

Afro-European Cartographies

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Edited by

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AfroEuropean Cartographies,
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INTRODUCTION: AFROEUROPEAN CARTOGRAPHIES

DOMINIC THOMAS

Africa is no longer exclusively in Africa.
As Africans disperse into the world, they
create other Africas, try other adventures
that probably aid in the valorisation of the
cultures of the Black continent.

—A. Mabanckou,
Le Sanglot de l'Homme Noir, 2012, 159–160

It was of course the Malian writer Amadou Hampaté Bâ who famously stated that “In Africa, when an old person dies, it is the same thing as a library burning.” In so doing, he explicitly referenced the relationship to orality, the “choice” of language, the question of audience, the incontrovertible issue of political commitment and the accompanying dangers associated with oppositionality. These questions remain pertinent today, and all African writers invariably find themselves navigating the complex terrains of geography, responsibility, and aesthetic originality. In reality, whether writing *on/from* the African continent or *in* global diasporic settings, African writers have been compelled to negotiate multiple languages in order to translate experience, often only *adopting* the language of written expression subsequently as a logical outcome of formal schooling. Franco-Congolese author Alain Mabanckou, for example, explains this situation and how he has endeavoured to define his relationship to “French”:

I learned French when I was six. This means that before six I was speaking five or six African languages ... I was shocked to see later on that there was no literature in these languages. Nothing is *written* in Bembé or in Lingala—they’re oral languages. [My novel] *Broken Glass* is written in French, but if you feel the rhythm of the prose, it’s like the Congolese way of speaking. That’s why I use only one kind of punctuation throughout the book: the comma. I’m proud that I now finally found a way to *deal* with the French (emphasis added).¹

For the most part, these linguistic exigencies have been closely tied to colonial influence; more recently, however, authors residing in geographic spaces *outside* of colonial-defined migratory spaces have been confronted with alternative challenges.² As Christopher L. Miller has written, “One sign of change in recent years ... has been a new global turn taken by certain African writers. ... Numerous authors have taken at least a few steps beyond the borders of the Hexagon [France], sending their characters on forays to other states of the European Union.”³ These transitions have yielded a range of practices. As far as the francophone context is concerned, most writers having elected to live outside of France, continue to write in French. Certainly, this aspect was underscored in the anthology published in 2013 by the organisation Etonnants Voyageurs, *L’Afrique qui vient*, whereby “Almost all these [francophone] writers either live in France or the U.S. and publish in French.”⁴ Notable examples would include In Koli Jean Bofane (Belgium), Véronique Tadjo (South Africa), Bessora (Belgium/Switzerland), Max Lobe (Switzerland), Fiston Mwanza Mujila (Austria), Théo Ananissoh, Wilfried N’Sondé and Sénouvo Agbota Zinzou (Germany), Koulsy Lamko (Mexico), and Kama Kamanda (Luxembourg). But other writers have in turn adopted the European languages spoken in the countries in which they now live. Fouad Laroui’s *Verbannen woorden (Words in Exile)* was published in Dutch in 2005, Rachida Lamrabet’s *Vrouwland (Woman’s Land, 2007)* and *Een kind van God (A Child of God, 2008)* in Flemish (Belgium), Chika Unigwe, author of *De Feniks (The Phoenix, 2005)*, writes in English and Dutch, and there is today a long list of authors in Italy such as Pap Khouma, Salah Methani, Mohamed Bouchane and Amara Lakhous whose works now form, alongside other African descendants such as Cristina Ali Farah and Gabriella Ghermandi, a library of contemporary Afro-Italian writing.⁵

Naturally, the changing status of European languages in the world today is also relevant, especially in the case of French. In 2000, almost 50% of French speakers lived in Europe, a number that will have fallen to 12% by 2050, and risen during the same period to 85% in Africa.⁶ Somewhat paradoxically then, the very survival of French is predicated on its ongoing usage beyond or *outside* of Europe. Such observations have significant implications when it comes to assessing *writing / production, consecration / recognition, and audience / distribution*. This is a dimension Pascale Casanova drew attention to in her book *The World Republic of Letters*,

The position of Francophone writers ... is paradoxical if not tragic as well. Since for them Paris is not merely the capital of world literary space, as

historically it has been for writers everywhere, but also the very source of the political and/or literary domination under which they labour.⁷

Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o has been the most influential reference in the debate concerning “European languages,” calling for their abandonment as a precondition to “Decolonizing the Mind.” Yet, his own partial recourse to writing in Kikuyu (alongside a handful of Swahiliphone authors), or Senegalese author Boris Boubacar Diop’s use of Wolof, are among the relatively small number of examples of writing outside of the “languages of imperialist imposition.”⁸ But there are also economic and market-driven reasons that disproportionately impact African languages. Gisèle Sapiro’s book *Les échanges littéraires entre Paris et New York à l’ère de la globalisation* (2010), explores translation practices in the context of globalisation: “central languages are vehicular languages—a work has a greater chance of being translated from a *peripheral language* toward a *central language* or another peripheral language if it has already been translated into a central language—because of consecration and accessibility.”⁹ The central language today is English, and languages such as French, German, Italian and so forth are increasingly becoming peripheral. Mariama Bâ’s novel *Une si longue lettre* (*So Long a Letter*, 1979) and Boris Boubacar Diop’s *Murambi: le livre des ossements* (*Murambi: The Book of Bones*, 2000) both sold far more in their English translations than in the original French.

