

The Power of a Singular Story: Narrating Africa and Its Diasporas

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“I am not an African.” The British-Caribbean writer Caryl Phillips was hit with this seemingly simple but forceful realization in early 2003, while sitting inside a one-story house surrounded by a snowy American landscape (Phillips, “Out of Africa” 206). Prior to this moment of clarity, Phillips had been in conversation with the Nigerian author Chinua Achebe, into whose living room he had been welcomed; the subject of their exchange had been Joseph Conrad’s controversial novella, *Heart of Darkness* (1902).

During this encounter, which took place almost three decades after Achebe first delivered his famous lecture on Conrad’s book—a talk entitled “An Image of Africa”—the Nigerian writer uncompromisingly stood by his verdict: Conrad, whose novella presented Africans as “rudimentary souls” and “savages clapping their hands and stamping their feet,” was a “thoroughgoing racist” (“Image” 19, 7, 11). Phillips, who had always rather viewed Conrad’s narrative as an indictment of the European colonial enterprise in Africa, took the opportunity of his conversation with Achebe to respectfully voice his disagreement with his elder, upon which the Nigerian writer emphatically replied, “you cannot compromise my humanity in order that you explore your own ambiguity. I cannot accept that. My humanity is not to be debated, nor is it to be used simply to illustrate European problems” (Phillips, “Out of Africa” 206).

It is at this point that Phillips became fully aware that he, born to African-Caribbean parents in St Kitts and brought up in England, had an interest in probing “the health of European civilisation” (“Out of Africa” 206) that Achebe did not share. While the younger British-Caribbean writer was willing to engage with Conrad’s tale about the “infamy” of colonialism (203), even if it meant putting up with “a certain stereotype of African barbarity that, at the time, was accepted as the norm” (205), his older Nigerian colleague was most definitely not ready to make such a concession. Eventually understanding the validity of Achebe’s

position, Phillips discerningly concluded, “Those of us who are not from Africa may be prepared to pay this price, but this price is far too high for Achebe” (207).

In the context of this special issue of *Research in African Literatures*, Achebe’s and Phillips’s divergent responses to *Heart of Darkness* are of more than anecdotal interest, for they bring into focus the contrasting nature of the two men’s relationship with Africa, an asymmetrical connection shaped by historically different experiences of the continent. Evidently, Africa was not the same to Achebe, who spent most of his life in Nigeria and only reluctantly joined the ranks of the “new” diaspora in the United States later in life, as it is to the Anglo-Kittitian Phillips, a descendant of the members of the “old” diaspora, those displaced by the transatlantic slave trade. To the heirs of those uprooted people, Africa quickly became a distant, intangible entity, yet for many it also remained a pivotal constituent in their search for identity, a quest for cultural roots powerfully articulated by the African American writer Countee Cullen in his 1925 poem, “Heritage,” in the form of a straightforward question: “What is Africa to me?”

Both Cullen and Phillips belong to the “old” diaspora, but this common biographical feature is perhaps also where the comparison between the two authors must end. Indeed, Phillips’s response to Africa, a continent to which he has now traveled repeatedly and on which he has set part of his novels *Higher Ground* (1989), *Crossing the River* (1993), and *A Distant Shore* (2003), by no means shares the romanticism of Cullen’s vision, epitomized in the “Strong bronzed men, or regal black / Women” that peopled the African American poet’s imaginary landscape (“Heritage” 1347). Of course, Phillips’s and Cullen’s contrasting outlooks are the products of different cultures and different times, separated as they are by the better part of a century. This, in turn, begs the larger question as to what extent the various responses to Cullen’s original query have been subject to transformation and renewal over the decades. Hence, it seems time to inquire, “What is Africa to me *now*?”

This updated version of Cullen’s question was first voiced by Paul Gilroy in an interview published in the magazine *Transition* in 2008. In this piece, the author of *The Black Atlantic* (1993) wondered whether African Americans today still wanted to cultivate an affiliative relationship with Africa, which, he said, “functions in their dreamscape much of the time as a place from which no light can escape, as the heart of darkness, as the core of unreason” (Shelby 124). In the African American imagination, Gilroy seemed to suggest, Cullen’s figure of the “noble savage” has morphed into its infamous evil twin, a bitter irony considering how this ideology has so often been invoked to inflict violence on the peoples of not only Africa, but of its diasporas as well. Intriguingly, as commentators such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie have pointed out, recent African—and even Caribbean—immigrants to the United States tend to hold similarly negative stereotypical views of African Americans themselves (Bady). The complexities informing this uneasy relationship between the different black diasporas have only begun to be unraveled (see, e.g., Chude-Sokei), and they undeniably warrant further investigation.

