

Introduction

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Just Randomly Experimenting

This volume is experimental. It takes readers beyond the straightjacket of Comparative Literature by inviting them straight into the workshops – *ateliers* – *Denkfabrik* – *Werkstatt* – *Habilitation projects* – of early and mid-career scholars who are passionate about the field of African Comparative Literatures.

I understand African Comparative Literatures as the field of study of artistic productions (literature, cinema, music, theatre, performing arts, etc.) by Africans and people of African descent who live both on the African continent and in the diasporas. They write and perform either in African languages such as Swahili, Wolof, Ixihosa and Hausa or in languages of Africa such as French, English, German, Portuguese and Spanish. Some also navigate between both African languages and languages of Africa such as Boubacar Boris Diop (Wolof and French) and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (*Gikũyũ* and English) or even explore literary forms in varieties such as Sheng in Kenya and Cameroonian Pidgin English (Peter Vakunta). Moreover, I regard African Comparative Literatures as a discipline building on African and African-diasporas corpora and, where justified, relying on home-grown methodologies and theories to address topics relevant to humanity, thus highlighting that literature is a solid ground on which to bring different parts of the world into a conversation by touching issues such as music and democracy, music/literature and healing traumas, cross-cultural aspects of childhood memories and film/literature and the future of sexualities, as this volume shows.

In this volume, we have started a conversation among five scholars from Africa currently living on three continents and studying works by authors from Cameroon, Guinea, Kenya, Rwanda, Senegal, France, Austria and Switzerland.

We share an ‘Africanity’ which is both biographical and academic given the places we were born, the training we received home and abroad, the places we

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currently work at, and especially how these factors reflect on our approach to comparative literature. For example, how can one study Léonora Miano's texts that are located between Africa, Europe and America without opening up to multimodal frameworks? What frameworks can do justice to Senegalese Hip-Hop in Wolof that responds to urgent social issues? The contributors to this volume were invited to follow the sport slogan JUST DO IT.

In just doing it, just practising, just testing out different frameworks, scholars whose papers are published in this collection reveal their visions of the field and highlight the essentially multidisciplinary nature of African Comparative Literatures, in that they develop or borrow in their analyses from cultural studies, sociology, digital criticism/humanities, intercultural relations, post(de)colonial identity studies, afrofeminism, queer studies, musicology, music therapy, aesthetics; intermediality, national and intracultural comparatism, trauma and memory studies, etc.

Selected contributors just did African Comparative Literatures while, where necessary, undoing, offering alternative paths to classical schools which have so far (in)formed our (under)standing of/in the field without taking into account our diverse backgrounds which allow us a nuanced entry into texts and cultural practices.

The volume comprises works of young scholars with an African heritage for the sake of visibility. My aim is to give these voices a platform beyond the constraining conditions of highly politicised and biased blind peer-reviewed journals that hardly accept papers by younger scholars, especially scholars from universities not considered prestigious and who attempt to rethink the discipline. How can one then grow as a researcher when the scene is still dominated by conservative schools and journals, and if one tries to write beyond the so-called 'canon'?

Luckily, the University of Vienna, which I joined in October 2020, hosts *Stichproben*, the *Vienna Journal of African Studies*. This journal encourages publications by early career scholars whose works contribute to African Studies in the wider sense. In my opinion, this umbrella discipline deserved to have been called Critical African Studies right from its inception, given the power imbalance between those doing research and the conditions of the peoples **about whom** research has been carried out and seldom people **with whom** research has been conducted. I have touched upon this crucial issue in the open access paper **Archiving Collective Memories and (Dis)Owning** (Tchokothe 2019).

The choice of the venue for that paper, which won me new friends, but also a colleague who felt 'attacked' and complained to the journal board about my paper ruining his reputation, because I criticised his **Owning** of people's archives in the publication process, was already a move into the open access format, which *Stichproben* and a growing number of journals promote.

The open access policy of the journal ensures selected works a good visibility, which helps young scholars from invisibilised universities such as the University of Yaoundé I occupy the scene. I honour this effort counteracting expensive and exclusive journals for which young scholars without a secure position, especially those in less privileged countries (Senegal and Cameroon for this volume) would have to invest part of their modest salary to publish a paper in volumes of which they sometimes do not get a printed copy. Costly journals and publishing outlets, that strangely live primarily on our expertise for unpaid peer reviews, are accessible to a circle of privileged people only.

Borrowing/Sharing Privileges

‘Borrowing Privileges: Libraries and the Institutionalization of World Literature’ is the fantastic title Venkat Mani (2013) gave to his paper, in which he pertinently reviews the role of libraries in the consecration of so-called ‘world literature’ (see for example Damrosch 2003). I regard this category as deceptive considering the incommensurable diversity of LITERATURES in/of/about/around the world and more as an exclusive rather than inclusive category. Thus, this volume gives the young scholars chosen – following the random sampling principle implied by the journal’s German title, *Stichproben* – the experimental and visibility privilege, which gives it a research-activist touch that I fully assume. Another level of research-activism comes through the approach to peer-review.

