

**TEACHING THE REPRESENTATIONS OF AFRICA IN THE WRITINGS OF THE
DIASPORA:
A CALL FOR THE RE-DEFINITION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE**

Moussa TRAORE

English department

University of Cape Coast in Ghana

camillio73@yahoo.com

Abstract

This paper presents the researcher's experience teaching a course in African and African American Literature to students in College in the mid West of the US. The paper exposes the diversity in the student population and the various texts chosen for the course, and it also provides the reader with the students' responses or reactions to the various texts chosen for the course syllabus, and also the students' reactions to the instructor's pedagogical approach. The paper ends with a call for the redefinition and revision of the scope of the field and also of the curriculum of African American Literature course.

Key words : diaspora, francophone, anglophone, pedagogy.

1. Introduction

This paper makes a case for the redefinition of the scope of the field of African American Literature. In the paper I demonstrate that a revised and broadened African American Literature course that comprises African American writings, continental Anglophone and Francophone African writings and also Caribbean Francophone and Anglophone works can effectively be taught in US colleges and I present my experience teaching a class at the English Department of Illinois State University as an example.

The first part of the paper provides some basic background information on the course and the students who enrolled in the course; it points out the increasing number of African students on Illinois State University campus and US college campuses in general, and the first part of the paper also exposes my students' reactions to the texts on the course syllabus and an analysis of those reactions. The second part of the paper addresses the reflections that I had after teaching that course: the need for a redefinition of the scope of the field of African American Literature in order to represent all the various elements that fall into the category of African American Literature, due to the change in demographics which in itself is a consequence of globalization.

2. Description, Basic Information on the Course and Context

In the Spring of 2007 I taught an undergraduate English course at Illinois State University, Normal. The course was titled "Selected African and African Diasporan Texts"; it was based on the representations of Africa in selected works of African American writers. The course fell under the rubric of "Text in Context" courses and I was teaching it as a graduate student in order to gather some data for the pedagogy section of my PhD dissertation that I was writing on Diaspora Issues. The texts on the course syllabus were some of the primary texts that I was analyzing in my dissertation. So my personal background and my academic interest informed

the topic I was writing my dissertation on. My topic itself was “ Intersecting Pan-Africanisms: Africa, North America and the Caribbean” and I was intending to do a comparative study of pan-Africanism, focusing on the specific features of Francophone and Anglophone pan-Africanism and by pan-Africanism I meant the relations between Africa and her Diaspora (African Americans and Caribbeans). Born and raised in Burkina Faso (French speaking Africa) and having had part of my education in an English speaking African country, Ghana, and also in the US, I have always been interested in comparing Francophone and Anglophone trends and also the relations between Africans and African Americans on the one hand, and the relations between Africans and the Francophone Caribbeans (from Haiti, Martinique, Guadeloupe, etc) on the other hand, in writing. So my personal background and my interests account for the choice of texts on the course syllabus. The following texts constituted the primary readings on course the syllabus: African American texts like Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, Maya Angelou’s *All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes*, Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* and Richard Wright’s *Black Power*. The Francophone Caribbean text on the syllabus was Maryse Condé’s *Heremakhonon*, and as samples of African writings I chose Mariama Ba’s *So Long A Letter*, Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* and Kofi Awoonor’s *Comes the Voyager at Last*. The theoretical readings included Ali Mazrui’s *The African: A Triple Heritage*, Vincent Khapoya’s *The African Experience* and Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin White Masks*. The following videos were watched along with the readings and discussions: Ali Mazrui’s *The Africans* (volume 1 and 2), Sembène Ousmane’s *Xala*, a PBS documentary on Marcus Garvey and the video versions of *A Raisin in the Sun* and *The Color Purple*.