Unsurprisingly, creative writers have been at the vanguard of precisely such an exploration, often including among their concerns the broader historical and sociopolitical links between Africa, its different diasporas, and their lands of forced or voluntary exile. A well-known case in point is Chimamanda

Ngozi Adichie's widely acclaimed *Americanah* (2013), a novel that, among its many insights, offers critical reflections on racial issues in the United States, as seen through the eyes of a Nigerian protagonist. Interestingly, Adichie's rich narrative lends itself to rather different readings, depending on one's chosen critical lens. Historically speaking, *Americanah* can be "placed within a . . . tradition of postcolonial writing" since, as Yogita Goyal astutely observes, it "revers[es] the heart of darkness narrative, where rather than Europeans or Americans going to Africa to find themselves, an African character travels to the heart of the West, only to find darkness there" (xii). However, despite the occasional—no doubt deliberate—caricature designed to reflect America's prejudices back at itself, Adichie's US characters are a far cry from the eye-rolling "savages" of Conrad's book. Indeed, one of the Nigerian writer's most remarkable achievements resides in her managing to engage (rather than offend) audiences globally, across continents, races, and cultures. Adichie's creative skills also allow readers to magnify singular narrative details into political statements of manifesto-like proportions, for better or for worse. Much has already been made in interviews and reviews about the novel's comments on the politics of black hair—weaves, cornrows, Afros, all carry ideological implications, Adichie emphatically suggests. Lending another domestic detail similar analytical weight, one might well venture an observation on the dietary habits of the main character, Ifemelu, who, after settling back in Nigeria after more than a decade in the United States, comes to long for the health food cherished by her African American quinoa-eating ex-boyfriend as much as for the boiled yams and fried plantains of her Nigerian home, though not without some disquiet at this transformation (*Americanah* 409). This minor narrative incident is noteworthy, for it offers a revealing glimpse into the ways in which the protagonist's diasporic experience has altered her relationship with her country of origin. For some critics, the leap from such interpretive minutiae about Ifemelu's cross-cultural identity to more general statements about the contemporary African condition has proved too tempting to resist. Ifemelu's world, they insist, is the globalized culture of the twenty-first century: so, out with the dubious Conradiana, in with the quinoa—Adichie's is the age of the "Afropolitan."

Or perhaps not. Indeed, Adichie—who, rather amusingly, has also confessed a penchant for quinoa (Nwonwu)—rejects the term "Afropolitan" with force. She asserts, "I'm not an Afropolitan. I'm African, happily so. . . . I'm comfortable in the world, and it's not that unusual. Many Africans are happily African and don't think they need a new term" (Barber). On the surface, this stance differs rather markedly from that of Taiye Selasi who, in her 2005 article, "Bye-Bye Babar" (then published under the name Taiye Tuakli-Wosornu), introduced precisely this neologism to reflect the multiple cultural affiliations of today's diasporic Africans, whom she described as "the newest generation of African emigrants" who identify as "Africans of the world." Selasi's position finds an echo in the words of scholar Chielozona Eze, who similarly claims that the term "Afropolitan" may felicitously capture the contemporary moment in which "the conventional notion of African identity that was conceived in opposition to the West is anachronistic" (234). Today's Africans, Eze continues in the same vein, are "Afri-hyphenated," since "their identities are constituted by relation rather than opposition" (235).

As strikingly dissimilar as Adichie's reaction to the word "Afropolitan" may be from Selasi's and Eze's, all three commentators are making very similar cases

for the inherent fluidity and cosmopolitanism of African identities. The same could be said of Achille Mbembe, who additionally provides a diachronic theorization of the concept of “Afropolitanism” in an eponymous 2007 essay. In this influential article, Mbembe suggests that the history of Africa, marked by slavery but also by multiple migrations to the continent—from Asia, the Middle East, and Europe (26)—is one of “colliding cultures” (27): “it is not simply that a part of African history lies elsewhere, outside Africa. It is also that a history of the rest of the world . . . is present on the continent” (28). Mbembe, more emphatically than Selasi or Eze, is in fact explicitly arguing against the ideological rigidity of movements such as nativism, nationalism, Pan-Africanism, all of which, he claims, have “lost [their] ethical heart” (29). In contrast to Mbembe, the Kenyan writer Binyavanga Wainaina chooses to reclaim the older notion of Pan-Africanism, stating, in unison with Adichie, that “I’m not an Afropolitan”—a term that he considers synonymous with “crude cultural commodification” (Santana).

