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Introduction

The Short Century and After: African Literatures and Cultures from 1945 to 2005

In 2001, Okwui Enwezor curated an exhibition of African art in Munich, Germany entitled *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945-1994*. According to the Preface, *The Short Century* asks what Africa's place is "in the writing of new narratives and conclusions particular to the proper understanding of the twentieth century." This special issue of the *Canadian Review of Comparative literature/Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée*, "The Short Century and After: Literature and Culture in Africa and the Diaspora," draws its inspiration from Enwezor's project. Like the exhibition, "The Short Century and After" begins from the end of World War II, the period during which anti-colonialist dissent and decolonization struggles intensified in Africa (Cooper 2005). However, here we extend the period under scrutiny into the present.

Thematically, the questions that "The Short Century and After" poses differ slightly from those Enwezor's project addresses. Specifically, "The Short Century and After" asks: how have African literatures and mass cultures responded to challenges posed the restructuring of the global capitalist economic system, rapid changes in audiovisual and communications technology, the decline of nation states and corresponding rise of corporate states and transnational institutions and agencies, on the one hand, and on the other, political instability at home, and the evolving models of social organization and modes of self-perception that have swept through Africa since the end of World War II? What generic, formal, and aesthetic innovations have these political, economic, technological, and cultural

challenges and shifts inspired in African cultural practices, and what contributions have literary and cultural criticism made to our understanding of these innovations? What are the possible implications of these transformations for the future of cultural production in Africa and for the analysis and interpretation of African literatures and cultures? Under what new economic and social conditions are artifacts of popular culture (for example, video films) produced, circulated, and consumed? In responding to these questions, the essays collected in this special issue of the *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature/Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée* touch upon a wide variety of issues that have been thematized in African arts and letters since 1945.

Needless to say, history is one of these themes. As Ngugiwa Thiong'o memorably observes, postcolonial African literature has always sought "to come to terms with 'the thing that has been'" (1972, 47). Reckonings with the past are crucial analytical strategies for making sense of a present that, often, seems as incomprehensible as the past is inscrutable. Over the past century crucial transformations have occurred in the poetics and politics of African literatures and cultures. Often, scholars describe these transformations either in terms of a rupture or a shift in the continuum of the modalities of representation. In each instance, they may distinguish between realist and postrealist, or between romantic and new realist, modalities, characterizing the change either in terms of a break or of an evolution. In each of these distinctions, the second element in the pairing is that in which the ideological positions and aesthetic techniques held to be axiomatic principles in the precursor are repudiated and a break or evolution is initiated. Thus, postrealist African fictions have been defined as narratives that denaturalize and repudiate realist legitimations of nationalism and subvert realist conventions of literary representation. Similarly, new realist African fictions have been described as narratives that repudiate the romanticist celebration of "a specially projected sense of uniqueness" and subvert its aesthetics (Appiah 150; Irele 213-14). For those who employ the metaphors of evolution and continuum, such transformation is construed as the product of a peculiarly African crisis of subjectivity, manifestations of which are "even more acute" forms of alienation and fragmentation than are to be found in Western modernist and postmodernist texts. As a consequence, it is argued that we may map African literature "onto a continuum marked by the configuration of epistemological [modernist] and ontological [postmodernist] elements" (Quayson 831).

Generally, accounts of African literary history that focus on the written tradition begin with Europe's "pacification" of Africa's "primitive" peoples, the introduction of colonial languages and institutions, the development of written vernaculars and the establishment of the mission schools and presses, etc. leading to the formation of a literate elite and the development of a literature that addressed the changes wrought by these processes. Here, literary history seems to take its cue from gentile history. With the imposition of colonial rule, Africans faced four pressing challenges: how to react to colonial subjection, a subjection marked by the defamiliarization of the self, the alienation of political sovereignty, and the expropriation of land and other material resources; how to deal with the imperatives of capitalist production that converted Africans, sometimes *en masse*, into slave or unskilled low-wage labour and/or consumers of imported goods; how to respond to the culture of modernity as represented in the pedagogies of colonial and missionary schools and the performance of ritual civility in colonial bureaucracies and "private" clubs and societies; and how, eventually, to regain lost sovereignty and the right to self-determination. Generally, in dealing with these challenges they elaborated ideologies, out of which emerged the political movements — Pan-Africanism, Black (and Arab) nationalism, Negritude, and so on—in the name of which they initiated various anti-colonial insurrections. Of these, two (Pan-Africanism and nationalism) would prove most influential precisely, we suggest, because their "properties and functions" were pragmatic responses to historical contingency (Sekyi-Otu, 36-38). It is to these movements, and to colonial (secular and missionary) pedagogy, that modern African letters owes its emergence after World War I.