Another factor that led me to include African authors on the syllabus was the change in the demographic of the area. Bloomington-Normal (the town where Illinois State University is) has been experiencing for the last fifteen years the recruitment of more and more African students. Prior to that, the area was “lilly white” as people often referred to it; there were very few black people (including African Americans and continental Africans). The demographics started to change because of the two main employers in the area (the college and the insurance company State Farm) started to recruit and employ respectively African students and African skilled immigrants. Many African American students also got enrolled in the college around the same time, due to the Affirmative Action and other structures put in place in order to provide more African American students with the chance to get a college education. These are the figures for the enrolment of African and African American students at ISU for Fall 2007, Fall 2008, Fall 2009 and Fall 2010, from the Illinois State University fact book. For details related to

immigration protocols and confidentiality, the college did not provide the exact number of Africans (who are referred to as “alien non immigrants” in the records) in the enrolment, hence the use of the term **Black/African American students** to refer to African students and African American students put together.

Fall 2007:

975 undergraduate Black/African American students

98 Black/African American graduate students

1073 total number of Black/African American students

Fall 2008:

990 undergraduate Black/African American students

102 graduate Black/African American students

1092 total number of Black students (graduate and undergraduate)

Fall 2009:

1015 undergraduate Black/African American students

106 graduate Black/African American students

1121 total number of Black students (graduate and undergraduate)

Fall 2010:

1032 undergraduate Black/African American students

103 graduate Black/African American students

1135 total number of undergraduate and graduate Black students

As the figures above show it, the enrolment of African and African American students kept increasing from 2007 to 2010 and that in turn increases diversity in the student population. That fact is also what led me to design a course syllabus that takes into account the students' backgrounds and experiences. I strongly believe that one of the most effective ways to teach Literature is to find ways in which students can relate to the materials on the syllabus and that can be done when students see themselves and their personal experience in the works under study. And in this case, including African writings into the African American Literature syllabus created a context where African students, African American students and white students could relate to the materials under study, since African American works and continental African works also make room for the experience of white students.

The increase in the number of African students on US colleges is not limited to the state of Illinois only. The whole of the US is affected and several scholars have pondered the issue. In

“Who Are the Other African Americans?” John R. Logan locates the areas where concentrations of African immigrant populations settle in the US. He noticed that Africans are dispersed, unlike Afro-Caribbeans who are heavily concentrated in some few selected areas:

Only a quarter of Africans live in one of the ten largest metropolitan regions, and these metro areas are geographically dispersed. This dispersion, in combination with their smaller numbers, may help explain the “invisibility” of African immigrants in the United States. In contrast, Afro-Caribbeans are heavily concentrated in just a few metro areas, all on the East Coast. Six out of ten live in New York, Miami, and Ft.Lauderdale metro areas; nearly six hundred thousand live in New York alone. (Shaw-Taylor and Tuch 52)

Logan also points out that African immigrants distinguish themselves from African Americans by their higher educational and income levels. That can be explained by the fact that many of the African immigrants already have a high educational level before they enter the US, and many of those immigrants seize the various education opportunities available in the US. In “African Diasporas and Academics”, Paul Tiyambe Zeleza captures the irony represented by the staggering number of African-educated immigrants in the US: “Africa, the least educated and most underdeveloped continent in the world has the most educated population in the world’s most developed country” (*The Study of Africa* 99). Zeleza points out that the new black immigrants do not only identify with Africa as most of the historic diaspora does, but they also display ethnic and nationalist interests or inclination:

African migrations to the North, especially Western Europe and North America are increasing. Many of these migrants are constituting themselves into new diasporas, whose identities involve complex negotiations with the host African diaspora communities and their countries of origin. If the diasporas of enslavement—the historic diasporas—had no choice but to see themselves in pan-Africanist terms whenever they identified with Africa, the diasporas of colonialism and neocolonialism—the contemporary diasporas—are more disposed to see themselves in pan-national, or even pan-ethnic, terms. (*The Study of Africa* 90)

Beside the fact that the African academic diaspora has to engage and negotiate with numerous factors and challenges like immigration requirements, and also “how to climb the slippery poles of the highly racialised American academy” (Zeleza 98), and how to meet the huge expectations and demands that families, relatives and friends place on them, in the form of financial and moral support, African immigrants also have the responsibility or the “abstract compulsion to defend and promote Africa in a country where things African are routinely denigrated and demonized” (Zeleza 98).

