The Representation of Africa in Black Atlantic Studies of Race and Literature.pdf

Babacar Mbaye
ABSTRACT

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Critics often represent the relations between African-Americans and Africa in terms of discontinuities, hybridity, and anti-essentialism. This postmodern approach fails to see the strategic values of essentialism and African identification in the Diaspora. A more productive approach is to examine the Afrocentrist and dualist views of Africa in the Diaspora.

In recent years, the scholars of Black Atlantic studies have tended to minimize the significance of Africa in the memory, literature, and culture of African-Americans. Going beyond the scholarship that tended to represent the relations between African-Americans and Africa mainly in terms of continuities and homogeneity, Paul Gilroy, Kadiatu Kanneh, John Cullen Gruesser, Kwame Anthony Appiah, and Manthia Diawara have represented these relationships in terms of the ambivalence of African-American intellectuals toward Africa and the diversity within the modern cultures of the Black Diaspora. Complementing Gilroy's representation of Black cultures as either hybrid or modern, Kanneh, Gruesser, Appiah, and Diawara have focused on heterogeneity and modernity in African-American culture.

Although they broaden our understanding of the relations between the Diaspora and Africa within the context of a promising field of Black Atlantic Studies, I want to argue that the theories of Gilroy, Kanneh, Gruesser, and Appiah are open to serious critique, because they over-emphasize anti-essentialism, hybridity, and ambivalence in African-American culture. I would suggest that they need to go beyond the reducible concepts of anti-essentialism and examine the importance of strategic essentialism in African-American resistance against racism. Thus, they would steer free from both
essentialism and anti-essentialism. Instead of perceiving Africa as an absence in the Diaspora, the theories proposed by Gilroy and his supporters would be more productive if they were to acknowledge the strong African presence in African-American culture.

The term “Black Atlantic” refers to the historical experiences and cultures of Blacks in the West and to a growing scholarship that explores the connections between Africa and its Diaspora. The term “Diaspora” comes from the Greek word Diaspeirein (to spread about). Originally referring to the dispersion of the Jews outside Israel, in the twentieth century the term “Diaspora” was enlarged to include the dispersal of Africans in New World societies by historical forces such as slavery, colonization, wars, and migrations.

In The Black Atlantic, Paul Gilroy argues that, from the late eighteenth century to the present, the cultures of Blacks in the West have been hybrid and antithetical to “ethnic absolutism” (4-5). According to Gilroy, the modern history of the Black Atlantic is a discontinuous trajectory in which nations, borders, languages, and political ideologies are crossed in order to oppose “narrow nationalism” (12). Gilroy’s term “Black Atlantic” describes the “rhizomorphic, fractal structure of the transcultural, international formation” of modern Black cultures that oppose the nationalist focus “common to English and African-American versions of cultural studies” (4).

In spite of its attention to the relation between Africa and its Diaspora, Gilroy’s Black Atlantic can be criticized for downplaying the importance of the African continuities in the Diaspora. In privileging hybridity over the importance of the African identification in the African Diaspora, Gilroy suggests that African people in the Diaspora are somehow living “in-between.” In contrast, I want to argue that this postmodern concept does not offer a productive insight into their strategies of identification. Rather, Africans in the Diaspora will alternately identify with, for example, America, and with Africa. Gilroy fails to see the strategic value of the concept of “race.” I will begin my argument by discussing two short examples to prove/explain my point.

A Response to Gilroyn’s Critique of “Race” and Afrocentrism
My main objection to Against Race is Gilroy’s representation of racial and cultural essentialism as antithetical to democracy. He writes: “The creative acts involved in destroying raciology and transcending ‘race’ are more than warranted by the goal of authentic democracy to which they point” (12). Gilroy’s rejection of race is based on the premise that Blacks and other groups who have been oppressed in the U.S. have, historically, found effective ways to resist oppression without invoking the idea of race. Gilroy writes: “Under the most difficult of conditions and from imperfect materials that they surely would not have selected if they had been able to choose, these oppressed groups have built complex traditions of politics, ethics, identity, and culture” (12). Gilroy’s dismissal of the importance of race as a tool of resistance is equivocal, since it focuses on the ruptures between the historical and contemporary experiences of
Blacks rather than on the connections between them. As Asante said in his review of *Against Race*:

*The history of discrimination against us in the West, whether the United States or the United Kingdom or other parts of the Western world, is a history of assaulting our dignity because we are Africans or the descendants of Africans. This has little to do with whether we are on one side of the ocean or the other. Such false separations, particularly in the context of White racial hierarchy and domination, is nothing more than an acceptance of a White definition of Blackness. I reject such a notion as an attempt to isolate Africans in the Americas from their brothers and sisters on the continent.* (847)

Asante’s critique on Gilroy’s concepts of Blackness suggests a split between Black scholars who advocate a postmodern and those who advocate an African-centered approach to Black Studies. While a postmodernist like Gilroy proposes the erasure of race and cultural authenticity, an Afrocentrist like Asante advocates their revival. In *The Afrocentric Idea* (1998), Asante criticizes the postmodernist approach of Gilroy: “I cannot accept any ideological position that discusses Africans as ‘the other,’ whether capitalized or not. In fact, I believe that constructions such as ‘the Black Atlantic,’ ‘double consciousness,’ and ‘The Other’ promote a Eurocentric supremacy and misstate the agency, that is, the evolving ownership of action or the subject role, of Africans” (177). Asante’s rejection of Gilroy’s concepts of “the Black Atlantic,” “double consciousness,” and “The Other” is rooted in his Afrocentric approach to culture in which Africa and its traditions are considered to be vital, real, and continuous points of references for peoples of African descent.

In *Afrocentricity* (1988), Asante described his Afrocentric approach to culture as based on “the existence of an African Cultural System; then the juxtaposition of African and American ways; and finally the values derived from the African-American experience” (2). The critique of such an Afrocentrist approach generally focuses on two related aspects: first, the implied essentialism (the assumption that there would be an essential, stable African identity); second, the assumption that this essence would be homogeneous, and that African communities would therefore always be essentially homogeneous as well. But if Gilroy assumes that Afrocentricity “dismisses the idea of racial identity as a locally specific, social, and historical construction” (189), he misses the point that Afrocentricity does acknowledge the related issue: the diversity in Black communities. In “African Centered Knowledge: A British Perspective” (2002), Mark Christian writes: “African Diaspora culture is hybrid. No serious thinker could deny this social fact. Yet there is now more empirical evidence emerging that can locate continuities and similarities, as well as variance in the Black global, historical, social, cultural, political and economic experience” (15). Christian’s thesis shows the local and transnational dimensions of Black cultures, opposing the dichotomy that Gilroy creates between the Diaspora and Africa.

Taking a view similar to Christian’s, Asante writes: “Unquestionably on the Continent our cultural system is manifested in diverse ways as it is in the Diaspora.
We have one African Cultural System manifested in diversities ... We respond to the same rhythms of the universe, the same cosmological sensibilities, the same general historical reality as the African descended people” (Afrocentricity 2). Asante’s insistence on the plurality within the African Cultural System counters Gilroy’s assertion in The Black Atlantic that “The Afrocentric project has an absolute and pervasive reliance on a model of the thinking, knowing racial subject which is a long way away from the double consciousness that fascinated black modernists” (188). Evidently, there is a tension between Asante and Gilroy on the issue of double-consciousness. This conflict is unnecessary because, as Du Bois shows in Soul, duality is a permanent dynamic in African-American culture. Gilroy is mistaken when he opposes a postmodern concept of a hybrid African Diaspora to an Afrocentrist concept of a pure, homogeneous Diaspora. The next section will discuss different Afrocentrist approaches to the African Diaspora, in which the diversity within African Diaspora is acknowledged in different ways.

