

KWANI? LITFEST 2010 – ‘Tell us what happened’

Through the lens of literary history, immediate post-independence African Literature is always supra-national. The canonical writers of the 50's and 60's embrace and critique their ethnic origins and spaces but transcend their national abode. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o sets out on his literary journey within a Gikuyu context and becomes an African icon with universal appeal; Achebe and Ayi Kwei Armah start off within their respective Ibo-ness and Fante-ness and transcend the Nation to become continental voices. The irony is that though their work remains vastly studied and dissected within these parameters, little has been passed down on the practical aspects of their craft - the meaning of national boundaries (and this is as practical as it gets) to the work of writing. When and where individual African nations and regimes did not suppress writing and literature they did this inadvertently by developing into spaces that are uninhabitable to the solitary literary imagination.

There is a likely risk that this will be lost to posterity.

On the other hand, Contemporary African writing is being developed in what are seen as vastly different circumstances, at least on the surface. Conversations on the African Nation's promise persist, flicker after the first twenty years of general independence; its attendant patriotic noises remain in isolated and select places and widely scoffed at. And so, few contemporary literary dreams are now produced from the promise of nation-hood, but in spite of it, and in some special cases, literary energies are developed as an anti-thesis of the latter when this was something that inspired and energized earlier writers. The Nation has therefore lost significance as key agent and player in the reproduction of Culture and Literature; it mostly retains interest as Subject.

An international republic of letters that is centered in international city-spaces and centers has emerged that seeks and develops most African contemporary writing. This has created the illusion of complete fracture between two literary generations. Careful scrutiny however reveals similarities between the circumstances of the so-called First generation of writers and those working in the contemporary age at least in the practical aspects of forging a literary work life. It is often forgotten that local universities such as Makerere University, University of Nairobi and Ibadan University formed regional alliances that fed publishers in the West particularly in London in a fashion that was akin to the trans-national channels of contemporary literature. That, its major players were characters that were formed within an interesting leftist and educated African Diaspora tinged with attempts at forming national identities. And that it is within similar spaces albeit changed in contemporary

circumstances that older and younger writers are now meeting without and in spite of the nation's influence.

Kwani Trust will hold a festival in December 2010 that comprises of lectures, conversations, panels, readings and workshops that explore the practical aspects of African writing and literary life between these successive literary generations. These conversations will also extend to narrativising and recapturing what is considered a literary temporal black hole – the 80s and 90s when writing seemed to have dried in the continent, and a fledgling present. The following questions serve as guidelines for what we hope the festival will do and the conversations that can be held on this:

1. Genesis: The Organizational Production of 'African' Literature

- How was Literature produced in the 50s and 60s?
- How did the assembly line that gave birth to the 'book' work?
- How were manuscripts discovered?
- How did manuscripts enter the pipeline which fed the African Writers Series?
- What were the main career paths within this production?

2. Contexts: The Writer, the State, Society and Family

- How did the writer tap into the contextual ideas of his city, his society, his country, his continent?
- How did the writer ensure that their ideas made it into these spaces?
- How were ideas organized in the public space?

3. Transitions: The In-Between World of African Literature - Exile and Departure/Arrival and Regeneration

- What exactly was taking place with literary production after the demise of the African Writers Series?
- How did the established writers try and find their feet with the loss of a significant publishing and writing space?
- How did these writers juggle day work and family with writing?
- What were the differences, if any - between these two different eras?

4. Present: Contemporary African Writing

- What are the modes of contemporary African literary production/production of African literature?
- How does this work and compare with AWS modes of production and what can contemporary Literature production learn from the latter?
- What are the sites of cooperation, production and research conversations on African Literature?