In “ A Dream Deferred: Undocumented Students at CUNY”, Carolina Bank Munoz captures that urgency of the phenomenon that immigration into the US has reached, and also the impact of that immigration on our schools and students. She points out the increasing number of immigrant students in schools and stresses the torments, insecurities, anxiety and hustles that those students face due to their “immigration status”. She writes:

I first became aware of the difficulties for undocumented students at the City University of New York (CUNY) when I started teaching a course at Brooklyn College, a CUNY campus, on the sociology of immigration. On the first day of class, five students requested appointments to speak with me in private. This was unusual to say the least. All five were undocumented and had family members who were undocumented. They were hoping I could help. (*Radical Teacher* No 84 p.8)

The other reasons behind the insertion of these materials in the syllabus (beside my interest in comparative diasporan issues) is the fact that they provide students with salient features of continental African pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial societies; the racial and political issues confronting African Americans and also the relations between African Americans and continental Africans. Those texts also deal with the features of Francophone Caribbean societies and the relations between Francophone Caribbeans and continental Africans. I included Maryse Condé and Frantz Fanon in the syllabus because I was intending to break a new ground in the field of African American Studies: the position or role of the Francophone Caribbean (that I also refer to as the Francophone Diaspora) and also the role of Francophone Africa in the field of African American and Diasporan Studies. Not much work had been done on those two topics.

The course was therefore intended as a broader, more globally-focused alternative to the traditional African-American literature course. Another goal of the course was to introduce students to postmodern and global perspectives; I wanted the students to look at the various texts in the class with the kind of interconnectedness and holistic approach that Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt (2000 & 2004) pose in their postmodern and global analysis in *Empire* (45) and *Multitude* (323-24): the existence of the first world in the third world, nation states losing their sovereignty, and several other features of global analyses of literary texts. My attitude in terms of students’ responses was informed by Robert Scholes’s notion of “the strong reader”(66) in *The Rise and Fall of English*: I encouraged students to approach the texts with information they already knew, if they thought that such an approach could help them in their reactions to the texts. The main topic in the class was the representations of Africa and her/its diaspora, and other important themes like race, migration, economy, society, marriage,

polygamy, education, politics, globalization and all issues that the students find to be of interest or relevance to the course content. The mode of evaluation was two main papers, weekly journal entries on the readings and in-class discussions. My pedagogy in this class (as in all my classes) is learner-centered. I personally went through the teacher-centered education system in French speaking Africa and I know how crippling such a pedagogy can be. When I discovered learner-centered pedagogy in my graduate school education in the US through the readings on Paulo Freire and bell hooks, I simply embraced it and made it my teaching philosophy. I always put the learner at the center of my teaching. I encourage my students and empower them so that they can frame and express their own thoughts, reflections and positions on the materials that we study. So my students end up trusting themselves and I also make sure they grasp new information and learn new things. My learner-centered pedagogy is not the extremely humanist one that allows everything in the classroom, or creates lawlessness and cacophony. My pedagogical approach affected the students' reaction to the materials as the reader will notice in the next sections.

3. Student Population, Background & Student Response(s) to Some the Texts Under Study

I had sixteen(16) students enrolled in my class and fifteen (15) of them were from the Midwest of the US, specifically from the college city (twin cities of Bloomington-Normal) and cities and towns around that area-- between Chicago, Normal and Springfield, Illinois-- . One of the students was a young man from West Africa; there were nine (9) white females, one (1) African American female, and five (5) white males. I have included in this section the students' reactions to the texts (among all those on the syllabus) that dealt directly with diasporan issues.

