jules-Rosette, *New Religions of Africa* (Norwood, N.J.: Ablex Publishing Corp., 1979), pp. 87-97.

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African Arts and *West Africa* are two additional sources in which articles on various aspects of popular arts in Africa can be found.

Eileen Julien African Literature

"Truth depends not only on who listens but on who speaks."

—Birago Diop

"Always something new from Africa."

—Rabelais

15

When most Americans and Europeans use the expression "African literature," what they mean is poetry, plays, and narrative written by Africans in English and French, and perhaps Portuguese. This chapter will focus primarily on these texts, sometimes referred to as "Euro-African," which are particularly accessible to Americans because of language and shared recent history. But it is not possible to speak or write of African literature as homogeneous or coherent, any more than this claim can be made for the varied texts that constitute European literature.¹ Africa is a vast continent, consisting of more than fifty nations and several hundred languages and ethnic groups. And despite many cultural similarities across the continent and a virtually ubiquitous history of imperialism and neocolonialism, there are many African experiences and many verbal expressions of them. Moreover, to see what we are calling African literature in proper perspective is to recognize from the outset both that it is a gendered body of work and that it represents but a fraction of the verbal arts in Africa. There is a vast production of African-language literature and oral traditions, which is largely unknown and ignored by those outside the continent.

Indeed, verbal artistic traditions, literary as well as oral, are ancient in Africa. Centuries before European colonialism and the introduction of European languages, there were bards and storytellers, scribes, poets, and writers in languages such as Kiswahili and Amharic. Many of those traditions adapt and live on in various guises today, and the African writers who will be considered in this chapter draw on these indigenous oral and written traditions as well as those of Europe, the Americas, and Asia.

Understanding of African literature has changed tremendously in the last twenty years, because of several important developments: the ever-increasing numbers of women writers, greater awareness of written and oral production in national languages (such as Yoruba, Poular, and Zulu), and greater critical attention to factors such as the politics of publishing and African literature's multiple audiences. These developments coincide with and have, in fact, helped produce a general shift in

literary sensibility away from literature as pure *text*, the dominant paradigm for many years, to literature as an act between parties located within historical, socioeconomic and other contexts. Fiction, plays, and poetry by women from around the continent have been singularly important because they “complicate” the meaning of works by their literary forefathers, bringing those works into sharper relief, forcing us to see their limits as well as their merits.

There are many ways to divide the terrain of literature written by Africans. These approaches reflect the fact that the continent is home to many different peoples and cultural practices, political and physical geographies, local and nonlocal languages. Thus we routinely divide African literature by *region* (West Africa, East Africa, North Africa, Central Africa, southern Africa, each of which is more or less distinctive environmentally and historically), by *ethnicity* (the Mande, for example, live across the region now divided by the states of Guinea, Senegal, Côte d’Ivoire, and Mali), or by *nationality* (a heritage of nineteenth-century European literary practice, whose merit in the African context is sometimes debated, and which privileges the force of national history and identity as opposed to ethnic or “African” determinants).

African literature is also often categorized by *language* of expression (anglophone, francophone, Hausa, Swahili, etc.) or *genre* (poetry, proverb, narrative, drama, essay), or some combination of these. The field may also be examined in terms of *themes* or *generations*. These many approaches suggest not only the diversity and complexity of life on the African continent but also the stuff of which literature is made: language, aesthetic and literary traditions, culture and history, sociopolitical reality.

This chapter, then, is divided into three parts. The first part focuses on selected themes and trends of African literature. The second briefly describes several contemporary debates surrounding this literature and challenges and prospects facing African writers and readers of African texts. Some reference will be made to oral traditions and literature in national languages. The third part of this chapter includes a discussion of selected authors and their works.

Themes and Trends

African literature is vast and varied, but there are two impulses or currents in African creative works of which we might make special note: the reclaiming of voice and subjectivity and the critique of abusive power.

Colonialism and Self-Representation

In the 1950s and 1960s, as nations around the continent moved more or less slowly to achieve decolonization, many Africans took up the pen. There were indeed African creative writers, as well as essayists and polemicists, who wrote in European languages well before this time. But it is in this vast, concerted literary practice of

midcentury that the moment of acceleration of contemporary African literature can be situated.

African narrative and poetry, in the era immediately preceding and following formal declarations of independence, were born, for the most part, in protest against history and myths constructed in conjunction with the colonial enterprise. Writers struggled to correct false images, to rewrite fictionally and poetically the history of precolonial and colonial Africa, and to affirm African perspectives. The implicit or explicit urge to challenge the premises of colonialism was often realized in autobiography or pseudo-autobiography, describing the journey the writers themselves had made, away from home to other shores and back again. African intellectuals and writers felt keenly that “the truth,” as Birago Diop had put it, “depends also on who speaks.”

In 1958, Chinua Achebe published *Things Fall Apart*. Characterized by a language rich in proverbs and images of agrarian life, this novel and his later *Arrow of God* portray the complex, delicately balanced social ecology of Igbo village life as it confronts colonial power. Achebe’s protagonists are flawed but dignified men whose interactions with British emissaries are fatal or tragic. Achebe, like other writers of those years, wrote in response to denigrating mythologies and representations of Africans by nineteenth- and twentieth-century British and European writers such as Joyce Cary, James Conrad, Jules Verne, and Pierre Loti, to show, as Achebe put it, that the African past was not one long night of savagery before the coming of Europe.

Similar processes occurred, and still occur, within other traditions around the continent. The condemnation of colonial domination and the determination to bear witness are more urgent in the Portuguese-language poetry of Agostinho Neto and the fiction of José Luandino Vieira, because of Angola’s long war of liberation. Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s novels (*Weep Not, Child*, 1964; *The River Between*, 1965; and *A Grain of Wheat*, 1967) explore the many facets of individual Kenyan lives within the context of colonialism: their experiences of education, excision, religious conflict, collective struggle, and the cost of resistance. *A Grain of Wheat* suggests, moreover, the coalescing of lives and forces in the making of historical events.

