Vanishing Timidity: A Roundtable on African Literature and Culture in the Language and Literature Classroom

The following round-table discussion took place at the University of Missouri-Columbia in November of 2003 among selected faculty and graduate students whose research and teaching deal with various aspects of African culture and civilization. The participants were as follows:

Juanamaría Cordones Cook
Gabriela Díaz Cortez
Rangira Bea Gallimore
Chris Okonkwo
Margaret Olsen
Cristina Rodríguez Cabral
Michael Ugarte
Flore Zephir

Michael Ugarte (MU) (Spanish, Modern Peninsular Literature): Many of us doing research in Hispanic Literature at the University of Missouri often point out the lack of attention to the Hispanic world outside of Spanish departments. Yet the lack of attention, we must admit, is exacerbated when we think of Africa and the little known about that continent both among students and colleagues. I have gathered together a group of professors at the University of Missouri-Columbia whose professional and experiential familiarity with African culture might give us insights on remedies to that absence both in general and with specific regard to the Spanish language and literature classroom.
MU: Tell us first what your role is at the University and describe the courses you teach that focus on Africa either as the main target of the course or as a specific unit within a course.

Chris Okonkwo (CO) (English, African, and African-American Literature): I teach twentieth-century Anglophone African literature and Afro-American literature with emphasis on the novel. I have taught “Literature of the Black Diaspora: The Mystical as Theme and Model” and “The Colonial Encounter: Major African Authors” concentrating on Chinua Achebe. I also teach “African American Literature of the Twentieth Century.” Most of these are Afro-centered, but not all. Some are topics courses dealing with world issues.

Margaret Olsen (MO) (Spanish, Colonial Latin American Literature): Due to the exigencies of our department I teach courses predominantly in Spanish language and literature, thus there is not a great deal of opportunity to deal exclusively with African themes. But my research deals entirely with runaways and the African presence during the first two centuries of colonization of Latin America. In terms of undergraduate courses, I try to incorporate works of the African diaspora into our introductory Hispanic literature courses, “Latin American Minority Women Writers in Translation,” “Afro-Latin American and Indigenous Writing,” and in seminars on colonial literature in which I incorporate my research on Alonso de Sandoval, letters and chronicles of conquest.

MU: For the last four years or so I have had a growing interest in the African presence in Spain and Spain in Africa as a research focus as well as a theme (one of many) in my undergraduate classes, particularly Peninsular Spanish civilization.

Rangira Bea Gallimore (BG) (French, African Francophone Literature): I teach French language and literature. My focus on Africa is in two geographical areas: Sub-Saharan Africa and the Mahgreb. I incorporate African themes into our civilization and culture course. Also, in our undergraduate composition course, we analyze a work of literature, so I choose to analyze a novel, Une si longue lettre, by an African woman writer from Senegal, Mariama Bâ. Since Francophone literature from Africa is my primary area of research, in virtually all of my graduate seminars I deal with related issues.

Juanamaría Cordones Cook (JC) (Spanish, Latin American, and Afro-Hispanic Literature): I teach contemporary Latin American literature. I started doing research on Afro-Hispanic literature when I discovered a great deal of activity in my native Uruguay in the area of theater. Soon after this research I met Nancy Morejón and thus began very timidly to incorporate her writing in the courses I taught, surveys etc., until finally my timidity vanished and I started teaching and researching almost exclusively in Afro-Hispanic literature. I regularly incorporate a lot of this research in a course in English I teach for the Honors College, “Emerging Canons of the Americas.” This coming semester I am teaching a graduate seminar on the works of Nancy Morejón.
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Cristina Rodríguez Cabral (CR) (PhD in Spanish, 2004, Afro-Uruguayan poet, specialist in the narratives of Manuel Zapata Olivella): I am a graduate student in Spanish literature. This department’s interest in Afro-Hispanic literature is the reason I’m here. I have experience conducting workshops on Afro-Hispanic literature in my native Uruguay and in Brazil. These were summer courses for graduate students, not only students from literature but journalists, historians, anthropologists, and sociologists. I want to incorporate African culture into the classes I might teach in the future as a means to know the culture and cosmology of the African people.