Determined to cultivate a wider readership and, thus, advance the cause of decolonization, "political intellectuals" such as Herbert Macauley, Leopold Sedar Senghor, Jomo Kenyatta, Eduardo Mondlane inaugurated the practice of "domesticating" European modernist concepts and genres to serve local needs. After World War II their heirs, many of whom had also grown skeptical of "European cultural superiority," began to assert "an African critical subjectivity," [and] producing fiction and poetry that inscribed the African as *subject* (Enwezor 12).¹ In doing so, they sought to express themselves in what

1 See, for example, the following: Leopold Sedar Senghor's *Chants d'ombre* (1945), Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952), Denis Osita Osadebay's *Africa Sings* (1952), Camara Laye's *L'Enfant noir* (1953), and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958). To Williams' list we should add Gamal Abdel Nasser (1918-1970), author of *Philosophy of the Revolution* (1954), and Keita Fodeba, whose *Poemes africaine* (1950) is exemplary in its fusion of Pan-Africanist and nationalist sentiments

each thought represented a national style. Peter Abrahams, Chinua Achebe, Tayeb Salih, Bessie Head, Nadine Gordimer, Wole Soyinka, Ayi Kwei Armah, Ngugiwa Thiong'o, and others, are the writers in whose works, this "national longing for form"—or, more precisely, the yearning for "forms of appropriate national style" would be most manifest (Williams 356-58).² Often, in seeking a national style, writers struck a literary compromise between realist or modernist literary conventions and African oral rhetorical forms and narrative techniques. Meanwhile, working alongside these "literary talents" were other writers who, using received literary genres such as melodrama, produced popular chapbooks, the literary precursor of today's video films. Characterized by a quotational aesthetic, the melodramatic narratives retailed in these chapbooks provided to urban residents assailed by the crises of modernity (individualism and social fragmentation; individual and collective identity; new technologies of sex, sexual mores, and gender relations; population displacement and migration; mass communication; and so on). The kind of moral guidance and aesthetic pleasures that these chapbooks provided for these new subjects of an African modernity are now provided by the video film (Newell 2001, 9-12).³

Unfortunately, as is now widely acknowledged the anti-colonialist insurrections that stretched from the early 1950s to the early 1990s yielded not decolonization but "arrested decolonization."⁴ Since the nation was the political entity in terms of which liberation movements mobilized their peoples to fight against colonial domination, the failure of the postcolonial nation-states to meet even the most basic expectations of their peoples unleashed a flood of often searing critical revaluations of the nation (Gikandi 1991, 103). Such revaluations are to be seen in Christopher Okigbo's elegiac poetry, Wole Soyinka's tragic drama, and Achebe's satirical evisceration of Nigerian politics, Ayi Kwei Armah's scatological representation of endemic corruption and decay in Ghana, Yambo Ouloguem's revisionary deflationary

narrative of Africa's mythic past and Mariama Ba's chronicle of an African woman's betrayal.⁵