In his *Death and the King’s Horsemen* (1975), Wole Soyinka makes the colonial setting incidental, a mere catalyst, in what is the metaphysical crisis of a flawed character, who is nonetheless the agent of his destiny and of history. Elesin, who must die in order to follow the deceased king to “the other side,” sees in the intervention of the British colonial authority a chance to stay his death and indulge his passion for life and love. Through every theatrical means—drum, chanted poetry, gesture, and dance, as well as script—Soyinka suggests the majesty, the social significance, and the great personal cost and honor of Elesin’s task, and then the magnitude of his failure.

A particular strain and manifestation of anticolonialist poetry is the French-language tradition known as *négritude*. It was in Paris of the 1930s, in the climate of modernism, surrealism, and jazz, that the idea of *négritude* arose. African and West Indian students, who were French colonial subjects, had come to the capital to complete their education. Products of colonial schools and assimilationist policies that sought to make Frenchmen of them, they had been taught to reject their African

cultures of origin and to emulate the culture of the French. Having experienced a far greater depth of alienation than those Africans schooled under British colonialism, they now felt the need to affirm those cultures from which they had been alienated, and they sought the means, both intellectual and literary, to rehabilitate African civilizations in Africa and the New World. The poetry of *négritude* grew out of this need to reaffirm "African values" and an African identity.

In 1948, Léopold Sédar Senghor published *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache* (Anthology of New Black and Malagasy Poetry), in which he assembled the work of French-speaking Caribbean and African poets, each of whom had "returned to the source," composing poems out of the matrix of African culture. The tone and themes of *négritude* poetry vary from poet to poet. Birago Diop's majestic "Souffles" (best translated perhaps as "Spirits") seems to emanate self-assuredly from West African oral traditions and village culture, as it affirms traditional beliefs in the cyclical nature of life and in the ever-abiding presence of the ancestors. David Diop, on the other hand, vehemently and passionately denounces slavery and colonial domination.

There are two Africas in many *négritude* poems: a utopian, pastoral Africa of precolonial times and a victimized, suffering Africa of colonialism. In both instances, Africa is often represented metaphorically as female, as in Senghor's "Black Woman" or David Diop's "To an African Woman." *Négritude* poems tend also to juxtapose an Africa characterized by the communion of humankind and nature and a Europe characterized by the fragmentation and discord of life. Thus, Senghor, in "Prayer to the Masks," for example, emphasizes the complementarity of "Africa" and "Europe," but in so doing he ironically lends credence to notions of their supposed essential difference, a difference that then forms the basis of judgements of inferiority and superiority:

Let us answer "present" at the rebirth of the World
As white flour cannot rise without the leaven.
Who else will teach rhythm to the world
Deadened by machines and cannons?
Who will sound the shout of joy at daybreak to wake orphans and the dead?
Tell me, who will bring back the memory of life
To the man of gutted hopes?
They call us men of cotton, coffee, and oil
They call us men of death.
But we are men of dance, whose feet get stronger
As we pound upon firm ground.²

The anticolonial tradition within French-language literature thus often stressed the cultural dilemma of the *assimilé* or contrasted two essentially different worlds. Camara Laye's narrative of childhood in Guinea, *The Dark Child*, is another example. Written under difficult conditions, when Laye was an auto worker in France, the narrative nostalgically constructs home as an idyllic space in which the figure of the mother, nature, and the joys and virtues of village life are fused. Cheikh

Hamidou Kane of Senegal, in a philosophical, semi-autobiographical narrative, *Ambiguous Adventure*, adds to these contrasting paradigms of "Africa" and "the West" yet another layer of opposition: the spiritual transcendence of ascetic Islam and the numbing preoccupation with material well-being, characteristic for him, of Africa and the West respectively.

But not all anticolonialist writers within the French tradition practiced confessional narrative, stressing such oppositions. Sembène's epic novel of the 1948 railway strike in French West Africa, *God's Bits of Wood*, is a powerful anticolonialist fiction that moves beyond the opposition between two static moments or sets of values ("tradition" and "modernity" or "good" authentic ways and "bad" alien ones). Moreover, Sembène conceives of change not as the tragic and fatal undoing of cultural identity but as a means of achieving a more just society or as an inevitable process which is stressful but redeemed, perhaps, by its rewards. Thus, in Sembène's novel, the Bambara and Wolof abandon divisive definitions of identity based on ethnic group and caste and forge a larger and more powerful identification based on class. Under Sembène's pen, urban work and technology are disentangled from divisive ideologies, and the strike forces women and men to realize that the supposedly private and feminine sphere of the kitchen and the public, masculine, and political sphere of the railroad are inextricably bound in one and the same space of deprivation and injustice.

There is also a tradition of anticolonialist satire in both English and French. Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino* heaps ridicule on the would-be *assimilé*, while Ferdinand Oyono's *Houseboy* and *The Old Man and the Medal* and Mongo Béti's *The Poor Christ of Bomba* offer scathing portraits of the hypocritical and mediocre French colonial masters who are would-be bearers of "Civilization."

The Logic of Power, Wealth, and Capital

The critique of foreign domination under colonialism and the concomitant, urgent issue of identity are often constructed as a conflict between the assimilation of "Western" ways and an African authenticity, and they are often articulated in realist narratives. With the advent of formal independence little by little throughout the continent, these issues gradually cede center stage to the disillusionment of independence and the critique of abusive power and corruption. This critique was never absent from African literatures. It is fictionalized and unveiled even in Achebe's novels at midcentury. But the critique of postindependence regimes is accomplished in part by a change in literary form, which Ngugi wa Thiong'o suggests in his controversial essay *Decolonising the Mind* (1986):

How does a writer, a novelist, shock his readers by telling them that these [heads of state who collaborate with imperialist powers] are neo-slaves when they themselves, the neo-slaves, are openly announcing the fact on the rooftops? How do you shock your readers by pointing out that these are mass murderers, looters, robbers, thieves, when

they, the perpetrators of these anti-people crimes, are not even attempting to hide the fact? When in some cases they are actually and proudly celebrating their massacre of children, and the theft and robbery of the nation? How do you satirise their utterances and claims when their own words beat all fictional exaggerations?