The first discussion we had in class was during the introduction part of the course, after watching Ali Mazrui's *The African* (volume 1). My students saw several good points in the documentary and some of them were anxious over certain issues .Many students commented on the family structure as it is portrayed in the documentary. One of them had this to say: "*I realized that in Africa, people do not talk so much about relations like cousins, nephews, etc. People simply belong to the same extended family and that is so cool. I think that we Americans can learn a lot from this. We could borrow such an idea to improve our society here. It reduces individualism*". The tribal marks made on the bodies of children with razor blades chocked some of the students, and they understood when I explained to them that this

practice is not common anymore and that is was a way to assert group identity. One of the students moved along the same line and said this: *“I understand why they would do such things in the past. It could be a very effective means to strengthen people’s identity. I also noticed that the marks were made for medicinal purposes when elders spray some medicinal powders on the marks in order to cure diseases and immunize children. So marking the body was certainly a useful practice with so many benefits, and now that modernity made it possible for all people to have access to basic modern medical treatment I understand why such a practice is disappearing”*. I was really delighted to see that my learner-centered approach and the use of texts alongside documentaries was making it easy for the students to understand and engage the texts.

One of the discussions that I still remember vividly came up during our study of Maryse Condé’s *Heremakhonon*. In the novel, the main protagonist is Veronica, a Caribbean Francophone woman from Guadeloupe. Her identity crisis begins at home in Guadeloupe when she dates white French men hoping to elevate her status by doing that. Frustrated after her French lovers sleep with her and leave her, she goes to Paris, where she is again miserable because she does not belong there either: she is referred to as a “black Caribbean woman”. She ultimately travels to Guinée in West Africa where she dates an influential politician named Ibrahim Sory, hoping to embrace her African roots and achieve a sense of “stable identity” through that relationship. There again she is disappointed because her African lover simply treats her like a sex object. Out of disappointment, Veronica flies back to Paris at the end of the novel. Almost all the students in the class found that in *Heremakhonon*, Veronica’s search for her identity is a failure from the onset. Most of them thought that *“she is promiscuous, and had to sort things out with her own self before setting out to look for her roots”*. One of my students who saw nothing good in Veronica’s identity crisis and quest for stability made this comment: *“she sleeps with everybody hoping that she could solve her problem that way.... I wonder how someone can make such a choice. She simply had to buy a ticket and go to the Jerry Springer show”*. The African American woman in the class had a different reaction to *Heremakhonon* and she said: *“Veronica reminds me of the familiar picture of women grappling with the challenges of self-discovery, regardless of their race. Veronica’s own conflict with herself is what undermines her identity quest. Her ignorance of her own culture [the Caribbean one]and that of the Guineans is the reason for her failure in her mission”*. Only one white female student was sympathetic towards Veronica and she puts it in these terms: *“Veronica was not accepted in Paris, where she was considered as a black Caribbean woman, and in Africa also, where she was considered as a foreigner. She tried several times and*

several things in order to end her alienation and rejection and also to find a place where she belongs but it never worked. She did her best, and deserves to be congratulated on the fact that she insists and does not easily give up”.

Another student was struck by the deep analysis of self-loathing and confusion conveyed in Fanon’s *Black Skin White Masks*. His criticism shaped his response to *Heremakhonon*. These were his thoughts. *“I came to realize that due to the fact that blacks were once slaves, black men feel the need to prove themselves to white men, while white men always feel superior to black men. Now the problem for the black man is that once he becomes educated, he is no longer considered as a black, and he doesn’t also fit within the white community. So as a consequence, black people who better themselves are still looked down upon by whites, but they are also exiled vis à vis their own race”.*

The African student in the class had this reflection regarding Veronica and search for a cure to her rootlessness and confusion: *“I am not surprised that she could not find what she wanted when she went to Africa. Africans today on the African continent have not experienced slavery and they do not understand when blacks from the US and the Caribbean are bitter because of slavery. Those blacks from the diaspora accuse us Africans of selling them to slave traders and I do not understand why they are blaming Africans today. We did not sell them to slave traders, some of our forefathers did and we the young generation of Africans must not pay for that. I do not also understand when blacks from the diaspora say that they are lost and confused, like Veronica does. Africans do not understand the situation of the blacks from the diaspora because we had different experiences although we are all blacks. So no wonder Veronica got disappointed when she tried to get some help from Africans”.*

These points reveal the enthusiasm with which my students engaged the texts which at first might sound abstruse to them since most of them had not studied African or Caribbean texts before, either in High School or in college. The other pedagogical strategy that I used in the class was the interrogative summary. It enabled me to see the exact degree of engagement that the students had with the materials under study, and also their specific responses and reflections on the texts.

