

Thinking Africa and the African Diaspora Differently: Theories, Practices, Imaginaries

Workshop Venue:

Centre for African Studies, University of Cape Town

Planned Date:

December 13-15, 2011

This workshop is part of a collaborative project between the Centre for African Studies at the University of Cape Town, the Africana Studies Department at Brown University, the Centre for Caribbean Thought at the University of the West Indies, and Faculty of Humanities at Addis Ababa University.

Introduction

There is a current crisis in the general history of thought and knowledge production. It is a crisis in which challenges for thinking and the practices of thinking itself are crucial. Within this context the central challenge posed by this workshop is that of breaking with a set of conventional academic and disciplinary frameworks and ways of working – to think, practice, perform and imagine Africa in new ways. A key idea of the workshop is the notion of "openings". What methodologies, approaches and forms of theorization open out to new conceptions of African subjectivities, ways of life, knowledges, aesthetics and imaginaries? And how do we begin to situate such approaches within the postcolonial academy and beyond?

This concern with new possibilities, difference and openings takes place in relation to a specific and complex set of histories and contexts. The first of these is the long, complex and varied history of the manner in which Africa has emerged as an epistemic object in Euro-centred/Western/Occidental knowledge and theory. A second is the manner in which the resultant knowledge projects have been translated into a familiar institutional and disciplinary framework and architecture of knowledge. A third is the embeddedness of such disciplinary projects in local histories of colonialism and apartheid. A fourth is the fate of such knowledge projects in the postcolonial university, where they have been subject to repositioning and new stylizations.

Contemporary conjunctions

One of the workshop arguments is that contemporary continuities run through these various contexts. As the continent is reconfigured in shifting global geopolitics, economies and imaginaries, so is the knowledge of, in and about Africa and the Diaspora. How is Africa and African Studies being positioned within contemporary configurations of knowledge/power as part of a process of the reconfiguration of imperial power? What new ways of thinking and figuring Africa have emerged as part of resistant/contestatory projects and dissident critiques, and how have these been institutionally sited? What theoretical coordinates and genealogies underlie such projects? How can "thinking Africa differently" open new spaces to grapple with the creation of new categories for us to engage the world in which we inhabit? How is Africa being thought and taught in the postcolonial university? On the continent? In the Diaspora? In South Africa, specifically? How has South Africa's role as regional hegemon been reflected in the arena of knowledge production? How do we write a non-colonial, or de-colonial, knowledge agenda for the postcolonial university from the perspective of our own time and place?

Intended as a set of provocations, such questions point to an area of critical inquiry and an overdue debate on knowledge, the disciplines and the university as an institution – in the contexts of the aftermaths and afterlives of colonialism/apartheid. The workshop invites scholars, practitioners, activists and artists of the visual, oral/aural and performative to debate, and engage critically with the ways in which contemporary Africa is produced and imagined today.

Points of departure/Overarching questions

- How has Africa been produced through different disciplinary knowledge projects, institutional sites, visual regimes and contemporary discourses – and how have these been contested?
- How do we open, engage with, and theorize epistemically excluded archives and bodies of thought and practice?
- How do we think Africa and the Diaspora outside of a set of conventional and inherited frameworks (from colonial ethnography, to Area Studies and more recently Development Studies)?
- What is involved in a conception of body, or performance, or landscape as archive?
- What are productive avenues to follow in questioning disciplinary frameworks and approaches, and how do we create space out side (or in conversation with) these frameworks, in forms of inter/trans/non-disciplinary knowledges and approaches?
- How do we avoid new forms of objectification/alienation and new logics of appropriation as part of the postcolonial academy?
- What new meanings to the human can we give in a world where necro-politics and disposable bodies are central to the order of rule?
- How does the epistemological project described here intersect with a politics of knowledge in the global academy, and with particular institutional politics and histories? Or how does this translate into curriculum?
- If, as we understand it, this line of thinking calls for a different project in a familiar institutional, disciplinary landscape, then what is involved in holding open and defending the space for such a project?
- And what does it mean to organize such a project under the heading of African Studies?
- How does "Thinking Africa Differently" open up spaces to grapple with the a theoretical framing of the present.
- How can African Studies grapple with issues of science and technology in the contemporary moment? What does it mean to think about science in Africa today?
- How do we grapple with the complexities of languages and knowledge formations on the African continent?

We invite papers, interventions and performances around these questions or any aspect that you think is central to the theme of "Thinking Africa and the African Diaspora Differently." Please email titles and abstracts of proposed presentations to the following thinking.africa.differently@gmail.com & sarmientonico@yahoo.com. The deadline for abstracts is November 10, 2011.

Harry Garuba, Center for African Studies
Nick Shepherd, Center for African Studies
Lungisile Ntsebeza, Center for African Studies
Gerl Augusto, Brown University
Anthony Bogue, Brown University
Binyam Sisay, Addis Ababa University
Rupert Lewis, University of the West Indies
Brian Meeks, University of the West Indies