The Writers' Forum: Discussion Among the Writers

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.umass.edu/cibs

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://scholarworks.umass.edu/cibs/vol11/iss1/13

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Afro-American Studies at ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in Contributions in Black Studies by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact scholarworks@library.umass.edu.
Discussion Among the Writers

Samba Gadjigo: In many ways you have obliquely touched on this; but I’d like to see you address it explicitly: To what extent do race, class, and gender—but especially race—interfere with, affect, or inform the production and reception of artistic works?

Toni Cade Bambara: Thank you for the question. I thought that’s what we were addressing among other things. Of course, it matters; it’s one of those crucial issues about which there cannot be silence. The official version on those issues has to be challenged. Take the film “Sidewalk Stories” by Charles Lane: independent film, black and white, less than a $300,000 budget, twelve-minute standing ovation at the Cannes Film Festival, a product of the independent black cinema. What can happen when you do your script, you go into production, you’re through with post-production, and you haven’t really run it through a race, class, gender analysis before you finish editing. I pick “Sidewalk Stories” because I think it is well thought out, it’s not exploitative, it doesn’t hustle working-class poor people in its depiction of the homeless milieu. It’s very careful and concerned in its depiction and its representation of black women in the film. But there is a moment in the shelter when the sidewalk artist with the young girl—the little kid that he has rescued—wants to make sure he doesn’t lose track of her. So he ties a little string around her foot and a little string around her wrist and then he ties it around his neck. This image, this gesture, this bit comes from a Chaplin film; in fact, we see it in a great many of the early European-American films. But that image of a black man with a rope around his neck begins to disrupt and derail the film for just a moment. In other words, the comedy of that scene doesn’t come off, certainly not for black spectators. There is too much baggage around that picture for that scene to come off. It’s one example in the whole film that I have any problem with because this is an unusually careful film in terms of addressing issues of race, class, and gender.

Earl Lovelace: Does race or class matter? Matter to the writer? To the viewer? As a writer you don’t see the reader, so I suppose it really wouldn’t matter. But I suppose that writing in the world, you’d expect there would be both white people and black people or anybody and everybody, hopefully. Certainly, I would want to think that for my own writing. I would want to relate in a particular kind of way to black people, given our history and given the fact that we have been so poorly represented, and hopefully I would be saying something that would help in some kind of way.

Ngugi wa Thiong’o: I agree with that. I think the problem is that people are not really understanding the question, but they know what has been said. In the whole discussion of all the panelists today, we have assumed the interplay of race, class, and gender. There is no way you can isolate any sensibility in today’s world which has not been affected by the interplay of race, class, and gender. If you take the 400-500 years of imperialist domination from its origins in Renaissance Europe to the present—if you talk about slavery and the slave trade—it’s a certain category of people of a certain race, of a certain
class enslaving people of a certain category of race, class, and so on. And even within that category, the issue of gender in terms of say how different groups were affected, the gender question was also very much central to that. So, there's no way to ignore it, because it's impossible to ignore the interplay of those three: race, class, and gender. And in fact in this case they are so pertinent to Ousmane Sembène’s work, whether you're taking God’s Bits of Wood, or for that matter the last novel, The Last of the Empire, what is interesting is the way the various conflicts among the various characters are very much rooted in those issues of race, class, and gender. And in some ways, there is no better way of answering that question than actually to refer to aspects of the work of Ousmane Sembène.

Ousmane Sembène: Pour ma part, je voulais seulement apporter un petit détail. Peut-être que la conception que j'ai des blancs dans ma tête diffère de celle de mes frères et soeurs de l'Amérique qui sont dans des ghettos. Peut-être qu'ils sont les plus étouffés par les Européens. Etant donné que moi, j'ai ma culture, ma langue, j'ai un repli sur moi-même: ce que j'appelle mes valeurs de refuge. De ce fait, quand je revendique, je dis: il est étranger sur ma terre. Et si je prends ce que je sais de la littérature afro-américaine depuis Du Bois jusqu'à nos jours, jusqu'à Toni Cade Bambara, les situations diffèrent. Mais, de toute façon, je pense que le problème est très délicat. Nous le posons.

Maintenant, en 1990, il y a des drapeaux, des hymnes, des gouvernements africains. C'est l'époque du néo-colonialisme. J'ai mon gouvernement noir, malgré qu'il soit mauvais, capitaliste, bourgeois, et manipulé par le néo-colonialisme. Après l'indépendance, on s'est empressé de nous envoyer ce qu'on appelle des conseillers techniques. Trente ans plus tard nous constatons que c'est l'échec total. Et ces conseillers, c'étaient des experts en matière de politique africaine. Souvent ce sont des anciens administrateurs de l'époque coloniale, ou fils d'administrateurs de l'époque coloniale, ou peut-être qu'ils sont sortis des Grandes Ecoles, de la Sorbonne, ou de Londres, ou des États-Unis, ayant fait de l'anthropologie africaine. Quelle peut être l'influence positive d'un tel expert qui est extérieur à ma culture, à mon univers mental, et qui veut conseiller mon gouvernement sur ce qui est bon ou mauvais pour moi, quand il ne sait rien de moi? Ce qui fait donc que cette charge de la race, de la culture, comme on a dit, existe encore.

