correspondents at large

Personal Reflections on Teaching Literature

SUSAN NALUGWA KIGULI

IN AN ESSAY TITLED "THE FUTURE OF CRITICISM," EDWARD W. SAID MADE A REMARK THAT I FIRST TOOK TO BE A PLATITUDE: "CRITICISM exists only because critics practice it. It is neither an institution nor, strictly speaking, a discipline" (165). On further thought, I began to see the strength of this assertion and the implication that practices cultivate continuity and certain ways of seeing. People are in many ways products of their historical and cultural contexts. For example, while I initially resisted starting my reflections on teaching literature by discussing how I was taught the subject in my early years, I know that my story will be incomplete if I do not at least devote a paragraph or two to that experience.

By the time I entered high school, in 1982, the pivotal abolition of English departments in East African universities had already taken place, and even though the major effects of the establishment of more-diverse literature departments at universities in East Africa were more evident at the universities, the attitude toward teaching literature had also changed at secondary schools. We were offered more variety in high school than were the students who read literature in the 1970s, when the colonial project was still extravagantly visible and not as consistently contested. Nonetheless, I cannot deny that Shakespeare remained the most hallowed author at our school; our headmistress repeatedly asserted that to claim our right to the knowledge of letters, we had to know a Shakespearean text. We therefore competed among ourselves in quoting Shakespeare and sounding as quaint as possible. Elevating Shakespeare to an exalted place as a legendary writer was not a problem, but I take exception to the manner in which it was done. Even when it was not plainly said, we students got the impression that the non-European texts were not good enough; in fact, it was made clear that the only texts worth studying were English. I always felt, even at that young age, that our teachers wanted to sell us the superiority of another culture. It was an eerie feeling, given that the content and context of other texts, particularly from the African continent, were more familiar to me and

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that I was convinced that what I understood and identified with merited more attention.

The literary menu at Makerere University was a lot more diverse than what we got at high school. We were offered, among other things, survey courses on American (in reality, North American) literature, Caribbean literature, African literature, and orature, particularly Ugandan orature, as well as snippets of other literatures in various modules.[1] In a private conversation with me, the Nigerian poet and scholar Harry Garuba referred to this offering to our undergraduates as an endeavor to teach world literature. As a student I found the Makerere University curriculum an interesting mixture of a strong English influence and some radical and topical debates, a mixture that seemed to be the trend in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Literary-stylistics classes frequently invoked Roger Fowler and Morris Halle.

We were also taught literary theory—earlier as well as twentieth-century theories—and we took a number of courses under the label "changing patterns," but the changes that these courses traced centered on English literature. I never saw the benefit of knowing texts such as *Beowulf* or *The Canterbury Tales* until years later, when I was a doctoral student at the University of Leeds and found that I could hold my own discussing Chaucer, Milton, Sidney, or Marlowe with friends. I had fun watching their surprise at learning that I knew so much about their literary traditions while they knew next to nothing about mine. The ambivalence and ironies of our education in the colonies have been, in my life, a source of many emotions, from extreme anger to helpless hilarity.

My experience teaching literature to undergraduates, in various places but mainly at Makerere University, echoes the history of how I was taught. There have been two dominant trends among my students: first, boredom at learning texts they regard as "foreign" and, second, an impulse to challenge texts they perceive as couched in colonial discourse and to invoke without much thought some of the received attitudes about these texts expressed by canonical African critics and writers, particularly Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. I sometimes have found students animatedly dismissing *Heart of Darkness* without having read it, their argument relying on Achebe's remark about having detected "a thoroughgoing racist" in Conrad! (11). The students seemed to think that they did not need to ruminate on Achebe's statement. Even more frightening, they had sometimes not even read Achebe's *Morning Yet on Creation Day: Essays* (1975) or his *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays* (1988).

On the other hand, teaching literature, especially here at Makerere University, has provided me and my students a new means of self-expression. Tutoring classes on language and literature—primarily African fiction and poetry—has been interesting, partly because the discussions I joined as a student in the early 1990s made me aware of the strongly Marxist orientation of both students and scholars. Their approach—particularly to texts that were not by African authors—was what I would term the resisting reader. Overall, Ngũgĩ's texts were favorites for discussion and encouraged the students to develop a critical voice.

I have always felt and still feel inevitable tensions teaching the literary, especially at Makerere University's Department of Literature. My students and I have been constantly faced with questions on the connections between texts, genres, contexts, and disciplines. On paper this may sound vague or even obvious, but in the classroom it becomes complex and sometimes offers inscrutable challenges.

I teach literature in translation because it brings to the class materials from areas and cultures where English is not a dominant language. We have read poets from Eastern Europe, such as the Romanian Nichita Stănescu, as well as writers from Asia and the Middle

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East. This is one way my classes have engaged with issues of translation and questions about the teaching of literatures in African languages.