Likewise, the question of consecration also remains crucial. As Alain Mabanckou argued in an article published in *Le Monde* newspaper in 2006, “La francophonie, oui; le ghetto, non.” “French literature—that is, a literature written by metropolitan French writers, has always corresponded to the traditional unit of measure, against which *francophone* texts [texts in French by authors from Africa, the Caribbean, etc.] are seen as marginal.”¹⁰ Shortly thereafter, in 2007, the publication of the *Manifesto for a World Literature in French* constituted an attempt to alter this dynamic, calling for a new “transnational world-literature in the French language, open to the world ... With the centre placed on an equal plane with other centres [and] in which language [would be] freed from its exclusive pact with the nation.”¹¹ But in the realm of literature, contrary to the Anglophone, lusophone or hispanophone spheres, the French context continues to hierarchize “littératures venues d’ailleurs” [literatures from elsewhere] by distinguishing between “francophile authors,” by which Mabanckou means “those authors coming from non-francophone countries who have decided to write in French ... And so we have Makine, Cioran, Semprún, Kundera, Beckett, etc.,” and African “writers such as Kourouma, Mongo Beti, and Sony Labou Tansi who are considered

foreign writers even though they write in French.”¹² To this day, major French bookstore La Fnac *segregates* African, Caribbean and Maghrebi authors according to geographic regions, just as the publisher Gallimard publishes “black” authors in its series “Continents Noirs” (Black Continents) and “major” authors in “La Blanche” (the White series)—a hierarchy now complicated by the inclusion of “successful” Black writers such as Alain Mabankou, Patrick Chamoiseau, Ananda Devi and Marie NDiaye in “La Blanche.” The French publishing sector, subjected to the lingering hegemonic and monopolistic forces of the Latin Quarter publishing establishment, only rewards works published in France (unlike the Booker Prize that is now truly globalized). And although micropublishing sectors exist in Morocco, Tunisia, Senegal, Cameroon and so on, the works they publish do not for the most part circulate *out* in the same way that the works published in France do not circulate *in*. This is due to the economic dissymmetry that disproportionately impacts the global south where prohibitive costs and inadequate purchasing power are the order of the day.¹³

Thus, *world literature* in English, edited and published in markets and outlets as diverse as Australia, Canada, South Africa, the United Kingdom and the United States while still privileging first-world consumers, cannot be compared to “world literature in French” that only *rarely* reaches audiences located outside of France or outside first-world distribution networks. Attempts to redress this imbalance through specialized series such as Gallimard’s “Continents noirs” or Hatier’s “Monde Noir,” while introducing new voices, nevertheless perpetuate hierarchies associated with the politics of reception and aesthetic classification. Language therefore remains of crucial relevance since, as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o recently highlighted in his book *Something Torn, Something New* (2009):

the middle class prefers the European linguistic screen that keeps it worlds apart from the people ... Postcolonial intellectuals prefer to express communal memories in foreign languages, which, in the end, means sharing those communal memories with the foreign owners of the languages or among themselves as a foreign-language-speaking elite.¹⁴

The relationship invoked by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o has also evolved to the extent that the kind of disconnect he has in mind between the African writer expressing her/himself via European linguistic modes is African continent-centric. Firstly, ascribing an “African” author with the task of “saving” the French language is of course problematic, since, “In the end, saying that a francophone author enriches or saves a language is far from being a compliment. Such remarks set up a relationship of subordination in

which francophone literature ends up being considered purely for its social function, for what it brings to the French language,” and “One does not write to save a language, but rather to create one.”¹⁵ And secondly, as Angolan writer José Eduardo Agualusa points out in a recent interview, “African writers are in a curious position: Our readers are not in our countries but in Europe. We write for foreigners, and it changes the way we write. We, as African authors, are more like translators—always trying to translate our reality for the foreign reader.”¹⁶ This dynamic changes when the African authors in question find themselves in diasporic settings—in such spaces as the European Union—and begin to address increasingly fellow nationals on the concerns and realities of *Afro-European* populations in Europe or African populations elsewhere whose experiences have been transformed by new cartographies.

