

BÉNÉDICTE LEDENT & PILAR CUDER-DOMÍNGUEZ (EDS)

New Perspectives on The Black Atlantic

DEFINITIONS, READINGS, PRACTICES, DIALOGUES

Offprint



PETER LANG

Bern · Berlin · Bruxelles · Frankfurt am Main · New York · Oxford · Wien

© Peter Lang AG, Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften, Bern 2012
Hochfeldstrasse 32, CH-3012 Bern; info@peterlang.com, www.peterlang.com, www.peterlang.net
ISBN 978-3-03911-801-4 pb.

Table of Contents

Introduction	9
BÉNÉDICTE LEDENT and PILAR CUDER-DOMÍNGUEZ	

Part I: Definitions

Whose Black World Is This Anyway? Black Atlantic and Transnational Studies after <i>The Black Atlantic</i>	23
LAURA CHRISMAN	

The ‘barque ouverte’ (Glissant) or <i>The Black Atlantic</i> (Gilroy): Erasure and Errantry	59
KATHLEEN GYSSELS	

Crossing the Black Atlantic to Africa: Research on Race in ‘Race-less’ Cuba	83
CHRISTABELLE PETERS	

Away from a Definition of African Literature(s)	105
DARIA TUNCA	

Drawing a Line between Europe and the ‘Other’	125
GARY YOUNGE	

Part II: Readings

Taking Shortcuts: Literary Perspectives of the ‘Black Atlantic’	135
JOHN MCLEOD	

Carnival and the Carnavalesque in Robert Antoni’s <i>Carnival</i>	155
IMEN NAJAR	

Tornadoes Full of Dreams: Paul Gilroy's Black Atlantic and African Literature of the Transatlantic Imagination . . . 173
WUMI RAJI

A Black Atlantic Agenda: Artistic/Narrative Strategies in Caryl Phillips's *The Atlantic Sound* and Isaac Julien's *Paradise Omeros* 195
EVA ULRIKE PIRKER

Part III: Practices

Mapping the Black Presence in England and Wales 219
KATHLEEN CHATER

Teaching the Black Atlantic in Spain: Institutionalisation and European Convergence 231
MAR GALLEGÓ

Teaching Caribbean and Black Atlantic Studies in France: A Few Elements of Understanding 249
JUDITH MISRAHI-BARAK

Paul Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* in Africa's Other Diaspora . . . 261
EMAD MIRMOTAHARI

Part IV: Dialogues

"Who are you calling a foreigner?" 275
CARYL PHILLIPS in Conversation with JOHN MCLEOD

"A Person of Many Places" 295
LAWRENCE HILL in Conversation with PILAR CUDER-DOMÍNGUEZ

Notes on Contributors 311

Introduction

BÉNÉDICTE LEDENT and PILAR CUDER-DOMÍNGUEZ

Although the triangular relations between Africa, Europe and the Americas started more than five hundred years ago, they were for centuries either misrepresented or even ignored. The silence around the shameful history of slavery and colonisation, on the part of both victimisers and victims, also led to a refusal to see the inherently heterogeneous nature of the societies shaped by the slave trade. With the exceptions of some individuals, in particular writers and thinkers from the Caribbean who were confronted perhaps more visibly than others with the legacy of the transatlantic relations, the topic had not been thoroughly examined and debated until the publication in 1993 of *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, in which Paul Gilroy put forward the concept of the “Black Atlantic” to define the African experience in its intercultural and transnational dimensions.¹ Reviewers and critics have pointed out the excitement generated by this book and celebrated its arrival because it valorised “a new and positive paradigm for analyzing black experiences in an increasingly unified but at the same time dissonant global culture”.² Moreover, the “Black Atlantic” has been seen as a necessary bridge between the work of African-Americanists and post-colonialists, and has thus encouraged efforts “to bring down the boundaries separating the two fields”.³ However, Gilroy’s project has also given rise over

1 Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

2 Simon Gikandi, “Introduction: Africa, Diaspora, and the Discourse of Modernity”, *Research in African Literatures*, special issue on the “Black Atlantic”, ed. by Simon Gikandi, 27.4 (1996), p. 1.

3 John Cullen Gruesser, *Confluences: Postcolonialism, African American Literary Studies, and the Black Atlantic* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2005), p. 4.

the years to some strong criticism, which Lucy Evans aptly summarises as being levelled at “his insufficiently grounded metaphors of free-floating hybridity, his unduly cheerful take on the effects of transnational journeys, and his privileging of culture over politics as a tool for effecting social change”.⁴

Perhaps the most often repeated and pertinent criticism of *The Black Atlantic* has to do with the ahistoricity of Gilroy’s treatment of slavery and the way that his book turns it into a metaphor, as Joan Dayan has remarked, going on to highlight that “[w]hat is missing is the continuity of the Middle Passage in today’s world of less obvious, but no less pernicious enslavement”.⁵ In the wake of Gilroy’s ground-breaking study, critics and writers alike have explored the triangular relations between Africa, Europe and the Americas from fresh perspectives that have undoubtedly increased our understanding of the societies in which we live, but have also helped us to unravel the complexities of the literatures produced by the representatives of this cultural field. Notably, Gilroy himself has continued to build on his original concept in his works. In his latest one to date, *Darker than Blue* (2010),⁶ he relies once more on readings of W.E.B. Du Bois and Frantz Fanon to illuminate issues of black consumption within a capitalist culture, the politics of race and anti-racism, and the circulation of black music as showcased in Jimmy Hendrix and Bob Marley. While this is certainly important work, one might argue that there is here a continued failure on Gilroy’s part to open up the scope of his analysis to locations outside North America and the Caribbean or else to such important issues as gender or religion.

The limitations of Gilroy’s work have been addressed with increased frequency over the years by scholars and artists within

4 Lucy Evans, “*The Black Atlantic*: Exploring Gilroy’s Legacy”, *Atlantic Studies*, 6.2 (2009), p. 266.

5 Joan Dayan, “Paul Gilroy’s Slaves, Ships, and Routes: The Middle Passage as Metaphor”, *Research in African Literatures*, special issue on the “Black Atlantic”, ed. by Simon Gikandi, 27.4 (1996), p. 7.

6 Paul Gilroy, *Darker than Blue: On the Moral Economies of Black Atlantic Culture* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010).

the field of African diaspora studies, in an endeavour to pay much needed attention to the actual social conditions in which slavery was born as well as to the current inequalities that it has triggered, which were made more visible, for instance, in the riots that happened in France in 2005. In spite of its potential as a tool for increased awareness, then, it seems that the concept of the “Black Atlantic” continues to require questioning and reassessing. This is precisely the goal of the present collection of essays, which attempts to go beyond Gilroy’s mostly North American focus to encompass an examination of the “Black Atlantic” in the context not only of Africa but also of Europe, which played a crucial role in the slave trade and colonisation, and is often chosen as the destination of migrants from Africa and other parts of the world, dramatically increasing the diversity of racial, religious and cultural backgrounds on the old continent.

