# Response

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#### I. Introduction

Journalists have a peculiar way of interpreting events around them. Helen Thomas, the oldest correspondent at the White House in Washington, D.C., was once asked at a convention if the press was being fair to President Clinton. She replied by narrating the following fictional story: The Pope went fishing with Bill Clinton once, and, of course, a group of journalists went with them. While they were fishing, a gust of wind blew the Pope's miter off his head and into the water. Clinton calmly got down from the boat and, walking steadily on water, retrieved the Pope's hat. Quite a feat. The next day, Bill Clinton eagerly opened the newspaper to see how the event was reported. The headline read, "Clinton Cannot Swim."

I promise not to play the journalist in my review of Professor Boyce Davies' paper, but if I don't succeed at least you'll know where I am coming from.

Romanticized, sometimes demonized, and greatly misunderstood, Africa labors painfully at a sociological, political, and economic crossroads. In the movie *Lion King*, Africa's fabled animal world comes alive in a lavish celebration of royalty, evil, and the triumph of righteousness. Simultaneously, however, "Akunamatata," the popular Swahili word that literally means "no problem," is mauled in a flagrant and gross misapplication. Properly applied, "Akunamatata" refers to a deep philosophical conviction that there is a solution for every problem, but the movie reduces it to a mindless frolic in a gluttonous and escapist world. Elsewhere, the restricted outbreak of the Ebola virus in Zaire draws a horde of foreigners and becomes the compelling subject of books in the West.

Africa attracts and repels, but it refuses to be shuttered up in the dark recesses of people's minds. This is the world that Professor Boyce Davies introduces us to in her faintly emotional analysis of Afro-diasporic creativity. She takes us on a tour of the Afro-diasporic mind, identifying and charting universal strands of history, Africa-discovered, re-created, and refined.

Professor Boyce Davies positions Afro-diasporic writings in two worlds: the first is the literary, through which the past, the present, and the hopes and desires of people of African descent outside the continent are articulated. The second is the social context, where daily living and struggles illuminate, sometimes, the aspirations and despair that structure Afro-diasporic existence. Which comes first, the literary or the social? For Professor Boyce Davies they may as well be the same. She argues that within the Afro-diasporic community, we witness a "movement from the daily circle of life, work, and struggle to one of emotional and spiritual possibilities."

My review of the essay starts from the point of identification: the personal and forceful decision of the diaspora to associate with, refer to, remodel, and live Africa in their dreams, in their cultures, and in their writings. One observes that writers cited by Professor Boyce Davies chose willingly to devote their literary musing to Africa. This decision inevitably influences their work. It may be argued that this choice is often a reaction to the refusal by the larger society to accept the different. Consequently, no writer, and for that matter no single Afro-diasporic community, can completely escape making this choice. Their literary odyssey must start here even if it eventually reaches for the globe. Even Professor Boyce Davies had to make a choice and accepts that it is her "migratory subjectivity."

In my response to the essay, I concentrate on three basic points that have direct relevance to the theme of this Roundtable. I identify these three points as the "Global Culture," the "Transformational," and, finally, the continuum that I describe as "Their Globe, the Globe, and Our…"

#### II. The Global Culture

Is there a global culture? For Professor Boyce Davies, the answer is emphatically no. She writes that there is no "uniform 'global culture' except under capitalist dominance." It is difficult arguing against such a position. Yet, this insistence on the perceived negative impact of capitalism is what I see as a dark streak running through Professor Boyce Davies' analysis of why Afro-

diasporic literature is where it is today. Literature, according to her, strives to depict the struggle within the individual and the community and helps in a "deliberate journeying outside of the boundaries of restriction and oppression."<sup>4</sup>

This position accepts the inevitable linkage between societies, communities, and continents. The interplay may be positive or negative but it does exist, although in the case of Africa and the Afro-diasporic community, it has had more negative than positive overtones. While I accept that a uniform global culture cannot emerge from an East-West or North-South mix, what does cannot be attributed to a particular cultural grouping. Yes, Africa remains the source of inspiration for Afro-diasporic writers and cultures, but can it be said that the creative imagination works only with this ingredient? Are there not others, borrowed from other worlds and cultures, that similarly influence the imagination of Afro-diasporic writers?