3.1 Interrogative Summary

This is the essence of what I asked my students to do in their weekly journal entries. It is a summary of the points that stood out to them during their readings. It should also contain many questions on the ideas and concepts that they do not understand. The journals should also contain many connective answers; I encouraged them to draw some connections between the

themes and issues that emerge in our readings of primary texts and theoretical materials. This is a section of the interrogation that a student did in her journal entry on *The Dilemma of a Ghost*: “I was surprised to see that the parents of Ato [the Ghanaian young man who married Eulalie the African American girl] refer to Eulalie as a white woman. I could not imagine how a black woman can be referred to as white. That was a big question that baffled me. But later when I paused in the middle of the reading to think, it dawned on me that in the documentary we had watched some few weeks ago on “African Americans Returning to Ghana”, we heard some Ghanaians referring to the African American returnees as “obroni” which means white person in Twi, one of the Ghanaian languages. That is when I understood why Eulalie was referred to by her Ghanaian in-laws “a white woman”, although she is a black African American woman.

The West African student in the class reacted to that remark in these terms: “Africans consider both white Americans and African Americans to be white, not because their skin is white (although that is the case with white Americans), but simply because they come from the US which is a Western country, a rich country, a country of white people. When I was in my country [he was from Ghana] I saw many African Americans getting angry because Ghanaians referred to them as “obroni” (white person). It is still difficult for Africans to believe that African Americans are black or that they are from Africa. That is where the misunderstanding comes from. African Americans insist that they are from Africa and Africans love African Americans and consider to be rich Americans or white”.

Those interrogative summaries or weekly journal entries were very helpful and enabled the students to draw a sort of mental map of some of the salient points in our readings. The same method also helped a lot in the sense that those interrogative summaries functioned as the springboard for in-class discussion. At the beginning of every class I made sure to go round and ask every student to share with the class the key points that they had in their journal entry or interrogative summary. Fruitful discussions ensued, a student would complete a point mentioned by their classmate, or answer a question raised by another one, or simply refute someone’s argument and propose a different argument, answer or interpretation. I always told them that all personal arguments are good (and are allowed in my class) as long as they are coherent and respectful of other arguments.

The work which generated the largest number of interesting reactions was Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*. One student wrote that Africa is not treated with seriousness in the play; she illustrated her point with the following statement: “Beneatha’s interest in Africa is not a serious one, it is flimsy, like a passing phase, or like one of those hobbies that

Beneatha signs up for and then drops them. The only time when Beneatha considers Africa with seriousness is when she is standing face to face with the hard reality of economic hardship, when her brother Walter gambled away the money that would have been used to pay her fees in medical school. When Asagai suggested that they go to Nigeria together, that moment is when Beneatha begins to contemplate Africa (and a return to Africa) with seriousness”.

One of the ladies asked this question in her journal entry on *The Dilemma of a Ghost*: “Had Ato come back to Ghana with a lot of money, would he and his wife Eulalie have been welcomed in a better way by Ato’s parents?” That question represents one of situations where I intervene with comments that might help the students grasp some of the issues in the texts. So as a response to that student’s question, I told the class that if Ato and Eulalie had come back with a lot of money, the difficulties that marked their reintegration would have been reduced because Ato comes from a poor Ghanaian family, with limited means. I also added that coming back with much money could not ensure a total reintegration because Ato’s parents, like all African parents who still adhere to traditional values would not be contented with money only. They would ask to know more about the background of their daughter-in-law and would watch her behavior and how she relates to them as her in-laws. In a nutshell, I told my students that financial security could have played a role, but the disappointments around issues like “Eulalie being a descendent of slaves” as the in-laws put it would still have been raised.