Convivial, Context-sensitive, Co-produced

We have given ourselves HONEST, NOURISHING and PATIENT feedback on the papers to ensure their quality and readability. In this sense, this volume is a Convivial, Context-sensitive and Co-produced approach to African Comparative Literatures. Reciprocity was key in the process, during which I fostered the notion of ,fratrie d’auteur.e.s’ that came up in the 1970s-80s in the Congo. ‘Fratrie d’auteur.e.s’ means a respectful and intellectual SHARING with the aim to elevate each other and pushing each other to explore new theoretical, methodological and analytical frameworks and, when possible, turning to an ‘epistemic disobedience’ (Mignolo 2013) and a ‘systematic disobedience’ suggested by Kessi, Marks & Ramugondo. In their introduction to the volume *Decolonising African Studies* (2020: 271), they write:

“Decolonizing entails a political and normative ethic and practice of resistance and intentional undoing – unlearning and dismantling unjust practices, assumptions, and institutions – as well as persistent positive action to create and build alternative spaces, networks and ways of knowing that transcend our epicolonial inheritance.”

They go further by naming four angles for decolonizing to take place: **structural**, **epistemic**, **personal** and **relational** (ibid 273), which I have combined in this issue while creating an 'alternative space and network'. I encouraged young marginalised scholars of African descent to experiment with **epistemic delinking** by coming up with own terms, methods, concepts and, where necessary, theory-free analyses. I intended to use my **personal** and **relational** situatedness as a scholar of African heritage currently holding an advantageous tenure-track professorship at a University endowed with symbolic power to make our voices heard through pertinent analyses in African Comparative Literatures.

In a nutshell, I used my 'occupational consciousness' to engage further in 'disobedient decolonial practice' as Kessi, Marks & Ramugondo (ibid 275) would put it. This journal issue is in a way my 'anthropology of anger', to speak with the economic giant hailing from Cameroon, Célestin Monga. This is my healthy anger with publication policies whose economies only benefit a happy few, not necessarily authors. Moreover, like one of my role models Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, who announced his 'farewell' to English as the language of his creative writing in *Decolonising the Mind. The Politics of Language in African Literature* (1986), I envision this issue as my first step into detaching myself from self-proclaimed and capitalistic 'impact journals' with their excluding policies, and which live on exploiting our labour (free and generous peer-review and writing papers) which are then sold at prices that most of our potential readers and colleagues cannot afford. I am aware that this is a long and complex enterprise in view of what Mudimbe already named in 1982 'l'odeur du père' which I translate as the omnipresence of the West in our thinking, languages, teaching, research and publication practices.

I would rather – as much as possible – focus on making a visible impact in journals and publication outlets open to creative, transformative and transparent formats by making space for alternative knowledge production, especially by less privileged scholars. In just doing so, my venture is akin to the idea of 'reclaiming our time'/space in African studies chanted by three scholars of African heritage who have a sounding experience knowledge of academic exclusion, namely Auma, Otieno & Piesche (2020). To me, peer review as currently practiced has its limitations, which explains our experiment with (O)Pen Peer (P)Review for this volume.

(O)Pen Peer (P)Review

In this volume, we have practised inclusion and transparency by doing (O)Pen Peer (P)Review, which is not yet a common practice in African Literary studies

and African Studies in general. I must mention the exception of Mattering Press¹ that is open to both open peer review and blind peer review. After receiving the abstracts, I organised contributors into commenting/evaluating and writing tandems. As the issue's editor, I provided feedback to all abstracts and all papers during the process and monitored the works of the tandems. The criteria for setting up the tandems were the link between the topics, the language of the paper and the non-existing connection between the people of a tandem, because another idea behind the project was to bring together colleagues who had never met, thus, to create a new network of peers. This worked very well and reactions by colleagues I contacted revealed that I had just expressed a common concern on de-centering/rethinking publication practices and working towards a new 'ecology of knowledges' (Santos 2014: 42). The following three shortened anonymised comments illustrate my point:

Reaction 1

"In fact, I think we need to possibly have a project on the 'intellectual/pedagogic autobiographies' of African scholars, here in Africa and beyond. I rarely read essays that reflect on what are our pedagogical filiations and affiliations; how did our schooling affect the way we research and teach; what really are our (new) approaches to the teaching of literature/culture etc; how do we continue to keep intellectual faith in moments when the academy itself thinks little of the humanities – literature is falling off the 'new' syllabus in Kenya, for instance; etc. These issues have become a bother for me of late. [...] Well, you will clearly get my paper earlier than planned. This one is one of those 'off my chest' essays and I will draft it quite soon. Uwe na siku njema."