“Best books” lists continue to ignore African writing—only rarely do writers other than Naguib Mahfouz, Tayeb Salih, or Chinua Achebe ever make such lists, even though three recent Nobel laureates (in addition to Mahfouz) hail from the continent (Soyinka, Coetzee and Gordimer). The *New Yorker* magazine, in its *Top 20 under 40* list of “young writers who capture the inventiveness and the vitality of contemporary *American* fiction” (emphasis added), included Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Dinaw Mengestu,¹⁷ a reflection of the global marketplace. This *also* extends into the academic realm where such writers as Helon Habila, Chris Abani, Mark Behr, Zakes Mda, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, Teju Cole, Wole Soyinka, Alain Mabanckou, Emmanuel Dongala, Patrice Nganang, Abdourahman Waberi and so forth now hold teaching positions in the United States. But this relative openness is not in evidence in Europe. A cursory glance at the Dalkey archive’s *Best European Fiction* Series, now in its 4th edition (2010–2013), ironically asks: “Yet times have changed, and how much do we even know about the richly diverse literature being written in Europe today?”¹⁸ Very little, I would answer, given that these anthologies have yet to feature among the 100-plus writers published to date a *single* “African” author. Such conclusions can only be understood within the broader socio-cultural and political context that persists in disassociating ethnic minorities with the category of Europeanness. Or, as Bernd Reiter points out with reference to the Portuguese context, by constructing nationhood “modernity, Europeanness, [and] whiteness” in terms of “difference to the non-European world.”¹⁹

The impact of such choices on identity and political consciousness is all the more interesting given the ways, as Saskia Sassen has convincingly illustrated, in which international migratory patterns are shaped by the dynamics of globalization.²⁰ African writers initially concentrated on the

internal dynamics of African societies, on the interaction with outsiders, settlers and colonial forces. Historically, African populations have responded to various “pull” factors during the colonial and then postcolonial era toward post-industrial economies as labourers, soldiers, students and so on, and writers soon turned their attention to the disorientation that followed colonial rule and that was a product of the gradual disintegration of the nation-state. In turn, these changes resulted in new migratory movements from the Global South toward the prosperous economies in the North. These transformations on the African continent have been well documented, but, as Fatima El-Tayeb has shown,

In order to deconstruct the particular forms of racialization shaping contemporary Europe, in their continental commonalities and national differences, it is necessary to be aware of the historical formations leading up to the present point; a point at which, after the major steps of economic and political unification have been implemented, the need to define what makes a European, to create common symbols and a shared sense of history in order to gain broad support for the new continental order, has increasingly moved to the centre of policy debates.²¹

Certainly these questions have proved challenging in Europe. In the 1980s, a little more than a decade following the signing into law of the Race Relations Act in Great Britain, Paul Gilroy pointed out in his important book, *There Ain't no Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (1987), that “the categories of blackness and Britishness were mutually exclusive.”²² Whereas, across the English Channel in France, the *French Republic [remains] one and indivisible* as enshrined in the first constitution of 1791, a principle that underscores the commitment to protecting the rights of all citizens regardless of ethnicity, religion or other social associations. As we shall see, countries have addressed these questions through often quite different approaches and policies, and substantial changes have taken place in recent years. Whether or not people accept the cultural and social changes that have taken place, the reality today, as Mark Stein demonstrated with the British context in mind, is that reciprocal mutations have occurred as a result of migratory dynamics, and today “‘blackness’ redefines ‘Britishness’ and ‘Britishness’ redefines ‘blackness’.”²³ As Sabrina Brancato has suggested:

Finally, writing the New Europe also means reviewing, rewriting and reformulating the relationship between Europe and Africa. Afro-European literatures crucially contribute to Europe’s mental decolonisation. They outline a path to go beyond the still dominant patterns of charity, paternalism and exoticism, and to formulate instead an effective idea of

equality and dignity, and implement a conception of citizenship and belonging no longer based on ancestral cultures but on the inevitably transnational and transcultural experience of the people who inhabit Europe today.²⁴

However, defining “African literature” is also proving to be an increasingly complex task since production can no longer be circumscribed exclusively according to a national or continental framework. There are writers *in* Africa as well as *outside* Africa, just as there are writers and works that navigate *between* the African continent and elsewhere. New categories have emerged, such as what Patrice Nganang has called the “national insiders” and “diasporic outsiders,” or what Papa Samba Diop describes as the “emigrants” and the “residents.”²⁵ In 2010, for example, the South African Nobel Laureate and twice Booker Prize-winning author J. M. Coetzee, who lives in Australia and now carries an Australian passport, was shortlisted for the 2010 Commonwealth Writer’s award for his book *Summertime* in the South East Asia and Pacific region. These complicated cartographies distort previous categories of belonging and correspond to just some of the complexities that surround the appreciation of African literature today. As Alain Mabanckou writes, “Africa is no longer exclusively in Africa. As Africans disperse into the world, they create other Africas, try other adventures that probably aid in the valorisation of the cultures of the Black continent.”²⁶