Some constituencies have already started to develop the potential of this line of work. In the early 2000s the Black Atlantic project, based in Berlin, brought together a group of artists and scholars who set up a series of interdisciplinary events around the African diaspora in the Western hemisphere.⁷ Since 2002 the Scotland’s Trans-Atlantic Relations (STAR) project at the University of Edinburgh has explored the relations of Scotland with the Americas, and particularly the Caribbean.⁸ Some historians too, like James Walvin, have deployed a sustained effort to chart the history of slavery in its triangular dimensions. In 2007 the International Slavery Museum opened in Liverpool, one of the British hubs of the slave trade, while on the other side of the English Channel the museum housed at the Château des ducs de Bretagne in Nantes now devotes part of its permanent collection to the history of the transatlantic trade that provided the French city with much of its wealth. Several collections of essays published in the last few years have also made singular contributions to the mapping of the black Atlantic cultures. Particularly worth mentioning

7 See <<http://www.blackatlantic.com>> [accessed 26 December 2011].

8 See <<http://www.iash.ed.ac.uk/star/>> [accessed 26 December 2011].

here is *Recharting the Black Atlantic: Modern Cultures, Local Communities, Global Connections*, a wide-ranging collection edited by Annalisa Oboe and Anna Scacchi.⁹

Our own contribution to ongoing “Black Atlantic” efforts dates back to the 2007 hosting at the University of Huelva (Spain) of a three-day Exploratory Workshop entitled “European Perspectives on the Black Atlantic” and generously funded by the European Science Foundation and by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Research. Its aim was to bring together leading experts and younger scholars working in the field of the African diaspora in order to (re-)examine the concept of the “Black Atlantic” and thereby come to a better understanding of the impact that it had had on our cosmopolitan societies. Interestingly, Huelva proved an appropriate venue for this workshop: not only does it have links with Christopher Columbus – who on his first transatlantic voyage in 1492 set sail from the nearby port of Palos – but it is also located in a region that has become a major landing site for African immigrants entering the European Union. The fate of this Andalusian area is thus doubly linked to the development of a globalised, multicultural Europe.

The lively, constructive debates held during the Workshop highlighted the need to expand the notion of the “Black Atlantic” beyond its original racial, geographical, linguistic and cultural borders. Participants agreed on how important it was to adopt a more inclusive and diverse approach to the “Black Atlantic”, to focus on real life rather than on theory, to promote transnational and comparative rather than narrowly national practices, and to favour political awareness of the present consequences of the Atlantic slave trade. Moreover, there was a general feeling that the field needed to be promoted because of its remarkable ability to disturb established historical truths and go beyond traditional dichotomies, and therefore provided an essential tool for cross-cultural

9 Annalisa Oboe and Anna Scacchi (eds), *Recharting the Black Atlantic: Modern Cultures, Local Communities, Global Connections* (New York and London: Routledge, 2008).

understanding.¹⁰ Encouraged by the synergies that manifested themselves during the Exploratory Workshop, we decided to put together a collection of essays that might be a worthy contribution to ongoing debates in the field. Our aim has been to maintain the main lines of work as defined at that event as well as to incorporate points of view and topics that were not originally included but which we felt would enrich the collection.

New Perspectives on the Black Atlantic has four sections, each of them dealing with a different approach to the question of the “Black Atlantic”. Part I, “Definitions”, comprises five essays touching on the various limitations of Gilroy’s original concept. In “Whose Black World Is This Anyway? Black Atlantic and Transnational Studies after *The Black Atlantic*”, Laura Chrisman acknowledges the remarkable impact Gilroy’s text has had in our current understanding of transnational blackness and examines in some detail its complex, wide-ranging heritage. For Chrisman, scholarly undertakings have moved in challenging directions, whether directly inspired by Gilroy’s work or not. However, they all appear to concur in their elision of Africa – a point also made by Wumi Raji’s essay in the next section – insofar as they have failed to take on board the participation of African scholars and activists, which sets up a striking contrast to the inclusion of the Caribbean in US-based transnational studies. Thus, Chrisman’s opening essay maps out our complex field of study, highlighting its underlying tensions and contradictions as well as pointing out the geographical expansion and ideological revisions taking place of late. Kathleen Gyssels’s “The ‘barque ouverte’ (Glissant) or *The Black Atlantic* (Gilroy): Erasure and Errantry” looks into the question of how Gilroy’s work relates to that of other thinkers of black diasporic identity, particularly Edouard Glissant. Starting from Gilroy’s own acknowledgment in *The Black Atlantic* of Glissant’s

10 For further information, the full report of the Exploratory Workshop’s conclusions is available online at the European Science Foundation website: <http://www.esf.org/index.php?eID=tx_nawsecured1&u=0&file=fileadmin/be_user/ew_docs/06-159_Report.pdf&t=1325627102&hash=530a59a873c9b757efd329cba83719623b696aad> [accessed 10 July 2011].

work (as selected and translated into English by Michael Dash in the book *Caribbean Discourse*), Gyssels launches a comparative analysis of the concepts devised by Glissant and Gilroy and of their divergent social and political implications. For Gyssels, while both thinkers and concepts have much in common, the “Black Atlantic” fails to adequately represent non-Anglophone black identities, and language borders end up being ultimately reinforced within a field that has an outstanding potential to bring them down. Moving on to address once more the geographical shortcomings of Gilroy’s analysis, Christabelle Peters, in “Crossing the Black Atlantic to Africa: Research on Race in ‘Race-less’ Cuba”, brings her analysis to bear on one of the hubs of the slave trade, Cuba, in its historical connections to Africa. According to Peters, Gilroy’s neglect of Africa within the framework of the “Black Atlantic” obscures the continued links between the areas within the triangle, a case in point being the political synergies behind Operation Carlota, i.e. the Cuban engagement in Angola in 1975. Peters contends that the military campaign was supported by a discourse that promoted the transcendence of ethnicity and projected the notion of a “return to Africa” for the descendants of the former slaves. Like Gyssels, she concludes that Gilroy’s paradigm is biased towards the experience of English-speaking black people, and thus fails to take into account the specific traits of other regions and their modes of apprehending the world, particularly in terms of spirituality. Next, Daria Tunca’s essay, entitled “Away from a Definition of African Literature(s)”, is more specifically literary and discusses the many questions raised by the label “African literature”. Taking the writers of the “new” Nigerian diaspora as an example, Tunca demonstrates how difficult it is to place them and their works. These artists’ complex identities can be defined using the notions of hybridity and cultural mixing that are part and parcel of Gilroy’s model; yet an informed examination of their writing cannot fully dispense with some reference to their national allegiance, a notion that is to some extent passed over in the “Black Atlantic”. Offering further theoretical insights into the question of categorisation in the fields of African and Black Atlantic letters, Tunca finally argues that one cannot entirely do away with label-

ling, even in the case of diasporic writers. In the last essay of this section, “Drawing a Line between Europe and the ‘Other’”, Gary Younge shows that the concept of the “Black Atlantic” has lost some of its connotation of otherness in twenty-first-century Europe, where culture and religion have been replacing race as markers of difference. Concentrating at once on contemporary Britain and on the debate around the publication in the Danish press of cartoons depicting Mohammed, Younge explains how the change in the perception of the ‘other’, and the ensuing redefinition of the Black Atlantic presence, has affected racial dynamics in Europe and has led to a repositioning of whiteness as the defender of the Enlightenment.

