

Susanne Gehrmann, Flora Veit-Wild (Eds.)

Conventions & Conversions

Generic Innovations in African Literatures
Innovations génériques dans les littératures africaines

Susanne Gehrmann, Flora Veit-Wild, Tobias Wendl (Hg.)

LuKA

Studien zu Literaturen und Kunst Afrikas

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 **Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier**

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Susanne Gehrmann, Flora Veit-Wild and Tobias Wendl

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Editeurs :

Susanne Gehrmann, Flora Veit-Wild et Tobias Wendl

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Herausgeber/innen:

Susanne Gehrmann, Flora Veit-Wild und Tobias Wendl

Die wissenschaftliche Buchreihe LuKA veröffentlicht Monographien und ausgewählte Sammelbände zu Literaturen und Oraturen in afrikanischen und europäischen Sprachen sowie zur performativen und visuellen Kunst Afrikas und der afrikanischen Diaspora. Die Beiträge zu LuKA verorten sich in den Literatur-, Kunst- und Medienwissenschaften. Im Mittelpunkt steht die Relevanz der Kulturproduktion Afrikas für aktuelle Theorien und Debatten. Publikationssprachen sind Deutsch, Englisch und Französisch.

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Generic Innovation in African Literatures: Introduction

Susanne Gehrman and Flora Veit-Wild, Humboldt-Universität Berlin

By convention, literary texts have been divided into prose, poetry and drama. They have been opposed to and distinguished from oral recital and story telling, from the performing and from the visual arts. By conversion, they have started to ally themselves with each other as well as with the non-literary and not text-based art forms.

By convention, African literature has been seen as a genre of its own kind, a genre configured as anti- or postcolonial, as *littérature engagée*, as concerned with social and political struggles. As such, it has traditionally been relegated to being mimetic, accessible, exuding an 'African' sensibility. By conversion, African literary texts liberate themselves from such generic prescriptions and categorisations. Not only do they participate in the innovations and renovations of literature instigated, inspired and facilitated through multifarious possibilities of crisscrossing literary domains, they rummage in formerly foreign and forbidden fields, daring miscegenation and misalliances.

By doing just that they refuse to be regarded as exotic, defy being labelled as African, deny being read as sources of ethnographic knowledge or being reduced to their expression of social critique and political protest. They demand to be judged by their aesthetic value. "Toute écriture est enceinte de son projet esthétique" [Writing is always pregnant with its aesthetic endeavour] (Nganang 2007: 10), Patrick Nganang affirms at the opening of his essay *Manifeste d'une nouvelle littérature africaine* [Manifesto for a New African Literature], and continues that literary works by African authors "le plus souvent récusent l'engagement, sans exception ne parlent pas de créole, et surtout ne se définissent pas par rapport à l'indigénat ou la colonie, encore moins par rapport au rococo!" [in most cases dismiss commitment, without exception don't speak Creole, and above all do not define themselves in relation to Africa or the colony, even less in relation to rococo!] (Nganang 2007: 10). What he envisions, or rather, demands, is an "ouverture donc à la République de l'Imagination" [an opening up to the Republic of the Imagination] (Nganang 2007: 12).

The contributions in this book show that generic innovation is neither based on or brought about by the arbitrary impulses of individual writers and verbal artists nor by general consent among a group or a generation. The essays dig into the context and the causes of the transformations that are taking place in the multi-fold contexts of modernisation and globalisation. Indeed, the fact that in many cases generational divides go hand in hand with the affinity for stylistic innovation, the breaking away from the canon and the literary norm, testifies that younger generations are growing up under new historical and political conditions and with new insights, linguistic phenomena,

knowledges and technological options and crafts. They will more readily break up given literary forms through references to film or television, by mixing words with sounds or by playing with various sorts of new orality: sending “myths and legends [...] onto the information highway” (Kaschula 2001).

At the same time, some writers who have their roots in the period of independence perform their own generic conversions by touching on matters arising on the political landscape of Africa that demand a breaking away from hitherto applied forms of novelistic representation. While the forward looking perspective of the independence period gave way to the stance of protest against neo- and postcolonial tyranny and thus grew from realist to surrealist and satirical modes of writing, the traumas of war, genocide, child soldiers or forced migration have generated imaginative works that explode any coherent representation and generic demarcation. The creative response to the great menaces of the 21st century – irony, sarcasm, self-doubt, linguistic and generic playfulness – reflects the deep concern of writers from and beyond the African continent about what can today be deciphered and configured, decoded and encoded as ‘truth’.

While intertextuality has long since been established as an important analytical paradigm in the domain of African literatures, especially as regards the postcolonial stance of *writing back* to colonial discourses on Africa and to the European literary canon (Ashcroft et al. 1988, Marx 2004, Riesz 2007), intermediality has only recently informed critical approaches in this field (Gehrmann/Prüschenk 2009). Nevertheless, in the era of rapidly expanding medialisation and digitilisation, interferences between literature and other media and forms of artistic expression are gaining in importance – not to forget that photography and film belonged to the first tools of ethnographic research and were also appropriated by the agents of African modernity together with the skills of writing.

Since the 1990s, research and debates on oral literatures from Africa have undergone decisive changes. While for a long time the analysis of oral forms of art was limited to the transcription of oral sources and their linguistic or ethnographic evaluation, orature is now perceived in its performative and semiotical dimension and analysed accordingly with methods from media, performance and theatre studies. Recent approaches are based on the premise that the appraisal of oral literature cannot take place without the context of performance in which it takes place (Okpewho 1992) and an understanding of it as an event of social interaction (Joubert 2004). The use of digital media and intermedial references to audio-visual or oral-performative arts inside the written text has obliterated the binary distinctions between written/stable/modern and oral/performative/traditional (cf. Kruger 2006; Bartels/Wiemann 2007). Even more so has the introduction of the World Wide Web in the new millennium revolutionised the modes of literary and artistic production, distribution and reception in Africa.

The first part of this volume, “**Intermediality in Prose, Poetry and Drama/Inter-médialités et nouvelles dramaturgies**”, presents critical engagements with inter-