Recourse to new critical categories, such as *Afro-Europeanism* or *Afropeanism*,²⁷ can therefore assist us—as indeed individual chapters in this particular volume confirm (focusing as they do on law, literature, race discourse, history, film, policy-making and adopting multi-sited and transnational frameworks)—in circumscribing the cultural, political, and social changes shaping literary production. *Afro-European Cartographies* extends a conversation that began in 2004 when the Spanish Ministry of Education funded the “Afroeuropa@ns: Black Cultures and Identities in Europe” project in coordination with the University of León, and that has thus far yielded two publications: *Afroeuropa@ns: Cultures and Identities* (2008) edited by Marta Sofía López, and *Afroeuropa@n Configurations: Readings and Projects* (2011) edited by Sabrina Brancato. As the latter recaps:

A comparative analysis of Afro-European literatures immediately lets emerge a number of extra-literary questions. Exploring the texts of authors of African descent from various linguistic and national contexts in Europe and pointing out shared characteristics and common trends allows us to determine if it makes sense at all to speak of an Afro-European identity and to envisage the limits of such a configuration.²⁸

The European Union itself was founded on the principle that it “is a family of democratic European countries,” yet more recent concerns with harmonizing and E.U. policy (most notably when the European Council signed the *European Pact on Immigration and Asylum* in 2008) and structuring identity around notions such as “Fortress Europe” have served to complicate relationships between European and non-European populations. Furthermore, the increase in border control over the southern perimeter of the E.U. has specifically targeted African migrants, thereby further complicating and exacerbating tensions between White and non-White Europeans already residing in the E.U. (even though the E.U. itself includes numerous territories that are not located in “mainland” Europe—the Canary Islands [in close proximity to the West African coastline], Ceuta and Melilla [located on the north coast of Africa at the border between the Atlantic and the Mediterranean], or for that matter Mayotte and Réunion [in the Indian Ocean]). In fact, as Éric Fassin has shown, “European identity is defined today, above all, in negative terms, and in opposition to ‘migratory pressures’.”²⁹ As Allison Blakely reminds us:

One of the most tangible changes among the black population now taking shape in Europe from that present earlier is an expressed black consciousness and striving toward respectable identity, at times emphasizing group identity and at times on the individual level. One reason it makes sense to speak in terms of an ‘Afro-Europe’ is that increasing signs of some form of black community are appearing.³⁰

My colleague Allison Crumly Van Deventer and I recently examined the ways in which inter-governmental and supranational governance structures adopted by the E.U. have reinforced economic, juridical and political collaboration. However, these policies have resulted in minority populations becoming increasingly aware of the widespread nature of racial discrimination in the E.U.:

Motivated by the shared experience of discrimination ... such groups are less concerned with ethnic factionalism and the attribution of social roles according to national/non-national or European/non-European entities, than they are with the various ways in which inclusion and belonging could be fostered and in turn redefine the hegemonic tendencies of current political configurations.³¹

Of course, these new “processes of cultural hybridization” explored by Graziella Parati in her book *Migration Italy: The Art of Talking Back in a Destination Culture*, or the question as to the pertinence of “Afro-European literature(s)” given “the plurality and heterogeneity within it,” as

Sabrina Brancato has argued, remain relevant.³² These developments connect with African literature today, as the “enfants de la postcolonie” [children of the postcolony] described by Abdourahman A. Waberi or as examples of the “post-nationalist” authors anthologized by Helon Habila, highlight the engagement of these authors with these twenty-first century questions.³³ This is especially crucial given that minority populations continue to be defined “as the very essence of non-Europeanness in terms that link migration to supposedly invincible differences of race, culture, and religion,”³⁴ rather than underscoring the multiple ways in which Afro-Europeanness and Europeanness operate as mutually interchangeable referential modes in which the historical nature of the relationship remains implicitly constitutive in nature, thereby preventing respective parts from being disentangled from the larger project of communal existence and community-building.

In the same way that writers such as Joseph Zobel (*La Rue cases-Nègres* [Sugarcane Alley], 1950) and Azouz Begag (*Le Gone du Châaba* [The Shantytown Kid], 1986) were able to offer insights on the political and living conditions in Martinique and the shantytowns of Lyon, respectively, today Afro-European authors such as Pap Kouma provide insights concerning the evidentiary mode of minority existence in E.U. countries. More recent African literature has turned its attention to social and political upheaval on the continent (genocide, dictatorship, child soldiers, and so on), whereas African and Afro-European writers living in Europe consider the exigencies of life *in* Europe. The E.U. *family of nations* may well call upon individuals and groups to *integrate*, as if somehow Afro-Europeans had failed or forgotten to do so, while simultaneously describing these populations in terms that bolster the sentiment that they are outsiders: *immigrato*, illegals, third-country nationals, the clandestine, refugees, the undocumented, illegals, deportees, asylum seekers.³⁵ Franco-Cameroonian writer Léonora Miano expresses this very well in a recent collection of essays, *Habiter la frontière* (2012):