A quick and imaginary trip to Africa may help buttress my point. Earlier in this Roundtable, Dr. Said noted that the role of the intellectual within a society cannot be limited to the halls of academe. Nowhere is this more obvious than in Nigeria, where a tyrannical military government holds sway over the continent's most populous nation. I was fourteen years old when I first read Wole Soyinka's The Man Died, and I didn't understand half of it. But I still remember pondering what he meant by writing that one dies if one keeps quiet in the face of tyranny. Today, Wole Soyinka lives outside Nigeria, hounded from his country for speaking his mind. What did Soyinka have to say, why did he become a threat? The complex answers can be found in what drives the Afro-diaspora. Professor Boyce Davies says that for this community, Africa became an "invented space of creativity, ancestry, and knowledge, as well as a deliberate place of practical existence to which one could return but which one could also re-create."5

Surprising as it may seem, the entire concept of a re-created and refined Africa is not one that has not crossed the oceans back into Africa. The search for that rethought and reborn Africa is what has turned Soyinka and many other Nigerian intellectuals into refugees in foreign lands. I do not know of any African writer or intellectual who is satisfied with what Africa is today or who does not wish she/he could remake and ennoble the

continent, and do justice to the spirit of the ancestors. This, for me, undergirds most thinking about Africa and is in the work of writers like Soyinka, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, and Ben Okri, who raise such questions such as, Which Africa do we want? Which Africa is attainable? How should we arrive at this Africa? While these concerns are very legitimate and at the core of any thoughtful meditation on the condition of Africa, may I remind us that, try as hard as they may, Africans and the diaspora cannot divorce the continent from the world system of which it is an integral component and against which it is measured.

#### III. The Transformational

This brings me to two types of writers that Professor Boyce Davies notes in her analysis of the "transformational." The first is that group of writers who, according to Professor Boyce Davies, "identified creatively the bases of colonization." The second consists of those who pursued a fundamental change in the relations between men and women. This distinction between the first group, all male, and the second, made up of women, is a curious one and generates the following batch of questions. (You'll pardon me if I ask more questions than I answer, but as a journalist I cannot help but do so.) When differences exist in writings, as in the case of the two groups identified above, to what do we attribute them? Time, different concerns, different understandings, different experiences, different sociological imperatives, or even gender?

Interaction between the different societies in the world is complex and seems to portend a movement toward globalization in literary works. I confess that globalization in creative works can only be loosely applied, but this should not lead us to the conclusion that our differing experiences cannot have global expression in literature. Some works owe their roots to the human attempt at understanding and giving meaning to existence. Literature is not and cannot be merely an expression of history or articulated proposals for social change, as Professor Boyce Davies suggests. Literature also focuses on love and nature, as well as on transformational issues such as the Afrodiasporic experiences resulting from colonialism and capitalism. It is worth pointing out that even the most esoteric ideas and

sentiments expressed in a piece of literature can be made, after some serious interrogation, to yield larger human, i.e., global, concerns. In this sense, literature skirts national boundaries and provides a platform for the possibilities of human affinity.

The creative imagination in the Afro-diasporic context does indeed document history, suggest and provoke sociological changes. However, hanging this millstone of very restricted creativity on Afro-diasporic writers, as Professor Boyce Davies does, can only mean that literature has nothing more than a responsive role in society. The creative imagination cannot be bounded this way. Sometimes—often—it strives to go beyond such limits.

### IV. Their Globe, the Globe, Our...

I see literature and the creative imagination as being in a global partnership. Our experiences are often different and sometimes have restricted application, but I don't think that the creative imagination bows to such laws. Early Afro-diasporic literature may have looked at the globe as "theirs," identifying the "owners" as the oppressive group. Today, however, Professor Boyce Davies sees this genre as looking at a world depersonalized and fractured by the machinations of "late capitalism." I suggest that we might be moving beyond this binary situation into an as yet ill-defined "Our globe." This is the future of Afro-diasporic literature, standing apart yet an integral component of a globality where Africa remains the "originary source . . . located in the memory of the crossing [and] the deliberate reinterpretation of 'remembered' cultural forms in a new space and in new conditions."

I want to close with a portion of Marcia Douglas's poem cited by Professor Boyce Davies in her essay. Douglas writes,

Here's your chance now follow the instinct of your tongue and say it your way.

This is the fascination of creative minds. Say it your way, the world interprets it in its way.

## Bolaji Ojo

## Notes

- 1. Carole Boyce Davies, "Transformational Discourses, Afro-Diasporic Culture, and the Literary Imagination," *Macalester International* 3 (Spring 1996): 200.
- 2. Ibid., 199.
- 3. Ibid., 200.
- 4. Ibid., 203.
- 5. Ibid., 205.
- 6. Ibid., 213.
- 7. Ibid., 200.