

Literary Spaces

Literary Spaces

Introduction to Comparative Black Literature

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Mr. Robert Dent, Jr.
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Christel N. Temple
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Introduction

At the 1995 annual meeting of the National Council for Black Studies (NCBS), there was a debate on the floor about the direction a Black Studies curriculum should take in order to reflect an African-centered point of view. When a member suggested comparative literature as an appropriate discipline for an African-centered study of Black literatures, the suggestion was rejected. A representative from the panel explained that the discipline of comparative literature is defined from a Eurocentric framework that does not permit Black literatures to be examined in contexts most meaningful to Black cultural readers or to readers seeking an African-centered literary experience. While *Literary Spaces: Introduction to Comparative Black Literature* is not a retort to this definition, it is an attempt to offer a unique framework for a broad comparative study of Black literatures.

The African world has produced an immense body of literature, which reflects the many literatures and ideas of numerous regions where people of African descent have engaged with diverse environments and created culturally significant communities. Such communities reflect cultural and social derivations of Black experience, as well as adaptations based on interactions with stimuli beyond their African origins. *Pan-Africanism*, the broad idea of unity, commonality, and cooperation among people who are physically, culturally, consciously, geographically, psychologically, or politically of African descent, is the foundation of this text. The critical areas of inquiry introduced here, as well as the literatures grouped into the categories implied in the definition of *Pan-Africanism* above, offer readers and students opportunities to explore the similarities and differences among the agents of global African experience.

This volume has several objectives: (1) to be reader-friendly; (2) to offer a simple, common-sense approach to the art of comparison; (3) to introduce the history of comparative Black literature; (4) to present a broad description of the African world through literature; (5) to demonstrate the breadth and vitality of African world literatures, which can support a separate, unique program of comparative study; and (6) to show that students today have a greater opportunity to learn the literatures of Africa and the Diaspora than earlier celebrated writers (such as Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, and Charles Johnson),

who were weaned largely on the richness of white European and American classics and literary traditions. Certainly there is no fault or error that earlier Black writers studied the white European and American literary classics. Any study of literature, regardless of the literature's cultural origin, is vital for broadening a reader's vision of the world.

However, in the discipline of Black Studies (also known as African-American Studies, Africana Studies, Afro-American Studies, Diaspora Studies, Pan-African Studies, and Transatlantic Studies), a discipline founded in 1968 to provide undergraduate and graduate students with immersion programs concerning topics relevant to the Black experience, there is enough literature from Africa and the Diaspora to comprise an entire course of study. The African American Studies department at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC) proved this sufficiency when it offered a track of study in Comparative Black Literature in its master's degree program in African American Studies from 1989 to 1995. UMBC offered a pioneer immersion program in literature of the African world in a comparative context, and the program did not require students to take courses in white American or European literature. The program offered the following courses: Comparative Black Fiction, Comparative Black Drama, Comparative Black Poetry, Black Literary Theory, Black Folklore, Black Intellectual Thought, Search for African Identity, and Topics in Comparative Black Literature (for example, Black Cinema). The program thus demonstrated that Comparative Black Literature is a sustainable area of study for a graduate program. The UMBC model is a prototype for this volume.

Quincy Troupe and Rainier Schulte's edited collection, *Giant Talk: An Anthology of Third World Writings*, is also a prototype for *Literary Spaces*.¹ Troupe and Schulte place their text's selected works into six sections: "Oppression and Protest," "Violence," "A Crisis in Identity," "Music, Language, Rhythm," "The Humorous Distance," "Ritual Magic," and "The Conceptual Journey." *Literary Spaces* models itself after several ideological foundations of *Giant Talk*, even though *Giant Talk* examines not only the literatures of Africa and the Diaspora but also the literatures of the Third World. Their introductory comments about the nature of the Black writer are noteworthy:

[I]t should be understood that the Third World writer, like any other writer, cannot create out of a vacuum. His starting point is not the celebration and elaboration of an already existing tradition or cul-

1. Quincy Troupe and Rainer Schulte, eds., introduction to *Giant Talk: An Anthology of Third World Writings* (New York: Random House, 1975).

ture, but the construction of a new culture as an antibody to a culture that he rejects. His position turns out to be extremely complicated, since he does not know what the exact forms of his orientation might be or should be. He only knows that he is in absolute confrontation with a culture that tried to form him but failed to do so. The cultural values that he inherited have lost their original supportive power and have left him in chaos. He must assimilate old forms and create new ones at the same time: that is his danger and his challenge as a moral, intellectual and artistic innovator.²

In describing the dynamics of the International Conference of Negro Writers and Artists held in Paris in 1956 and in Rome in 1959, Troupe and Schulte offer support for a distinct “Black” comparative literary endeavor:

Richard Wright emphasized that black writers and artists were not “allowed to blend, in a natural and healthy manner, with the culture and civilization of the West.” They felt that the black experience, their common bond, had its own validity and to explore that experience fully required them to separate themselves from the ideas and traditions of the Western world. One basic and historical situation, racial separatism, forced them all to start from a similar point: a clash with Western civilization.³

Troupe and Schulte also suggest that “Third World writers searched fastidiously for ways to distinguish their work from the dominant Western culture, and develop the beauty and strength of their culture”⁴ because there was a fear at the Second International Conference “of succumbing to the sterility of the Western civilization which has been for the last few centuries basically European.”⁵ By the twenty-first century, with significant communities of Black writers in Europe and the Americas, the definition of *Western* and *European* literature has shifted slightly to include a representation of literature by people of African descent; yet the Black literatures appear largely on the margins of the literary canon.

Although this volume includes a section “Influence, Adaptation, and Structure,” which highlights Black writing specifically modeled after previously published works (including those in European literature), writers of Black litera-

2. *Ibid.*, xxx.

3. *Ibid.*, xxv.

4. *Ibid.*, xxvi.

5. *Ibid.*, xxvii.

ture, unlike white European and American writers, are not constrained by a long and often burdensome tradition. Indeed, according to an analogy by Troupe and Schulte, “[w]hile the German writer may be haunted by Goethe, and the Englishman by Shakespeare, these [Third World] writers felt no such restraint, and admitted of no such measuring stick. It is exactly this freshness and vitality that now attracts the Western world to the literary productions of the Third World. The tables have been turned.”⁶

Inevitably, Alioune Diop’s passion as displayed at the First International Congress of Black Writers and Artists in 1956 is a challenge posed in this volume. For, during the Congress, he encouraged African scholars to “declare and assess together the wealth, the crisis and the promise of our culture . . . revealing and offering to the admiration of the world varied and undoubted talents which have hitherto only been kept under a bushel by the concerted silence of the colonial powers and racism.”⁷

With all of these precursors in mind, this volume offers a history of comparative Black literature, evaluates the role of Black literatures in comparative literature programs, and presents the debates, from 1969 to the present, about the placement of African-derived literatures in the universal literary canon.

6. *Ibid.*, xxvii.

7. Alioune Diop, “Opening Address,” *Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature* 43 (1995): 13–14. (Originally published in *Présence Africaine* 8, 9, 10 (November 1956): 10–18.)

Special Note

For artistic purposes, the author has chosen to use the many regional variations in spelling, sentence structure, punctuation, and word usage that are not considered “standard” English as it is written in the United States. In having done so, the author encourages the readers of this collection to accept such variety—and, more important, to celebrate it.

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