Black Europeans today refuse to have to choose between the sub-Saharan or Caribbean part of their identity and the European part. Rather, they wish to provide a shelter for both, to cherish them, to meander from one to the other, mix them together without having to hierarchize them. It is in the in-betweeness they find themselves most comfortable, complete, and fulfilled. From what were once sites of rupture, they have created instead attachments in which the worlds they are made up of touch one another without having to collide.³⁶

The protagonists of African literature “have transformed Africa into a global territorial signifier, one that exceeds Africa as ‘place’ ... but from

which Africa itself is never absent”³⁷ (Thomas, 2007: 22), establishing the kinds of “branchements” (connections)³⁸ described by French anthropologist Jean-Loup Amselle. Writing from Paris, London, Lisbon, Madrid, Berlin, Brussels, Amsterdam or Milan, in diverse languages, with or without the accents of Kinshasa, Dakar, Cotonou, Douala or elsewhere, new “international writers” (as J. M. Coetzee has called them), “new arrivals,” as Abdourahman A. Waberi has claimed:

now living outside the African continent, test their creative machinery in an interstitial space that is always haunted by their experiences in, and ongoing relationships with, Africa. It is a space between here and elsewhere, the intimate and the colossal, yesterday and today; a space, finally, that is both foreclosed and open, at once improbable, familiar, and strange. This space is in the process of becoming the main scene, if not the common place of their inquiry. Melancholy minds will deplore the brain drain. Amateurs of authenticity will cry over the loss of roots. And artists will continue their route. In order to understand the turbulence of globalization it is necessary to discard the following binary oppositions: rootedness vs. cosmopolitanism, relativism vs. africanity. The infinite and unpredictable number of possible relations between cultures, places, and temporalities leads us to question the diverse without denying the contours of one’s own enclosure, and many African writers sift these enigmas through the sieves of their texts.³⁹

The so-called Arab Spring and African Revolt,⁴⁰ or the “*Afrique qui vient*” (the overarching theme of the Etonnants Voyageurs festival held in Brazzaville, Republic of Congo, in February 2013), share in the concern for the future of Africa and Africans, no matter to which cartographies they are attached. As Achille Mbembe has stated, Africans are preparing this “soulèvement”—this *uprising*—and “It is up to literature and the creative imagination to lay the groundwork for the advent of this new era.”⁴¹ Of course, as new diasporic populations yield new voices the spectre of Africa will be close by since, as Alain Mabanckou reminds us, “Warm water does not forget that it was once cold”....⁴²

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A TIMELY INTERVENTION—
OR BEFORE ITS TIME?
A SHORT HISTORY OF EUROPEAN ACTION
FOR RACIAL EQUALITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

SHARMILLA BEEZMOHUN

The 12 April 2011 saw the start of the French government's ban on people wearing face coverings or veils in public spaces, following the precedent set by the Belgian lower house of parliament exactly one year earlier. Commenting on this ban, which was also under consideration by governments in Denmark and Spain, the *Observer* journalist Viv Groskop noted:

It's not a public safety issue or even a misguided attempt to liberate oppressed women. It's a law designed to appeal to anti-immigration sentiment and, in France in particular, to stake a claim on the (resurgent) Front National's territory. (Groskop 2011, 35)

A few days later, UK Prime Minister David Cameron gave a speech on immigration to Britain. He said that the hundreds of thousands of people coming into the country every year needed to be cut to tens of thousands. This prompted robust criticism from the Liberal Democrat business secretary Vince Cable, who stated that “talk of mass immigration risks inflaming ... extremism” (Watt 2011, 4). Yet Cameron seemed the one more in tune with European views on this issue, as one week later France and Italy came to an agreement about how to deal with the thousands of mainly Tunisian migrants who had been arriving on Italian shores during the Arab Spring. The agreement entailed allowing the countries to re-erect national border controls and thus sidestep the Schengen pact on free movement within Europe in “exceptional circumstances.” This was no surprise to many—the *Guardian* newspaper pointed out that both Sarkozy in France and Berlusconi in Italy were under pressure from far Right parties and, further, noted that “Centrist parties in Germany, Austria, Belgium and the Netherlands have all tried to appease the far right by

threatening to re-erect national border controls” (Hooper and Traynor 2011, 22). Indeed, on 13 May Denmark announced that it would unilaterally introduce border and customs controls on its borders with Germany and Sweden, as some fifteen European countries clamoured to end the Schengen Agreement’s passport-free travel law (see Traynor 2011, 1), prompting writer and editor Will Hutton to comment:

It is hard not to be very uneasy. Every month, there is another milestone passed in the ever onward march of Europe’s populist, anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim, nativist right ... The trouble is that the longer the left’s response is confused, the more the populist right has begun to make anti-immigrant attitudes culturally acceptable. (Hutton 2011, 34)

Hutton seemed to have his finger on the pulse of European xenophobia and fascism. At the end of May the *Guardian* reported on “an escalating campaign of intimidation and violence” on trade union meetings and anti-racist groups following attacks across England by supporters of the English Defence League (EDL), a far-Right movement (Taylor 2011, 17). At the end of June Matthew Goodwin suggested in his book on the British National Party, *The New British Fascism: Rise of the BNP*, that “these are people preparing for a race war” (in Arnot 2011, 6). Not one month later the horrific 22 July terrorist attack in Norway claimed over seventy lives. Initially assumed by many to have been the work of Islamist fundamentalists, it soon became clear that the Norwegian far-Right extremist Anders Behring Breivik was the perpetrator of the attack. Aslak Sira Myhre, director of the House of Literature in Oslo, wrote:

For decades, political violence in this country [Norway] has been almost the sole preserve of neo-Nazis and other racist groups ... No foreign group has killed or hurt people on Norwegian territory since the second world war, except for the Israeli security force Mossad ... Even with this history, when the devastating terror hit us we instantly suspected the Islamic world ... It was not thus. Once again, the heart of darkness lies buried deep within ourselves. The terrorist was a white Nordic male; not a Muslim but a Muslim hater. (Myhre 2011, 26)

I start with this brief sketch of some events in 2011 because, to my mind, they illustrate a resurgence of xenophobia that is alarming to someone who grew up facing the daily trials of racist name-calling and worse in the streets of 1970s Britain. Anyone of my generation or older who hails from a black or Asian background and who lives in Britain will remember those “bad old days” when the criminal charge of “racially-motivated attack” did not exist, when we knew which areas to avoid and just took being called “paki” or “wog” on the chin. That was when the

second generation of black and ethnic minorities in the UK spearheaded the concerted fight back against the institutional and everyday racism prevalent in British society from the late 1960s and through the 1970s. They were first led by Black Power organisations and the Asian Youth Movement and then by groups such as the Alliance of the Black Parents Movement, the Black Youth Movement and the Race Today Collective, and activists such as John La Rose and Darcus Howe. After riots in the early 1980s by black youths in London, Liverpool, Bristol, Leeds, Bradford and Birmingham, the Black British publishers New Beacon Books, Bogle L'Ouverture and the activist Race Today Collective established the International Book Fair of Radical Black and Third World Books. The Book Fair intended to bring together people from across the world as a “meeting of the continents for writers, publishers, distributors, booksellers, artists, musicians, film makers, and the people who inspire and consume their creative productions” (White et al. 2005, vi) to participate in discussions about what was happening across the globe. This was a deliberate part of New Beacon founder John La Rose’s methodology to fight against inequality and social and racial oppression through the acquisition, passing on and exchange of information.

Whilst the twelve International Book Fairs of Radical Black and Third World Books of 1982 to 1995 were important in numerous ways for the struggle against inequality and racism, there is one particular organisation which grew out of the Book Fairs that I would like to focus on here—European Action for Racial Equality and Social Justice, which brought together anti-racists and anti-fascists from the UK, Belgium, Italy, France and Germany to fight the rise of fascism and xenophobia across the continent.

Each International Book Fair hosted various forums, ranging from cultural topics, such as Black British theatre and black and third world independent publishing, to the political, such as discussions on the racist and fascist attacks on black, left-wing and community booksellers in the UK or the impact of new technologies on the working day. At the third Book Fair in 1984, a forum was held entitled “Migrant Struggles in Britain and Europe.” It was chaired by Darcus Howe and had on its panel: Eduige Aplogan, a lawyer and political activist from France; Umran Beier, a Turkish-born British-based worker from the Migrant Action Group in London; Ian Macdonald, a Scottish-born radical barrister; and Rigo Pizarro, a Latin American migrant active in the Latin American Workers Association. Mogniss Abdallah, a radical North African living in France who was one of “Les Beurs” and founder of the press agency on immigration and urban cultures, Agence IM Media, should also have

attended but was prevented from doing so because of problems in obtaining a passport. (He was, however, able to resolve this difficulty in time to attend the Book Fair the following year.) As with all the Book Fair activities, this forum came about through discussions by the Organising Committee of the Book Fair about the programme, with this topic in particular coming up after Darcus Howe and Linton Kwesi Johnson had met Mogniss Abdallah in France and had learned about the migrant workers' struggles there.