[I only want to add a small detail. It may be that in my mind I have a conception of whites that is different from the conception in the minds of my American brothers and sisters who live in ghettos. Perhaps they feel more stifled by the Europeans. Since I have my own culture and language, I can withdraw into a world of my own, into what I call the values that offer me refuge. So when I speak up in protest, I can say: “The European is a stranger in my land.” But the situation is different in what I know of Afro-American literature from Du Bois up to the present, up to Toni Cade Bambara. In any case, we are merely formulating a very difficult problem.

Today, in 1990, Africa has its flags, national hymns, and governments. This is the time of neocolonialism. I have my own black government, even if it is bad, capitalist, and bourgeois, as well as manipulated by the forces of neocolonialism. After independence everyone eagerly sent us what are known as technical advisers. Thirty years later...
it is clear to us that this has been a total failure. These advisers were experts in the field of African politics. Often they were former colonial administrators or the sons of those who were administrators in colonial times, or they had degrees from top professional schools, from the Sorbonne, from London or the United States, and had studied African anthropology. What positive influence could such an expert have, since he was an outsider to my culture and my mental universe? And yet he wanted to advise my government on what was good or bad for me, without knowing anything about me. Consequently the burden of race and culture, as Ngugi called it, still persists.

**Question from the Audience:** In the film “Mandabi, there is a scene where Dieng goes to the post office to have a letter translated, and Sembène plays the role of the translator. He’s seated at a table on which there is a very prominent photo of Che Guevara, the Cuban revolutionary and patriot. The image of Che Guevara in a Dakar post office provokes me to ask, how local or specific an audience does an artist address? For whom is the artistry intended? Would the rural masses in Senegal or in Africa in general recognize that photograph?


Si les masses paysannes ne connaissent pas Che Guevara, les citadins des villes de toute l’Afrique le connaissent, et sa photo, c’est pour mieux le faire connaître! Si vous entrez chez moi depuis cette époque, j’ai une photo, grande—un mètre carré—de Che Guevara dans mon salon.

[The story of Che Guevara belongs to all of humanity. Che Guevara came to Conakry in Guinea during the time of Sékou Touré, and then we went to Labé. I am going to tell you an anecdote. It’s a good thing to live a long life. It is possible to like or dislike Sékou Touré, but we took the same path in life and he was a friend. I was in Conakry, and in Guinea a conference was being held with Sékou Touré, Modibo Keïta, Senghor and the former President of Mauritanie, Moktar Ould Daddah. Since I did not live very far from Sékou Touré, he said: “We’re going to play a trick on your friend.” Because he referred to Senghor as my friend. And so we went to Labé, which was very far, and all the heads of state were there. Sékou Touré, who did not stand on ceremony, took me by the hand and said: “Let’s introduce people to each other.” Che Guevara was behind me and he introduced him first to Modibo Keïta, then to Ould Daddah, and finally to...
Senghor, which gave Senghor quite a start.

Even if the rural masses do not know Che Guevara, he is known to the urban population throughout Africa, and his photograph is in the film to make him even better known. Since that time, if you come into my house, you will see that I have a large photograph, one meter square, of Che Guevara in my living room.

**Question from the Audience:** Mr. Sembène, many critics have pointed out the enduring presence of the griot in your works; some even go so far as to call you a modern griot. To what extent do you consider the griot a model for the modern African writer, and how can the tradition of the griot be transposed into our technological age?

**Ousmane Sembène:** Il faut savoir que toutes les ethnies africaines n’ont pas de griots. Je veux bien répondre mais j’aimerais bien poser une question pour mon instruction; est-ce que dans la société gikuyu il y a des griots? Est-ce que mon ami Ngugi peut nous informer? Je reviendrai à la réponse.

[We must realize that not all African ethnic groups have griots. I am quite willing to answer, but for my own education I would like to know if in Gikuyu communities there is a griot? Can my friend Ngugi enlighten us? I shall come back later to my answer.]

**Ngugi wa Thiong’o:** The tradition of the griot is not there in all communities. I suspect that it is part of those societies in Africa which had a more or less centralized state. What we have among the Gikuyu is another kind of poetic tradition, which fosters competition among various poets. Instead of having wrestling matches, you’d have—as it were—poetic wrestling matches between various regions. In fact, this art was so highly respected and it was taken so seriously that it was only practiced among that group who had really developed the art of writing. They kept it as part of the guild so that it never spread to the community as a whole.

**Ousmane Sembène:** Je pense donc que nous apprenons que sur le continent il y a des groupes qui n’ont pas de griots, dans le sens général du mot. J’ai, du côté de ma mère, les Diola qui n’ont pas de griots, mais ils ont des forgerons. Et du côté de Samba Gadjigo, de sa culture, des Peul, le forgeron est un être inférieur. Donc, vous voyez la différence qui peut exister lorsque vous utilisez une expression en disant qu’ elle a une valeur tout à fait continentale. Dans la société wolof il y a des griots. Il y a énormément de couches qui ont le pouvoir de la parole selon les circonstances et les moments. Il y a ceux dont Ngugi vient de parler, qui ont aussi le pouvoir de la joute oratoire, et il y a chez les Wolof un lutteur, un champion lutteur. Il doit être poète. Avant d’affronter son adversaire, il doit lui-même créer ses chansons. Chez les Malinké et les Bambara il y a les dialis, les forgerons, et il y a aussi les tisserands.