Afrocentrist Views of the African Diaspora
In an attempt to re-inscribe Africa into Black Atlantic Studies, Joseph Roach, Charles Piot, Manthia Diawara, and Kwame Appiah have focused on the relations between the continent and its Diaspora. In Cities Of The Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance (1996), Roach, who shares Gilroy’s formulation of the Black Atlantic as a history “that does not begin and end at national borders but [that] charts its course along the dark currents of a world economy that slavery propelled” (5), departs from Gilroy by identifying connections between cultures and histories in Africa and those in the Americas. Roach writes: “The concept of a circum-Atlantic world (as opposed to a transatlantic one) insists on the centrality of the diasporic and genocidal histories of Africa and the Americas, North and South, in the creation of the culture of modernity” (4). Unlike Gilroy, Roach emphasizes the cultural connections between Africa and its Diaspora. Roach writes:

*Circumstances favored the reciprocal acculturation of Creoles of Various lineages within a unique network of African, American, and European practices. These included mortuary rituals, carnival festivities, and a multitude of musical and dance forms that others would eventually describe (and appropriate) under the rubric of jazz.* (9)

Roach continues: “At the same time, the Africans brought with them vital necessities such as skilled agriculture” (10). Roach’s emphasis on the Africanisms evident in the contemporary life of the Blacks of the Diaspora opposes Gilroy’s narrow concept of modernity.

Like Roach, Piot, Appiah, and Diawara have shown that Africa is essential in the theorizing of modernity in the Diaspora. In “Atlantic Aporias: Africa and Gilroy’s Black Atlantic” (2001), Piot criticizes Gilroy’s dismissal of Africa in his Black Atlantic theory, saying:

*This omission not only silences a major entity in the black Atlantic world but also leaves unchallenged the notion that Africa is somehow different – that it remains a site*
of origin and purity, uncontaminated by those histories of the modern that have lent black Atlantic cultures their distinctive character. (156)

Alternatively, Piot described his own methodology:

I attempt to return Africa to its diaspora. But I aim to do so not by characterizing it, as an earlier diaspora literature long did, as a site of origin and symbolic return but rather by seeing Africa as itself diasporic – as derivative of the Atlantic slave system and made and remade by its encounter with modernity. Imagining the diaspora as prior to the homeland might also enable us to read the black Atlantic and theories of identity developed by diaspora scholars like Gilroy and Hall back into the cultures of the mainland. (156)

On the one hand, Piot distances himself from Gilroy, since his study of the Diaspora begins with a study of Africa's history and modernity. On the other hand, Piot is close to Gilroy, because his investigation also begins with an acknowledgement of the double-consciousness that slavery has brought modern Black societies. Piot himself agrees that Gilroy and he have this point in common: “Any attempt to account for the nature and meaning of contemporary cultural production on the African mainland needs to begin, I would suggest, where Gilroy’s analysis of the cultures of the diaspora does: with the slave trade” (159).

Like Roach and Piot, Appiah uses Africa as a primary site of investigation. In In My Father’s House: Africa and the Philosophy of Culture (1992), Appiah explores the relations between late nineteenth-century African-American intellectuals such as Alexander Crummel, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Africa, which Gilroy also examines in The Black Atlantic. Like Gilroy, Appiah discusses the role that the ideology of racial homogeneity played in the formation of nationalism in the Diaspora. He argues that Crummel and Du Bois used African identity in biological and racial terms in order to counter the claim of European cultural supremacy (x). According to Appiah, Crummel and Du Bois believed that Blacks had a common destiny “not because they shared a common ecology, not because they had a common historical experience or faced a common threat from imperial Europe, but because they belonged to this one [Black] race” (5). Just like Gilroy, Appiah criticizes this opinion because it departs from the assumption that biological race would be a transcendent essence, deciding people’s identity and destiny. However, in dismissing the concept of “race” altogether, Gilroy and Appiah deny the fact that many people in the African diaspora feel intimately bound together by this concept, just as in the time of Du Bois, who perceived Blackness as a racial identity that united all people of African descent. (126-27)

Despite its demise of race, Appiah’s In My Father’s House is, however, important in Black Atlantic Studies because it explores the connections between Black intellectuals in Africa and those in the Diaspora. He represents Africa as a site with multiple identities and concerns that can only be dealt with through a broad understanding of modernity. Opposing the western definition of modernity as “the characteristic intellectual and social formation of the industrial world,” Appiah places the word in its African context.
“by trying to understand the modern through its antithesis, the traditional” (107). Appiah explains:

I want to try to expose some natural errors in our thinking about the traditional-modern polarity, and thus help us toward an understanding of some of the changes in progress in Africa, and the ways in which they have – and have not – made her more like the West. I want to examine some aspects of traditional culture – understanding this simply to mean culture before the European empires – as it manifested itself in one place in Africa, and then to look at some of the ways in which the experience of colonization and extended interaction with the West has produced a culture in transition from tradition to modernity, a culture that, for want of a better word, I shall call nontraditional. (107)

Appiah wants the world to see Africa as a place where both tradition and modernity shape the lives of people, creating multiple identities that cannot be discussed in racial, absolutist, or monolithic terms only. One example Appiah gives is his own father who is a Pan-Africanist, an Asante, a Ghanaian, a Christian, and a Methodist at the same time (ix), reflecting the diversity in Africa that some Black intellectuals in the West do not want to recognize, since it gives the impression of westernization.  