The point made by Wainaina about Afropolitanism—namely, that it often tends to privilege style over substance, and that the word and its underlying cross-cultural concept are an easy target for consumerist recuperation—is an accusation that has been repeatedly leveled against the term since its inception. This criticism, first directed at self-styled Afropolitan fashion events (see Eze 239), can now be said to permeate academia itself, a field often in denial about its own capitalistic-like inclination toward the endless proliferation of labels.¹ Importantly, what the examples of Adichie and Wainaina show is that one need not necessarily discard concepts such as “African” or “Pan-African” and their attendant prejudices in favor of trendier (but no less problematic) words. The alternative, favored by Adichie and Wainaina, is to work toward reinvesting older familiar terms with new, flexible, more contemporary meanings.

Crucially, the categorization of writers and their works as either “African” or “Afropolitan” is not a simple matter of terminology. Let us, by way of illustration, return to the example of *Americanah*. Hailed as the quintessential Afropolitan novel—a status it probably shares with Taiye Selasi’s *Ghana Must Go* (2013)—Adichie’s book has garnered an impressive amount of critical attention, in the form of newspaper reviews, conference papers, and, more recently, academic essays gradually making it into print. Favorite topics of inquiry have included the political nature of black hairstyles (mentioned above), the writer’s use of the blog form within the novel, the impact of globalization on societies around the world, and relations between black people of different cultural backgrounds in the US. It is rather striking, however, that comparatively little attention has been devoted to the critique of Nigerian society that also forms the backbone of the book. Indeed, a dizzying amount of statements about contemporary Nigeria punctuate the narrative, in Adichie’s typical anecdotal style: power cuts, institutionalized corruption, unemployment issues, Christian fundamentalism—all of these have, more often than not, been sidelined by critics in favor of more fashionable global- or Western-oriented counterparts.

Admittedly, this relative critical neglect of the African continent in Adichie’s novel cannot be laid exclusively at the door of Afropolitanism, a notion that, at least in the forms proposed by Mbembe and Eze, makes provision for the inclusion of the African continent itself.² However, in the case of *Americanah*, the cross-cultural emphasis privileged by Afropolitan criticism seems to have insidiously

shifted the center of attention away from the continent, in a slightly disturbing repetition of the Euro-American-centered patterns of inquiry for which Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* has so often been criticized. Needless to say, this is not to deny that the important diasporic component of Adichie's narrative deserves the attention it has received; rather, in the field of criticism as in those of fiction or history, what seems to be needed is what Chinua Achebe has called a "balance of stories" ("Today").

Significantly, Achebe's felicitous phrase is also invoked by Adichie in her famous TED talk on the "Danger of a Single Story," whose title we have appropriated for this introduction in a different form, "The Power of a Singular Story," to draw attention to the fact that literary criticism, even when it relies on complex scholarly theory or terminological buzzwords, should not exist in and for itself. It should always, we feel, serve the literary text, with one ultimate aim: that of heightening readers' empathy with the singular stories of individuals, whether fictional or real, brought to us by creative writers through their works. Predictably, the deceptively simple question "What is Africa to me?" was initially formulated by an artist rather than a scholar. It is the depth of meaning behind this plain-spoken interrogation, and the myriad possible answers to it, that this volume will seek to explore.

The issue opens with contributions by three writers from the African diaspora who explain what Africa has meant to them, to their lives and their careers. In his meditative piece, Caryl Phillips starts from Cullen's and other African American musings on the continent—whose romanticism remains for him rather self-serving—to concentrate on his own undramatic perception of the place as a British writer of Caribbean descent. Phillips only felt the need to know Africa when he had already started writing, a late interest in the continent that might in part explain why he does not share most of the anxieties that his African American fellow writers felt in relation to the land of their ancestors. Karen King-Aribisala, as a Guyanese married to a Nigerian, conveys in her contribution her divided feelings about Africa, which she first idealized and then experienced as being alternatively bitter and sweet, a polarization that has proved inspirational for her fiction. She examines different circumstances of her daily life in Nigeria when her Africanness has been questioned—in matters of food, language, or clothing—and on several occasions she reacts by opposing the group's cultural chauvinism to the individual ability to empathize and transcend tribalism. Interviewed by Elisabeth Bekers, Chika Unigwe examines how she relates to her native Nigeria as a writer who settled in Belgium and raised a family there, a country where nationality is still often associated with the color of one's skin. Unigwe tells us how moving away from Africa obliged her to redefine her identity parameters and how writing helped her to cope with such an upsetting experience.