Within the last fifteen years, then, the literary landscape has been strewn with quite stunning fictions of failure, as Africans grapple with the new abuses of neocolonial regimes and seemingly inexorable global processes. The Congolese writer Sony Labou Tansi, like his compatriot Henri Lopès, has given us compelling portraits of dictatorship. Labou Tansi's comic and nearly delirious fables (*L'Etat honteux* and *La vie et demie*) expose not only the corruption and savagery of these dictators but their frailty and insecurity. Ngugi's fictions (*Petals of Blood*, *Devil on the Cross*, and *Matigari*) signal the greed for wealth and power unleashed by "independence" and the betrayal of Kenyan peasants and workers by leaders who collaborate with international capitalism, when they do not vie with it. These fictions cross over into the absurd and turn away from the realism that characterizes many first-generation narratives focused on colonialism. As Ngugi has suggested, writers invent new forms commensurate with the new and deeply troubling reality.

Revisions

The *négritude* poets defended the humanity of those whose humanity had been denied on the basis of race, a step that was unquestionably necessary, but what this quite often meant was an idealization of a precolonial past and the affirmation of an African or racial essence. Traits that were held to be "naturally" African—such as love of nature, rhythm, spirituality—that had been negatively valued, were now seen as positive. These particular representations of African identity and a racial or Pan-African nation came and continue to come under attack by African intellectuals and writers, most notably Wole Soyinka (*Myth, Literature and the African World*, 1976) and, in sustained arguments, by Marcién Towa (*Léopold Sédar Senghor: négritude ou servitude?*, 1971) and Stanislas Adotévi (*Négritude et négrologues*, 1972). Likewise, literary sequels to and revisions of this perspective abound.

Yambo Ouologuem's *Bound to Violence* is a chronicle of a fictional dynasty that is corrupt, barbarous, and politically astute, a fitting adversary, then, for the newly arrived French colonials. Ouologuem negates *négritude*'s claim of precolonial goodness but seems rather to assert an inherent African violence.

A still more important sequel to or revision of these early representations is the writing by women which has developed rapidly in recent years. What was missing, of course, in the early chorus of voices denouncing the arrogance and violence of the various forms of colonialism were female voices. As recent writing by women makes clear, gender gives writing a particular cast. The "first generation" of male writers critique the imperial and colonial project for its racism and oppression, but they nonetheless (and not unlike the European objects of their critique) portray these

matters as they pertain to men, and they formulate a vision of independence or of utopias in which women are either goddesses, such as muses and idealized mothers, or mere helpmates.

In 1981, Mariama Bâ's epistolary novel *So Long a Letter* rocked the literary landscape. At the death of her husband, Ramatoulaye writes a "long letter" to her divorced friend Aïssatou, now residing with her sons in the United States. Through the experience of writing, the heroine Ramatoulaye comes to terms with her own independence, having been betrayed by her husband of many years, who took as a second wife the girlfriend of their daughter.

Ouologuem's *Bound to Violence* had already questioned the premises of black nationalism and of a "pure" time before colonialism. Bâ's novel made clear that the nationalism and independence that these (by now) celebrated male writers had been defending were by and large patriarchal: women were symbols of the nation or, at best, helpmates of man, who alone would reap the real fruits of independence. In Bâ's novel, which is imbued with its own prejudices, we nonetheless see a conflation of class biases, male vanity, and female complicity in the practice of polygyny. In this novel and her posthumous *Scarlet Song*, which describes the stakes and constraints in interracial or, more precisely, cross-cultural marriages, one can infer the gender biases of these early notions of nation and identity.

As with the French-language literatures of Africa, a powerful force in English-language literature is the emergence of women writers, who have filled the silences surrounding women's lives. Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966) suggests the tension between women's desires and the strictures of womanhood in the same era that male writers seemed to portray as the nearly golden age before colonialism. She concludes her novel with this haunting passage:

Efuru slept soundly that night. She dreamt of the woman of the lake, her beauty, her long hair and her riches. She had lived for ages at the bottom of the lake. She was as old as the lake itself. She was happy, she was wealthy. She was beautiful. She gave women beauty and wealth but she had no child. She had never experienced the joy of motherhood. Why then did the women worship her?

Ama Ata Aidoo, in her early collection of short stories and sketches *No Sweetness Here* (1971), gives voice to women's concerns as they face problems of urbanization and Westernization: standards of beauty, the absence of husbands and fathers, prostitution, clashing values and expectations. In her most recent novel, *Changes* (1992), Aidoo explores the meaning of friendship, love, marriage, and family for young women in contemporary West Africa.

Bessie Head's fictions of village life in rural Botswana lay bare the mystifications of race, gender, and a patriarchal God. In a most moving scene in *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1969), for example, titular authority and might give way to the moral force of ordinary people. The mean-spirited and reactionary rural Botswana chief is disarmed by the sheer presence of the villagers who have come purposefully to sit in his yard and wait for him to come out and face them. They make no threats of

violence, but he knows they will no longer tolerate his excesses, that he is effectively divested of power. If for Sembène social transformation proceeds from the material world of the workplace and of the kitchen, that is, from the outside in, for Head this transformation proceeds from the heart and spirit, from the inside out: it is personal and collective spiritual strength that enables the transformation of the external social order.

More recently, Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988), like Ken Bugul's *The Abandoned Baobab* (1982), is a rebellious young woman's account of coming of age, of the journey from countryside to city. Bugul's fierce and ambiguous autobiographical narrative traces the heroine's hellish road from her Senegalese village to Brussels, while Dangarembga's young Tambu struggles against the racism of colonial Rhodesia, the deprivations of her class, and the male privilege of brother, father, and uncle. Women who survive, who provide, who circumvent patriarchy, are the heroines of this story.

Many of the established writers continue to write with new perspectives or in new ways. Achebe's recent novel *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987), for example, is a "dialogic" narrative, set in the city of Lagos; it interweaves several perspectives and several registers of language, the voices of women and men, professional and popular classes.