Ce qui faisait donc que ces griots connaissaient la technique de l’époque. Le travail du fer, du métal ne nous a pas été apporté par l’esclavage ni par la conquête coloniale. Et lorsque parfois les griots se mettaient à parler de la guerre, avant de parler de la bravoure des hommes et des femmes, ils parlaient d’abord de leur armement et du
type d’armement et de celui qui avait fabriqué l’armement, et du féticheur ou marabout qui avait béni ces armes. Le griot parlait aussi de l’accoutrement du combattant : quel est le tisserand qui l’a tissé, et quelle est la femme qui a cardé le coton, si c’est la mère, si c’est la femme, si c’est la bien-aimée ou la fiancée. C’est donc vous dire que les griots, en ce moment-là, connaissaient, d’une manière sommaire ou complète, la technique de l’époque. Et si le combat se passait à cheval, ils devaient parler de l’harnachement du cheval. Alors, pour vous parler seulement du rôle du griot, tous ces détails sont très importants dans sa description. A croire que parfois même le griot assistait à l’agonie de son héros.


Ce que je souhaiterais que les artistes africains empruntent au griot, ce sont ses connaissances, c’est de parler de la femme, de son être intérieur et de son être physique. Que m’importe si Penda est une prostituée, c’est ce qu’elle fait dans la société qui m’intéresse. Dans “Niiwam,” la femme, après avoir terrassé son mari, l’enjambe, et ce sont les femmes qui lui disent : “Mais on ne fait pas ça à un homme.” Et la femme se retourne : “Mais où est l’homme ?”

La jeune fille a un rapport avec son garçon le jour de l’anniversaire de la naissance de Mohammed. On me dit qu’il ne faut pas écrire cela, même si cela a eu lieu. Mais c’est la première nuit qui est la plus intéressante pour les amoureux. Sans blasphémer, pour la mère de Mohammed aussi c’est la nuit la plus intéressante, la naissance de son fils.

Quand je parle des ouvriers, c’est la même chose. Prenez par exemple le cas de ce vieil homme dans Les bouts de bois de Dieu. Il a travaillé pendant trente années sur le chemin-de-fer et il est mort, mangé par les rats. Mourir mangé par les rats c’est inimaginable parce que le corps d’un mort est sacré. Ce n’est pas sa mort qui m’a été reprochée, c’est le fait que les rats l’aient mangé. Cependant, comme il meurt seul, sans personne pour l’enterrer, il n’y a que les rats, il faut que les rats le mangent. Ici donc, l’opposition entre la machine, l’homme et les rats sert à montrer la nouvelle société.

De même, quand Abdou Kader Bèye, dans “Xala,” fait pousser sa Mercedes ou quand il prend de l’eau d’Evian pour la mettre dans le radiateur de sa voiture, cela fait rire la salle. Là peut-être que je me suis trompé, parce qu’une voiture Mercedes coûte trop cher. Et cette bourgeoisie compradore, ces commis voyageurs du néocolonialisme, trouvent que l’eau qu’ils boivent est trop calcaire pour le radiateur. C’est pourquoi ils utilisent l’Evian. Ils préfèrent soigner cette apparence de richesse, de mimétisme de l’Occident. Donc ce que nous cherchons, ce que je cherche, c’est ce passage maintenant du griot traditionnel, classique, à mon époque.

Nous ne serons plus comme l’Afrique d’avant, l’Afrique ne reviendra jamais en arrière. Nous allons vers l’avant comme tous les peuples. Nous n’avons pas à attraper...
l’Occident, nous avons à nous développer nous-mêmes petit à petit. Mais mon travail se situe dans un milieu très difficile.

Pour ce qui est de mon travail, quand j’ai besoin d’en savoir, je vais consulter des experts. Je leur demande et ils m’aident beaucoup. Il en est de même pour la religion musulmane, pour la religion catholique, et pour le droit. J’ai besoin d’avoir une connaissance qui puisse au moins introduire les spectateurs ou le lecteur dans les règles de ce système. La transposition, ce n’est pas moi qui l’amène, c’est le peuple qui l’amène. En dehors de la bataille pour une langue ou des langues africaines tout le reste me vient de mon peuple. Je n’invente rien, et les trois livres sur lesquels je travaille en ce moment et qui doivent sortir ne sont vraiment pas du tout des inventions. C’est tout.

[I think we can learn from this that there are ethnic groups on the continent that do not have griots, in the true sense of the word. Those on my mother’s side, that is the Diola, have no griots, but they have blacksmiths. In the case of the Peul, to whom Samba Gadjigo belongs, the blacksmith is an inferior person. So you can see the wide diversity that exists when you want to apply a concept throughout a whole continent. Within Wolof society we have griots. There are very many different social groups that have the power of the spoken word, depending on different moments and different circumstances. There are those, to whom Ngugi just referred, who also have the power to engage in oratorical contests, and the Wolof have champion wrestlers, who must be poets. Before fighting his adversary such a wrestler has to compose his own songs. The Mandingo, the Bambara have diali who are blacksmiths and they also have weavers.

