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PROLOGUE

The articles in this special issue of the *Dalhousie Review* were all delivered as papers at the Conference on African Writing held at Dalhousie University and Mount Saint Vincent University in Halifax in May 1973.

The fact that a conference on African writing should be held in Canada may appear puzzling to some. It certainly puzzled the news media in Halifax sufficiently for them (with one notable exception) to avoid the conference altogether. But African studies are developing rapidly in Canada, and many universities teach and carry out research in a wide range of African subjects. In addition, the links between Africa and Canada are surprisingly strong. Not only are there public and political connections between Canada and many African countries of the Commonwealth, but also there are many personal contacts among Canadian academics and their colleagues in African universities.

Even more striking, however, are the similarities in many of the problems facing writers in Africa and Canada. On the surface there are numerous points of similarity. The regional differences in African literature are more pronounced than those in Canadian literature, and, of course, accentuated by differences in nationality and language. But there is as much doubt whether there can be "Canadian" literature or the "Canadian" novel (as opposed to regional novels and literature set in Canada) as whether it is fruitful to talk of the "African" novel -- about which Chinua Achebe has much to say in this issue. The literature of Africa and that of Canada both reflect the legacy of colonial values. And some of the most amusing satire in both literatures describes that form of insanity peculiar to colonial or ex-colonial life; a point on which Douglas Killam dwells in "African literature and Canada."

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But the conference showed that the affinities between Canadian and African writers or critics are much more a matter of tone and mood than one of the obvious similarities between their cultures. An obsession with identity, or at least with freedom from having to define oneself in relation to the dominant markets and media of the U.S. and Europe was the attitude shared most consistently by African and Canadian speakers. This affinity of viewpoint (or, perhaps, more accurately "of predicament") is less apparent in the printed papers as they appear here than in the discussions which followed their delivery at the conference. In particular, Chinua Achebe's paper on the African novel stimulated surprisingly passionate comments from both African and Canadian listeners.

An interest in the cultural traditions and standards peculiar to African writing is, naturally, more in evidence in this collection. The articles by Daniel Kunene, Kofi Awoonor and Donatus Ibe Nwoga are all concerned with different aspects of this problem. And the variety of approach in each is a good indication of the variety of mood which the conference offered: from Kofi Awoonor's rhetorical fireworks to Donatus Nwoga's careful argument and Daniel Kuene's scholarly clarity.

A paper not included in this collection was read by Peter Palangyo on "The Language of Literature in East Africa". In it he discussed the possibilities of Swahili as a literary language, and again provided a stimulating foil to Gerald Moore's critical paper dealing with the use of English in East African literature.

When speakers turned to French African writing, their interests were still closely allied to the general themes raised by previous speakers -- as these printed papers show. Claude Wauthier deals with both English and French writers in his wide-ranging survey of "The Situation of the African Writer in Post-Colonial Africa". But he concentrates on English works. Emile Snyder, on the other hand, in his article on Cesaire, deals exclusively with French writing. And here the coherence of mood in the conference papers is apparent. In dealing with Cesaire's attitude towards his blackness and his cultural loyalty towards both his African background and his immediate Caribbean environment -- that "dandruff speck on the surface of the ocean" -- Snyder returns to the same discussion of cultural roots and instincts joined by Kofi Awoonor,

Donatus Ibe Nwoga and Chinua Achebe -- with Canadian echoes from Douglas Killam. Even Gerald Moore's article on ocean and river imagery in the poetry of J.B. Tati-Loutard and Tchicaya U Tam'si reveals the poetic instincts deriving from their environment.

South African writing figured prominently in the discussions at the conference. Nadine Gordimer's paper on the new black poets provoked a great deal of comment, and Dennis Brutus read poems by the poets she discussed. Later he led a discussion on Politics and Literature, with Kofi Awoonor, and described the increasingly explicit political tone in Arthur Nortje's poetry.

One of the most vital features of the conference was the public reading from their works by the writers. Kofi Awoonor and Dennis Brutus read some of their poems in an afternoon session. And in an evening session Chinua Achebe, Nadine Gordimer, and Peter Palangyo read from their novels and short stories. The effect of these readings was remarkable. Not only were they exciting in themselves, but they kept the writers' works as a presence at the conference. And as a result there was hardly a hint of stuffiness or academic aridity in any of its three days. The major participants were a remarkable group, and the atmosphere prevailing was unusually frank and friendly. The heady quality of the meetings is difficult to recapture in print, depending as it did on the presence of so many extraordinary people. But the quality of the papers themselves is of more durable stuff, as the readers of this special issue will no doubt judge for themselves.