Part II, “Readings”, focuses on how Gilroy’s concept of the “Black Atlantic” can be productively used in readings of certain literary texts. In his essay “Taking Shortcuts: Literary Perspectives of the ‘Black Atlantic’”, John McLeod starts by paying tribute to the huge impact that Paul Gilroy’s conceptualisation of the diasporic and the transnational has had on cultural and literary studies alike. He nevertheless also points out, like Tunca in the earlier section, the prescriptive nature of Gilroy’s almost systematic rejection of the sedentary (be it racial or nationalistic) and highlights the fact that, because of its essentially theoretical rather than pragmatic stance, the Black Atlantic model is not always liberatory. McLeod’s ensuing discussion of Jackie Kay’s novel *Trumpet* (1998) emphasises the need to go beyond Gilroy’s conceptual straightjacket and concentrates on Kay’s metaphorical use of adoption which, through its exploration of the mutually inclusive impulses of filiation and affiliation, resists the protocols of critical theory. Like McLeod, Imen Najar addresses Paul Gilroy’s model through the discussion of a novel. In her essay, “Carnival and the Carnavalesque in Robert Antoni’s *Carnival*”, Najar reminds us of the importance of local and popular creativity in the African diaspora, an aspect of Black Atlantic culture that Gilroy’s predominantly transnational perspective has tended to neglect. She particularly focuses on the cross-cultural and transgressive potentials of Trinidadian carnival and how this street celebration has had a thematic, formal and epistemological effect on the diasporic writing of Antoni, a writer with

roots in Trinidad. Interestingly, his *Carnival* combines an interest in the local fete with identitarian preoccupations that in a sense overlap with Gilroy's fascination for the hybrid and the fluid. Wumi Raji's "*Tornadoes Full of Dreams: Paul Gilroy's Black Atlantic and African Literature of the Transatlantic Imagination*" discusses several examples of texts that seem to be more fully committed to the notion of the "Black Atlantic" because they bring Africa into the equation, thus critiquing Gilroy's lack of engagement with Africa (like Chrisman above). Raji's analysis of Bode Sowande's 1990 play *Tornadoes Full of Dreams* as a sophisticated critique of the West, of modernity and the Enlightenment leads him to call for a more inclusive view of the "Black Atlantic" that looks at all its constituencies in their historical specificities and takes account not only of the 'routes' followed by the African diaspora, as Gilroy does, but also of their 'roots'. In contrast, Eva Ulrike Pirker's "A Black Atlantic Agenda: Artistic / Narrative Strategies in Caryl Phillips's *The Atlantic Sound* and Isaac Julien's *Paradise Omeros*" takes a more positive look at the "Black Atlantic" in examining how the works of these two Black British artists of Caribbean descent tie in with Gilroy's view of the diasporic black experience as "a rhizomorphic fractal structure",¹¹ thereby illustrating the fact that *The Black Atlantic* "is as much a statement of method as it is an intellectual history and a work of criticism", as Louis Chude-Sokei has argued.¹² Pirker specifically addresses the formal and generic features of Phillips's travelogue and Julien's video installation – such as their use of multiple narrative perspectives – to underline their questioning of spatial fixity and unravel their complex negotiations of a Black Atlantic agenda, which is not meant to be rigidly celebratory but is shown to adapt, in both Phillips's and Julien's works, to political realities.

In Part III, "Practices", the essays shift towards the practical applications of the concept of the "Black Atlantic" in order to explore the impact it has had on academic disciplines and see to

11 Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, p. 7.

12 Louis Chude-Sokei, "The Black Atlantic Paradigm: Paul Gilroy and the Fractured Landscape of 'Race'", *American Quarterly*, 48.4 (1996), p. 745.

what extent it has altered their epistemology and working procedures. Kathleen Chater's contribution, "Mapping the Black Presence in England and Wales", details the methods that she deployed as a historian to keep track of the descendants of the Black Atlantic living in eighteenth-century England. Starting from the assumption that academics tend to focus on exceptional cases and that attention also needs to be paid to the ordinary black inhabitants of England at the time, Chater explains how she used available genealogical sources to put together a database containing detailed information on the Black British population. The next two essays turn towards the institutional reception of Gilroy's famous work. In "Teaching the Black Atlantic in Spain: Institutionalisation and European Convergence", Mar Gallego undertakes an evaluation of the way in which Gilroy's theory has influenced the shape of teaching and research within Spanish universities. She believes that the current trend towards interdisciplinary, transatlantic studies has been inspired by Gilroy's work but also encouraged by the process of European convergence that has recently made Spanish institutions of higher learning reassess their syllabi. Gallego's essay gathers substantial data about the configuration of black diaspora studies and their (still short) history in Spain and attests to what she perceives as a deep transformation within the country's academic institutions. Judith Misrahi-Barak's essay "Teaching Caribbean and Black Atlantic Studies in France: A Few Elements of Understanding" picks up this thread of analysis in order to assess the situation in France. Misrahi-Barak claims that French institutions insist on a rigid compartmentalisation of disciplines that thwarts rather than encourages interdisciplinary work. As a result, she argues, Gilroy's book was not warmly welcomed in French academia, and she takes the fact that *The Black Atlantic* was not translated until 2003 (although a second translation followed in 2010) as suggesting only lukewarm interest in what is to this date considered a ground-breaking theory. Besides these structural components, Misrahi-Barak contemplates how the French republican discourse has also hampered the spread of the "Black Atlantic" paradigm within French institutions of higher learning. Finally, Emad Mirmotahari looks into the impact Gilroy's notions

may have on actual classroom practices in his essay “Paul Gilroy’s *Black Atlantic* in Africa’s Other Diaspora”, in which he describes his use of Abdulrazak Gurnah’s novels to challenge his students’ more established notions of black identity. Gurnah, who was born in what is now Tanzania, discloses in his work a radically different type of Africanness, one that is connected to Asia and to the Indian Ocean rather than to the Atlantic and the Americas. Mirmotahari thus deploys Gurnah’s texts as a starting point to make visible the limitations of Gilroy’s theory and to help students develop their own critical viewpoints as well as a truly plural notion of the African diaspora.

Finally, Part IV, “Dialogues”, shifts focus once more in order to engage with the “Black Atlantic” from the perspective of two creative writers whose work includes transatlantic themes and characters. In conversation with John McLeod, Caryl Phillips expresses his reservations concerning the adjective “Black” in Gilroy’s famous formula and seems to be wary of any attempt to conceptualise the transatlantic field, while acknowledging the usefulness of such endeavours in some cases. The interview is in great part a discussion of Phillips’s *Foreigners: Three English Lives* (2007), a generically hybrid book which imaginatively recreates the lives of three famous black men, Francis Barber, Randolph Turpin and David Oluwale, who lived in England in the eighteenth and the twentieth centuries. Focusing on themes such as class, Englishness, otherness and identity, *Foreigners* very much revolves around the question that is asked in the title: “Who are you calling a foreigner?” However, many other issues close to Phillips’s artistic preoccupations are broached in the course of the exchange, including the power of literature, the recent changes in the publishing industry, as well as the intricacies of the writing process. In conversation with Pilar Cuder-Domínguez, African Canadian author Lawrence Hill traces his beginnings as a writer and the difficulties of getting published in Canada, as well as his literary influences, which feature notable African American figures such as Richard Wright and Langston Hughes. More importantly, he reflects on his own role and concerns as a black Canadian writer, describing himself as a person of many places. Hill then discusses

at some length his latest book of fiction, *The Book of Negroes* (2007), winner of the Commonwealth Writers' Prize in 2008. Hill's novel shuttles between Black Atlantic locations (western Africa, the United States, Canada, and Britain) and traces the many arrivals and departures, psychological as well as geographical, deriving from the historical slave trade and also more generally involved in the African diasporas. Hill conceives of writing as "an act of navigation, to find your way, to chart a map. Writing about Africa is a way for me to embrace it and to make sense of it in relation to me". Thus, Hill's definition seems to position him as a Black Atlantic writer.

In his review of *The Black Atlantic* Louis Chude-Sokei concludes that Gilroy's book is, in spite of its obvious lacunae, "rife with suggestions for further study".¹³ The present volume seems to live up to this concise declaration: it answers the first criticism by attempting to offer a wider range of perspectives – whether geographical or methodological – and testifies to the second part of the statement by covering a great variety of areas – including culture, history, literature, politics and translation. In both cases, it confirms that almost twenty years after its publication *The Black Atlantic* has not lost any of its power to inspire and to stimulate.