What, however, is most remarkable about these works is that in reevaluating the nation they also considered it necessary to seek new forms capable of conveying their perception of the postcolonial crises. In *A. Man of the People* (1966) this quest for form prompts Achebe to adopt "a homodiegetic (first person) narrative" (Gikandi 1991, 106), while in narratives by other writers and in the plastic arts it prompts a radical break with the epistemological presuppositions that subtend realist aesthetics. Formal experimentation as in magic realist fiction, or a recursive turn to a pre-modern African aesthetic, as in the neo-traditionalist wood sculpture such as "Yoruba Man with a Bicycle" and "Warrior on Horseback with Captives" (Appiah 148)⁶, as a few examples of the avenues taken in the search for form. In African magic realist texts such as Ahmadou Kourouma's *Les solails des independances* (1968), Amadou Hampate Ba's *L'Etrange destin de Wangrin* (1973), Tahar ben Jelloun's *Enfant de sable* (1985), and Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991), the quest seems to have been resolved in mythic narratives in which the fluid, radically unstable, reality of the postcolonial world is refracted through the perspective of marginalized figures (an abiku, a masculinized woman, the last male heir of a dying clan). Here oral discourse ceases to be a traditional aesthetic resource necessary for validating the cultural authenticity of the work; rather, it becomes "a means by which radically to disrupt" epistemological and ontological boundaries such as those that subtend Achebe's representation of occult and quotidian events in *Things Fall Apart* (Quayson 844). A similar impulse is to be observed in Francophone African films such as Souleymane Cisse's *Yeelen* and Idrissa Ouedraogo's *Tilai* and "Warrior on Horseback with Captives," Lamidi Olonade Fakeye's wood sculpture. Perhaps more "Back-to-the-future" than "Return-to-the-source," such art offers us a visual tableau that, by representing humans (in Fakeye's sculpture a *jagun jagun* or "principal warrior" and his human trophy) and objects (a Dane gun and a horse) and their constituent parts (the head, torso, etc.) in proportion to values assigned them in indigenous African thought, attempt to realign epistemology with ontology.

2 For a discussion of this notion, see Brennan (1989, 113-14) and Brennan (1990, 44-70).

3 I-or studies of African popular literature and video film, see Obiechina (1972); Haynes and Okome 2000; Newell (2003), Ogede (2004); and Adejunmobi.

4 We are indebted to Biodun Jeyifo for this useful phrase. See "The Nature of Things: Arrested Decolonization and Critical Theory," *Research in African Literatures* 21 (1990): 33-47.

5 For further discussions of this development in African literature, see the following: Gikandi (1991, 101-06), Appiah (1992, 149-50), and Irele (2001, 212-15).

6 See *Lamidi Olonade Fakeye of Ila-Orangun, Nigeria: A Retrospective Exhibition* (September 15 - October 2, 1987), Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo

Such is the diversity of works comprising what we consider to be African literatures and cultures that it seems virtually impossible to produce a unitary yet comprehensive profile. A random selection of titles from the contents of *The Cambridge History of African and Caribbean Literature* (2004)—"Arab and Berber oral traditions in North Africa," "African oral epics," "Ethiopian literature," "African literature in Arabic," "The Swahili literary tradition," "Gikuyu literature," "Literature in Yoruba," "Literature in Afrikaans," "African literature in Portuguese," and "Francophone literatures of the Indian Ocean"—suggests why. So do African literatures in indigenous African and Arabic scripts, such as those represented in the special issue of *Research in African Literatures* (Spring 1997) devoted to the Oral-Written Interface, and writings by Africans now dispersed across the world.⁷ The multiplicity of regional, ethno-linguistic, and historical literary and oral traditions is such that, as the editors observe, "a literary history of Africa, consisting of a coherent and linear narrative of its development over time, is neither feasible nor meaningful" (xv). Nor is it meaningful, given this diversity of literary and oral traditions, to insist upon the application of a singular mode of critical analysis. Consequently, what the essays selected for inclusion in this special issue of *CRCL/RCLC* share is not so much a unitary content or analytical methodology. Rather, it is the diversity of content, the interdisciplinary and theoretically informed close readings of relevant material, and the perceptiveness of the responses they offer to the questions posed above, that they have in common.