Réaction 2

"Bonjour Rémi,
Concernant le tandem, je peux dire que j'ai bien aimé cette initiative. Ce jeu de regards croisés à été très enrichissant pour moi et le collègue [...]. Je pense que nous allons continuer la collaboration pour d'autres projets.
Merci pour tout. "

Reaction 3

"Dear [...] Rémi,
Thanks so much for sharing this wonderful proposal and you can count on my participation. [...] You have eloquently unveiled the established bias that skews the field for young scholars especially those from the global south in a context

¹ Peer review – Mattering Press, [<https://www.matteringpress.org/about/peer-review>] retrieved on October 4, 2022.

where capitalism has invaded even the spheres of knowledge creation, validation, sharing. Thanks again and I am in.”

In and out

At the project’s beginning, nine scholars were in, all very enthusiastic. Constraints such as digital teaching and administrative loads, the ongoing Covid-19 crisis and the ensuing emotional, social, private and financial insecurity, the emphasis on the originality of the paper that pushed us to reject one paper, and deadlines forced four to withdraw including the author of the promising “Well, you will clearly get my paper earlier than planned. This one is one of those ‘off my chest’ essays and I will draft it quite soon” (reaction 1). Colleagues who could not make it did send their best wishes for the project to succeed and looked forward to reading the outcomes of the journey that we started together in the form of an email I sent out on February 12, 2021. We have exchanged many emails among ourselves and with the journal’s editorial board which I thank for their dedication and support of this publication project that is part of the debate on de-homogenising/de-centering research and publication practices by being serious about scholarship while caring for one another.

It has been very helpful to have a face behind a feedback even when the feedback was demanding, not to feel isolated during the writing process, to have a clear working schedule as opposed to some journals that respond after a year or longer to a submission or sometimes do not even respond at all. Also, it has turned out to be very key to know that one was part of a writing group with people from different backgrounds, different language packages and a rich knowledge of artistic productions from Africa and beyond. The co-work has proven that (O)Pen Peer (P)Review fosters the quality of the paper while ensuring peer-relation as opposed to peer-isolation, which is the common practice. Peer-relation, especially given the ongoing Covid-19 crisis, has proven to be an important aspect for the creativity of young scholars and a response to blind peer-review that often leaves the author with a paper full of comments without a real interlocutor to turn to.

As a group, we had agreed on a one-year-schedule. As anticipated, there have been minor changes along the way but there are many reasons to be happy about the final product. In this volume, young scholars with diverse backgrounds and mobility trajectories in terms of training, teaching and research share with readers an aspect of their current work. These are following the alphabetical order that is kept in the volume: Buata Bundu Malela (The Democratic Republic of Congo-Belgium-Azerbaijan-Poland-France-Mayotte), Aminata Cécile Mbaye (France-Martinique-Senegal-Germany-Canada), Germain Nyada (Cameroon-Germany-Canada-Cameroon), Serigne Seye (based in Senegal, with numerous research and conference trips to Tunisia, Germany, the Netherlands, Canada and

France where he is giving a talk on Senegalese Hip-Hop at the moment I am finalising this introduction²), and myself (Cameroon-Germany-Kenya-Tanzania-The Democratic Republic of Congo-The Comoros Archipelago- Rwanda-Austria). These journeys and the languages of writing/works in the corpora (Wolof, partly Swahili in a drama film, English, French and German) have influenced the five contributions and approaches to analysing literary and cultural forms from Africa and beyond. For example, Germain Nyada has brought into dialogue works from Guinea and Cameroon (French) and works from Austria and Switzerland (German). Serigne Seye goes against monomethodology by offering an original intracultural and intranational comparative reading of Senegalese Hip-hop and literary texts in French and Wolof from the perspective of being both a scholar and an artist, an insider whose practice and double consciousness have important theoretical echoes on his analysis of the songs and the context he knows very well.

Usually, this is the moment readers would expect a summary of each paper. Since the volume is experimental and has not followed a classical call for papers on an umbrella topic and given that each paper is preceded by an abstract, I will remain unclassical by kindly inviting you, together with contributors to **JUST... Doing African Comparative Literatures**, to **Just Walk** into our open workshops – *ateliers – Denkfabrik – Werkstatt – Habilitation projects*.

A Common Project

This project would not have been possible without the openness of the editorial board of *Stichproben – Vienna Journal of African Studies*, the interest and commitment of colleagues who joined this adventure despite time and Covid-19 constraints, Ona Obiorah who did the final proofreading of texts in English, and Hannah Mühlparzer, my right hand in Vienna, who accompanied the editorial process and joyfully learned from the exercise. To you all: *Murakeza neza* [Thank you in Kinyarwanda].

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² Reprise et parodie dans le rap sénégalais | Carnets de littératures africaines (hypotheses.org), [https://apela.hypotheses.org/6074] retrieved on October 4, 2022.

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