Flore Zephir (FZ) (French, Sociolinguistics, particularly Haiti): I teach a variety of courses here in French, foreign language education, and minority languages, and sociolinguistics (bilingualism and language contact). The course on minority languages focuses in part on the Creole languages of the Caribbean, which were developed in the seventeenth century, from the contact between the European languages brought by the colonizers and the African languages brought by the slaves. In my seminar on bilingualism, we deal a great deal with issues of language status and issues of immigrant languages in American society, particularly in the educational institutions. In my course “Structure of Modern French,” we deal with some issues of dialectology, involving the varieties of French spoken outside the hexagon, namely in the Caribbean and Africa.

Gabriel Díaz Cortez (GD) (Spanish, Graduate student interested in transatlantic issues related to Hispanic literature and culture): I’m a graduate student in my third semester. So far, I’ve taught elementary Spanish courses for undergraduates. But in Winter 2004 I’ll be teaching a composition and conversation course in which we’ll have a section on the African presence in the Caribbean. We’ll read poems by Nicolas Guillén and an article on Afro-Caribbean music. Later in the semester, in the unit on Identity, we’ll listen to music by an Afro-Uruguayan musician, Ruben Rada, and we’ll read poems by Cuban poet Nancy Morejón.

MU: Thank you. I think now I’d like to turn this into a freewheeling discussion, so please jump in when the spirit moves. Describe your experiences in the classroom: students’ reception to the material and your response to that reception. Do you sense a need or urgency on students’ part to learn about Africa?

CO: Before I arrived I don’t think the English department had any courses at all in African literature. Of course they did offer Afro-American literature, and some African works were taught in a course on “Comparative Approaches to Literature.” But I remember the first class I taught here—the “Comparative Approaches” class. My chosen focus was on “The Colonial Encounter and the African Experience,” and I had four students enrolled. “OK, this is going to be tough,” I said to myself, but my department chair said, “Hang on, Chris, they don’t know you, this will change; just make it exciting.” Three of these students were black, and they were taking the course not because of requirements or credit hours but because they were interested. These students turned out to be my ambassadors: they spread the word around. The next
semester I taught the course again, and I had five students—that’s progress. One of them was a student from Taiwan. And when I taught the course the third time, I had twenty-six students. Word had gotten around—this course was here. What I found fascinating was that when I taught Chinua Achebe, students were intensely interested. Many of them were tired of the more canonical European writers. Most remarkable was my course on the “Mystical Experience” in which students have to navigate through different belief systems. Many of these students could relate to the content, particularly the black students. There was just one white student in class and she was good for everybody. She ended up writing one of the best papers in the class—her presence was greatly appreciated. In this course the first three classes are foundational: we have to read the historical material, that is, we have to know about the real historical and cultural experience. Sometimes I require them to write culturally specific papers.

BG: I have a comment: I have been here since 1990, having been hired to teach Francophone literature. When I got here it was a shock for me to learn that there were no courses offered in the English department in Anglophone African literature. Normally in other universities, African literature written in English is far more dominant in the curriculum than Francophone literature. When I taught my first course here, I had eighteen students. This is because when we teach a course at the beginning levels of French, there is always a section on Francophone topics. My point is that my entrance here was easy, and my courses became popular. But apparently the English department here was more reluctant to include African literature in their curriculum until your arrival, Chris.

CO: I was hired to teach African American literature, but because of my experience and because I saw a gap, I decided to offer courses in African literature. I knew that there were parallels with African-American literature. My African American literature classes made more sense if I was able to draw upon the African experience. I have gotten good results; I have lots of repeat students. I think now the English department appreciates the fact that we can “kill two birds with one stone,” in other words I can teach both African and African American literature.

MU: So you’re saying that the offering of African literature in your department was “through the back door”?

CO: Pretty much.

MU: I’d like to add that in my classes when I bring Africa into the discussion (in a unexpected way), invariably my students’ ears perk up. They are interested I think because as Americans, often the issue of race puts them on edge. But I find this edginess positive.

BG: The book I introduced in composition and conversation was a success, because I invited African men and women to come to talk about various issues such as polygamy which is very controversial. This year I introduced a less difficult book called
Dossier. In this class each student has to present a dossier on one African country. This is both an oral and written presentation. In the graduate level class I deal exclusively with Africa, so I have to start out teaching about the entire continent. I started with the statement by Joseph Campbell, that “The darkest thing about Africa is our ignorance of it.” When I first asked my students what do you think or know about Africa, I get answers about elephants and the “dark continent.” I spent a great deal of the course on history and colonization, so I ended up not doing enough on the literature.

