



Discursive Possession of Western Literature by African Thought

Doctoral Workshop with Prof. Wendy Laura Belcher
(Princeton University), 26-27 September 2014

Westerners have long conceived of Africans as without intellectual history or written literary traditions. Using a new model of transcultural intertextuality that I call “discursive possession,” however, we will explore how European authors have been taken over by African thought and had their texts co-constituted by Africans. This theory enables us to read European texts ordinarily classified as orientalist (i.e., as examples of appropriation) as also exhibiting aspects of African thought, as culturally heterogeneous texts constructed through the mediated agency of their European authors. That is, they produce texts through which other texts and voices speak—a body called an “energumen,” literally, “one that is wrought upon.” Conceiving of European texts and authors as spoken through, as that which are wrought upon, as energumens, proves a useful resource for critical thought in postcolonial studies.

In this two-day workshop, we will examine examples of how African discourse has animated American and British fiction over the centuries, including that written by two of the most famous authors ever to write in English: Samuel Johnson and Herman Melville. The aim is to shift students’ postcolonial perspective beyond a narcissistic focus on Europe’s imperial grasp on the globe and to add a perspective on how African discourse has shaped European texts.



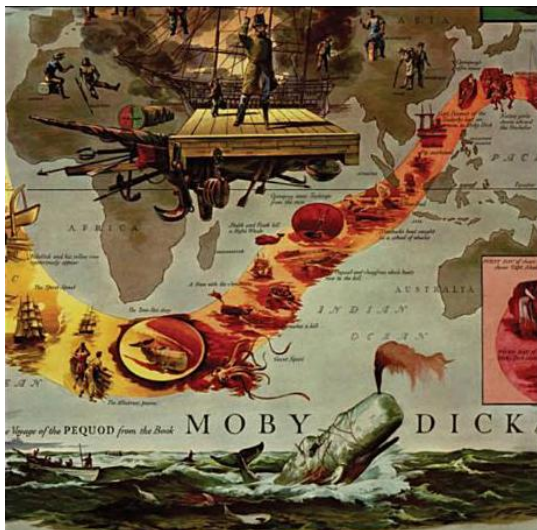
Dr. Wendy Laura Belcher is an associate professor of African literature at Princeton University for the Department of Comparative Literature and the Center for African American Studies. She is the award-winning author of several books, including *Abyssinia’s Samuel Johnson: Ethiopian Thought in the Making of an English Author* (Oxford 2012) and the forthcoming *The Life and Struggles of Our Mother Walatta Petros: A Translation of a Seventeenth-Century African Biography of an African Woman* (Princeton 2015).

Friday, 26 September (Plattenstr. 47, PLH-102)

- 10.15-12 am Seminar discussion of *Rasselas* (in Prof. Reddick's MA seminar)
- 4-5.30 pm: "Discursive Possession of Western Literature by African Thought" (Lecture and Discussion)
- 5.30 pm: Break
- 5.45-7 pm: The Black Queen of Sheba: Ethiopian Influences on Western Literature (Lecture and Discussion)
- 7 pm: Apéro



Saturday, 27 September (Plattenstr. 47, PLH-102)



- 10-10.30 am: "Stuckey and Cartwright on West African Influences in *Benito Cereno*" (Lecture)
- 10.30-12 am: Discussion of *Benito Cereno*
- 12-2 pm: Lunch
- 2-2.30 pm: "Ethiopian Influences in *Rasselas*" (Lecture)
- 2.30-4 pm: Discussion of *Rasselas*
- 4 pm: Break
- 4.15-5.15 Workshop on publishing journal articles

Required Reading

- Melville, Herman. *Benito Cereno*. Bedford/St. Martin's, 2006. (124 pages)
- *Johnson, Samuel. *History of Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia*. Ed. Jessica Richard. Guelph, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2008. (chapter 40 to the end)
- *Cartwright, Keith. 2002. Introduction and Chapter 7: *Reading Africa into American Literature: Epics, Fables, and Gothic Tales*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky.

Additional Primary Reading

- Haggard, Henry Rider. *Queen Sheba's Ring*. London: E. Nash, 1910. (chapter 1)

Additional Secondary Reading

- Belcher, Wendy Laura. *Abyssinia's Samuel Johnson: Ethiopian Thought in the Making of an English Author*. New York: Oxford UP, 2012.
- Carney, Judith Ann. *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2001.
- Gates, Henry Louis. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*. New York: Oxford UP, 1988.
- Gikandi, Simon. *Slavery and the Culture of Taste*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2011.
- Lee, Debbie. *Slavery and the Romantic Imagination*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002.
- Pollitzer, William S. *The Gullah People and Their African Heritage*. University of Georgia Press, 1999.
- Sobel, Mechal. *The World They Made Together: Black and White Values in Eighteenth-century Virginia*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987.
- Stuckey, Sterling. *African Culture and Melville's Art: The Creative Process in Benito Cereno and Moby-Dick*. New York: Oxford UP, 2009.

* Available on OLAT. Search for "Workshop Wendy Belcher" or use the following link:
<https://www.olat.uzh.ch/olat/url/RepositoryEntry/11265933314?guest=true&lang=de>

All interested students, members of staff and other guests are cordially invited to the workshop. Please register by sending an e-mail to Johnny Riquet (johannes.riquet@es.uzh.ch) by 20 September.