The 1984 forum marked the first time a *European* perspective on the struggles of the non-European population had been singled out as a theme at the Book Fair. By 1986 this perspective was extended further by a forum on "Racist Killings and the Rise of Fascism in Europe," with contributors from the UK, Norway and France. Nii Addy, the first German-Ghanaian participant in the Book Fair, attended for the first time when this panel took place, and remembers the experience well:

Here, right in Europe, the diaspora was at work ... This experience provided for many important contacts and later facilitated regular visits from other Afro-Germans, representing a wide spectrum of the emerging consciousness of black West- and later also East German youths ... All in all, the Book Fair helped me to better appreciate the struggle of black people in Britain and the historical connections it had to the experiences of other oppressed people throughout the post-colonial world. (Nii Addy, in White et al. 2005, 38)

His brother, Oboama Addy, who started to attend the Book Fair the following year, reinforced the importance of what was happening in terms of the links that were being made in this arena: "the book fair helped me in my search for a positive identity as a young African European, putting my own circumstances into an international framework" (Oboama Addy, in White et al. 2005, 39).

At the start of the 1990s, the incredible sight of the Berlin Wall coming down was relayed on television screens all over the world. Despite this amazing development, the political situation in Europe was causing many people grave concern. Racial attacks and murders across the continent were on the increase, whilst there was a lack of any concerted action against these crimes. Moreover, there was a host of hostile anti-immigration policies being implemented by European governments, directed primarily against entrants from the developing world. In direct response to these developments, between 1987 and 1991 a further four forums on the rise of racism and fascism in Europe and how to combat it were organised by the International Book Fair, with testimonies and discussion coming from participants from the UK, Germany, France,

India, Kenya and South Africa among others. The debates and discussions culminated in 1991 with the publication of the booklet “Racism Nazism Fascism and Racial Attacks: The European Response,” edited by John La Rose, which came out of the forum of the same name that had been held in London in March 1990. In his introduction to the booklet, Ian Macdonald set out the motives of the forum and the publication:

So much has been written and talked about (i) what the neonazis, fascists and xenophobic elements in the population have been doing, (ii) how governments have been reacting to these attacks and pogroms, and (iii) about the new measures being discussed and implemented by member states of the European Economic Community. All these are important, but in a sense they are backdrops to the enormous degree of resistance and struggle being waged by large sections of the population throughout Europe for racial equality and social justice. These struggles are largely ignored by the press and media. The publication of the proceedings of the Forum is one small step to redress this balance.

The publication is only a beginning. But it is an important beginning. It sets the ideological and political framework of the struggle. It highlights the extent and the depth of the struggle, and it calls for a unity of effort in a setting of organisational autonomy.

Black people will be involved; so will white; women and men; foreigners as well as nationals; new immigrants and those with permanent residence; trade unions and other working class organisations, political parties and black caucuses, media and art collectives, cultural and professional organisations. (La Rose 1991, 3)

The 1990 forum had as its speakers Mogniss Abdallah from France, Nii Addy from the former West Germany, Udoka Ogbue from the then German Democratic Republic and Tarlochan Gata-Aura from the UK. Testimony after testimony was given about the rising number of racist murders that had occurred in different parts of Europe, often linked to the rise of working-class unemployment amongst young white men and their ensuing bitterness and dissatisfaction which had not been tackled by governments. There was a decision to establish an international monitoring group to watch developments in Germany and elsewhere. Out of this came the setting up of an Organising Committee For European Action For Racial Equality and Social Justice, announced by chairperson John La Rose at the end of the forum:

at the present moment we have been in dialogue here and we have heard things that no other platform in Britain has ever heard ... and it's quite possible that no other meeting in Europe has ever heard ... we have taken

the first step ... an important step, which will count in the history of social change in European society. (La Rose 1991, 42)

European Action for Racial Equality and Social Justice thus formally came into being in 1991, when the 1990 forum booklet was published. In Britain its members included John La Rose, Ian Macdonald, Michael La Rose, Linton Kwesi Johnson, Leroy Coley, Azim Hajee of the Camden Black Workers' Group, and Suresh Grover from the Southall Monitoring Group among others. There were also participants from Germany, France, Belgium and Italy, many of whom had attended the Book Fairs.

European Action in 1991 had as its main priority a mission to Maastricht to protest against the new immigration laws of "Frontier Europe," where the harmonisation of European Union policies relating to the right to asylum and matters of immigration control and police cooperation was discriminating against blacks and Asians in particular. As Mogniss Abdallah stated:

European policies were openly being characterised by the racialisation of institutional practices, the rise of nationalist political parties with a newly acquired "respectable" profile, and a new cycle of racist violence caused by a militant far-right wing recruiting, in particular amongst white working class youth who were bitter because of mass unemployment. Beyond international solidarity actions and cultural exchanges, it was becoming urgent to react together, to coordinate action and provide a strong alternative voice at a European level. (Abdallah, in White et al. 2005, 34)

In December 1991, joined by people from black workers' groups from the UK, a delegation from European Action arrived in Maastricht to lobby and picket the inter-governmental conference of twelve European heads of state against the racist immigration laws and to draw attention to the rise in racist murders. The local newspapers ran as their headlines the phrase the delegates had borrowed from Malcolm X: "Don't wait for the ovens to burn." Around the same time, John La Rose and Linton Kwesi Johnson also visited the European Parliament in Strasbourg at the invitation of Dacia Valent from Italy, Europe's first black MEP, where Johnson read some of his poems highlighting the black struggles in Britain. Bernie Grant, one of the UK's first black MPs, was also present at the European Parliament for this visit.