Works cited

- "Black Atlantic". <<http://www.blackatlantic.com>> [accessed 26 December 2011].
- Chude-Sokei, Louis. "The Black Atlantic Paradigm: Paul Gilroy and the Fractured Landscape of 'Race'", *American Quarterly*, 48.4 (1996), pp. 740–745.
- Dayan, Joan. "Paul Gilroy's Slaves, Ships, and Routes: The Middle Passage as Metaphor", special issue on the "Black Atlantic", ed. by Simon Gikandi, *Research in African Literatures*, 27.4 (1996), pp. 7–14.
- European Science Foundation. <<http://www.esf.org>> [accessed 10 July 2011].
- Evans, Lucy. "The Black Atlantic: Exploring Gilroy's Legacy", *Atlantic Studies*, 6.2 (2009), pp. 255–268.

13 Chude-Sokei, "The Black Atlantic Paradigm", p. 745.

- Gikandi, Simon. "Introduction: Africa, Diaspora, and the Discourse of Modernity", special issue on the "Black Atlantic", ed. by Simon Gikandi, *Research in African Literatures*, 27.4 (1996), pp. 1–6.
- Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).
- . *Darker than Blue: On the Moral Economies of Black Atlantic Culture* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010).
- Gruesser, John Cullen. *Confluences: Postcolonialism, African American Literary Studies, and the Black Atlantic* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2005).
- Oboe, Annalisa, and Anna Scacchi (eds). *Recharting the Black Atlantic: Modern Cultures, Local Communities, Global Connections* (New York and London: Routledge, 2008).
- "STAR" Project. <<http://www.iash.ed.ac.uk/star/>> [accessed 26 December 2011].

Away from a Definition of African Literature(s)

DARIA TUNCA

I feel that language in its widest sense is the hawk suspended above eternity, feeding from it but not of its substance and not necessarily for its life and thus never able to be translated into it; only able by a wing movement, so to speak, a cry, a shadow, to hint at what lies beneath it on the untouched, undescribed almost unknown plain.¹

The issue is not whether reality exists, but whether there is only one right way to describe it in all cases.²

African literature and the Black Atlantic

When I set out to write a doctoral thesis on contemporary Nigerian literature a few years ago, I did not know that the result would turn out to be a study of what could be described, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, as “Nigatlantic” writing. Indeed, the authors whose work I chose to examine – Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Ben Okri and the lesser known Gbenga Agbenugba – are all of Nigerian parentage, but they seem to have as many connections with Europe and/or America as with Africa, be it in terms of their biographical details, the thematic concerns informing their work, or the stylistic treatment of the subject matters they explore. These writers and other authors of Nigerian descent living in the West, such as

1 Janet Frame, *Living in the Maniototo* (New York: Braziller, 1979; repr. London: Women’s Press, 1981), p. 43.

2 George Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal about the Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 263.

Segun Afolabi, Helen Oyeyemi, Uzodinma Iweala, Chris Abani and Chika Unigwe, have been grouped under the banners of “Nigerian” and “African” literature, but they can alternatively be assigned the label “diasporic” and, in the case of Okri, Agbenugba, Afolabi and Oyeyemi, be called “(Black) British”. This testifies to the fact that the epithet “Nigerian” and, more generally, the denomination “African”, have undergone a broadening of scope in recent decades.

Thirty-four-year-old Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a case in point. She was born in Nigeria in 1977, a country where she was also raised, and left the African continent to pursue higher education in the United States. She has lived in America ever since, but still regularly returns to Nigeria, which she regards as her true home. Her literary imagination is simultaneously shaped by her middle-class upbringing in the university town of Nsukka, the religious and linguistic legacies left by British colonisation in Nigeria, the significance of her Igbo ethnicity in her country’s history, and the difficulties faced by African immigrants in the US. Adichie may be classified as a writer of the diaspora, but relatively few people dispute her status as a Nigerian novelist, as the enthusiastic response to her 2007 Orange Broadband Prize victory in her home country has shown. Put differently, identity need not automatically be tied to one’s place of residence: diasporic Nigerian authors may assert their “Nigerianness” by “seek[ing] to imaginatively reclaim their country”.³

Less straightforward perhaps is the case of Helen Oyeyemi, who was born in Nigeria to Yoruba parents but left for Britain when she was four. In an article revealingly entitled “Home, Strange Home”, she has cautiously expressed her desire to lay claim to her

3 Helon Habila, “Is This the Year of the Nigerian Writer?” *The Times*, 8 August 2007, <http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/article2223011.ece> [accessed 21 January 2010]. In fact, it seems that residence abroad does not solely determine the use of the term “diasporic”, either – to the best of my knowledge, Chinua Achebe has never been categorised as an author of the African diaspora, even though he has lived in New York State for many years.

African heritage by describing herself as “a Nigerian brought up in Britain”, but she admits without hesitation that, “when it comes to Africa, I just don’t get it”.⁴ Similarly, she uses the first person plural “we” when talking about Africans,⁵ but has also said that “[she] wouldn’t call [her]self Nigerian or a Nigerian writer”.⁶ These paradoxical statements might seem to verge on incoherence, but I must confess that they reflect my own divided feelings on the subject: as an observer, I would deem it inappropriate to challenge Oyeyemi’s right to affirm her attachment to her Nigerian roots, yet I somehow frown when I see this young Londoner’s work featured in special displays of “world fiction” in British bookshops. Critical attempts at circumscribing more adequately the writer’s crosscultural identity have yielded hyphenated labels such as “Nigerian-British” or “British-Nigerian” which, though viewed by many as the best alternatives, may give the impression that the writer is neither fully British nor fully Nigerian. A similar argument may be invoked concerning the more generic term “Afro-European”.⁷ Moreover, hyphenated labels do not necessarily offer a viable solution in situations in which more than two cultural backgrounds are involved.

4 Helen Oyeyemi, “Home, Strange Home”, *Guardian*, 2 February 2005, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2005/feb/02/hearafrica05.development2>> [accessed 21 January 2010].

5 Helen Oyeyemi, “Moving on Myth”, *Lip Magazine*, 5, 3 March 2005, <<http://www.thelip.org/?p=75>> [accessed 20 October 2007, no longer online].

6 Marianne Brace, “Helen Oyeyemi: Purveyor of Myths Turns Her Focus to Cuban Deities”, *Independent*, 18 May 2007, <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/helen-oyeyemi-purveyor-of-myths-turns-her-focus-to-cuban-deities-449273.html>> [accessed 21 January 2010].

7 Discussions during the 2006 “Transcultural Modernities: Narrating Africa in Europe” conference in Frankfurt have shown that this label is also problematic: some scholars felt the denomination was tinged with neo-colonialism and preferred the alternative “Euro-African”; others believed that “Euro-African” was the more neo-colonial of the two. The debate is further complicated by the fact that Ngugi wa Thiong’o applied the tag “Afro-European” to literature written by Africans in European languages, regardless of the authors’ physical location. See his *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: Currey, 1986), p. 27.

Although Oyeyemi claims that “[she] do[es]n’t feel [she] particularly belong[s] anywhere and wouldn’t say it’s that big a deal”,⁸ her fiction is pervaded by the theme of identity, often reflected in the presence of intertwined personalities and cultures that cannot be disentangled. By way of example, the heroine of *The Icarus Girl*,⁹ Jessamy, is an eight-year-old child born of a black Nigerian mother and a white English father, and who seems to suffer from a Yoruba-culture-inspired, turn-of-the-screw-like possession by an alter-ego who is possibly her dead twin. Oyeyemi’s second novel, *The Opposite House*,¹⁰ whose title echoes a poem by American writer Emily Dickinson, follows the characters of Maja, a young British singer of Afro-Cuban origin, and of Yemaya, one of the *orisha*, or spirits, of Santeria.¹¹ In a somewhat similar vein, her third novel, *White Is for Witching*,¹² features characters of African and European origin and confirms the recurrence of the motifs of doubleness and Otherness – not only racial, but also psychological and sexual – in her work. Indeed, one of the main characters in the book, Miranda, has a mental disorder called pica, and becomes romantically involved with Ore, a girl of Nigerian descent.

