

Report on Africa Seminar Trip
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A central ambition in travelling to West Africa was to make some connections between African cultures and settings, and their fictionalized representations as presented in the African novels we are teaching in the core course. As a comparatist I have studied and taught German, Spanish, Portuguese, and British literatures. Spending time living and studying in Europe and Latin America has been an essential part of my training in those literatures, not merely to become familiar with the literary referents involved, but to have a kind of credibility that only comes of investment beyond the armchair. I have no illusions about the degree of authentic immersion that is possible in three weeks or even three years, but I think the contact and effort involved are at least an additional vantage point from which to probe the meaning of a literary text and the issues it treats.

One of the first important revelations about Africa came from our exposure to the two African nations we visited, Ghana and Senegal, and that is the need to speak of African culture in the plural. Any Africanist knows there is not AN African culture, and I was aware at an intellectual level of that fallacy, but the practice of treating Europe and Asia in terms of independent countries rather than in the collective, while Africa is more commonly referred to and discussed as a single unit, has left I think a persistent impression of its being a monolithic entity.

Insofar as one may generalize, for example, the difference in temperament between Ghanaian and Senegalese people struck me as every bit as dissimilar as Brazilians are from Germans. So simple and perhaps almost self-evident an insight as that will go far in strengthening our efforts as teachers to convey an appreciation for the complexity and diversity of African cultures, beyond what a narrowly selective group of African novels might.

On the other hand, certain important commonalities of the African experience emerged, such as the one which seems to be paradigmatic of the whole post-Colonial set of dilemmas: the problem of language. Some in Ghana expressed resentment at the enduring legacy of colonialism implicit in the continuing preeminence of English, and expressed the belief that Twi will come to replace English as the national tongue. At other times, we heard expressed resignation to the dominance of English or French, together with the lament that the native tongues seem to be dying out and surely cannot survive indefinitely. ■ came to appreciate the dilemma of writers who find it hard to speak in an authentic voice when the language is not a mother tongue. The choice between fragmented authenticity and artificial universalism is not an easy one.

One of the deepest impressions left was of a harangue full of anger and resentment that was delivered to four of us when we met in Senegal with a group of journalists at the state run

newspaper. The editor referred to the appalling conditions in which he and his countrymen had been born and lived, the lack of any rhyme or reason to his poverty and our affluence, the history of exploitation to which he felt Africa had been subjected at Western hands, and finally ended with his bitter insistence that we owe it to Africa to redress the injustice of it all. ■ think at that moment the irrationalism, the politics of retribution and hatred evident in a work like Fanon's Wretched of the Earth (on the Core Course syllabus), suddenly became if not more reasonable, at least less remote, less incomprehensible than before.

Throughout Senegal, politics were much more frequently and passionately discussed than in Ghana (with the exception of the political science professor at U of Accra). The disgust with which opposition politicians and critics of the government dismiss their reputation as being the premiere democracy in Africa, suggested the dangers of making assumptions about western political labels used in third world contexts. The Ghanaians, by contrast, generally had little to criticize in their government. It was only with reflection that I realized that in the approach to full democracy, free debate creates an impression of discontent much higher than that evident in more repressive, and thus seemingly satisfactory regimes. One can see how, from both the Senegalese and Ghanaian perspectives, a little learning can be a dangerous thing where American tourists are concerned.

Given the rather appalling living conditions throughout

Africa, it was really no surprise to hear some express the sentiment that until economic problems find some solution, political debates are a luxury many Africans are not much interested in.

Ghana was by far the more hospitable of the two countries. I found it strongly reminiscent of Brazil, where I lived for two years, in terms of terrain, tropical surroundings, and a disarming openness and friendliness of the people. The frequently expressed pro-American feelings of the people were especially surprising, seeming to belong to a past era. Everywhere we went, the stunningly vibrant and vivid colors of the open air markets with their fruit and wares, the blazing reds and oranges of the taxi cabs, and the resplendent colors of the native apparel, seemed a stubborn protest against the barrenness of living conditions.

The changed environment we found in Senegal was a subject of frequent and sometimes heated debate among ourselves. Though outwardly the countries share much, the reception we received was markedly different. It is hard to form judgments based only on anecdotal evidence, but that is all such a trip provides. My first morning in Senegal, I was tricked out of twenty dollars by the smoothest, most charming con artist I hope to ever meet. The "tour" of the city we paid for was a ridiculous bus trip through town with three or four "photo-ops" for which we were dutifully herded in and out by the officious Adam, and then a stop at an "artist center," where a couple of young men were drawing

outlines of Africa and bosomy Africans with glue, and applying sand. The canned nature of the tour, together with the kitschy tourist trap, revealed perhaps more about African expectations of American interest and taste, than about Africa itself. The next day, we had another tour of two residences which we took to be compensatory for the first day's disappointment, but it turned out to be rather more expensive than anticipated. In the moving tour of the Slave House on Goree Island, such petty deceptions were soon forgotten, as we listened to a poignant account of one of history's most harrowing practices. When, a few days later, we learned that the Slave House was itself another entrepreneurial creation rather than historical reconstruction, we could only laugh hysterically at the pattern which had once again surfaced, and wonder if in reality we had only circled Richmond for nine hours, and were somewhere in Goochland being led around by canny exploiters of Miss Quested-like American tourists.

As I alternated between resentment of a kind of crafty salesmanship that seemed to grease the whole economy and culture of Senegal, and a desire to recognize and appreciate one more variety of difference, I remembered how the same dilemma had arisen in teaching the epics of ancient Greece to students. Odysseus, greatest hero of the Hellenes, was known as wily Odysseus, teller of tales, deceiver of men and womanizer to boot. How many values are universal, and how many culturally variable-- or at least subject to varied cultural interpretation. Madison Avenue, after all, is certainly more exploitative than any street

hawker in Dakar, but **it** operates in culturally sanctioned adornment and is therefore "respectable."

Probably all who participated in the trip would agree that among the greatest benefits of the **seminar** were the enhanced appreciation we developed for each other, both as professional colleagues and as friends. Life in the university community will be more comfortable as a result, and because of the friendships that were forged, there will be more exchange both personal and intellectual. How else would I have entered into discussion about racial politics with a Black member of the Law faculty, talked about abortion, capital punishment, and gender issues with a self-styled leftist from the political science department, or had a fruitful exchange about Formalism in art and literature with a painter from the Art department (not to mention discussing Mormonism with a Quaker provost and a director of international studies)?

Since returning, these friendships have continued to develop. My experiences have already found their way into class discussions in the section of the Core Course I am now teaching. The rich personal encounter I had with fellow Mormons in Ghana provided the background for a slide presentation and lecture I gave to a local church group here in Richmond. And I am in correspondence with some of the people I met while in Africa. I am confident the benefits of the faculty seminar will continue to inform my personal and professional life for a long time.