As Adejunmobi, Adesanmi, Coly, and Carlson show in their essays, the interplay between economic impoverishment, political repression, and rapid technological change and symbolic practices in African literatures and popular culture has been mutually productive. To understand this, consider Adejunmobi's analysis of West African video film narratives: in her view, the increased poverty rates that have rendered print narratives unaffordable to most people have also created the vast audiences enjoyed by this popular cultural form in the cities of the region. Engendered by small scale investors, audiovisual technologies, and a corps of directors, producers, and actors drawn from television drama, mass produced serialized video drama has

spurred the emergence of a "culture of technical and discursive reiteration" in West Africa. At the same time, she recognizes innovations at the aesthetic and ideological levels that technology, economic imperatives, and audience reception have made possible in popular African drama. The most significant of these are a preference for narrative continuity between sequels, each of which must then begin *in medias res*, and the provision of morally desirable resolutions to transgressions (murder, incest, homosexuality, infidelity, political malfeasance, and so on) for the regulation of which the postcolonial state has proven itself all but irrelevant. Thus, Adejunmobi seems to share the view that, though productive in this sense, serialized video drama has also impoverished other forms of popular culture such as "traditional" Yoruba drama by subordinating them to the cash nexus (Ogundele 98). Similarly, in the realm of African prose fiction, Adesanmi explores the innovative ways in which Francophone African women writers (Abibatou Traore, *Sidagmie*; and Fatou Keita, *Rebelle*) have reinscribed polygamy and female circumcision, both key institutions of African patriarchy, thus symbolically rendering them as potential sites for both resistance against male domination and the transformation of African women into proactive agents of social and cultural change.

In a similar vein Coly shows how, in Calixthe Beyala's *Le petit prince de Belleville*, emigration from Africa in search of better economic opportunities in Europe provides Mam, Beyala's protagonist, the opportunity not only to achieve economic independence from Abdou, her emasculated and nostalgic husband, but also to renounce the Africa she remembers "as a prison house for women" in favor of a France that affords her space to assert her sexuality. To be sure, Beyala would qualify Mam's "affirmation of France as home" in *Maman a un amant*. Yet, she argues, against literary precursors in the Francophone Africa tradition who can only imagine home as a geographically fixed spot and scholars for whom it is a cognitive, non-spatial environment, Beyala inscribes it as both cognitive *and* spatial by recognizing the constraints that racial, social, and sexual impediments impose upon the ability of subjects to transfer "home" across territorial, economic, and symbolic borders. Given her reading of M.G. Vassanji's "novels of migration," it is likely that Steiner would subscribe to Coly's proposition since Vassanji's East African Indian emigrants' response to displacement roughly parallels those of Mam and Abdou. Compelled by political instability to emigrate to North America, they either attempt to reenact a supposedly "authentic" self that is peculiar to their East African homeland (*No New Land*, 1991), or they attempt to perform a

See essays in *Research in African Literatures* 28.1 (Spring 1997). See, also, Sana Camara, "A'jami Literature in Senegal: The Example of Serin Muusaa Ka, Poet and Biographer," *Research in African Literatures* 28.1 (Fall 1997): 163-82 and Farida Abu-Haidar, "African Literature in Arabic," *The Cambridge History of African and Caribbean Literature*, Vol. 1, eds. F. Abiola Irene and Simon Gikandi. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 178 - 98.

socially assimilable national (Canadian or American) identity that is supposedly culturally neutral (*Amriika*, 1999). In either case, "home" is an idea that can only be realized in performance, and what is always at stake in these performances is the immigrant subject's identity. For those who, like Abdou, value continuity, purity, and stasis and seek to preserve the "solid self" that the ancestral home confers, memories and artifacts of that homeland must be conserved and redeployed in the service of self-preservation (Said 295). Conversely, for those who, like Mam, value rupture, adaptation and dynamism, and desire a fluid self, memories and artifacts of the ancestral homeland must be discarded to facilitate self-discovery in the host country. So in the immigrant novels of Beyala and Vassanji in which immigration may be a failed translation or translation-in-progress, the Diaspora space is always the site of an ambivalent relation between the subject and the host community.