Taking on Appiah’s theory, Diawara’s In Search of Africa emphasizes how modern Africans preserve their ties with the Diaspora while embracing multiple identities that, indeed, are influenced by the West. Unlike Gilroy, Diawara theorizes the Diaspora from the vantage point of how modern Africans perceive it. Diawara, who is a native of Guinea, describes Africa as a site where tradition and transgression of taboos coexist with an appropriation of external values that enrich the continent’s modernity. Diawara states:

We [Africans] are modern in the way in which we keep fighting for our independence, defying certain traditional taboos judged archaic by our new standard, in our perpetual attempts to redefine the nation-states … A true measure of our modernity lies in our desire for freedom and better lives. (57)

This modernity is influenced by African-American culture since many young Africans shared the spirit of resistance and artistic creativity that emerged in the United States in the 1960s. Diawara writes:

For me and for many of my friends, to be liberated was to be exposed to more R&B songs and to be up on the latest news about Muhammad Ali, George Jackson, Angela Davis, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King Jr., all of whom were becoming an alternative source of cultural capital for African youth and were creating within us new structures of feeling, which enabled us to subvert the hegemony of Francité after independence. (103-104)

Diawara’s statement shows that modern Africans and Blacks of the Diaspora are culturally and historically related, especially with regards to the combat of racism and discrimination.
African-American Dualist Views of Africa

Complementing Gilroy’s *Black Atlantic*, Kadiatu Kanneh’s *African Identities: Race, Nation and Culture in Ethnography, Pan-Africanism and Black Literatures* (1998) and John Cullen Gruesser’s *Black on Black: Twentieth-Century African-American Writing About Africa* (2000) have discussed the dualism of twentieth-century African-American writers towards Africa. Kanneh’s thesis is as follows:

Recognizing the multivocal structure of texts and discourses, I argue that an analysis of the connections between times, places and disciplines reveals both how meaning emerges from and accrues to the discursive object, ‘Africa,’ and how ‘Africa’ becomes located and defined as object of knowledge. (1)

Kanneh’s representation of the Diaspora as a site where African identities are constructed in a diversity of “multivocal” texts and discourses shows the multiple ways in which Africa is represented in twentieth-century African-American literature. Referring to Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, Kanneh writes:

‘Africa,’ as an original home, exists at the limits of the imagination. It belongs to, and is allowed to remain as, a point of departure, with no conscious remembering of place, territory and landscape. ‘Africa,’ in Beloved, has already been metaphorized into the floating space in between Africa and America, where its absence comes to represent a homelessness and restlessness out of which new identifications are formed. (122-23)

Kanneh’s representation of Africa as an “absence” in *Beloved* is problematic since the history of American slavery on which the plot of the novel is based does not prevent the characters in the book from being connected with the continent.

Africa is recreated in Sweet Home, the place where Baby Suggs, an elderly African-American woman, lives. One day, Baby Suggs invites all her neighbors to join her at a clearing space and tells them: “Here … in this place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don’t love your eyes; they’d just soon pick em out” (88). Baby Suggs’ references to the “flesh that weeps” and to the “flesh that dances on bare feet” suggest the sorrow that slaves felt in the plantation in contrast with the joy that their forebears experienced in Africa before they were brought to the United States. In asking her community to get together at a clearing space, Baby Suggs recreates the communal and pastoral life that her ancestors led in Africa. This reading of *Beloved* as a re-enactment of an African past opposes Kanneh’s argument that Africa is an absence for African-Americans. If Africa cannot be said to be materially present and accessible, it is certainly true that Africa is called into presence by Baby Suggs’ performance, and in this way it is materialized as an effective point of reference.