Les Soleils des indépendances (1968; *The Suns of Independence*, 1981), the first novel of Ivoirian novelist Ahmadou Kourouma, was a momentous event in the French-language tradition, because of both its nearly creolized, Malinke-inspired French and its exploration of the relationship between masculinity and nation, as embodied in its protagonist, the noble Fama, dispossessed by colonialism and the ensuing independence. Kourouma has since published *Monné outrages défis* (1990; *Monnew*, 1993). Set in the colonial period, this novel also examines the new life of a chief become unwitting collaborator or puppet. But through its formal experimentation, the novel approaches the colonial reality with freshness and insight into the complexity of African responses, failure, and complicity as well as into the power of language, voice, and media.

With regard to formal experimentation, there has been interesting use made of the detective or mystery story, or, more generally, of teleological endings in Ngugi's *Petals of Blood* (1977) and *Devil on the Cross*, translated from the Gikuyu (1982), in Boris Diop's *Le Temps de Tamango* (1981), and in Sembène's *Le Dernier de l'empire* (1981; *The Last of the Empire*, 1983). For some theorists of the nineteenth-century European detective novel, the teleological ending suggests the ability of the reading subject to reorder facts, to rewrite history and thereby create a sense of power to shape destiny. That interpretation might offer some insight into the current popularity of the genre in Senegal, Nigeria, and Kenya.

Another significant development in the practice of African literature is the ever more frequent marriage of text to media and performance, enabling writers to gain wider local audiences for their works. Thus, although cinema is not without its own constraints and contradictions, Sembène has turned to telling his stories through film (*La Noire de . . .*, 1966; *Mandabi*, 1968; *Emitaï*, 1971; *Xala*, 1974; *Ceddo*, 1977;

Camp de Thiaroye, 1987; *Guelowaar*, 1993). Ngugi wa Thiong'o has turned to theater and co-authored two plays, *I Will Marry When I Want* and *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*. The greater local impact of these media and of national languages is evident when films are censored and playwrights arrested. Radio and television are also great popularizers, but since they are controlled by the state in most cases, there is a built-in process of censorship. "Popular" fiction, such as the many pamphlets available at Nigeria's Onitsha market, appeals to an urban, minimally schooled audience. Written in European and local languages, it is often moralizing and didactic. Newspapers, which may or may not be state-owned, also provide important outlets for both writers and their critics.

At the same time that writers are engaged by local issues and traditions, they also have had vital exchanges and intertextual relationships with writers from other African cultures and from other continents, those from Europe and North America as well as from Asia and Latin America. It was in the former Soviet Union that Ousmane Sembène received his training as a filmmaker. Whether by "influence" or affinity, African writers such as Sony Labou Tansi and Ben Okri use narrative techniques akin to the "magical realism" of Colombian writer García Márquez. Likewise, for most of this century there has been a literary and cultural tradition shared by African, African American, and Caribbean writers. As early as the 1920s, Senghor and Aimé Césaire of Martinique read and admired the African American writers of the Harlem Renaissance. It was the literary project and achievements of these writers that inspired Senghor's and Césaire's early poetry and cultural theorizing. Now, at century's end, the transatlantic dialogue is still more spirited, with African writers and intellectuals coming frequently to the American side, and American and Caribbean writers and intellectuals of African descent, such as Maryse Condé of Guadeloupe, crossing over to the African side and contributing to Africa's ongoing discourse on itself.

Debates, Challenges, and Prospects

Of course, the consensus has always been that literature in Africa is deeply political. Part of its politicality may, of course, be in the eye of the Western beholder, who often has been trained to see art and aesthetics as apolitical. But, indeed, many African texts are explicitly political.³

An important debate in African literary circles focuses, then, on the implications and consequences of writing in national or now Africanized European languages. Ngugi has been in the forefront of a campaign for African literatures in African languages. For him, this would seem to be a matter both of the irrelevance of the European language to "authentic" experience and of the audience for whom the author writes. If African writers and intellectuals want to address Africans, most of whom are not literate in European languages, then writers should write, this argument runs, in the languages and aesthetic traditions of those African populations. This shift in audience will also affect what writers say, the perspectives they offer, and will foster the growth of African languages and literatures.

This debate has been divisive for African writers, many of whom feel at home in European languages. In addition, there are many forces, foreign publishers and (paying) readerships, and still lower literacy rates in national than in European languages, militating against the use of African languages. But there are indeed many thriving African-language literatures, such as those in Yoruba, Swahili, Poular, and Zulu, and these will continue to grow. With the ever-increasing legitimacy of these literatures, through school and university curricula, and new interest by publishing houses, the controversies surrounding European-language literatures are likely to subside.

An equally important debate in African literary circles, as in African studies generally, is the very meaning of the term "African." For some, Africa is either racially or culturally defined, and they often look toward the past, "original," that is, precolonial, Africa to locate the signs of African authenticity. Those who hold this view may equate certain forms, such as proverbs and tales, or types of language, such as colloquial or creolized French or English, as the pure expressions of Africa and those to which writers of European language texts should aspire or which they should emulate.⁴

For others, such as philosophers Anthony Appiah and V. Y. Mudimbe, these supposedly pure, authentic forms and the notion of "traditional times" are illusory. So, too, for the Arabic-language writer Tayeb el Salih of Sudan, who holds that Africa has always been syncretic.

This debate has serious repercussions. To champion a narrow African authenticity based on some arbitrarily chosen moment of the past is probably to exclude the work of white South Africans. It is to exclude much of the work of a writer such as Wole Soyinka, whose work is syncretic, embodying Yoruba and multicultural elements. Indeed, Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* makes this point explicitly: there is no contradiction in being African and being "universal."

Perhaps this is an appropriate moment, then, to note that the literature of North Africa has not been included in this chapter. This is less a matter of principle than it is the consequence of the nineteenth century's compartmentalization of the continent into "black" (sub-Saharan) Africa and "Arab" (north) Africa. To have been able to study the literatures of Africa at all is a recent phenomenon, and it is more recent still that the literatures to the north and south of the Sahara are read and taught side by side. The reconciliation of Africa to itself is one of the challenges facing African writers and peoples today: to overcome the topographical/cultural division of North African/Arab and sub-Saharan/black, on the one hand, and, on the other, given the new South African ideal of a "nonracial" society, to reconsider the role of race in a definition of African identity.