These biographical and literary elements epitomise the complexities surrounding Oyeyemi’s background and her vision of identity. The writer, for all the nonchalance conveyed in her interview with Marianne Brace, shows acute awareness of the intricacies of her cultural heritage when she recognises that she has “the muddled perspective of someone who is *in* a Nigerian cultural framework but not *of* it”.¹³ Interestingly, Oyeyemi’s self-assessment is strikingly reminiscent of Stuart Hall’s description of *Britain* – not

8 Brace, “Helen Oyeyemi”.

9 Helen Oyeyemi, *The Icarus Girl* (London: Bloomsbury, 2005).

10 Helen Oyeyemi, *The Opposite House* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007).

11 Santeria is “a complex of religious cults in the Afro-Cuban population, combining Yoruba African and Spanish Catholic traditions, especially concerning the saints (*santos*) who are identified with the spirits (*orisha*) of the Yoruba pantheon”. See John Bowker, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 856.

12 Helen Oyeyemi, *White Is for Witching* (London: Picador, 2009).

13 Oyeyemi, “Home” (my emphasis).

Africa, Asia or the Caribbean – as “the land which [Black Britons] are *in* but not *of*”.¹⁴ These combined statements capture an elusive sense of home(lessness) and (un)belonging evocative of descriptions traditionally associated with members of the “old” African diaspora – that is, with people whose ancestors were forcibly transported to the Americas several centuries ago.

Even if one disregards complex cases such as Oyeyemi’s, it clearly appears that, in recent years, the diasporic experience has taken on considerable importance among those commonly labelled as “African” writers. It may thus be argued that contemporary Africanness embraces dynamics of identity formation akin to those described by Paul Gilroy in his *Black Atlantic*:¹⁵ they appear to involve a web of cultural influences shaped by the intertwining of African, European and American histories. In other words, the “inescapable hybridity and intermixture of ideas”¹⁶ present within the Black Atlantic have become essential features of today’s African identities.

Despite their common characteristics, however, the recent forms of transatlantic Africanness and the process described by Gilroy are different in at least two respects. Firstly, it is no longer the common experience of slavery, but the broader phenomena of colonisation, twentieth- and twenty-first-century political exile and economic migration to Europe and the United States that act as central paradigms. Nevertheless, the links between the racism and cultural discrimination that have spread throughout Europe and America on the one hand, and the continents’ history of slavery highlighted in *The Black Atlantic* on the other, are not difficult to establish. Besides, the emphasis on the post-independence experience in contemporary African literature by no means signifies that slavery does not feature among its thematic concerns: for instance, Ben Okri’s novels *Dangerous Love* and *Starbook*

14 Cited in Alison Donnell, ed., *Companion to Contemporary Black British Culture* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. xii (emphasis in original).

15 Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

16 Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, xi.

testify to the latent presence of the subject in diasporic African fiction.¹⁷ Secondly, I would contend that the conception of Africanness put forward in the present essay diverges from Gilroy's theory in another respect, in that the national model rejected in *The Black Atlantic* cannot be done away with completely in the African context, at least when examining the literary production of writers from Nigeria.¹⁸ Needless to say, I do not champion the existence of homogeneous national literary traditions in Sub-Saharan African countries, given that most of these states underwent a "clinically induced birth at the Berlin Conference regardless of traditional ethnic boundaries", to use Joanna Sullivan's felicitous phrase.¹⁹ However, I believe that recent developments in the literary field, such as the publication of the novel *Half of a Yellow Sun*,²⁰ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's imaginative re-creation of the Biafran war, highlight the relevance of issues from Nigeria's past to the country's present and future.²¹ Evidently, the national angle is only one among many others that can be adopted when considering the literature of African countries. For example, it might be argued that Adichie's narrative views the Biafran conflict from a particular ethnic – rather than a broader national – perspective; one might alternatively wish to emphasise the book's pan-African resonance, or maintain that Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation*, another "Nigerian" novel, falls outside any

17 Ben Okri, *Dangerous Love* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1996); *Starbook* (London: Rider, 2007).

18 Many of the examples contained in this article pertain to Nigerian literature. I am aware that some of my observations may not apply to all African countries. Moreover, I have deliberately excluded any mention of Arabic-speaking North and East African territories in view of my limited knowledge of their literatures.

19 Joanna Sullivan, "The Question of a National Literature for Nigeria", *Research in African Literatures*, 32.3 (2001), p. 71.

20 Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun* (London: Fourth Estate, 2006).

21 Adichie is, of course, not the first Nigerian author to have published a novel about the Nigerian Civil War: Chinua Achebe, Elechi Amadi, Buchi Emecheta, Flora Nwapa and Ben Okri, among others, have dealt with the subject in their fiction.

national framework, since it describes a war in an unnamed African location.²²

As most postcolonial critics know, the hypernym “African literature” has also been the target of much criticism. A manifestation of the reticence towards the label can for instance be found in a 2007 blog entry published on the *Guardian* website, in which journalist Crystal Mahey wonders why African authors must always be tied to their ethnicity:

But what is African literature? Understanding literature in terms of a homogenised construct, whether it’s “African”, “south Asian” or “British diaspora”, can be limiting – and many differences including race, class, ethnicity, gender and generation in both the writing and the writers will be eclipsed under such umbrellas.²³

There seem to be two different – yet related – issues at stake in this debate. The first pertains to the definition of the adjective “African” in the combination “African literature”; the second more generally concerns the use of “ethnic” labels.

Towards a definition of African literature

It is well-documented that extensive discussions of the term “African literature” started at a conference on “African Writers of English Expression” in Makerere, Uganda, in 1962. Participants in the event parted without agreeing upon a definition, and the question sparked disagreements that gave rise to a series of articles in

22 Uzodinma Iweala, *Beasts of No Nation* (London: Murray, 2005). Notice, however, that Iweala’s title echoes that of the song “Beast of no Nation” by Fela Anikulapo Kuti, the Nigerian “King of Afrobeat”, and that the narrator of the novel bears an Igbo name, Agu (which means “leopard”).

23 Crystal Mahey, “Why Must Authors Be Tied to Their Ethnicity?” *Guardian*, 11 July 2007, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/booksblog/2007/jul/11/whymustauthorsbetiedtoth>> [accessed 21 January 2010].

the journal *Transition*. One of the main points of contention concerned the issue of language. While the Nigerian critic Obiajunwa Wali claimed that “any true African literature must be written in African languages”²⁴ – an opinion later vigorously defended by Ngugi wa Thiong’o in his *Decolonising the Mind* – Chinua Achebe believed in the possibility of creating “a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings” in order to “carry the weight of [his] African experience”.²⁵ The controversy was never formally resolved, and the question of language continues to regularly arise in debates on the “authenticity” of African literature. Nevertheless, most contemporary African authors who have gained international recognition through their work in English seem to have tacitly sided with Achebe. Even Ngugi, though still of the opinion that europhone African literature is “an unwitting accomplice to the repressive post-colonial state”,²⁶ no longer maintains the inflexibility of the equation between language and culture as he did in *Decolonising the Mind*:²⁷ he now acknowledges that “[w]hat [African writers] write in whatever language derives its stamina, stature and identity from African languages”.²⁸

Since the 1960s, potential definitions of African literature have had to accommodate yet another factor, namely the increasing number of authors who have joined the ranks of the diaspora, as mentioned above. Dialogues between Western-based and home-based authors, greatly facilitated by the existence of the Internet, have allowed paternalistic influences of Western culture to be, at least partly, transformed into transatlantic exchanges. As a result,

24 Obiajunwa Wali, “The Dead End of African Literature”, *Transition*, 10 (1963); repr. *Transition*, 75/76 (1997), p. 333.