There is in these personal testimonies a reluctance to generalize about what Africa represents for these three artists, even if the continent and its history have fed much of their fictional and nonfictional production. Quite significantly, what one tends to remember most vividly from these individual statements are the anecdotes that capture the mood of their respective narratives while also containing enlightening thoughts about diasporic Africanness, which sophisticated theories might not be able to convey so economically. Think, for instance, of Phillips's meeting in 1980s Warsaw with famous Polish writer Ryszard Kapuscinski, who is mystified to hear that, with the exception of Morocco, his younger fellow writer

has never been to Africa, as if such a visit was a must for any black writer. Then there is Karen King-Aribisala's encounter with an apparently corrupt Nigerian policeman, which starts as a cultural confrontation meant to make her feel like an outsider but ends up as a sympathetic exchange on the difficulties of daily life in Nigeria. Finally, one cannot but be struck by Chika Unigwe's story about Vlad, a young boy of Polish descent who migrated to Flanders, Belgium's northern region, and manages a few years later to reinvent himself as Flemish, a metamorphosis that is not accessible to the writer's own Belgian-born mixed-race son because he bears Africa on his face. Clearly these micro-stories provide abundant food for thought on the many meanings that Africa may have for the members of the African diaspora.

These three personal pieces are followed by seven critical articles. The first one is a wide-ranging examination of the African presence in Caribbean literature by Alison Donnell. She starts from the complexities that surrounded early, often forgotten, attempts by West Indian critics and writers—such as G. R. Coulthard and Oscar Dathorne, but also Una Marson, Victor Stafford Reid, and Derek Walcott—to establish cultural connections between the Caribbean and the continent that their ancestors had been forcibly taken from. Often relying on a sense of anticolonial solidarity, these endeavors, she argues, have helped West Indian intellectuals to articulate the specificities of their Caribbeanness and somehow give a lie to the famous statement that Kamau Brathwaite was to make in the 1970s about the absence of Africa in Caribbean literature. Donnell analyzes the Barbadian poet's own contribution to the debate and highlights how his ongoing intervention crucially informed “a new approach for reading Caribbean literature” but also impacted on creative writing from the region. As Donnell further shows, such an impact is exemplified by two recent novels by Charlotte Williams and Nalo Hopkinson, which provide stories reaching across to Africa in meaningful ways.

With the notable exception of Brathwaite and of a few scholars, for example Louis James, the exploration of African echoes in Caribbean literature was thus relatively limited in the late twentieth century. This has however not been the case for the other major literary exponent of the “old” diaspora, African American literature.³ Morrison's work, for instance, has been more than once viewed from the “African” angle (see Jennings). This line of investigation is pursued in this volume by Serena Guarracino's study of the Nobel Prize winner's work, an essay that is nonetheless unusual in that it does not address Morrison's often discussed fiction but her more marginal production for the opera and musical scene, *Margaret Garner* (2005) and *Desdemona* (2011), two pieces haunted by Africa that both reenact through performance a memory of the ancestral land. Guarracino examines how these two works by Morrison convey the presence of Africa through affect flows, triggering in the audience an aural experience of the continent.

While Guarracino concentrates on shared affect, the next contributor, Rebecca Romdhani, focuses on the manifestation of individual emotions, more particularly shame, in her analysis of Caribbean-Canadian Nalo Hopkinson's speculative novel *Brown Girl in the Ring* (1998), set in a futuristic Toronto. This fiction features various supernatural beings originating in Africa that, Romdhani argues, are most productively read as zombie figures. Such a reading, she suggests, gives way to an enhanced understanding of the emotional legacy of the transatlantic slave trade inherited by the African-Caribbean diaspora and shows how reconnecting with

one's African cultural heritage can prevent the zombification induced by this traumatic past and ultimately lead to some form of healing. Like Hopkinson, Lawrence Hill can be described as a black Canadian author, even if, unlike her, he does not have roots in the Caribbean but in the US. In her essay, Pilar Cuder Domínguez concentrates on how Hill's nonfictional and fictional investigations of racial identity in Canada combine with an examination of Africanness, both his own and that of his characters. While his early fiction deals more particularly with the notion of roots, his later novel, *The Book of Negroes* (2007), is more focused on the idea of routes, a shift that Cuder Domínguez construes as a move away from essentialism.