We also did regular group assignments in the class. I asked students to form groups based on their affinity, so they could team up with whomever they wanted to work with. I then distributed a list of discussion questions to each group, and each group had different questions to discuss. Those sessions were very fruitful; students argued, shared their opinion and came up with very precutting questions that they could not answer. I would then listen to each group sharing their questions and answers with the class and I would ask the entire class to ponder some of the questions that the group discussions raised. One of such questions arose around *Anowa* (this play and *The Dilemma of the Ghost* were in the same collection by the same author) was this: “What is the role of the two old men referred to as “the- mouth- that- eats- salt and pepper” in *Anowa*? Some of the students thought that this expression was portraying the 2 men as gossips, as the 2 old women who are mentioned in *The Dilemma of a Ghost*. Others thought that the author named the 2 old men in those terms in order to provide an insider’s view that helps understand better why events unfold the way they do in the play.

Another aspect that impressed me in the students discussion of *The Dilemma of a Ghost* is the fact that some of the students brought their own experience on the text and that pleased me

a lot. I realized that they were gradually turning into strong readers as Robert Scholes put it. A white female student had this to say: *“Eulalie and Ato remind me of my sister who married a Nigerian young man. We accepted him because my sister informed us in advance, and told us everything we wanted to know about him before she introduced him to our family. We were satisfied with who he was and we still tease my sister once a while because her husband speaks with an accent but that is all, we love him. I think that Ato’s relatives find it difficult to accept Eulalie because Ato did not inform his parents in advance. He did not take his time to inform his parents and to “educate” them in advance about his wife’s culture, habits, beliefs, etc. Ato has simply been a bad go-between, from the very beginning. He is not a good intermediary, and I blame him for the trouble his wife is going through.”* All the students were struck by the overall portrayals of Africans as self-confident and African Americans as insecure in Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*. One of them captured that difference in these terms: *“ I noticed that in A Raisin in the Sun, the Nigerian young man Asagai is very confident and focused. He is so serious with his studies that he even travels to Canada in summer to take special classes. He also dresses formally and neatly and speaks very formal English, although he has an accent. He also seems to be from a well to do and stable family in Africa and the proof lies in the fact that he asked his sister to send him some traditional African clothes for his friend Beneatha and her sister did that. On the other hand Walter Lee is an African American chauffeur who only thinks of making quick money. He does not behave like a responsible father and husband. Another point that surprised me is that Mamma, the matriarch in the play, and her son Walter Lee do not seem to know much about History. For instance, Mama confuses Liberia and Nigeria, and Walter Lee thinks that Africans are tribal warriors and he also despises college students like George and his own sister Beneatha. He does not seem to value education, unlike Asagai who takes education and life in general very seriously”*.

The students’ response to Richard Wright’s statement in *Black Power*, in his letter to President Nkrumah of Ghana that “Africans’ life must be militarized” (389) was very interesting. A white male student interpreted that statement this way: *“Wright meant that Africans need more discipline and hard work in order to advance to a more modern and technologically advanced stage”*. Another young man interpreted the same statement this way: *“Wright means that Africans should arm themselves and fight the colonizers out of the continent, and I am outraged at such an advice or suggestion. Richard Wright is simply calling for more weapons in Africa, and such an act would increase the civil wars that are already claiming innumerable lives in Africa”*.