25 Chinua Achebe, “English and the African Writer”, *Transition*, 18 (1965); repr. as “The African Writer and the English Language”, *Morning Yet on Creation Day: Essays* (London: Heinemann, 1975), p. 62.

26 Ngugi wa Thiong’o, *Penpoints, Gunpoints, and Dreams: Clarendon Lectures in English Literature 1996* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 127.

27 Ngugi, *Decolonising*, pp. 13–16.

28 Ngugi, *Penpoints*, p. 103.

many definitions of “African literature” put forward in the past seem too narrow to capture the complexity of contemporary globalised identities. Consider, for instance, Nadine Gordimer’s interpretation of the term “African writing”:

African writing is writing done in any language by Africans themselves and by others of whatever skin colour who share with Africans the experience of having been shaped, mentally and spiritually, by Africa rather than anywhere else in the world. One must look at the world *from Africa*, to be an African writer, not look *upon Africa* from the world. Given this Africa-centred consciousness, the African writers can write about what he pleases, and even about other countries, and still his work will belong to African literature.²⁹

Appealing as this definition may seem, one may legitimately wonder where Gordimer’s prerequisite of “Africa-centred consciousness” leaves a writer like Segun Afolabi, the winner of the 2005 Caine Prize for African Writing. Afolabi was born in Nigeria, lived there intermittently for several years before attending university in Wales, and he now resides in London. Like Oyeyemi, he includes himself when speaking about Africans,³⁰ but says he has “never really considered [him]self as an African writer”³¹ and admits that he would rather leave the task of dealing with contemporary Nigeria in literature to others, as he feels more comfortable with the subject of diaspora.³² The fact that the short story

29 Nadine Gordimer, *The Black Interpreters* (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1973), p. 5 (emphasis in original). Gordimer leaves room for Caribbean poets of the Négritude movement in her definition by including “a dream Africa” (pp. 5–6), i. e. an idealised vision of the continent, in her conception of “Africa-centred consciousness”.

30 Segun Afolabi, Interview with Ike Anya, *Nigeriaworld*, 28 September 2005, <<http://nigeriaworld.com/feature/publication/anya/092805.html>> [accessed 21 January 2010].

31 “New Generation of Nigerian Novelists Emerges”, *CNN.com*, 25 October 2006, <<http://edition.cnn.com/2006/SHOWBIZ/books/10/25/nigerian.novelists.ap/index.html>> [accessed 9 November 2006, no longer online].

32 The writer made this comment during an event entitled “Caine Prize for African Writing 2005: the winner and other shortlisted writers reading and in conversation with Becky Clarke”, which took place at the Africa Centre in London on 6 July 2005.

that earned Afolabi the Caine Prize, “Monday Morning”,³³ centres on a family of asylum seekers from an undisclosed, presumably Hispanophone country, may be interpreted as the acknowledgement of affinities in the fundamental processes underlying contemporary migrations to the West. In this sense, the diasporic component of Afolabi’s fiction might be viewed as a counterpart to Caribbean writers’ explorations of identity through references to the Jewish diaspora.

Gordimer’s definition poses a second problem. Assuming one were to disregard writers of the “new” diaspora for a moment (one can, after all, not blame the South African author for failing to anticipate the importance taken by the diasporic phenomenon in the decades following her statement) and recognise that African writers are indeed individuals who possess “the experience of having been shaped, mentally and spiritually, by Africa”,³⁴ would this entail that European writers are only those who “hav[e] been shaped, mentally and spiritually, by Europe”? This condition would certainly disqualify Nigerian-born novelist Chika Unigwe from ever claiming a place in Belgian literature – even though she is a fully-fledged citizen of Belgium who, some years ago, was also an elected political representative on the local council of Turnhout, the Flemish town where she lives with her family.

I should mention that none of my reservations are specifically directed at Nadine Gordimer’s commendable attempt at defining African literature – I could easily have chosen someone else’s formulation. My remarks are merely designed to highlight the fact that “you cannot cram African literature into a small, neat definition”³⁵ – a statement which, I believe, could be extended to any cultural phenomenon. Definitions are not mathematical formulae that can be adapted simply by changing one of their components, as my attempt to apply Gordimer’s words to European literature

33 Segun Afolabi, “Monday Morning”, *A Life Elsewhere* (London: Cape, 2006), pp. 1–15.

34 Gordimer, *Black Interpreters*, p. 5.

35 Achebe, “African Writer”, p. 56.

suggests; rather, as Bakhtin convincingly argued, each word (and, I shall add, each concept) “tastes of the [...] contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life; all words and forms are populated by intentions”.³⁶ This is probably why the adjectives “Aussie” and “Paki”, though they owe their forms to the same linguistic process of shortening, have taken on such different connotations; why literary prizes for women or black writers are socially acceptable, while awards exclusively reserved for men or white writers would be considered discriminatory.

The element of race touched upon here has, until now, not featured at all in my discussion of the label “African literature”. Surprisingly perhaps, in a world still very much divided along racial lines, this criterion has excited little controversy in recent years. On the one hand, few – if any – contemporary critics consider Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* or Joyce Cary’s *Mister Johnson* to be part of this literary tradition, in view of the dubious depictions of Africans these books contain.³⁷ On the other hand, white authors from South Africa or Zimbabwe are typically considered African writers despite their European ancestry, presumably because their life experiences and creative works are inseparable from their countries’ colonial histories. There appears to be similar unanimity around the status of contemporary emigrant writers who have spent most of their adult lives on the African continent, and who have written texts that deal with local issues and (at least partly) address African audiences. Whether black or white, such

36 M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. by Michael Holquist, tr. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 293.

37 Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (1902), in *Heart of Darkness and Selections from The Congo Diary* (New York: The Modern Library, 1999), pp. 1–96; Joyce Cary, *Mister Johnson* (1939; repr. London: Longman, 1975). Chinua Achebe’s forceful reactions to the representation of Africans in Conrad’s and Cary’s novels are well known. See respectively “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*”, *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays 1965–1987* (London: Heinemann, 1988), pp. 1–13; and “My Home under Imperial Fire”, *Home and Exile* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 1–35.

authors are regularly categorised as “African”, as evidenced by the cases of the (black) Guyanese-born Karen King-Aribisala and the (white) British-born Rosina Umelo.³⁸ This type of consensus, however, seems to be the exception rather than the rule in the debate around what constitutes “African literature”.

Away from a definition of African literature

Considering the number of criteria involved, one can effortlessly understand why no authoritative definition of the label “African literature” has been established to date. The diversity found within the so-called determining factors – differences in culture, nationality, locality – also easily accounts for some African writers’ resentment at being grouped into a single category and, in the process, burdened with the task of being the voice of an entire community.

I believe that some of the problems that have plagued the critical debate around what constitutes African literature can be traced back to the clash between objectivism and experientialism, or experiential realism. Objectivism yielded traditional Aristotelian categorisation, according to which “[a]ll the entities that have a given property or collection of properties in common form a category. Such properties are necessary and sufficient to *define* the category. All categories are of this kind”.³⁹ The limitations of this type of approach were already perceived in the context of African literary studies by Chinweizu et al., who, recognising that the category “African literature” was an evolving set, suggested that the traditional model be replaced by the notion of “family resem-

38 On Rosina Umelo, see Susan Arndt, *African Women’s Literature: Orature and Intertextuality* (Bayreuth: African Studies, 1998), pp. 68–69, n23. Even if Arndt actually discusses the classification of Umelo as an Igbo writer, her arguments also apply to the categories “Nigerian” and “African”.