In contrast to the writers of the "old" diaspora, the representatives of the "new" diaspora, who are at the heart of the last three contributions, have a more concrete knowledge of Africa, either because they were born on the continent or because they spent a part of their formative years there. Quite strikingly, the focus in the next set of articles is less on these writers' interrogating the idea of Africa than on bringing to the fore the variegated nature of the experiences that these authors portray. Bénédicte Ledent's piece on *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* (2007) by American-Ethiopian Dinaw Mengestu interprets the novel as an attempt to depict the African diaspora not as a monolithic whole, but as a crossroads of different, converging, and diverging life stories. Focusing on its Ethiopian migrant protagonist's complex interactions with the communities that surround him in his Washingtonian exile, Mengestu's narrative stops short of giving a straightforward answer to Cullen's query but nevertheless provides an idiosyncratic reflection on today's displaced Africanness, which is markedly different from the upbeat and intentionally "self-congratulatory" Afropolitan model (Selasi). The following article, by Dave Gunning, looks at three recent novels by African-British writers, Aminatta Forna's *The Memory of Love* (2010), Helen Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl* (2005), and Brian Chikwava's *Harare North* (2009), which all address cases of dissociative identity disorder. Yet, Gunning shows, the three authors suggest diverging interpretations for this condition, basing their reactions on different cultural norms and on contrasting approaches to the trauma paradigm, which has often been imposed indiscriminately on the continent by the West. The range of responses given by these novels once again undermines the possibility of any form of diasporic homogeneity whereby all African writers would have a similar take on the same subject. Joshua Yu Burnett's contribution on Nigerian-American Nnedi Okorafor's speculative fiction concludes the issue. This final futuristic note is quite appropriate as the texts discussed here, *The Shadow Speaker* (2007) and *Who Fears Death* (2010), turn to a post-apocalyptic Africa, an imagined place where true postcolonialism has become possible and where the models and social conventions inherited through colonialism have disappeared. Burnett demonstrates the counterhegemonic potential of Okorafor's narratives, which can help us revise our understanding of Africa and its diaspora.

Whether they focus on the "old" or the "new" diaspora, all the contributions to this volume have one thing in common: the refusal to homogenize the image of Africa and to iron out the differences between various African diasporic experiences. Africa is by definition a fluctuating entity, which under the pen (or the keyboard) of its diasporic writers refuses to be generalized, an amalgamation that would only lead to a "single story" of Africa, to echo Adichie again. Instead, what the writers offer are singular stories, personal visions of the continent, past,

present, or future, that tend to defy theorization and account for multiple identitarian configurations. No wonder therefore if the articles in this issue, in the trickster fashion invoked in the pieces by Cuder Domínguez and Burnett, display generic variety (fiction and nonfiction, but also speculative novels and musical theater), methodological diversity (affect, trauma, or folklore), as well as apparently surprising combinations bringing the African diaspora together with Poland, Guyana, and Belgium, in addition to more frequently discussed countries such as Canada, the United States, and Britain.

The 2003 encounter between Chinua Achebe and Caryl Phillips discussed at the beginning of this introduction not only gave rise to the piece “Chinua Achebe: Out of Africa,” but it also led to a filmed interview, which was broadcast in March 2003 by the BBC in its *Profile* series and was significantly entitled “The Power of Stories.” While, as mentioned above, the printed conversation registers the two writers’ different responses to Conrad’s famous novella, its filmed counterpart is more consensual and concludes on precisely what the title of the documentary announced, namely the “power of stories”—not only in the decolonizing process, but also more generally, because, Achebe says, “There is no better way of controlling people than providing them your own version of who they are.” At a time when, for Phillips, it is “increasingly difficult to open up the world” to such a “balance of stories,” it seems more important than ever to resist standardization, whether dictated by theorists or by publishers, and listen carefully to the singular narratives from the African diaspora and thereby allow them to unpack the power that they can claim.

NOTES

1. One might posit, with only the slightest touch of cynicism, that an obscure notion of “post-Afropolitanism” is only just around the corner.
2. In fact, Mbembe even situates the “centre of Afropolitanism par excellence” in South Africa’s Johannesburg (29). His definition of the concept is visibly rather different from Selasi’s, whose focus is mainly on the diaspora.
3. For some brief comments on other differences between the African-Caribbean and African American diasporas, see Ledent and Tunca (5).

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