This means that the griots knew the technology of their time. The working of iron and of other metals was not brought to Africa by slavery nor by colonial conquest. At times when the griots spoke of war, before mentioning the bravery of men and women, they would talk about their weapons, the type of weapons they used, identify who had produced those weapons, and also name the diviner or marabout who had blessed them. The griot also talked about the clothing of the combatant, mentioning the weaver who produced the material, and the woman who carded the cotton, whether it was the mother, or the wife, or the sweetheart, or the fiancée. This is to say that the griots of the past were familiar, in general or in detail, with the technology of their time. If the battle was fought on horseback they were expected to describe the way the horse was harnessed. All these details are very important when we describe the function of the griot, to such an extent that at times the griot was present at the death-throes of the hero.

Let me tell you a legend: A nobleman goes to war; one of his eyes is pierced by an arrow. He turns back to the griot and says: “Look at me, I did not close the other eye,” and the griot replies: “I am here.” His other eye is destroyed and he cannot see any longer. He says to the griot: “Tell me the right direction and I shall pierce the enemy.” Is that the griot’s invention or is it a true story? In any case, this bears witness to the importance of the griot.

It is this type of knowledge that I would like the African artists to take over from the griot. They should speak about women, about their inner self and their physical self. It does not matter to me whether Penda is a prostitute or not, it is what she does for society that interests me. In “Niiwam,” the wife throws her husband down on the floor and then
steps over him, and the other women say to her: “You don’t do that to a man.” She turns around and asks: “Where is there a man here?”

The girl has intercourse with her fiancé on the anniversary of Mohammed’s birth. People tell me not to write that even if it happened. But the first night is the most interesting night for lovers, and it is no blasphemy to say that for Mohammed’s mother as well it was the best night—the night that led to her son’s birth.

It is the same thing when I speak about the workers. The old man in God’s Bits of Wood, for example, who worked for thirty years on the railroad and who dies, eaten by rats: There is nothing more unthinkable than being eaten by rats because the body of a dead person is sacred. I was blamed not for his death but for having him eaten by rats. He died alone, there was nobody there to bury him, only the rats, so they had to eat him. The machine, human beings, and rats had to be placed in contrast, in order to profile the new society.

When Abdou Kader Bèye, in “Xala,” gets people to push his Mercedes, or when he takes Evian water and puts it in the radiator, that makes the audience laugh. But perhaps there I made a mistake because a Mercedes Benz is too expensive. And this comprador bourgeoisie, those traveling salesmen of neo-colonialism, believe the water they drink is too hard for the radiator. That is why they use Evian. They would rather keep up this appearance of wealth, this aping of the Western lifestyle. So, what we are looking for, what I am looking for, is a transition from the classical griot to my era.

We will not be like Africa of years past. Africa will not go back. We are moving forward like any other people. It’s not a question of catching up with the West. We have to take care of our development by ourselves, step by step. But I carry on my work under very difficult conditions.

When I need information for my work I consult experts and they help me a lot. Whether it is a question of Muslim religious practice, or of Catholicism, or legal matters, I need to get a certain basic knowledge which allows me to introduce my readers or my audience to the way these systems work. The transposition you mentioned will not be effected by me but by the people. Beyond the battle for an African language or for African languages all the rest comes to me from my people. I don’t invent anything. The three books I am working on and which will be coming out soon are not inventions. That is all I have to say.

Samba Gadjigo: During our last night’s session Ousmane Sembène did raise an issue which is related to the teaching of African literature in the American universities. Since we are running short of time, I would like to remind our artists if they still wish to discuss or to give their opinion about the issue, now is the time to do so. Who would like to start? . . . We’ll start with Ngugi.

Ngugi wa Thiong’o: I can’t really talk extensively about the study of African literature in the United States or in the Western world because I have not really been in the teaching profession in this part of the world for long. But my impression is that the teaching of African literature is not really very rooted in the institutions here, although
it is probably catching up slowly. The study of that literature is for instance not yet given enough financial backing in terms of staff who are appointed specifically for that literature or department that deals specifically with that literature. So I have the impression that the teaching of African literature is still very much on the margins of the study of literature in the West generally. That’s why in my introduction I was saying that it is a pity because what people are really missing is a literature which is, in so many ways, very central to the liberating consciousness of the twentieth century. In fact, in most cases you’ll find African literature taught in history departments, in anthropology departments, in archaeology departments, sometimes even in the biological sciences—which is of course a positive comment on African literature if it can fit into all those other departments, but still as a literature it has its own particularities and therefore it needs to be seen as part of literature generally. It’s not just African literature; I get the impression that it is the literature of black people as a whole which is still marginalized and has not been given the resources necessary to make it be part of the central institutions of the West. As I have said, the sensibility which this literature represents is actually the sensibility of the majority even in the West in so far as it’s the sensibility of struggle, and such a struggle is part of the majority in the West and in the world generally.