39 Lakoff, *Women*, p. 161, emphasis in original.

blances” put forward by Wittgenstein.⁴⁰ The Austrian philosopher, working on the concept of “game”, had developed “the idea that members of a category may be related to one another without all members having any properties in common that define the category”.⁴¹ Ironically, while Chinweizu et al. advocated a “pragmatic rather than a rigid or dogmatic approach” to categorisation,⁴² their work celebrated “the autonomy and separateness of African literature [...] within an implicit notion of organic unity”.⁴³ In other words, in spite of their theoretical allegiance to a pragmatic attitude towards the classification of African literature, they defended a hyper-prescriptive view of what the aesthetics of “true” African writing should be.

George Lakoff, in his enlightening study of categorisation, adopted a more coherent experientialist perspective which can also be of use in the present discussion of African literature. Taking his cue from developments in the examination of categories since Wittgenstein, and especially the work of Eleanor Rosch, Lakoff argued in favour of a prototype-based approach to classification. Rosch, challenging traditional theories in the 1970s, had established that, because the properties defining a category are not shared by all its members, all elements in a category do not have equal status. Some sub-categories or category members are felt to be “prototypes”, which is to say that they have the special cognitive status of being “the best example”,⁴⁴ sometimes in specific cultural contexts. Based on this claim, Lakoff investigated the internal structure of categories in more detail and proposed several

40 Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie and Ihechukwu Madubuike, *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature, Vol 1: African Fiction and Poetry and their Critics* (Washington: Howard University Press, 1983), p. 307.

41 Lakoff, *Women*, p. 12.

42 Chinweizu et al., *Decolonization*, p. 307, see also pp. 13–14.

43 Kadiatu Kanneh, “What Is African Literature? Ethnography and Criticism”, in *Writing and Africa*, ed. by Mpalive-Hangson Msiska and Paul Hyland (London: Longman, 1997), p. 74, commenting on Chinweizu et al., *Decolonization*, p. 4.

44 Lakoff, *Women*, pp. 40–41. Further references to this book will be mentioned in the text.

models of classification. His analysis of the concept “mother”, in particular, may prove to be of interest in the discussion of the category “African literature”.

According to Lakoff, it is impossible “to give clear necessary and sufficient conditions for *mother* that will fit all the cases and apply equally to all of them” (p. 74). For instance, a definition akin to “woman who has given birth to a child” does not cover the full range of cases – think, for example, of an adoptive mother or a female who has contributed genetic material but has not borne her child (p. 74). Lakoff therefore defines “mother” as “a concept that is based on a complex model in which a number of individual cognitive models combine, forming a cluster model” (p. 74);⁴⁵ the “ideal case” in which models converge gives rise to prototype effects (p. 91). The category “mother”, he further suggests, is structured “radially” (p. 91): it contains a central sub-category, defined by a cluster of converging cognitive models, and non-central extensions which are variants of it. These variants are not generated from the central model by general rules, but are extended by motivated convention (p. 91).

In my opinion, it is possible to view “African literature” as such a category. Just as there is no necessary and sufficient condition for motherhood, so there is none for being part of “African literature”, and neither are there fixed rules by which non-central extensions of the concept may be generated. Just as new motivated sub-concepts of “mother” have appeared following the evolution of technology, so historical changes have produced new types of “African literature”, including diasporic writing. Just as non-central cases of motherhood which rate low on the “goodness-of-example” scale (p. 15) are rarely mentioned without qualification (e.g. stepmother), so I would probably not call Afolabi or Oyeyemi “African” writers without some form of hedging. Yet, considering the importance of the diasporic experience in present-day African literature, I might wish to include their work in a study of contem-

45 The concept “mother” combines “the birth model”, “the genetic model”, “the nurturance model”, “the marital model” and “the genealogical model” (p. 74).

porary Nigerian fiction. Finally, just as a mother's insightful account of her experience cannot encompass the opinions of all members of the class, so no single African writer should be turned into a representative of thousands of communities across a continent.

Ultimately, all systems of classification are inherently subjective, as Lakoff shows in his investigation into the relationship between categories and the human mind. Experientialism, on which his work is based, shares with objectivism "a commitment to the existence of the real world" and "a recognition that reality places constraints on concepts", among other things (p. xv), but it also diverges from it in several respects, one of which the author summarises as follows:

One of the cornerstones of the objectivist paradigm is the independence of metaphysics from epistemology. The world is as it is, independent of any concept, belief, or knowledge that people have. Minds, in other words, cannot create reality. I would like to suggest that this is false [...]. (p. 207)

Lakoff refutes the essentialist claim that there are "natural kinds of entities in the world, each *kind* being a category based on shared essential properties" (p. 161, emphasis in original). Taking an example from biology, he demonstrates that different taxonomic models, adopting different criteria, may be equally valid (p. 121), so that there is not one "correct" way of interpreting the natural world. He extends his reflection to culture-specific institutions such as kinship categories, which do exist but "are products of culture and hence products of the human mind" (p. 207).

Lakoff's view could also be applied to the concept of race. One may acknowledge the existence of skins of different shades, but still argue that race is a construct of the human mind – a mind which, for various historical, social and cognitive reasons, singled out this particular feature as a basis for categorisation.⁴⁶ In my view, failing to recognise the social and political significance of "blackness" amounts to providing racial discrimination with an

46 For details on the historical development of the discourse of race, see Michelle M. Wright, *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

essentialist foundation.⁴⁷ Considering the numerous factors that have shaped “blackness” over the centuries, not to mention the evolution of the label in the British context in recent years,⁴⁸ the process of identifying a “black” author seems to be fraught with difficulties as extraordinary as those encountered in the categorisation of African writers.

In sum, this discussion has shown that, considering the complex structure of the categories “African” and “black”, one may, based on different sets of cognitive models (or depending on the importance given to each model), take the subjective but motivated view that writers such as Ben Okri, Helen Oyeyemi and Segun Afolabi can be called both “African” and “black British”. Whether they *should* be categorised as such, however, is a different question.

African literature, African literatures, or simply literature?

It may be a sweeping – though not entirely unfounded – generalisation to say that creative writers are notoriously wary of labels. Even Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, though she says she has come to accept categorisations, is still suspicious of them because “there

47 I was, for example, struck by some of the content found in the “Submission” section of a 2006 issue of the literary magazine *Sable*. The journal invites creative writing contributions only by “writers of colour” (p. 129) and subsequently mentions “Terminology: We have used the term ‘people of colour’ to indicate ‘*non-caucasian*’ and take this to include people of African, Asian, Latin American, Middle-Eastern, Polynesian, Native American / First Nation descent. This terminology may be substituted for a more appropriate term at a later stage within SABLE” (p. 129, my emphasis). I find the editors’ choice to accept or reject submissions on the basis of a writer’s phenotype questionable to say the least (even if the mention of the biological criterion is somewhat softened by the second part of the definition).