Like Kanneh, Gruesser has also explored the way in which Africa is constructed in twentieth-century African American literature, although he often diminishes the importance of Africa as a point of inspiration for people in the Diaspora. The texts that Gruesser discusses in *Black on Black* include Richard Wright’s *Black Power: A Record
of Reactions in a Land of Pathos, Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*, and Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*. *Black Power* is an account of Wright’s 1953 visit to Takoradi, Ghana, where Kwame Nkrumah had invited him. In the book, Wright discusses his relationships with Africa and his impressions of the newly independent nation of Ghana, where he believes the strength of tradition and religion threaten Nkrumah’s attempt to build a free, democratic, and modern state. Early in the book, Wright says:

Africa! Being of African descent, would I be able to feel and know something about Africa on the basis of a common ‘racial’ heritage? Africa was a vast continent full of ‘my people.’ … But, am I African? Had some of my ancestors sold their relatives to white men? What would my feelings be when I looked into the black face of an African, feeling that maybe his great-great-great grandfather had sold my great-great-grandfather into slavery? Was there something in Africa that my feelings could latch onto to make all of this dark past clear and meaningful? Would the Africans regard me as a lost brother who had returned? (4)

Wright’s statement suggests his anxiety about the experience of meeting native Africans whom he perceives as both relatives and strangers. Wright wonders whether Africans are either links to his own racial and cultural heritage or connections to his ancestors’ historical experience of slavery. In the middle of the book, Wright says: “Being obviously of African descent, I looked like Africans, but I had only to walk upon a scene and my difference at once declared itself without a word being spoken” (152).

Wright, then, tends to perceive himself as both insider and outsider in Africa, epitomizing the double-consciousness that Gruesser, like Gilroy, identifies in the African-American writer’s attitudes toward Africa. However, representing Wright’s relations with Africa solely in terms of duality and in-betweenness is reductionist, since there are occasions when Wright clearly identifies with Africa. For example, watching the dance of a group of Ghanaian women, Wright is fascinated by an African folklore that reminds him of the African-American culture in his native Mississippi. Wright says: “I’d seen these same snake-like, veering dances before … in America, in storefront churches, in Holly Roller Tabernacles, in God’s Temples, in unpainted wooden prayer-meeting houses on the plantations of the Deep South” (62). This statement shows Wright’s awareness of his African cultural background, reinforcing Du Bois’s idea in *Souls* that Africa strongly influenced the folklore of the Deep South (195). The fact that Wright is not always able to identify with Africans does not mean that he is living in an abstract in-between space, nor does it mean that he would turn away from Africa as a potential identification. The similarity that Wright sees between Africans and African-Americans opposes assertions like those of Gruesser, who argues that in *Black Power*, Wright alienates himself from Africans (141). Later, Gruesser contrasts *Black Power* with Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, arguing that this book opposes Wright’s ambivalence toward Africa.

Set in rural Georgia from the early to the middle twentieth century, *The Color Purple* is the story of Celie, an African-American woman who overcomes the physical and
emotional abuses of two Black men named Alphonso and Albert and later discovers the joy of independence and self-fulfilment. Celie’s newfound freedom is heavily influenced by Shug Avery and Sophia, who are two major female characters in the book. Shug, who used to be Albert’s mistress, falls in love with Celie and later inspires her to resist his oppression and achieve economic independence. In a similar vein, Sophia inspires Celie by teaching her to stand strong against men.

Another major character in *The Color Purple* is Nettie, who is Celie’s sister. While Celie was living with Albert in Georgia, Nettie had gone to Africa to work as a missionary. In Africa, Nettie travels to Senegal, Liberia, and later settles in the fictional African village of Olinka with Adam and Olivia, who are Celie’s Children. From Africa, Nettie writes many letters to Celie in which she discusses her views of the continent. In a letter to Celie, Nettie says: “Today the people of Africa – having murdered or sold into slavery their strongest folks – are riddled by disease and sunk in spiritual and physical confusion. They believe in the devil and worship the dead. Nor can they read or write” (145). Discussing Nettie’s views of Africa, Gruesser maintains that they oppose the romanticization of Africa as a land of glory because Walker, like Wright, knows that the continent is still suffering from the effects of colonization and cultural imperialism (156-57). One thing that Gruesser does not say is that Nettie’s statement reflects a reproachful, primitivist, and condescending African-American view of Africa, recalling the distrust of religion and tradition that is evident in Richard Wright’s *Black Power*.