Lake Moka waterfall.

MU: This brings us to our next question. Assuming there is a need to focus on African issues, how do you go about dealing with your students’ lack of knowledge? Can you give suggestions on how to impart basic information: geography, regional differences, history?

BG: There is a lot of material from the Media Center. There are lots of videos through the center. For web sites, I use the embassy web sites.

MO: In our area, colonial Latin America, the interest in the African diaspora is growing, and that is reflected even in the recent textbooks as well as scholarly works in this area.

JC: On your last question on how to deal with students’ lack of knowledge, in my syllabus for my “Emerging Canons of the Americas” course I teach through the Honors College, I have a bibliography of studies dealing with Africa and post-colonialism. The way I deal with the lack of knowledge is that I start philosophically with Franz Fanon. It is amazing how Fanon has opened so many windows for the discussion, to add more rigor to students’ thinking.
CO: What I like to do is a map identification exercise—a blank map of Africa with the outlines of the different nations. I ask them to identify the countries, making it clear that it’s OK to be wrong, that their ignorance is the ignorance of many so-called knowledgeable people. Everyone knows Egypt, Somalia, Kenya, but they usually get over eighty percent wrong. And when I ask them to give me words that come to mind when they think of Africa, I point out that hardly anyone says “human.” So I say that this is where the problem starts, no one thinks about how Africa connects with humanity. I also provide substantial information about the authors and their countries, but you can imagine how much time this takes in the development of the class.

MU: Now I’d like to ask you about the issue of orality. Much is said of the oral tradition in African literature. Yet at the same time, there is a plethora of African writers and artists whose names are familiar to European/U.S. intellectuals and cultural critics. How do you deal with the avoidance of stereotypes that might arise as you concentrate on oral literature?

BG: In my African literature course I use a book called *La carte d’identité*, meaning ID card. It’s interesting because the protagonist is named Mélédouman. As a man from the Ivory Coast he speaks Agni, a tone language spoken in Ivory Coast and Ghana. In this language his name can mean two things: either “I have a name” or “They falsified my name.” But a native speaker of a syllabic language such as French who will not stress the right vowels appropriate to the African language will understand “I don’t have a name.” But when the protagonist speaks his own name or when a speaker of Agni pronounces it, he intends it to mean “They falsified my name.” I think this shows the students that we are not talking only of this book, but of the entire history of Africa. This is my way of entering the issue of the differences between orality and writing.

MO: One of the big questions in my field of colonial literature is “Where is the voice?,” especially in reference to testimonials and slave narratives. The issue exists from the moment in which African voices are contained in the texts of conquest—letters or chronicles. The question of where the African voice lies in these foundational texts is never easy. Indeed, when one puts together a course on Afro-Latin American women writers, just finding written texts is a major task, unlike other courses in which the texts are almost prescribed. Thus orality is a way of dealing with that task.

JC: Do you think there is also a conflict between the written and the published?

MO: Absolutely. There are many Afro-Latin American women writers who barely get into print.

CR: I think when we are dealing with Afro-American literature, it’s important to spend time before analyzing the text to explain that we are dealing with a different issue in this class. It’s important to let students know that searching for the texts is one of the primary issues, unlike in a course that deals with Europe. So talking about history and politics before colonialism is very important: the literary text within its historical
context. They should know, for example, that a voice in a text may come from many other voices. This is the point of orality. We need to deconstruct what is normally thought of as written.

CO: I’d like to add that when we talk about orality we need to ask ourselves other questions such as, for whom are we writing: the audience of the literature, who are the critics, publishing houses that control the dissemination of this information? Assuming I’m teaching *Things Fall Apart*—Africa’s best export to the world (besides petroleum), we have to distinguish between orality per se, and orality as embedded in a work of art. Many people tell us that we are just dealing with sociology or anthropology. Too much folk tale, they say, let’s just deal with the novel as art. But we have to understand that to Africans the history of the novel is an oral history, that there is an imposition of orality in the written text. At the same time there could be a course that deals exclusively with real orality, the oral tradition, ritual, drama, epics and how they are disseminated. Ngugi Wa Thiong’o from Kenya has said that he needs to write for the community, for the peasants, and he has to write in a language, Kikuyu, that his people will understand. So we’re dealing not only with orality but with reception, also with how a language becomes a language. All this is an integral part of African literature itself and other literatures as well.