Thus the circumstances in which African novels, plays, and poetry are produced, many of them the legacy of colonialism, are as important to our understanding of African literature as are the style and images of the texts we read. Many factors give African writing its character and at the same time impinge on its development. One of the terrible, ironic testimonies to the vitality of African literature, to its resolute denunciation of all forms of domination, is the fact that writers—Kofi Awoonor,

Mongo Béti, Bessie Head, Dennis Brutus, Nuruddin Farah, Jack Mapanje, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, and Wole Soyinka, to name some of the most prominent—are routinely censored and forced into exile, when they are not incarcerated and tortured. African writers often wander, teach, and write on foreign shores because they cannot do so at home.

Within Africa, college students in a former French colony such as Côte d'Ivoire may, in fact, never read Ngugi of Kenya, either because of francocentric and anglocentric educational legacies, or because they cannot afford to buy books, were books available. American students have far greater access to African literature than do most African students.

Books by African writers are likewise more likely to be published and marketed in Paris and London than in Dakar or Lagos; or those published in major overseas capitals are more likely to garner international acclaim. African books are also more plentiful in university libraries in Europe and the United States, and scholars outside of Africa are more likely to review and critique those books in the prominent and widely read periodicals, newspapers, and publications of the West.

All these factors come between the reader and the lines on the page when one picks up a book of "African literature." To insist on such categories of literature and to contextualize it in this way is also to recognize that our understanding of the field has shifted in the last few years. We are far more conscious of the ways in which the factors outlined above are present *in texts*, of the ways in which new texts *revise* the meaning of their antecedents, and the fact that the literary act is a function of the *reader* as well as of the writer and what is written.

Selected Authors and Titles in African Literature

English-Language Literatures: West Africa

Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation and home of the University of Ibadan, has been a particularly important site of English-language literature. In 1958, Chinua Achebe published what has become to date the most widely read African novel, *Things Fall Apart*. Achebe retells the initial moment of colonialism, the encounter between the Igbo and the British, from the perspective of the colonized. In this novel and in *Arrow of God* (1964), which treats a later moment of the colonial period, he constructs an African voice and subject, denied by the literature of empire and colonialism. His *No Longer at Ease* (1960), *Man of the People* (1966), and recent *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987) focus on the corruption and contradictions of life in the post-independence era. Achebe is also an essayist and short-story writer.

Nigeria's 1986 Nobel laureate for literature, Wole Soyinka, is especially known as a playwright and poet, although he has written several novels (*The Interpreters*, 1965; *Season of Anomy*, 1973), memoirs (*The Man Died*, 1972; *Aké*, 1981; *Isara*, 1989), and essays (*Myth, Literature, and the African World*, 1976; *Art, Dialogue, and Outrage*, 1988). His plays range from the popular *The Lion and the Jewel* (1963) and *Trials of*

Brother Jero (1963) to the dense and sophisticated *A Dance of the Forests* (1963), *The Road* (1965), *Madmen and Specialists* (1971), to *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975), which ranges in tone from slapstick to dirge. His collections of poetry include *Idanre* (1967), *Shuttle in the Crypt* (1971), *Ogun Abibiman* (1976), and *Mandela's Earth and Other Poems* (1988). Soyinka's work is rooted in Yoruba mythology and aesthetics and in Nigerian history, both current and past. It explores a range of experiences and is articulated in a brilliant, poetic language revealing an extraordinary command of English and of world literature.

Buchi Emecheta and Flora Nwapa have challenged or modified our understanding of Nigerian history and society with works that consciously introduce feminist perspectives. Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966) was the first novel to be published by a woman writer in Nigeria. Emecheta is the author of several novels and has now created her own publishing house in London, where she resides. Her most acclaimed novel to date is *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), which examines marriage and the family in the village and colonial city from a woman's perspective.

Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* made a singular impression when it was published in London in 1952. Tutuola's adventurous tale and hero are virtually lifted from the repertoire of Yoruba oral traditions and placed on the page in effective but non-"literary" English. The combination of rich imagination and untutored language gives the work a freshness and originality that garnered critical acclaim and stirred a great many debates about African writers and writing.

Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991), winner of the Booker Prize, is the story of a spirit child, an *abiku*, born to poor Nigerian parents and is, in some sense, a postmodern descendant of Tutuola's narrative.

Other prominent Nigerian writers include playwright Femi Osofisan, who has well over fifty stage and television plays to his credit, including *The Chattering and the Song* (1977) and *Once upon Four Robbers* (1991); poet and playwright John Pepper Clark, who has also edited and transcribed the Ijaw epic *The Ozidi Saga* (1977); the syncretic, modernist poet Christopher Okigbo (*Labyrinths with Paths of Thunder*, 1971); and neotraditional poet Niyi Osundare (*The Eye of the Earth*, 1986), winner of the Commonwealth poetry prize and the Japanese-sponsored NOMA Award, given each year to "the best" book published in Africa.

Ghana's premier novelist is Ayi Kwei Armah. His earliest fiction, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968), is set in the last days of Nkrumah's regime. In this novel of disillusionment and alienation, a railway clerk, "the man," makes his way in a greedy and corrupt world. In later novels, *Fragments* (1970), *Why Are We So Blest?* (1972), *Two Thousand Seasons* (1973), and *The Healers* (1978), Armah's fiction moves from this focus on the personal experience of disillusionment to historical and allegorical analyses of African failure to resist Arab and European conquerors.

Ama Ata Aidoo is a playwright (*Dilemma of a Ghost*, 1971; *Anowa*, 1980), short-story writer (*No Sweetness Here*, 1971) and novelist (*Our Sister Killjoy*, 1966; *Changes—A Love Story*, 1991). In each of these genres, Aidoo, who has an extraordinary ear (and pen) for dialogue, renders the dynamism and complexity of women's experiences in rapidly changing societies.