Some of the most interesting student reflections in this class came up during our study of *Comes the Voyager at Last* where the African American protagonist ultimately makes it back home to Ghana and achieves a reintegration within the community. I had anticipated that the students would find it difficult dealing with the complex plot of the novel, the flashbacks, the non-linear trajectory of the main protagonist's trip from America to Africa and the subplots that really add to the artistic power of Awoonor's novel. In order to facilitate things for the students, I asked them to answer or discuss a certain number of questions that I had written on the board, and one of the questions asked the students to determine the main events and time frames in the work. By setting that question I was intending to help the students grasp the key events, periods and characters in the work. In their answers, the students concluded that the main events in *Comes the Voyager at Last* can be classified in two main categories, based on the timeline: the period of the 19th-century slave trade in Africa, and the 1950s-1960s, or the period of Civil Rights Movement in America. One of the students made a very powerful yet controversial, thought-provoking and delicate remark during the discussion on the Civil Rights Movement in the US and decolonization in Africa. With a lot of confidence he said: “ *the Civil Rights Movement and the decolonization struggles yielded considerable important victories for African Americans and continental Africans, I mean independence from colonial powers on one side and desegregation and other similar achievements for African Americans on the other side. But while the combat of the Civil Right Movement resulted in some institutions being put in place in order to ensure some degree of human and social development like schools, hospitals, security forces for blacks in the US, the European colonial powers gave a pseudo-independence to their African colonies, so that neo-colonialism could start its course and ensure the impoverishment of African countries while enriching European countries*”. I was pleased at this juxtaposition between African decolonization and the African Americans' Civil Rights Movement, from a discussion based on an African novel, and I was also aware of the debatable nature of the point on the positive results of the Civil Rights movement on African American's lives.

4. Analysis of the Students' Reactions & Implications

My students' reaction to these texts was highly informed by their background. Most of them being from the Mid West of the US where the majority of people --except those in large urban cosmopolitan areas like Chicago—have not had much interaction with diasporans (especially

Africans and African Americans) as I mentioned above, referring to the recent arrival of African students, African immigrant workers and African American students in that part of the Midwest of the US. As the discussion above shows, my students enthusiastically engaged the texts on the syllabus, and the data also shows that some of the students simply looked at the protagonists' challenges as consequences of wrong choices in life. Examples of such judgments are in the comments that some students made over Beneatha's impulsiveness, her determination and involvement in a tireless identity quest in *A Raisin in the Sun*. Those students simply thought that Beneatha was not serious in life and did not know what she wants. The same students also looked at Veronica's relationships with both white and black men as a sign of frivolity. It is interesting to point out that my students' reactions to the texts reflected their background and experience: very little previous contact with Africans and African Americans and also the impact of the negative stereotypes that Western Modernity attached to Africans and African Americans by presenting them as brutal and ignorant savages: Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (to some extent) and Merlon Riggs's *Ethnic Notions* are repositories of such stereotypes. I still remember the reflection of a white young man who saw Hansberry's work as another version of a Western classic. When I asked him to elaborate on his point this is what he had to say: "*I just do not see anything new or impressive about A Raisin in the Sun. It is just another version of the Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice, because both works deal with the desire to make it in life by borrowing money from others. Hansberry simply reproduced Shakespeare's work*". This comment shows that many of our students still believe in the Eurocentric view that no original, respectable and important literary work can be produced by authors who were branded as "the others, the primitives, the orientals"

5. The Need for a Redefinition of African American Literature

As my experience teaching this class shows, a broader and more inclusive syllabus for the African American Literature course can be taught to even students who have had no previous exposure to continental African or diasporan issues. Almost 90% of the students in my "Text in Context" class did not have any previous exposure to African and African American writings, but that did not prevent them from delving into the texts, raising very relevant questions and helping provide answers to those questions. With the increasing number of African students on our US college campuses, the teaching of African American Literature cannot remain limited to African American writings only. Continental African and diasporan

Caribbean Francophone works which for a long time have been excluded from the field of African American Literature have to be included into the curriculum. Teaching this class also enabled me to see how American students—blacks and whites— and African students react to the issue of the relations between Africa and her diasporas. For many of my students, that class was the first opportunity they had to reflect over topics on Africa, African Americans and also the relations between Africans and African Americans, as they emerge in literary works. Many of them expressed their gratitude for a course which was such an eye-opener. The impact that the class had on the students could be measured by the fact that the first day of class, none of the students could define (or was willing to define) or state what she/he thought the term “diaspora” meant. Looking at the quality of the work that the students produced at the end of the semester, I clearly noticed how comfortable they had become with the whole concept of diaspora, precisely the African diaspora in America. Teaching this class also enabled me to see the necessity to incorporate diaspora issues especially the relations between Africa and the Francophone and Anglophone diasporas in the teaching of African American Literature. Such a change in the curriculum is much needed now.