48 See Bénédicte Ledent, “Black British Literature”, in *The Oxford Companion to English Literature, seventh edition*, ed. by Dinah Birch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 16.

are expectations which come with them. Nigerian writers are supposed to write a certain way".⁴⁹ Yet classifications are impossible to avoid – in Lakoff's words, "[t]here is nothing more basic than categorization to our thought, perception, action and speech" (p. 5). Thus, even intellectual movements which have placed deliberate emphasis on fragmentation, the instability of signifiers and the multiplicity of perspectives have given rise to new labels – post-modernism, deconstruction, postcolonialism – and structured sub-theories. It is not possible to do away with categories and the names that come with them. Moreover, in the specialised field of postcolonial studies, it does not seem practicable to describe an author or a literature using the sole basic-level terms "writer" or "writing" at all times. If the existence of categories can be blamed on human nature, literary critics, historians or journalists cannot conveniently shrug off the responsibility for their linguistic choices. The use of labels, and the decision pertaining to what or who should be included within the selected categories, are not neutral: they inevitably reflect construals. Even if, as an informed researcher, one may not apply epithets with the intention of pigeonholing writers in the manner described by Adichie, there is no doubt that "[t]he question of categorization is always a political one", as Mark Stein aptly emphasises in his study of Black British literature.⁵⁰

Beyond the conceptual debate, the scholar who is acutely aware that language can only imperfectly capture a tiny, subjective portion of reality is faced with a series of practical choices and dilemmas. Considering the influence that Aristotelian systems of categorisation still have on our mentalities,⁵¹ should the label "African literature" once and for all be transformed into "African literatures", on the model of the journal *Research in African Literatures*, or would this initiative come across as pedantic? Should

49 Rosie Millard, "This Is the Africa You Don't Hear About", *Sunday Times*, 10 June 2007, <http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/article1908943.ece> [accessed 21 January 2010].

50 Mark Stein, *Black British Literature: Novels of Transformation* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2004), p. xv.

51 I do not hesitate to include myself here, considering my reaction to the categorisation of Oyeyemi's works in British bookshops.

scholars add explanatory footnotes to justify the use of labels in their work, or multiply hyphenated tags in an attempt to capture the different components of crosscultural backgrounds? Can studies of literature based on categories forged by history be effective in the denunciation of racism and colonialism, or are they, conversely, instrumental in the perpetuation of segregating mentalities? Finally, what roles do writers themselves play in this debate? Should their imaginations, as reflected in their fiction and poems (and inevitably viewed through the lens of criticism) be determining factors in the assignment of labels? Or should the writers' parentage, their declarations in essays and interviews, the way their works are marketed, or even their nationalities, intervene in processes of categorisation?

It is probable that none of these questions will ever find a definite answer. It seems that one must come to terms with the fact that the label "African literature" is no more than "a convenient shorthand for the many distinctive literatures of the African continent";⁵² it is a phrase which should – but realistically cannot – be clarified each time it is used. So where to from here?

Works cited

- "New Generation of Nigerian Novelists Emerges", *CNN.com*, 25 October 2006, <<http://edition.cnn.com/2006/SHOWBIZ/books/10/25/nigerian.novelists.ap/index.html>> [accessed 9 November 2006, no longer online].
- Achebe Chinua. "English and the African Writer", *Transition*, 18 (1965), pp. 27–30; repr. as "The African Writer and the English Language", *Morning Yet on Creation Day: Essays* (London: Heinemann, 1975), pp. 55–62.
- . "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*", *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays 1965–1987* (London: Heinemann, 1988), pp. 1–13.

52 Oyekan Owomoyela, "The Question of Language in African Literatures", in *A History of Twentieth-Century African Literatures*, ed. by Oyekan Owomoyela (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), p. 364.

- . “My Home under Imperial Fire”, *Home and Exile* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 1–35.
- Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Half of a Yellow Sun* (London: Fourth Estate, 2006).
- Afolabi, Segun. Interview with Ike Anya, *Nigeriaworld*, 28 September 2005, <<http://nigeriaworld.com/feature/publication/anya/092805.html>> [accessed 21 January 2010].
- . “Monday Morning”, *A Life Elsewhere* (London: Cape, 2006), pp. 1–15.
- Arndt, Susan. *African Women’s Literature: Orature and Intertextuality* (Bayreuth: Bayreuth African Studies, 1998).
- Bakhtin, M. M. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. by Michael Holquist, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).
- Bowker, John (ed). *The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).
- Brace, Marianne. “Helen Oyeyemi: Purveyor of Myths Turns Her Focus to Cuban Deities”, *Independent*, 18 May 2007, <<http://arts.independent.co.uk/books/features/article2554629.ece>> [accessed 21 January 2010].
- Cary, Joyce. *Mister Johnson* (1939; repr. London: Longman, 1975).
- Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie and Ihechukwu Madubuike. *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature, Vol 1: African Fiction and Poetry and their Critics* (Washington: Howard University Press, 1983).
- Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness* (1902), in *Heart of Darkness and Selections from The Congo Diary* (New York: The Modern Library, 1999), pp. 1–96.
- Donnell, Alison (ed). *Companion to Contemporary Black British Culture* (London: Routledge, 2002).
- Frame, Janet. *Living in the Maniototo* (New York: Braziller, 1979; repr. London: Women’s Press, 1981).
- Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).
- Gordimer, Nadine. *The Black Interpreters* (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1973).
- Habila, Helon. “Is This the Year of the Nigerian Writer?” *The Times*, 8 August 2007, <http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/article2223011.ece> [accessed 21 January 2010].
- Iweala, Uzodinma. *Beasts of No Nation* (London: Murray, 2005).
- Kanneh, Kadiatu. “What Is African Literature? Ethnography and Criticism”, in *Writing and Africa*, ed. by Mpalive-Hangson Msiska and Paul Hyland (London: Longman, 1997), pp. 69–86.
- Kuti, Fela Anikulapo. “Beast of No Nation (part 2)”, *Fela Anikulapo Kuti – King of Afrobeat: The Anthology* (Barclay, 1999).
- Lakoff, George. *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal about the Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).
- Ledent, Bénédicte. “Black British Literature”, in *The Oxford Companion to English Literature, seventh edition*, ed. by Dinah Birch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 16–22.

- Mahey, Crystal. "Why Must Authors Be Tied to Their Ethnicity?" *Guardian*, 11 July 2007, <http://blogs.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/07/why_must_authors_be_tied_to_th.html> [accessed 21 January 2010].
- Millard, Rosie. "This Is the Africa You Don't Hear About", *Sunday Times*, 10 June 2007, <http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/article1908943.ece> [accessed 21 January 2009].
- Ngugi wa Thiong'o. *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: Currey, 1986).
- . *Penpoints, Gunpoints, and Dreams: Clarendon Lectures in English Literature 1996* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).
- Okri, Ben. *Dangerous Love* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1996).
- . *Starbook* (London: Rider, 2007).
- Owomoyela, Oyekan. "The Question of Language in African Literatures", in *A History of Twentieth-Century African Literatures*, ed. by Oyekan Owomoyela (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), pp. 347–368.
- Oyeyemi, Helen. *The Icarus Girl*. London: Bloomsbury, 2005.
- . "Home, Strange Home", *Guardian*, 2 February 2005, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2005/feb/02/hearafrica05.development2>> [accessed 21 January 2010].
- . "Moving on Myth", *Lip Magazine*, 5, 3 March 2005, <<http://www.thelip.org/?p=75>> [accessed 16 August 2007, no longer online].
- . *The Opposite House* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007).
- . *White Is for Witching* (London: Picador, 2009).
- Sable: The Lit Mag for New Writing*, 8 (Summer 2006).
- Stein, Mark. *Black British Literature: Novels of Transformation* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2004).
- Sullivan, Joanna. "The Question of a National Literature for Nigeria", *Research in African Literatures*, 32.3 (2001), pp. 71–85.
- Wali, Obiajunwa. "The Dead End of African Literature", *Transition* 10 (1963); repr. *Transition*, 75/76 (1997), pp. 330–335.
- Wright, Michelle M. *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).