Where African literature is taught, the question of interpretation arises, and of course this depends very much on people’s individual ideologies—ideological positions on the various issues in the world. This does, of course, affect how this literature is interpreted when it’s actually taught. As far as the knowledge of African languages is concerned, I’m always amazed—in a way this is a comment on the special predicament of the African situation—that it’s only when it comes to expertise in African literature, African history, African anthropology, or whatever that experts, both Western and unfortunately also African, do not have to know African languages at all. In almost any other area of expertise in the world it would be inconceivable for someone to say that he or she was an expert in Chinese history without a knowledge of Chinese. In the case of French, I can’t conceive of someone saying, “I’m really the leading authority on French culture and literature,” and has no knowledge of French at all. Yet, in the case of Africa, it’s the exact opposite: people will plead ignorance. Maybe it’s part of the predicament of the Third World really that the world is dominated by a handful of European or Western nations, and in the realm of culture, a handful of European languages dominate the world. I was talking the other day at Penn State University to the annual meeting of the Comparative Literature Association. And I was pointing out in my talk that these departments tend to be dominated by German, French, and English: those languages which again historically are associated with colonization and the domination of the world. Comparative literature departments, to be genuinely comparative, need to open out to literatures of post-colonial societies, and even more so to the languages of post-colonial societies.

Ousmane Sembène: [Spanish text]

http://scholarworks.umass.edu/cibs/vol11/iss1/13
ami Ngugi, on ne peut pas enseigner une culture si on n'en possède pas la langue. Il faut mettre les littératures africaines sur le même pied d'égalité que les autres littératures du monde et ne pas les considérer comme des littératures marginales. C'est peut-être bien de m'inviter mais je connais des professeurs africains qui connaissent mieux que moi la littérature africaine parce que c'est leur spécialité. La base de la littérature, c'est la civilisation et la culture. La culture, c'est la langue. Ces professeurs africanistes, malgré leur meilleure volonté, me rappellent un peu les ethnographes qui, au début du siècle, parcouraient l'Afrique et, sans aucune analyse, montraient mes parents, mon père, ma grand-mère et tout ça en train de danser avec des feuilles de banane là où je pense, et qui disaient que les Africains passent leur temps à danser, oubliant que ce sont eux qui ont détruit des capitales, des constructions et des cultures.

Quand je suis entré par ici, je crois avoir lu que cette partie de l'Université a été fondée en 1827. Je ne sais pas si c'est vrai ou non, ou si j'ai mal lu. Chaka est mort en 1827. Samouri est né en 1830. Je peux vous donner des dates où des hommes ont lutté pour notre indépendance, et quand je demande cette question aux professeurs qui enseignent des cultures africaines, ils disent: "I don't know."

Peut-être qu'on peut nous enseigner la technique ici, et c'est vrai, parce que mon fils a appris la technique aux États-Unis pendant quatre années, et il a fait six ans en Union Soviétique. Je pense que c'est un enfant techniquement riche et ce n'est plus moi, parce que moi j'ai vu mon père se découiffer devant le blanc, tandis que moi, j'ai refusé de me découiffer devant le blanc. Je pense que mon fils ne tombera même pas sa veste devant le blanc.

Et à ces africanistes, je leur demanderais d'étudier, de connaître les langues africaines et de ne plus faire l'amalgame, parce que les ethnologues d'il y a cent ans ont menti et aux blancs et aux noirs. Ils ont dit aux blancs: voilà votre civilisation, elle est supérieure à celle des noirs, et aux noirs: votre culture est inférieure à celle des blancs.

Maintenant quand je regarde sur les plages de Dakar ou de l'Afrique, je vois que nos femmes sont habillées et que ce sont les blanches qui sont nues. Donc, je peux faire de l'ethnographie pour dire à mes femmes: vous êtes mieux habillées et tout ce qui va avec cela. Elles sont nues parce qu'elles ont besoin de beaucoup de soleil, moi j'en ai trop, c'est tout. Cela fait donc partie de ma création. Mais je leur demanderais, mon dieu, d'étudier les cultures et les langues africaines et de ne plus vous induire en erreur. Je leur demanderais aussi d'étudier les Afro-Américains, de les connaître mieux, de savoir ce qu'ils pensent, ce qu'ils écrivent.

On nous a canalisé vers la danse, la musique. Dès qu'il y a une musique quelque part, s'il y a un noir, on se retourne pour voir s'il bouge les fesses. Ils nous ont tellement influencés que même dans les accoutrements vous voyez déjà l'habillement de l'Africain plus ou moins complexé. Je souhaiterais une culture qui ne nous laisse pas en paix, ni blancs, ni noirs.

Car qu'est-ce que c'est que la culture? C'est ce dont nous avons besoin du jour de notre naissance à notre mort. Dans les quatre langues africaines que je parle, il n'y pas de mot qui signifie culture. La culture, c'est une succession de situations. Donnons des exemples: La manière d'être à table, pour vous, c'est pour moi la manière d'être sur une
natte. La seule façon dont l'épouse pose le plat suffit à vous donner de l'appétit ou à vous le couper. Tenez, vous rentrez chez vous, votre femme vous dit sans cérémonie: voilà à manger. Déjà cela vous coupe l'appétit. Ou le mari qui vient avec ses fleurs (parce que vous avez le langage des fleurs), arrive devant sa femme et laisse tomber le bouquet de fleurs, en disant: c'est pour toi. Et c'est là le langage gestuel qui n'a pas besoin d'être parlé, mais qui se comprend. Chez nous, nous sommes bien nous habiller, mais ce n'est pas pour moi, c'est pour l'autre. Voilà donc une autre expression de ma culture. Ma façon de saluer l'homme ou la femme, ma façon de me comporter avec quelqu'un qui est plus jeune que moi ou plus âgé que moi. Et cela dans toutes les langues. Les mots sont chargés d'un potentiel de violence, et de douceur poétique aussi. Cela dépend de la façon de les employer. Dans toutes les langues, on peut dire je t'aime, mais on ne peut pas dire je t'aime en faisant des gestes agressifs. Je pense donc que ceux qui enseignent la littérature africaine, ou les civilisations africaines, doivent faire un effort pour comprendre tout ceci.