The reciprocal interplay between symbolic practices and economic processes, political repression, and technology in African literatures and popular cultures is no less evident in the "literary cultural nationalism" of the Black Atlantic, prison writing, and literary song texts. With regard to Black Atlantic literatures, Creary's contribution to this volume shows that Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and Countee Cullen (the Harlem Renaissance), Jorge Barbosa, Balthasar Lopez da Silva, and Manuel Lopez (*C/aridados*), and B.W. Vilakazi (the New Africa Movement in South Africa), all keen observers of "the effects of racialized forms of twentieth century industrial capitalism," used modern literary forms and oral and other elements of "folk" culture to produce poetry and fiction that repudiated colonialists' myths and racist stereotypes, and posited alternative "cultural identities" ("The New Negro," *Caboverdeano*, and "The New African") for their peoples, and inspired future leaders of anti-colonialist and anti-racist liberation movements. As Mugambi's essay, "Speaking in Song: Power, Subversion and the Postcolonial Text," suggests, one notable form of oral discourse employed in literary experimentations of this kind is the song text: literature (notably, but not exclusively, poetic) that incorporates songs (lullaby, epithalamion, dirge, *mucung'wa*, *mbird*) into the written medium. The song text from John Pepper Clark's *Song of a Goat* (1961) and Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawno* (1966) to Mariama Ba's *Un chant ecarlate* (1981), Niyi Osundare's *Songs of the season* (1990), Yvonne Vera's *Without a Name* (1994), and Marjorie Macgoye's *Make It Sing and Other Poems* (2000), strategically uses the audibility of songs to saturate the text with the presence of a distinct indigenous language and, thus, to subvert the hegemony of the colonists' language, and to interrogate the "Mother

Africa" trope by means of which the African woman's subjectivity is abstracted into an idealized image.

From Winks' discussion of African prison poetry we may deduce that, in South Africa as in the postcolonies to the north, the tradition of literary experimentation by means of which the Barbosas, Vilakazis, and the p'Biteks gave voice to the changing political aspirations and cultural realities taking place in their communities did not end with them. If anything, it has been perpetuated and nurtured by writers (Dennis Brutus, Wole Soyinka, Ngugiwa Thiong'o, Breyten Breytenbach, and Jack Mapanje) who were incarcerated for composing works deemed subversive by the State. But where their literary precursors sought to affirm the cultural pride and integrity of their peoples by creating an aesthetics of liberation, "prison" writing seeks to defy the despotism of apartheid and postcolonial regimes with an *ars poetica* characterized by verbal economy and precision, imagery and rhyme, and complex tropes.⁸ Uttered "from the vantage point of the present," such literature gains its political efficacy from its temporal structure: "it tells both of a time before the present (insofar as it expresses and protects a collective memory), and of a prophetic futurity (insofar as it represents a praxis)."

The dialectical interplay between symbolic practices and economic processes, political repression, and technology we have been discussing is a recurrent theme in all of the essays collected in this volume.⁹ Sometimes references to it are explicit, as the essays discussed above show. Sometimes, however, they may be oblique. Sankara's critique of autobiographical writing in Francophone Africa, Halpe's psychoanalytic reading of "gendered subjectivity" in *The Sand Child* and Carlson's analysis of the relationship between space and identity in *N'zid*, are examples of such oblique references.

In "Navigation, Intertextuality, and In-Between Spaces: Expressions of Identity in Malika Mokeddem's *N'zid*" Carlson posits three kinds of influence on *N'zid*: Algerian (as in the Arabic term *n'zid*, which connotes birth,

8 For the phrase, "aesthetics of liberation," we are indebted to Patrick Taylor, who defines the narrative of liberation as "narrative liberated from mythical closure." Since the African prison literature Winks discusses include poetry, we have substituted "aesthetics" for "narrative" while retaining Taylor's definition. See Taylor, *The Narrative of Liberation. Perspectives on Afro-Caribbean Literature, Popular Culture, and Politics* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1989), 5.

9 For an exposition of the notion of "dialectical interaction," see Quayson (2003, xxxii-xxxiii). In adopting Quayson's term, we do not claim for our analyses a reading that is as comprehensive and subtle as Quayson's model of the dialectic would require.