Other distinguished Ghanaian writers include the poets Kofi Awoonor (*Night of My Blood*, 1985; *This Earth, My Brother*, 1971) and Kofi Anyidoho (*Elegy for the Revolution*, 1978; *Ancestral Logic & Caribbean Blues*, 1993) and playwright Efuwa Sutherland (*Edufa*, 1969; *The Marriage of Anansewa*, 1980).

English-Language Literatures: East Africa

East Africa has produced several remarkable English-language writers. The talent and vision of Somalia's Nuruddin Farah have come to international attention only relatively recently. He has written a series of striking novels (*From a Crooked Rib*, 1970; *A Naked Needle*, 1976; *Sweet and Sour Milk*, 1979; *Sardines*, 1981; and *Maps*, 1986) whose female protagonists bring into sharp focus issues of gender and nationalism.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o of Kenya has had a long and important literary career. His early trilogy of lyrical novels (*Weep Not, Child*, 1964; *The River Between*, 1965; and *A Grain of Wheat*, 1967) are set in the days of the Emergency, Mau Mau, and the period immediately preceding Kenyan independence in 1963. Through the portrait of intersecting, individual lives, Ngugi explores the ethical, religious, and social dilemmas of those times. In his later fiction, *Petals of Blood* (1977), *Devil on the Cross* (1982), and *Matigari* (1987), he attacks the savage greed of the neocolonialist elites. Ngugi has been a practicing playwright as well and has also co-authored several important plays (*The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, with Micere Mugo, 1976, and *I Will Marry When I Want*, co-authored in Kikuyu with Ngugi wa Mirii, 1982).

Okot p'Bitek of Uganda, in a satiric poem, *Song of Lawino* (1966), translated from Acoli and modeled on songs of the oral tradition, uses the persona of a scorned wife to attack indiscriminate assimilation of Western ways. *Song of Ocol* (1970) is p'Bitek's husbandly reply.

Taban lo Liyong, also of Uganda, is the author of *Fixions and Other Stories* (1969) and a great many other original collections of poems, proverbs, and tales. Jack Mapanje of Malawi is likewise a respected poet (*Of Chameleons and Gods*, 1981).

English-Language Literatures: Southern Africa

Zimbabwe has recently become an important hub of literary activity. A group of talented young novelists have risen to international prominence. Chenjerai Hove's *Bones* (1988), winner of the 1989 NOMA award, and Shimmer Chindoya's *Harvest of Thorns* (1989) are literary testimonies to Zimbabwe's war of liberation. Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988) is the story of women's resistance and resignation before the double bondage of settler colonialism and patriarchy, while Dambudzo Marechera's collection of short fiction *The House of Hunger* (1978), winner of the 1979 Guardian Fiction Prize, tells, in near verbal delirium, of the brutalization and violence of black life in a Zimbabwean township.

South Africa, like Zimbabwe and Kenya with their history of settler communities, has produced significant English-language literature for more than a century. Between 1948 and 1994, in the context of legislated *apartheid*, English-language literature in South Africa was written both by white South Africans of British and Afrikaner descent, and by black South Africans and those of mixed descent. South African literature is one of the richest and most complex on the continent.

Liberal, white South African writing came to international attention in 1948 with Alan Paton's sentimental and paternalistic *Cry, the Beloved Country*. Prominent white South African writers of recent years include poet and novelist Breyten Breytenbach (*In Africa Even the Flies Are Happy*, 1978; *True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist*, 1984; *Memory of Snow and of Dust*, 1990), J. M. Coetzee (*Waiting for the Barbarians*, 1980; *Life and Times of Michael K.*, 1983; *Foe*, 1986), and André Brink (*A Dry White Season*, 1979).

Nadine Gordimer, the Nobel laureate of 1991, is also a writer of fiction. To date she has published eleven novels and nearly as many collections of short stories. Her most recent fictions include the novels *Burger's Daughter* (1979), *July's People* (1981), *A Sport of Nature* (1987), *My Son's Story* (1990), and *None to Accompany Me* (1994), a first post-*apartheid* work, and the collection of short fiction *Jump and Other Stories* (1991). One of the unique strengths of Gordimer's fiction is its sustained probing of racial and gender identities through incidents, objects, and her characters' very own voices. In particular, she deconstructs whiteness and masculinity (and their opposites) as natural attributes.

Athol Fugard, the white South African playwright, has been a highly visible presence in New York theater circles for many years. Among his plays are *Boesman and Lena* (1969), *Master Harold and the Boys* (1982), *A Lesson from Aloes* (1981), and *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead*, co-authored with John Kani and Winston Ntshona (1976). Fugard's plays are spare dramas of survivors, those who cope with lives entangled and nearly wasted in the snares of *apartheid*.

While liberal white South Africans, by and large, have expressed the guilt, fear, alienation, and general malaise of the white minority living under *apartheid*, black and black-identified South African writers have written of the deprivation, injustices, violence, and anger suffered by the black majority. Their narratives are often set in the cities and townships.

Among the earliest narratives of black life under *apartheid* are autobiographical novels set in urban South Africa, *Mine Boy* (1946) and *Tell Freedom* (1954) by Peter Abrahams, and *Down Second Avenue* (1959) by Ezekiel Mphahlele. The alienation of life in the slums of *apartheid* is also the subject of Alex LaGuma's naturalist fictions *A Walk in the Night* (1967) and *In the Fog of the Season's End* (1972). More recently, Mbulelo Mzamane's *Mzala* (1980) and *Children of Soweto* (1981) have stressed the resilience of black South Africans.

Bessie Head is one of the best-known South African writers among Western feminists. An exile to rural Botswana, she authored several novels, including *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1968), *Maru* (1971), *A Question of Power* (1974), and a collection of short stories, *The Collector of Treasures* (1977).

In the category of fiction, South Africans have made particular use and developed particular talents for the short story, among them Richard Rive, James Matthews, and Miriam Tlali. Many novelists also, such as LaGuma, Head, and Mzamane, have practiced the short story.