Je demanderai aux universitaires de faire une thèse sur le sujet suivant: Comment les blancs perçoivent et enseignent la culture africaine quand ils n'en parlent pas les langues? Et je leur demanderai aussi de connaître la culture noire américaine. Voilà une culture qui a donné ce siècle la plus belle chose qui puisse exister au monde et qu'aucune autre culture n'a donnée, c'est le jazz. Il est né du monde culturel noir américain. Pendant des années personne n'en voulait, c'était le chant ou les Blues dans les champs de coton. Maintenant vous avez le jazz chinois, le jazz japonais, même chez la reine d'Angleterre on joue le jazz. A l'Elysée on joue le jazz, à la Maison Blanche on joue le jazz. Voilà une relation de culture à civilisation.

Beaucoup de musiciens européens, quand ils ont voulu comprendre le jazz, sont venus s'établir aux États-Unis, avec les noirs. Ils ont appris la langue, ils ont appris la musique, ils ont appris l'intonation de la voix. C'est l'héritage du monde. Donc voilà ce que notre monde à venir nous incite à faire. Je pense que maintenant nous voyons la grande cantatrice Jessye Norman qui a chanté la Marseillaise - j'étais à Paris avec elle. Il y a deux mille ans, où étaient les parents de cette femme? Mais maintenant la voilà, tout le monde la reçoit. Aussi est-ce un gain pour l'humanité. Voilà donc tout ce que nous avons à faire. La culture ne sert qu'à cela, d'être bien ensemble.

[As far as the teaching of African literature in American universities is concerned: From what I have observed, those we call Africanists know nothing of Africa. All year long we see them traveling through Senegal, asking questions. As my friend Ngugi has said, you cannot teach a culture if you do not master the language. African literatures must be treated like other world literatures and not considered marginal literatures. It may be a good thing to invite me, but I know African professors who know African literature better than I do, because that is their profession. Culture and civilization are the foundation of literature. Culture is language, and these Africanist professors, despite their best intentions, remind me a little of those ethnographers who, at the beginning of the century, used to travel around Africa and depicted my relatives, my father, my grandmother, and many others dancing with banana leaves stuck you know where. They did not analyze what they saw and they said that Africans spend all]
their time dancing. They were oblivious of the fact that it was they who destroyed capital cities, buildings, and entire cultures.

When I came here I think I read—I don’t remember where—that this part of the University was founded in 1827. I don’t know if this is true or not, or if I misread. Chaka died in 1827. Samori was born in 1830. I can give you dates on which men fought for our independence, but when I ask these professors who are teaching African culture, they say: “I don’t know.”

Perhaps we can be taught technology here. That is so, as a matter of fact, since my son learned technology in the United States for four years and also studied for six years in the Soviet Union. I think he is technologically well endowed. He is not in my situation because I saw my father take his hat off to white people, while I have refused to do so. I think that my son will not even take his jacket off when he meets a white man.

As for those Africanists, I would tell them to study and master African languages and no longer throw all of Africa into the same pot, because the ethnologists of the last century lied both to the blacks and to the whites. They were the purveyors of both a superiority and an inferiority complex. They told the white people: “Your civilization is superior to that of the blacks,” and to the black people they said: “Your culture is inferior to that of the whites.”

When I now observe the beaches in Dakar or in Africa generally, I see that our women are dressed while white women are naked. Now I too could engage in ethnography and tell our women: “You are better dressed, and all that goes with it.” But all it really means is that white women are undressed because they need a lot of sun, while I have too much sun. So this is a part of the way I was created. I would ask Africanists to really study African languages and cultures, and not to lead you astray any longer. They should also study Afro-Americans, to know them better, to know what they are thinking, what they are writing.

We have been channeled towards music and dance. Whenever there is music somewhere, if there is someone around who is black, people turn to look whether he is wiggling his buttocks. We have been so strongly influenced that it has given Africans a complex even in the way they dress. I wish for a culture that does not leave any of us at ease, whether we are black or white.

What is culture? It is what we need from the day of our birth to the day of our death. In the four African languages I speak there is no word for culture, because culture consists of a succession of situations. Take the way people sit down to a meal, which for me means sitting on a mat. The way in which the wife puts down the dish is enough to make you either lose or get an appetite. You come home and your wife just says: “Here is your food.” That already makes you lose your appetite. And in your case, since you use the language of flowers, the husband who comes home, just drops the flowers in front of his wife and says: “This is for you.” These are examples of a language of gestures that do not require speech but are understood. Back home we like to be well dressed, but we do not do it for ourselves, we do it for other people. That is another expression of my culture, as is the way I greet a woman or a man, the way I behave with someone who is younger or older than I. This is true in all languages. Words are loaded with a potential...
for violence, and also for poetic gentleness. It depends on how we use them. In all languages we can say, "I love you," but not with aggressive gestures. So I believe that those who teach African literature or African civilization have to make an effort to understand all this.