MU: I’d like you to talk now about the Hispanic world in relation to the continuing African diaspora. Can you give us a specific case—a writer, a Spanish speaking country, a region within the Hispanic world—in which the African diaspora manifests
itself? Address specifically how you incorporate this manifestation into the Spanish language, literature, culture classroom. This question is especially for the professors of Spanish but if anyone else would like to weigh in, feel free to do so.

CR: His question is important to me, as a student, a researcher, and as an Afro-Uruguayan poet. I am writing a dissertation now on an Afro-Colombian writer, Manuel Zapata Olivella. I can say that if we don’t have a background in African cosmology, it is difficult to understand his novels. For example, the title of one of his books is Changó, el gran putas. Much information is needed just to understand the title. Also important is that Zapata Olivella is not African per se, he is like many Afro-Hispanics the product of hybrid cultures: European, African, indigenous. So in the classroom we must enter the world of native American, African, as well as European cultures. Most of the African authors I have read talk about resistance, thus post-colonial issues are crucial. So we need to take all these historical issues into consideration.

FZ: I would like to interject a comment even though I do not teach literature. I have a great deal of contact with undergraduates as the undergraduate advisor of this department. I find that students have a great deal of difficulty understanding diasporic literature, and thus tend not to appreciate it because they do not understand the context and have never been exposed to the realities of this part of the world. To remedy this, I think we might think about offering a new course as an introduction to the African context: a course dealing with the history, colonialism, languages; this would give them the foundation that they need so that they can later take more specific courses.

The town of Basacato on Bioko Island.
MO: I must point out that in terms of Afro-Hispanic literature, the context of Latin America is much different from that of Africa or even Afro-America. Just one specific difference is that even though we are talking about the end of the nation and national boundaries, Afro-Latin Americans tend to be very nationalistic. So we must ask if we want to contextualize these texts, which of the many possible contexts should we use? Alonso Sandoval, a seventeenth-century writer, for example: is he a product of Africa and the Americas? Without placing him in a context of Spaniards writing in America on indigenous American peoples or African peoples, he makes no sense. At the same time we need to ask where did Africans come from, what areas, what were and are their realities—a whole spectrum of realities from that of a free person of color, to slave, to domestic slave, plantation slave.

JC: But why do you feel you need to choose?

MO: My point is that from the perspective of the practicality of teaching a course, one has to keep in mind what we are requiring our students to know. I wish we could cover everything, but practically we can’t. So I favor focusing on specific areas: Caribbean, River Plate, Central America—so that students get a sense of specificity. We must center, because if we offer a survey that purports to deal with everything, we end up foundationless. And if we look at our graduate reading list, we need to be mindful of what we ourselves consider to be the essential knowledge.

CO: Is it possible to organize a course by nation rather than by continent? Perhaps we’d be better off if we started by making exclusions, by saying “We’re not dealing with certain areas.”

MO: I think that’s inevitable.

MU: I asked for specific cases in Hispanic literature, and our discussion has wandered—productively, I think—into other areas or into the more general issues involved. But getting to a specific case of my own research and teaching, I’m now studying the writing of Donato Ndongo from Equatorial Guinea. As I began looking into his works, I realized that just studying Spanish colonialism in Africa was not enough. I had to broaden my horizons by looking into other African literatures, re-reading Things Fall Apart by Chinua Achebe, Portuguese-African writers, and becoming familiar with a variety of other issues. Ndongo feels a great affinity with Afro-Hispanic writers, namely Zapata Olivella whom he knows personally. So in larger terms, what all this points to, I think, is the crisis of knowledge we are all dealing with in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

CR: I think it’s also significant that there are relatively few people in the university dealing with these issues. The ideal would be to have a team working on them: a professor covering history, another geography, so when a student comes to me to study literature, they know, for example, where Liberia is. We have too few resources.

MO: Originally this was the idea behind Black Studies: an area that suffered also from this fragmentation of knowledge because the lines were quickly drawn between Africa
and African America. It's difficult to reconstruct the African diaspora because it is so diverse: we need to deal with these issues from a multi-disciplinary perspective; that is, we need to remedy the fragmentation of knowledge.

