The Writers' Forum: Language and the Writer

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PART TWO
WRITERS’ FORUM
Language and the Writer

The afternoon session of the conference was conceived as a public conversation in which writers from Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States would explore topics, problems, and experiences they shared as writers, using Sembène’s work as a point of departure. Unlike many such round-tables, where the participants know each other and re-enact in public the discussions they have already held in private or in print, this forum was unrehearsed. Some of the writers had never met each other before. On the evening before the conference, the writers gathered at the home of Rhonda Cobham-Sander and Reinhard Sander to discuss the themes they would develop the next day. They were joined by Samba Gadjigo, Thomas Cassirer, and Michael Thelwell.

The writers decided to focus their discussion on language, and from that point of reference to develop several ideas. On the one hand, they wanted to discuss the technical issues of expression, editing, and publication that they face. At the same time, they wanted to stress that to write a language and then to have it read is a political act of cultural legitimation in a world where majoritarian forces are at work to shrink the universe of written languages, a theme most notably developed in Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s collection of essays, Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature. As writers they wanted to highlight that language is a striking metaphor for voice, role, self-knowledge, praxis, and personal power. Furthermore, these writers of African ancestry saw in their appropriation of colonial European languages a poignant expression of the contradictions of contemporary cultural politics and the ambiguity—structured by race, class, and imperialism—of their own positions within this discourse.

In the unrehearsed discussion that follows, each writer—with the exception of Sembène—makes a brief statement; then they discuss each other’s ideas and respond to questions from the audience, with Samba Gadjigo playing the role of moderator. Self-criticism and personal integrity, the deconstruction of dominant representations of the past and present, and the assertion, even the demand, that African and diaspora voices be heard and reckoned with are not only important ideas in Africa and throughout the African diaspora, but they are essential ingredients in any counter-hegemonic practice.