The teaching of African American Literature has been traditionally focused on the following topics: slave narratives, the Harlem Renaissance, contemporary race issues, the interaction between black and white America, and the power conflict and identity issues that result from that interaction. Recent works of critics like Henry Louis Gates Jr and Kwame Anthony Appiah take a close look at the identity issue and power relations that exist between African Americans and white America. Appiah’s works particularly engage Africa, but the examination of the relations between Francophone Africans and the Francophone diaspora in the Caribbean has not been introduced in the curriculum of African American Literature yet. The class that I taught at Illinois State University shows how Francophone diasporan texts can be taught alongside the texts that have so far been considered as canonical in African American Literature. Such an innovation will benefit students in several ways: they will be exposed to Francophone continental African works, Francophone Caribbean works, plus the African American works which are generally taught in African American Literature.

References

- Achebe, C. (1958): *Things Fall Apart*. London: Heinemann.
- Aidoo, A. A.(1995): *The Dilemma of a Ghost and Anowa*. London: African Writers Series.

- Angelou, M. (1986): *All God's Children need Traveling Shoes*. New York: Random House.
- Awoonor, K. (1992): *Comes the Voyager at Last. A Tale of Return to Africa*. NJ: Africa Press.
- Ba, M. (1989): *So Long a Letter*. Modupé Bodé-Thomas (Trans).USA: African Writers Series.
- Condé, M. (1989):*Heremakhonon*. Trans. Richard Philcox. USA: Lynne Rienners Publishers.
- Conrad, J. (1902) *Heart of Darkness*. Great Britain: Blackwood.
- Fanon, F. (1967): *Black Skin White Masks*. Trans.Charles Lam Markmann. New York: Grove Press, Inc.
- Hale, M. (2009): “Teaching the Immigration Debate in Freshman Composition”. *Radical Teacher* No.84. (18-30)
- Hansberry, L. (1994): *A Raisin in the Sun*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Hardt, M & Negri, A.(2000). *Empire*. USA: Harvard University Press.
- Hardt, M.& Negri, A.(2004) *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*. New York: The Penguin Press.
- Khapoya, V.B. (1994): *The African Experience: An Introduction*. USA:Prentice Hall.
- Logan, J. R. (2007): “Who Are the Other African Americans? Contemporary African American and Caribbean immigrants in the United States”. *The Other African Americans. Contemporary African American and Caribbean Immigrants in the United States*. Yoku Shaw-Taylor and Steven A. Tuch (Eds).New York: Rowman &Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
- Mazrui, A.(1986): *The Africans: A Triple Heritage*. New York: Little Brown& Company.
- Munoz, C. B. (2009): “A Dream Deferred: Undocumented Students at CUNY”. *Radical Teacher* No 84 (8-17).
- Riggs, M. (1987): (dir). *Ethnic Notions*.
- Sembene, O. (1973): *Xala*. Paris: Présence Africaine.
- Scholes, R. E. (1998): *The Rise and Fall of English: Reconstructing English as a Discipline*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Wright, R. (1954): *Black Power*. New York: Harper.
- Zezeza, P. T. (2007). “African Diasporas and Academics: The Struggle for a Global Epistemic Presence”. *The Study of Africa, Vol II: Global and Transnational Engagements*. Paul Tiyambe Zezeza (Editor).Dakar: CODESRIA.

The Author

Dr Moussa TRAORE is a Lecturer at the English department of the University of Cape Coast in Ghana. He teaches Comparative Literature and his main area of research interest is Postcolonial Studies, African and African American Literature and Diaspora Studies. Dr Traore holds a PhD in Comparative Literature from Illinois State University (US) and he recently published a book titled "Intersecting PanAfricanisms: Africa, North America and the Caribbean" with Lambert Academic Publishing (LAP) in December 2011.