I would ask academics to write a thesis on the following question: How do whites perceive and teach African culture when they do not speak African languages? I would also ask them to know African-American culture. That is a culture that has made the most beautiful contribution in the world to this century, one which has been made by no other culture. I am talking about jazz, which originated in the cultural world of black America. For years no one was interested. Jazz was merely a kind of song and Blues in the cotton fields. Now there is Chinese jazz, Japanese jazz, and jazz is played even at the court of the Queen of England, at the Elysée Palace, and at the White House. This is how culture relates to civilization.

When they wanted to understand jazz, many European musicians came to the United States to be among black people. They learned both the language and the music, and they learned the right intonation. It is a heritage shared by all of humanity. This is what we are called upon to do for the world of the future. Recently we saw the great singer Jessye Norman sing the Marseillaise—I was with her in Paris. Where were the forebears of this woman two thousand years ago? Now here she is being welcomed by everyone, and that is a gain for all mankind. This is all we have to do. To get along together in harmony is the sole purpose of culture.

Toni Cade Bambara: I think that while we’re at it we might also talk about film—the teaching of African film or Third World film in the film schools around the country. It’s curious that at this point in time, if you were abroad most anywhere and took a degree in American studies, the literature you would be reading for American literature would be black literature. And that’s true at the University of Tokyo, University of Havana—you bet, University of Peking, Catholic University in Rio de Janeiro, a whole lot of universities. It is assumed that you cannot be conversant in American studies, not be grounded in American reality, without a thoroughgoing knowledge of African-American literature. That of course is not true here.

This parallels or echoes the same situation with music: that in most parts of the world there was a recognition of black improvisational music or what some people call jazz as the great art form of this country, certainly the authentic music of this place. It was a good thirty-two years or one and a half generations before this country caught up with that knowledge, but then began to use black improvisational music to make propaganda more palatable, that is to say the USIA began to send jazz combos around the world, began to use music as part of its “Voice of America” barrage, and of course what with the Motown sound Corporate pop, we know now why Coca Cola would like to teach the world to sing in perfect harmony.

This next wave has been the film. The filmmakers in my neighborhood are better known in Peking than they are in my neighborhood, and that’s an aspect of USA-style apartheid. They’re better known in Paris, in Holland, in Britain, in Canada than they are in the major film schools in this country, even those filmmakers who have caused a
great deal of articles to be written in fairly prestigious journals, who have stopped the show at Cannes Film Festivals, who have garnered all kinds of medals at the Berlin Film Festival et cetera, are still not taught here. So as you say, Ngugi, it’s not just the African languages, it’s not just the particular situation of African people, it is the nature of that same war.

Earl Lovelace: I think Ngugi was saying a while ago that it appeared to be absurd that a handful of European languages should dominate Africa. Well, I think that is as absurd as the fact that a handful of European nations continue dominating Africa and the world. I think that what we’re talking about really is the continuing of a colonial relationship, which seems to suggest to people who have been in power that they can understand those over whom they have exercised power, that they are simple people, and that those who used to be in power can say and do what they want. And I don’t know to whom we are complaining, that is the other question. I don’t know if we want to ask people who have been teaching or interpreting Africa and whom we view as European to go and get a better course—to learn your lessons better, you know, learn your languages more carefully—and then come back and present a view of Africa. I think that if that has to be done, it has to be done firstly by an engagement of African people themselves: to enter the world and to give it a view of the world, a view that contends with the existing view, and it seems to me that that is what is going to change the world. I don’t know how well we are capable or fitted to do this because I’ve been hearing from here, for example, terms like slavery, roots of slavery, the slave master, and things like that. Now who is this master? The notion of master which I have heard people talk about is in terms of black people and white people, and it is assumed that one will say, “Okay, this white slave master.” For me the term master connotes mastery over something; it suggests that one is following him, that he is to be followed, and it seems to me that the experience of Africans in relation to Europeans and the relationship of their struggle against enslavement has exactly not been to follow him, but to have themselves a different view of where they should go. I don’t know how we continue with this language and expect to change anything.

John Wideman: All I’ll say is, “Amen.” The intellectual bankruptcy of the University is well documented, if any one cares to examine this on most issues important to us—sex, race, gender—we’ll find that intellectual bankruptcy is not an accident, it’s a tradition and, in fact, what else would we expect, given the fact that universities have this sort of top-down notion of expertise and control. The people who go through them are “clients,” what is taught there are not necessities, but something to get you through a certain kind of very predictable bourgeois existence, and they’re not the places where change, social change, has ever come from except when that change has been one way or another forced out into the street, into the people’s hearts. I was in South Africa recently and I got this sense of change as opposed to what we are looking for in the University. Mandela said that he had been using the phrase “power to the people” for many years and thought he understood it, but only within the last few months as he sat...
in a prison cell did he realize that he was going to be liberated from that cell not by Mr. De Klerk’s generosity but by the power of the people and that he could sit in that cell every day and feel that power getting stronger and stronger. Then he began to know really what power of the people meant. Why are we looking to the University for the power of change, for the power to change things?

