

# Introduction

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The essays appearing in this edition of *JLS* are selections of the lectures and research presentations made by the faculty and participating students of the first Programme for African Doctoral Students in literary studies hosted by the Department Theory of Literature at the University of South Africa which was held in Pretoria from 7 to 11 August 2000. The event was planned as part of the preconference programme of the Congress of International Comparative Literature Association. Its purpose was to establish a forum for exchange between researchers and scholars in African literatures from different parts of the world and doctoral students based at African universities.

This took the form of lectures presented by five faculty members which included Bernth Lindfors from the University of Texas, Kofi Anyidoho from the University of Ghana, Mineke Schipper from the University of Leiden, Alain Ricard from the University of Bordeaux and Nhlanhla Maake from the University of the Witwatersrand. Ten doctoral students from universities across Africa were selected from some fifty applicants who had applied and were funded to attend the five-day programme in Pretoria.

The selection published here consists of five essays: two by the faculty members, Bernth Lindfors and Mineke Schipper, and three by doctoral students, Ashleigh Harris, Maurice Vambe and Herman Wasserman. They deal with various aspects of African literature ranging from canon formation and the relationship between narrative and identity to specific studies in a variety of African literatures. The essays have not been selected for any thematic coherence but, as will become evident, nevertheless have more in common than the mere fact that they appear together between the covers of this edition. They engage with concerns pertaining to postcolonial literatures in which developments ranging across canons, identities, histories and narratives are traced and gauged.

The essay by Bernth Lindfors, "African Literature Criticism and the Postcolonial Curriculum", is an empirical study on teaching and research in African literatures conducted over several years. It highlights the rapid academic institutionalisation of African literature as a distinct discipline "with its own history, politics, rituals and polemics". This took place during the course of the second half of the twentieth century, beginning in Africa and spreading to Europe and the USA. Central to this process are the procedures related to canon-formation made manifest in the reading lists of African

literature curricula at different institutions. The essay provides comparative data with reference to rates of pedagogical and critical attention conferred on specific authors and texts. It also quantifies the distribution of critical work between Africa and the USA. The various instruments designed for this, are, in Lindfors's words, "attempts at quantifying qualitative discriminations" and identifying patterns within and across specific counties inside and outside Africa. The essay provides valuable information and points towards the need for broadening national curricula to include writers from across the continent. It also stresses the need to facilitate research and communication among scholars and researchers in Africa and from elsewhere. The extensive empirical data presented in the essay provides a basis for further research into other aspects related to the formation of national regional and other canons of African literatures. This may include, as John Guillroy (1995: 233-249) suggests, studies of how the functions assigned to educational institutions within specific historical conditions and national agendas shape the establishment and modification of the various pedagogical canons of African literatures.

In "Narratives, Identities, Selves: Intercultural Perspectives on Autobiographical and First-person Narratives", Mineke Schipper outlines the intercultural research prospects, problems and protocols on self and identity in first-person narratives in African and other literatures. It sets out by interrogating the assertion that autobiographical narratives are a "European invention" adopted by Asian and African cultures in the process of contact. It proceeds to reflect on theories of identity and African perspectives on Self and the Other. It concludes with some observations on first-person and autobiographical narratives in African literature. While observing that there can be no question of a single and fixed African identity, this field offers a range of research possibilities in African literatures, including comparative research between African, Asian and Latin-American literatures on the ways in which selves and identities are woven into narratives. The essay, in delineating a field, is exploratory in orientation.

Ashleigh Harris's "Speaking the 'Truth by Dissembling': Necessary Ambiguities in the Tar-Baby Tale" deals with the role of a narrative figure from West African trickster tales in the preservation of cultural descent and the construction of group identities in African-American literature under conditions of displacement, appropriation, disruption and erasure. She examines the successive transformations of the tale as it migrated from Africa to the plantations of America and its subsequent appropriation in Joel Chandler Harris's *Uncle Remus Tales*. The essay relates modifications in the signification of the tale to the changing social conditions under which it is

#### INTRODUCTION

articulated and rearticulated. It shows how the political ambiguities in these narratives, dialogically uttered, in the Bakhtinian (1981) sense, to voice and preserve lost histories and experiences of slavery, came to be erased in dominant appropriations.

Maurice Vambe examines the way in which *Black Sunlight* by Dambudzo Marechera contests the orthodoxy in the discourse on Zimbabwean national liberation and decolonisation in his essay “Dambudzo Marechera’s *Black Sunlight*: Carnavalesque and the Subversion of Nationalist Discourse of Resistance in Zimbabwean Literature”. Where official discourse presents the historical event of national liberation as inevitable and natural, Marechera’s novel, in Vambe’s reading, subverts this in a narrative which foregrounds national liberations as acts of social construction. Vambe reads Marechera’s *Black Sunlight* through the Bakhtinian trope of the carnivalesque to contest the unitary conceptions of postcolonial national identities based on an authentic African image. In opposition to this, multiple nonrealist and open-ended narratives of colonial resistance and postcolonial identities are suggested. Vambe concludes by pointing out contradictions in both orthodox nationalist discourse and in Marechera’s narrative.

Herman Wasserman’s essay “Postcolonial Cultural Identity in Recent Afrikaans Literary Texts”, while related to issues broached by the four previous essays, examines postcolonial identity in Afrikaans fiction. As a language forged by the interaction between settler and indigenous communities and associated with both Afrikaner nationalism and opposition to it, Wasserman, following the bipolar classification of Mishra and Hodge ([1993]1994), writes that Afrikaans has come to occupy both complicit and oppositional positions within colonial discourse in South Africa. This is combined with Stuart Hall’s (1994) typology of two moments in the construction of cultural identity: a first moment of a presumed singular, pristine, static and shared culture invoked for the purposes of unity and resistance; and a second moment in which the fragmentation, discontinuity and dynamism of the culture of the colonised is acknowledged. Wasserman identifies traces of both positions and moments in Afrikaans texts.

These essays culled from the presentations made during the first Programme for African Doctoral Students, as already mentioned, not written or selected to comply with a set theme, nevertheless explore the interface between textual and contextual matters. Engaged in postcolonial discourse as all these essays are, in more than one, the theories of Bakhtin provide the means for relating texts to their social and historical contexts. As research in progress, the essays indicate some of the areas currently investigated in the expanding field of African literary studies.

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