CO: But this crisis of knowledge also has to do with the crisis of subjectivity or identification. We are dealing with several consciousnesses that form an individual being. In Equatorial Guinea, for example, you have the surrounding Francophone countries as well as many indigenous languages. But you also have to register much beyond all this with the emphasis on commonalities as well as fragmentation—the postmodern postindustrial age, migration/immigration, global issues. Actually, African literature seems to have shifted to more modern writers dealing with more contemporary issues of movement, belonging, the global economy. You also have African writers who are writing from within Europe. The postcolonial subjects have to negotiate who they are. “Who am I? Am I Nigerian, African, Ibo, American?” My point is that all this seeps into the crack of subjectivity.

GD: I have a question: What about aesthetics? Do you think that one of these commonalities might be in the realm of aesthetics? Can we analyze the work itself as a work of art?

MO: I think you would have to learn African aesthetics first or Afro-Hispanic aesthetics. At the same time I don't think it would be valid to talk about African aesthetics without using European tools. And that gives us a view that is too partial.

MU: But you [MO] said before that you were interested in finding the voice of the text. Don't you think this is an aesthetic issue common to any literary text: who's speaking?

MO: Certainly, but even the category of narrative voice isn't going to be a single issue across the globe. I think if you begin to talk about poetics, you have to deal with the differences in views of aesthetics.

FZ: When you talk about poetics you tend to deal with the text in a vacuum. I don't think you can understand the text without dealing with the socio-cultural elements out of which the text arises.

CO: It is not possible. I wouldn't do it. For many years African writers have had to deal with criticisms of their work as being too political, sociological, extensions of anthropology and devoid of aesthetic value according to what Westerners had in mind. Then there is the issue of the various languages that many writers are writing in, “Englishes,” that is, combinations of English with native African languages. In my classes I have had to balance aesthetics and politics—we cannot forget that Africans tend to use the novel as a way to redeem themselves, or as a way to counter the colonial project.

MU: The last question is about ghettoization or marginalization. Given the academy’s acknowledgement that there is a need to study Africa, how do you deal with the tendency to create separate areas—often unrelated to core curricula or departmental interests—that demonstrate that acknowledgement. I refer hypothetically to the addition of
a course with an African theme without a serious intent to incorporate that course as an integral part of a program or a department’s offerings?

CR: I don’t know how much power professors have in designing curriculum. But if the department is serious about incorporating African issues, they can do it. I’m afraid that, not only in this university, but in others as well, there seems to be a trend toward black everything. There is a black boom because of certain legal mandates or because of a trend rather than as a result of a serious attempt to understand blackness and black culture. So sometimes universities look for someone who looks latina or black and expect that person to act the part. I am worried about this. All universities need a person like me to keep up with the trend, but I don’t know how serious they are about including my message into the curriculum. It depends on who is paying your salary.

MO: I think much of this has to do with expectations. Again we go back to the difference between the respective disciplines. Your students [to Prof. Okonkwo] come into your classes knowing a bit about the U.S., about African-Americans, etc., but our charge in Romance Languages is first to teach our students Spanish. So imagine how ill-equipped to learn they are when we teach them about these intensely complex cultural issues. And to make it even more complex, we’re telling them that the canon is being scrutinized.

CO: In our situation in the English department, there are certain course requirements. When you look at these requirements you notice that the inclination—despite our attempt to create this new area of Africana literature and theory—is toward the more canonical areas. I’m talking about graduation requirements. What we’re trying to do now is to compensate for the lack we had before. One wonders if all these other courses are a waste of time if they are not required.

MU: Thank you. Any final thoughts?

CO: I want to stress that I’d like to see African novels used not as a reflection of African history, but as African history itself.

MO: My final thought is a question: Do we study the issues we have been dealing with as something tangential or do we put them squarely in the middle of what we do as teachers?

CR: My final thought is on requirements. It would be useful to have requirements in Afro-Hispanic culture, African history, for example.

MU: My final thought is on a phrase I read not long ago on research now being done in the humanities and social sciences. The phrase was, “In this age of post-disciplinarity.” I think this phrase refers to a desire to find, if not create, links between and among disciplines. But at the same time I was struck by the reality of the situation: the fact that little or no concrete manifestations at the level of development dialogue between or among departments is actually taking place.
CO: Yes, I have a post-final thought: If we were really engaged in this dialogue we would not be doing our jobs, that is, we would not be doing what we were hired to do.

MU: Well on a note of yearning for real post-disciplinarity, I’d like to thank you all for participating in this discussion.