**Toni Cade Bambara:** I wanted to respond to what John said. Why do we expect change in a university? Because the war has to be fought on every front. One of the difficulties we face, whoever we are—organizers, mobilizers, creators of thought, contenders, warriors with an oppositional culture—one of the things that we’re struggling to come to grips with these days is from whence will come the kind of analysis that really tells us accurately where we are at this point in time in this country. We’re at that stage where we really need a very holistic view of the various spheres of contestation and battle in this country. Nobody quite has it, but we do know, for example, that when a great deal of agitation takes place, for example in the legislative arena, that we might gain there, but it won’t get picked up, or it won’t be reflected in personal relationships. Or where the feminist movement gains ground and maybe even consolidates some ground with that struggle around gender issues, if the question of racism—white supremacy, let’s get real!—is not also fearlessly addressed in that battle, that affliction, that pathology can begin to... you know what I’m saying, back that up! So we’re in a process, we’re in a moment now, it seems to me, where there needs to be a constant attention to the whole structure and where there need to be tremendous kinds of dialogues going on in terms of coalitions which have never been forged before. This is it. The University may not continue in this bogus way recruiting people to be trained in the delusional systems, to bolster a totally fraudulent version of reality, of human beings, of what human nature is; the war is fought here too. There is no margin, there is no margin; there’s no safe place to be anywhere and that is one of the reasons I feel kind of sorry for people caught up in the universities who think they’re safe. I’m thinking particularly of all these Africanists who think that their days have long since been numbered, everything’s over but the bleeding. At these conferences you see people still swaggering about attempting to silence people from the margin, as they say. The margin’s at the center—it’s a new day.

**Ngugi wa Thiong’o:** I’ll just add on to that very quickly and say that while I agree absolutely that, of course, the battlefield finally is really in the streets, let’s remember—since we are talking about the dialectics of form and content—what happens at the universities can also, in fact, influence what is going on in the streets and vice versa. Let me just take a very simple case: We may think there is no connection between the peasant in Africa and universities like where we are today. But take a student from Africa who gets his parents to sell their cows to get him to higher education in Africa and then on to America. And he or she enters a literature department here and finds that those who are in the literary canon, or who represent the great tradition, completely exclude the literature of African Americans. So he or she goes away thinking that the only African-
American writer who belongs to the canon of the mainstream is Ralph Ellison. For a long time *Invisible Man* was the only novel which used to be represented as part of their literature. The same student who has come here to gather knowledge takes that knowledge back to a remote village or center of culture in Africa and he goes to teach literature. What will he be teaching? He too will exclude what is genuinely his heritage from what he will be imparting to African students in the centers of culture or wherever they come from. This is a narrow example, but we can actually see that what happens at universities is very, very crucial; in fact, universities are ideological factories where very important ideological battles have been fought, are still being fought, and will be fought.

**John Wideman:** I want to perhaps clarify and dialogue. Number one, I was trying to address...well, number one, if universities were burned to the ground today I wouldn’t get a check next Friday—so already I’m ambivalent about losing the university. But what I was attempting to address is the sense of surprise and outrage and the kind of frustration that universities aren’t at the leading edge, that they aren’t other than they are. That shouldn’t be a surprise anymore and that’s what I was attempting to address. My son is going to a very good and expensive school in America—Brown University—he is doing Afro-American studies. He decided that there wasn’t enough there; he wanted to go back to the source. He learned enough there to want to go back to the source and so he attempted to do a year abroad in Africa, and he thought a program was set up, but at the last minute it collapsed, so he wound up going to SOAS in London—the School of Oriental and African Studies. He was hoping there to get back to the roots, but in fact he found out there’s a systematic racist policy at SOAS. And he’s been instrumental in uncovering that sham, the documents on record, and showing that African voices are not allowed to be part of that education. And I think that’s something very important and I support him in that and I’m proud of that. But he did not go there in a posture of being surprised and disappointed that SOAS didn’t offer him what he wanted. When he found something that he didn’t like, he knew what the next step was.

**Question from the Audience:** Mr. Sembène, beyond your role as a writer and filmmaker, what sort of influence can you and other African artists have on the burning political issues of the day? The war in Eritrea or the one in the Western Sahara come to mind as examples.

**Ousmane Sembène:** On va essayer de répondre. En ce qui concerne l’Eritée il faut voir l’ensemble du continent africain et les textes signés par les chefs d’état africains que Nyerere a appelés “le syndicat des chefs d’état.” Est-ce qu’ils reconnaissent les frontières héritées du colonialisme? 


[I will try to answer. On the question of Eritrea we have to look at the whole of the African continent and at documents signed by the African heads of state—“the trade union of heads of state,” as Nyerere called them. Do these documents recognize the legitimacy of the borders inherited from colonialism?

In the coming years three issues are going to be brought to the fore: First of all Eritrea, secondly South and North Sudan, and then the problem of the Polisario: Morocco, Algeria, and Mauritania. I don’t know what is going on in other African countries, but I do know that in the independent newspapers of Senegal we write about Eritrea, about the Sudan, and about the Polisario. We have no solutions. The solution depends in part on affairs of state. But I do know that in Senegal there are young people who support the struggle of the Eritrean people, and I know that for our film showings we invite representatives of Eritrea to participate on an equal footing with other states in Africa. Just as our friend Med Hondo made a film for the Polisario, it is up to our friends from Eritrea to ask us how we could produce a film for them so they could express themselves. We can go that far but we cannot go any further. We are aware of the tragic situation. In any case, that is our position as Africans. But we have not ignored Eritrea, we do not ignore the Sudan, nor the Polisario. That is my answer to this question.]