On the other hand, however *The Color People* represents Africa in a positive light. The book expresses the joy and fulfillment that an African-American can have from the experience of crossing the Atlantic Ocean and learning or living in Africa. In a letter to Celie, Nettie says that she did not know about Africa’s great civilizations until she traveled abroad. During a visit to an English museum, Nettie sees “thousands of vases, jars, masks, bowls, baskets, [and] statues” from Africa (145). When she asks why the items were taken from Africa, Nettie is baffled by the answer “Hard times” given by the European historians:

‘Hard times’ is a phrase the English love to use when speaking of Africa. And it is easy to forget that Africa’s ‘hard times’ were made harder by them. Millions and Millions of Africans were captured and sold into slavery – you and me, Celie! And whole cities were destroyed by slave catching wars. (145)

Nettie’s statement corrects the misconceptions relating to Africa’s current crisis by stressing the history of foreign domination that brought it about. By narrating this history, Nettie uncovers the truth about slavery from an African-centered perspective. Nettie’s African consciousness is clearly manifest when she states: “We are not white. We are not Europeans. We are black like the Africans themselves. And we and the Africans will be working for a common goal: the uplift of black people everywhere” (143). Instead of analyzing *The Color Purple* as a critique of an essentialist, romantic view of Africa, we can also read the novel as an exploration of the tensions between the need to criticize
such romantic perceptions, and the need for productive ways in which to identify with Africa.

**Conclusion**

The scholars of Black Atlantic Studies tend to have a radical, postmodern approach to the study of the relations between African-Americans and Africa, especially when the connections are examined in the context of the African-American intellectuals’ attitudes about Africa. Critics of the Black Atlantic theory such as Gilroy, Kanneh, Gruesser, and Appiah often downplay the place of Africa in the Diaspora by representing the relations between African-Americans and Africa mainly in terms of discontinuities and double-consciousness. Opposing this postmodernist and anti-essentialist representation of the relations between African-Americans and Africa, Joseph Roach, Charles Piot, Molefi Kete Asante, and Manthia Diawara have stressed the affinities between African-Americans and Africa. Referring to Gilroy’s *Black Atlantic* and *Against Race*, Asante has condemned the representation of the intimacies between Africa and its Diaspora in terms of discontinuity and double-consciousness. In doing so, the critics of Gilroy have provided alternative ways of understanding the relations between the Black Diaspora and Africa beyond the reducible concepts of anti-essentialism, duality, difference, and hybridity.

Without a doubt, the Black Atlantic theories of Gilroy, Kanneh, and Gruesser are important since they recognize the fluidity and double-consciousness in African-American culture, which W.E.B. Du Bois himself points out in *Souls*. Yet, the Black Atlantic theories have limitations, because they neglect the importance of the collective cultural and racial experience that African-American writers such as Toni Morrison, Richard Wright and Alice Walker affirm in their works.

In African-American literature, Africanisms and identification with Africa are either visible or invisible depending on the historical or cultural context in which the text is placed. In order to understand the writers’ attitudes about Africa impartially, one must, at the same time, examine the ways in which Africa is celebrated and the ways in which it is misrepresented in their works. This integrative study of the place of Africa in twentieth-century African-American literature will help transcend the reductive anti-essentialist and essentialist perspectives about Africa that have emerged in recent years in both Black-Atlantic and African-centered schools of thought.
Bibliography


Notes


2. See Bonnett and Watson (2), and Ronald Segal: 1995, xiii.


4. Not all African scholars are happy with this emphasis on diversity and multiplicity. In “A Quick Reading of Rhetorical Jingoism: Anthony Appiah and His Fallacies” (2003), Molefi Kete Asante says: “Appiah establishes himself squarely in the anti-African camp while parading as an African scholar. He uses the claim of being African in much the same way as Clarence Thomas seemed to use the fact of his blackness as a shield to attack Africans” (1). Asante’s comment reflects the anxiety that some Black scholars express when native African intellectuals represent Africa in postmodernist terms.