In 1992 another European Action initiative was to write an open letter to the Anti-Racist Alliance and the Anti-Nazi League in the UK, as bitter divisions had emerged between those groups (which would culminate around the Stephen Lawrence Campaign in 1993). The letter urged that

they learn from the mistakes of the 1930s and abandon sectarianism to fight together for the common aim of ending fascism. This is what made European Action and those organisations coming out of the New Beacon circle so strong—what Azim Hajee calls “the unique approach of the Book Fair activists involved in European Action—and their genuine willingness to build alliances with other organisations without requiring that they abandon their political perspective or their autonomy” (Hajee, in White et al. 2005, 54).

These are just some examples of the work of European Action for Racial Equality and Social Justice. The organisation, which existed from 1991 to around 1995, was very fluid in terms of campaigns and members, yet in its short life span it also offered support to groups such as the Stephen Lawrence Justice Campaign in the UK and Caravan, an organisation fighting against the oppression of Arab and African youths in France.

The archives of European Action for Racial Equality and Social Justice are housed at the George Padmore Institute (GPI) in north London. The GPI is an archive, library and educational research centre housing a number of unique archive collections relating to the political, social and cultural history of the black community of Caribbean, African and Asian descent in Britain and continental Europe. It was founded in 1991 by New Beacon Books with the aim of making its important collections open to the public, thereby allowing new generations to learn not only about the history of Europe’s black populations, but also to access the often-hidden history of activism for social justice and racial equality. From 2006–2008 the GPI’s Heritage Lottery Funded *Crossing Borders Archive Project* enabled both the European Action and the International Book Fair of Black Radical and Third World Books archive collections to be fully sorted, conserved and catalogued; the resulting catalogues are on the Institute’s website and researchers can visit the GPI to look at available documents in detail.

And not a moment too soon, it seems to me. Whilst the *Crossing Borders* project was underway in 2007, the *Guardian*’s Patrick Barkham discovered that, out of 785 Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), only nine were not white (five from the UK, three from France and one from Belgium)—that is, only 1.1% (Barkham 2007, 4). This figure increased to thirteen MEPs if those of recent Turkish/Kurdish descent were added—but was still far less than the number of far-right MEPs (Barkham 2007, 6). Neena Gill, the only Asian woman in the European Parliament at that time, said:

Nobody would believe me when I said “Britannique.” Only two nights ago I was at a function and this Belgian found it really hard to accept I was an MEP because I was wearing a sari ... It is the sort of thing that would have been said in Britain 35 years ago. (Barkham 2007, 6)

Moreover:

As well as being the only Asian woman in parliament, Gill is the only Sikh too. She says she receives “almost weekly” calls from Sikh groups in Italy and France who are attacked because “of the turban issue.” (Barkham 2007, 7)

In the same year, Yudit Kiss, a Hungarian economist based in Geneva, wrote of the worrying trend of far-Right MEPs from Austria, Belgium, France, Italy, Romania and Bulgaria working together in the European Parliament, stating:

Extreme-right rhetoric is a powerful and long-lasting poison, because it addresses people’s darkest anxieties ... A continent in which identity politics, exclusion and xenophobia become accepted political currents would be easy prey for radical extremist mobilisation and attacks. (Kiss 2007, 28)

Only four years later, and we have events happening like those I described at the start of this chapter. It seems, then, that there has never been a better moment for the archives of European Action For Racial Equality and Social Justice to be made accessible to the public—at a time when resurgent fascism seems to be sweeping all in its path, and when the murder of scores of people by a far-Right terrorist in Norway prompts the writer Aslak Sira Myhre to plead: “We need to use this incident to strike a blow to the intolerance, racism and hatred that is growing, not just in Norway, nor even only in Scandinavia, but throughout Europe” (Myhre 2011, 26). And yet there still seems to be no coherent response from those of us who want to oppose such bigotry. What European Action aimed to do and how it did it could very well act as a blueprint for us, if all the various factions opposed to the far Fight come together to emulate its methodology. For, as Will Hutton says of Europe’s march towards xenophobia and the Left’s lack of response, this “is a battle for the soul of Europe—and at the moment the wrong side is winning” (Hutton 2011, 34).

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