continuity, and evolution), Western (as in the Mediterranean Sea, an intertextual reference to *The Odyssey* and *Ulysses*), and literary (Rimbaud, Cixous, and Khatibi) whose identities are as averse to easy categorization as hers. For her, these "influences" have a two-fold significance: first, their diversity reflects Mokeddem's identity and, second, they together reinforce the techniques (intertextuality and "spatial and temporal disjunction") of literary postmodernism that Mokeddem uses. For Carlson, then, there is an multilayered relation between authorial identity, literary technique, and ethnolinguistic and literary influences. So here the dialectical interplay is between the literary symbolic domain and authorial identity, this last being as "nomadic" and "multifaceted" as her protagonist's, Nora's. Although postmodern narrative strategies such as those Carlson analyzes in *N'qtd* are also used in *The Sand Child* it is Freud whose influence suffuses Ben Jelloun's imagination. The dialectic at work in Halpe's "The Problem of Eros in Tahar Ben Jelloun's *The Sand Child*" differs. Halpe links the difficulty of "narrating Ahmed/Zahra" (or representing a woman who is gendered male by paternal fiat) to a reworking of the Freudian theory of instincts that, eventually, leads Ben Jelloun to the "unspeakable trauma" concealed beneath the conflict between Eros (the life instinct) and Thanatos (the death drive). Inspired by Herbert Marcuse, she identifies this trauma as death, and describes *The Sand Child* as "a grand repetition" compulsion of the death trauma that, for Marcuse, is the "final negativity" that casts a long shadow over existence. Thus, Halpe invites the reader to see the novel's multiple narrations of Ahmed/Zahra that obstruct the desire for narrative closure as a Marcusean invitation to circumvent the power of time by suffusing "consciousness of the text with the lived tension of Eros." In her reading of *The Sand Child*, then, it is the interplay between narrative structure and technique and the trauma of death concealed beneath the conflict of Eros and Thanatos that makes possible the reader's playful participation in the text's erotic affirmation of life.

In "History and the Production and Reception of Autobiography in Francophone Africa," Sankara traces the genealogy of Francophone African autobiography through three phases: colonial ("African-mind" autobiographical fragments, memoirs, and first-person autobiographical narratives), post-independence (nationalist personal autobiography by male and female writers), and post-nationalist (memoir that embed the self in social relations and historical entanglements). Though mindful of the extraversion of Francophone African autobiography in the earlier phases, Sankara focuses his critique on memoirists of the latter phase who, having shifted from

autobiography, a form that presupposes a first-person narrator/protagonist whose assumed interiority the narrative is ethically mandated to explore, to the memoir, a form that inscribes "the subject in a social environment" in which as observer or participant he mediates the readers' experience of history. Sankara also discusses the political impact of their projects by publishing outside Africa and adopting a rhetorical style that is aimed at a foreign rather than an African readership. For him, Amadou Hampate Ba's *Amkoullel, l'enfant peti* (1991), a memoir "written primarily with a European audience in mind," exemplifies this worrisome trend. For us, what makes Sankara's critique possible is the presupposition that Francophone African autobiography should do two things if it is to mediate African readers' knowledge of the colonial past effectively: adopt rhetorical modes of address that orient its narrative towards a distinctively local African readership, and be published by local presses. In other words, Sankara's critique rests on the assumption that the dialectical interplay between rhetorical modes of address aimed at an African audience and relations of literary production may engender in readers a keen appreciation of history from an "African perspective."

Whatever our philosophical or theoretical reservations about Sankara's assumption may be, there can be no doubt that in the Short Century and After it is the quest for African perspectives (as opposed to a singular "African perspective") that has served as a guiding light for African writers and artists. We observe this quest, for example, in what Abiola Irele describes as Ngugi wa Thiong'o's "adventure with language" (65). A symptom of "the tension between tradition and transition in the modern African imagination," Ngugi's decision to write his novels in Gikuyu rather than English is both "a gesture of refusal toward . . . cultural subjugation" and an illustration of "the ways in which, as Africans, we have had to employ writing for the full exploration of what Soyinka has called the "movement of transition" in our collective existence" (66). In answering the questions posed at the beginning of this Introduction, the contributors to this special issue of *CRCL* have demonstrated that writing is just one of several media they employ for the purpose of exploring this "movement of transition." Thus Tunde Kelani, who is possibly the most internationally renowned video filmmaker in Nigeria, has declared that his objective is both to conserve Yoruba culture and set "new standards" for the industry (Adejunmobi). For his works, as for works by African writers and artists in the Short Century and After, Irele's assessment of African letters is applicable: "The process of elaborating a new and distinctive expression represents, in itself, the making of a tradition of letters,

one that retraces the course of our modern adventure and may well take novel and unexpected directions in the future" (66),

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