Yet poetry has been a singularly important medium for black South Africans who reside in the townships. Oswald Mtshali's *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum* (1971) and *Fireflames* (1980), Siphso Sepamla's *Hurry Up to It!* (1975), *The Blues Is You in Me* (1976), and *The Soweto I Love* (1977), and Mongane Wally Serote's *Yakhal'inkomo* (1972) and *No Baby Must Weep* (1975) are all forged in the crucible of black urban life in South Africa. Of South African exiles residing in the U.S., the poet Dennis Brutus is surely the best-known in Europe and America. Brutus's poetry (*Sirens, Knuckles and Boots*, 1963; *Letters to Martha*, 1969; *Stubborn Hope*, 1978) is poised between an unrelenting naturalism, in which life in prison, in urban slums, or in exile has been narrowed, caged, trivialized, and demeaned, and a painful, tenacious desire for life as it might be, that space of imagination, possibility, energy, and renewal.

We wait now to see the literature of the new South Africa.

French-Language Traditions

The writers who have been most important for French-language traditions have come from the West African countries of Senegal, Cameroon, Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, and Mali, and from the Central African nation of Congo. Senegal was home to several of the poets of *négritude* to whom we referred in the first section of the chapter: David Diop (*Coups de pilon*, 1961; *Hammer Blows*, 1993), Birago Diop (*Leurres et lueurs*, 1960; *Les Contes d'Amadou Koumba*, 1947, *Tales of Amadou Koumba*, 1966), and Léopold Sédar Senghor, future president of Senegal (*Chants d'ombre*, 1945; *Hosties noires*, 1948; *Ethiopiennes*, 1956; *Nocturnes*, 1961; and *Lettres d'hivernage*, 1973; all translated in Melvin Dixon's *Léopold Sédar Senghor: The Collected Poetry*).

Senegal also has a rich tradition of novels in French. Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *L'Aventure ambiguë* (1961; *Ambiguous Adventure*, 1969), a novel of coming of age and the journey north, is now a classic of French-language literature in Africa. Aminata Sow Fall is the author of several novels, including the provocative *La Grève des battus* (1979; *The Beggars' Strike*, 1981). Boubacar Boris Diop has also authored several novels, among them the political mystery *Le Temps de Tamango* (1982). Mariama Bâ is an important feminist writer (*Une si longue lettre*, 1979, *So Long a Letter*, 1981; *Un chant écarlate*, 1981, *Scarlet Song*, 1985), and Ken Bugul has written a woman's account of going to Europe in *Le Baobab fou* (1983; *The Abandoned Baobab*, 1991). Ousmane Sembène has been a powerful artistic voice for African self-determination, both as a novelist (*Le Docker noir*, 1956, *The Black Dockworker*, 1987; *O pays, mon beau peuple*, 1957; *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu*, 1960, *God's Bits of Wood*, 1970; *Le Mandat*, 1966, *The Money Order*, 1972; *Xala*, 1973; and *Le Dernier de l'empire*, 1981, *The Last of the Empire*, 1983) and filmmaker.

Guinea is the home of novelist Camara Laye, whose tender, nostalgic *L'Enfant*

noir (1953; *The Dark Child*, 1954) is one of the best-known French-language texts outside of Africa. The younger generation of talented Guinean novelists includes Alioum Fantouré (*Le Cercle des Tropiques*, 1972), William Sassine (*Wirriyami*, 1976; *Le Jeune Homme de sable*, 1979), and Tierno Monenembo (*Les Crapauds-brousse*, 1979). Djibril Tamsir Niane has produced a version of the Mande epic of Sundiata, *Soundjata ou l'épopée mandingue* (1960; *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali*, 1965), as has Camara Laye, *Maître de la parole* (1978; *Guardian of the Word*, 1980).

Two major writers from Mali are Amadou Hampâté Bâ and Yambo Ouologuem. Hampâté Bâ, the editor and transcriber of several Poular narratives, is the author of *L'Etrange Destin de Wangrin* (1973; *The Fortunes of Wangrin*, 1987), an account of French colonialism as experienced by an enterprising interpreter. Ouologuem's *Le devoir de violence* (1968; *Bound to Violence*, 1973) is an innovative, iconoclastic novel, a chronicle of a fictional precolonial dynasty.

Bernard Dadié of Côte d'Ivoire has been a prolific playwright, the author of serious plays (*Béatrice du Congo*, 1970) as well as numerous comedies and satires (*Monsieur Thogo-Gnini*, 1970; *Papassidi maître-escroc*, 1975; *Mhoi-Ceul*, 1979). Dadié has also published traditional tales, short fiction, and satirical accounts of life in New York, Paris, and Rome. Ahmadou Kourouma, also of Côte d'Ivoire, is the author of *Les Soleils des indépendances* (1968; *The Suns of Independence*, 1981) and of *Monnè, outrages, défis* (1990; *Monnew*, 1993), novels whose originality of language lends still greater power to their stories of colonial and postcolonial disinheritance.

Cameroon is home to two novelists who have provided the francophone tradition with its most satirical portraits of the French: Ferdinand Oyono (*Une vie de boy*, 1956, *Houseboy*, 1966; *Le vieux nègre et la médaille*, 1956, *The Old Man and the Medal*, 1969) and Mongo Béti (*Le Pauvre Christ de Bomba*, 1956, *The Poor Christ of Bomba*, 1971; *Mission terminée*, 1957, *Mission to Kala*, 1964). Béti's later novels focus on the mediocrity and failure of post-independence Cameroon (*Remember Ruben*, 1974; *Perpétue ou l'habitude du malheur*, 1974). René Philombe is another well-known Cameroonian writer. He has authored plays, poetry, and short fiction (*Lettres de ma cambuse*, 1965; *Les époux célibataires*, 1971; *Petites gouttes de chant pour créer l'homme*, 1977; *Africapolis*, 1978). More recently, Cameroonian writer Werewere Liking has brought new energy and vision to stage productions both in French and in African languages, with the use of puppets and the revitalization of ritual theater (*Une nouvelle terre*, 1980). Her fictions *Orphée Dafric* (African Orpheus, 1981) and *Elle sera de jaspe et de corail* (1983) which she calls "song-novels," abandon traditional and static generic boundaries as well.