I feel I must also mention my experience teaching for Food for the Hungry's Go-ED academic program in Africa for four years starting in 2006. I taught our students, who came from various colleges in the United States, a course we termed Postcolonial African Literature, part of which involved learning a component of orature and conducting field research for an orature project. Most of the students thought this was the most exciting section of the course. They found many similarities between the orature of their own people and that of the communities they were visiting, and they insisted that the moral lessons of the different types of orature they encountered seemed to bridge cultural and racial divides. Throughout my four years teaching this course, my students argued that orature demonstrated that these similarities in life lessons—and shared questions about fundamental matters such as life and death—unified humanity.

The most intriguing part about supervising a research paper on orature is that while students always protest before conducting their fieldwork that orature has died out, they always come back with a lot of information and express surprise at having found it.

In discussions on orature, many of my students use concrete examples to argue that, while its moral lessons are consistent across cultures, orature illuminates the unique characteristics of each society, which they think is a positive trend. One group of students presented this Luganda riddle: "I have a wife; she looks where she is going and looks where she is coming from. What is she?" The answer: a bundle of firewood. Because sticks look the same on either end, they can be said to look forward and backward. What determines the front is the position of the person carrying the firewood. My students animatedly talked about this riddle as implicitly commenting on life as a constantly changing process, with no clear-cut beginning or end. In the community where the students found this riddle, firewood was a basic source of fuel. People went out to the nearby forest and collected dry twigs to use for their cooking, so the community was familiar with the image of firewood and could attach various meanings to it. The students contended that this riddle was context-specific and unique—it would not, for instance, have emerged in the United States, where firewood is not a common staple of existence.

Most students, especially those on the semester-abroad program, observed that studying a people's orature was a learning experience that allowed for interaction with people as well as analyses of their lives and culture. Many students referred to and discussed values that they thought oppressed certain groups of people. For example, they struggled to understand and accept stories, myths, or proverbs that seemed to encourage negative images of women or children. They felt that these pieces of orature encouraged the community to disregard the domination of one group by another.

In my discussions with students of orature, be they local or on the exchange programs, I have observed something that continues to absorb my attention despite its being obvious—during the discussions and performances, one can tell that different generations tell stories in ways that show the peculiar situations and conditions in which they were brought up. The older generations, for example, are attached to history, while the younger ones, particularly from communities that have experienced war, seem preoccupied with overcoming experiences of violence and loss and are not especially concerned with preserving or recovering their stories and history.

Before starting their research, students seem to take the subject of orature to be a classroom exercise, but after they have conducted their research, they always confess that the fieldwork was a way of communicating

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with people in a cultural medium their subjects are familiar with and treasure deeply. The students said that sharing different pieces of orature always led to deeper conversations about life in the communities.

Perhaps because of my location, my teaching and thinking about literature is interdisciplinary. I attribute this to the thinking about what the literary in an African context should be, exemplified by scholars and writers such as Okot p'Bitek, Pio Zirimu, Taban Lo Liyong, Ngũgĩ, and Austin Bukenya, thinking that culminated in the introduction of *orature* as a term and as a subject taught in African universities and later in secondary schools. I think that scholars in East Africa should have paid more attention to the way the teaching of oral literature was initiated in the Department of Literature at Makerere University in 1969, when Zirimu and his student Bukenya and other colleagues remained adamant that the course on oral literature had value even when they faced resistance in trying to teach it. Bukenya, in his afterword to a collection of essays on orature titled *Performing Community*, mentions the early efforts that he and his colleagues made to establish a place on the Makerere University syllabus for a course on oral literature.[2] He was also instrumental in popularizing the subject of oral literature, especially in Kenya.

Visiting Makerere University in 2013, Ngũgĩ maintained that the university, and the Department of Literature in particular, should do more to claim and own the term *orature*, which two of its faculty members, Bukenya and Zirimu, had given to the literary world. I feel uneasy that although we are aware of the importance of the term *orature*, our own courses in the university's curriculum still bear the name "oral literature." To effectively review the literature curriculum at Makerere University, scholars who use the term *orature* need to know its origin and the debate around its coinage—a history that is documented in a paper that Zirimu and Bukenya delivered in Lagos in 1977 at the Colloquium on Black Civilization and Education at the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture. It is up to us to make known this debate and others like it and to highlight the tensions inherent in our knowledge production so that scholars may begin to assess with more understanding what we do and what we have not done.

Teaching literature in an African context has a lot to do with exchanges and contestations between cultures and disciplines. Nothing seems fixed, and many different forms and influences are constantly being absorbed, so there seems no such thing as a stable tradition or literary movement.

Notes

1. *Orature* is a term coined by Pio Zirimu and his student Austin Bukenya in the 1970s as an alternative to *oral literature*. *Orature* refers to imaginative verbal art in which oral composition and performance are crucial. According to Zirimu and Bukenya, orature parallels literature and is an important aspect of the skill of oracy—the mastery and effective use of the spoken word.

2. The essays in *Performing Community* grew out of a collaborative effort, coordinated by Dominic Dipio, between the Department of Literature at Makerere University and the Department of Foreign Languages at the University of Bergen.

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