French-language literature in Africa has been immensely enriched by the contributions of Congolese writers. Among the poets are Jean-Baptiste Tati-Loutard (*Poèmes de la mer*, 1968; *Les Normes du temps*, 1974; *La Tradition du songe*, 1985) and Tchicaya U Tam'si (*Le Mauvais Sang*, 1955; *Feu de brousse*, 1957; *A triche coeur*, 1958). Both have written fiction as well: Tati-Loutard has written short stories (*Chroniques congolaises*, 1974; *Nouvelles chroniques congolaises*, 1980); U Tam'si wrote two novels, *Les Cancrelats* (1980) and *Les Phalènes* (1984).

Henri Lopès began his career as a writer of short stories or vignettes (*Tribaliques*, 1971, *Tribaliks*, 1987), and has gone on to write both political satire (*Le Pleurer-Rire*, 1982, *The Laughing Cry*, 1987) and quasi-autobiographical fiction (*Le Chercheur d'Afriques*, 1990). Sylvain Bemba is both a novelist (*Rêves portatifs*, 1979; *Le soleil est parti à M'Pemba*, 1982) and playwright (*L'Enfer, c'est Orfeo*, 1969; *Une eau dormante*, 1975; *Un foutu monde pour un blanchisseur trop honnête*, 1977). Likewise, Sony Labou Tansi writes both plays (*Conscience de tracteur*, 1979; *La Parenthèse de sang*, 1981) and novels (*La vie et demie*, 1979; *L'Anté-peuple*, 1983; *Les Sept Solitudes de Lorsa Lopez*, 1985), which dissect the neocolonial reality.

Portuguese-Language Literatures

It is not surprising that there have been fewer Portuguese-language writers than English- or French-language writers: only five African states were formerly colonies of Portugal: Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, São Tomé and Príncipe, Angola, and Mozambique. Moreover, these writers have been little known outside the lusophone countries of Africa, Portugal, and Brazil. They are at last coming to the attention of a wider audience.

There are significant parallels between the anticolonial impulse of lusophone writing and that of anglophone and francophone literatures, but lusophone literature is distinctive nonetheless for a number of reasons. Many Portuguese who immigrated to Portugal's African colonies were poor and thus found themselves living among African peoples in the suburbs of major cities. A large *mestiço* population resulted. This racial contact and mixing has been significant in the development of lusophone African literatures and has thus always posed a challenge to the notion of "race" as a defining feature of African identity. In addition, unlike their anglophone and francophone counterparts, lusophone writers who have grown up in such urban areas tend to have little direct experience of African-language oral traditions.

Among the celebrated Portuguese-language writers of Africa are Baltasar Lopes of Cape Verde, Luis Bernardo Honwana of Mozambique, José Luandino Vieira of Angola, and Agostinho Neto, poet, activist, and first president of independent Angola. Baltasar Lopes, a pioneer of Cape Verdean literature, has written in many forms, from poetry to novel to essay. His 1947 novel *Chinquinho* is the child's story of home, schooling, and leavetaking so characteristic of African and Caribbean writers. As such, the novel portrays humble lives and the hardships of Cape Verdean life. Luis Bernardo Honwana is a journalist whose literary reputation rests on a single, remarkable collection of short narratives. The title story of Honwana's *Nos matamos o cão tinhoso* (1964; *We Killed Mangy-Dog*, 1969) is typical of his subject and style: it is an eloquent allegorical tale about masculinity, the origins of violence, and, not incidentally, the brutalizing effects of colonialism. Vieira's *A Vida Verdadeira de Domingos Xavier* (1974; *The Real Life of Domingos Xavier*, 1978, published first in French in 1971, when Vieira was incarcerated) is an account of arrest, imprisonment, and torture, an inspiring testimony to the bravery and faith of the Angolan people

under Portuguese repression. Neto's collection of poems *Sagrada Esperanca* (1974; *Sacred Hope*, 1974) likewise portrays the humiliation of colonial domination and expresses hope for justice and dignity.

NOTES

1. The cultural unity of Africa continues to generate considerable debate. For an affirmation of such unity, see Cheikh Anta Diop, *The Cultural Unity of Black Africa* (1959; reprint, Chicago: Third World Press, 1978), and Clinton Jean, *Behind the Eurocentric Veil: The Search for African Realities* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992); for an opposing view, see Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), and V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa* (1988).

2. Melvin Dixon, trans., *Léopold Sédar Senghor: The Collected Poetry* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1991).

3. See Fredric Jameson's "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," *Social Text* 15 (1986): 65–88, and Ahmad Aijaz's rejoinder, "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the 'National Allegory,'" *Social Text* 17 (1987): 3–27, for arguments about the political nature of postcolonial literature.

4. See Chinweiger, Onwuchekwa Jemie, and Ihechukwu Madubuike, *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1983), vol. 1.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

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Claire Robertson Social Change in Contemporary Africa

How could he understand that the [Kikuyu] people [of Kenya] did not want to move backwards, that the ridges no longer desired their isolation? How could he know that the forces that drove people to yearn for a better day tomorrow, that now gave a new awareness to the people, were like demons, sweeping the whole country . . . from one horizon touching the sea to the other horizon touching the water?!

16

Change is the predominant aspect of contemporary African life for rural and urban dwellers. In this chapter the focus will be on two types of change: class formation, that is, the exaggeration of inequality, and change in gender relations.

These processes are intertwined in many cases. With the disappearance or modification of deeply rooted customs and the proliferation of Western-type education, African life, especially in towns, is taking on aspects familiar to Western readers. But it is dangerous to assume that "Westernization" is taking place, for social change has assumed particularly African aspects, while economic change significantly differs from that experienced in Western countries.

Historical Background to Contemporary Social Change

The West industrialized over a relatively long period of time beginning in the eighteenth century, after it had already increased its agricultural productivity considerably, and used emigration to rid itself of excess population. This process of industrialization was developed and controlled by Europeans, who then used their sophisticated technology to conquer most of the rest of the world in the nineteenth century. Even before conquest, which took place in most areas in the late nineteenth century, some areas of Africa had been extensively involved in Western trade, although on African terms. One motivation for conquest was to shift the terms of trade to favor Europeans. Thus, other world areas were incorporated into a European-