

# In and Out of Africa: African Memoirs after 1980

ALIOUNE SOW & LUISE WHITE

Over the last fifteen or so years there has been an explosion in the publication of memoirs by Africans, white and black, about growing up there, about going to war there, about being in jail there. Fifteen years ago, it would have been hard to imagine that the self-absorbed recollections of white children growing up in settler societies would be marketable. Starting in the mid-1990s the writings of Kwame Anthony Appiah, Alexandra Fuller, Peter Godwin, Wendy Kann, Douglas Rogers, Gillian Slovo, and Lauren St. John have been published by commercial publishing houses in London and New York. At the same time, a new body of highly successful memoirs written by authors such as Ishmael Beah, Aminatta Forna, and Helene Cooper, signaled a new phase in the history both of writing about the self in Africa and writings about Africa that became popular. Alexandra Fuller's books were reviewed in the *New York Times*, for example, while Ishmael Beah's account of being a child soldier in Sierra Leone, *A Long Way Gone*, became a talk show phenomenon, nominated several times for the best book of the year, with an Australian newspaper sending reporters to Sierra Leone to challenge the veracity of his narrative.

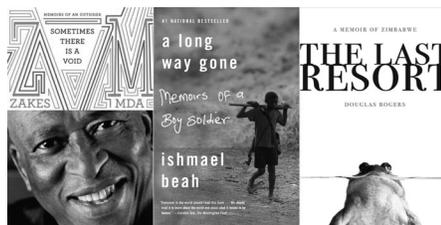
This recent iteration of African memoirs, both as writing and publishing, as well as their circulation and reception had not yet been fully interrogated. Viewed from North America, these many publications and their commercial success looked like something brand new, a new way of 'explaining' Africa to audiences and ultimately a new way to relate to the continent. But the writing of memoirs and autobiographies by Africans for readers outside of Africa is not new, and the motives and the intentions of the writing are complex and sometimes ambivalent. For instance, in the 1950s, memoirs and autobiographies were as much about

the experience of growing up in Africa explained to Europeans and Africans as they were about the triumph of nationalist ideals. The best examples of which are Camara Laye's *L'Enfant Noir* (1953), Peter Abrahams' *Tell Freedom*, (1954) and *The Autobiography of Kwame Nkrumah* (1957).

The workshop "In and Out of Africa: African Memoirs after 1980" was inter-disciplinary in scope, inter-regional in content, and examined the memoirs that have been published locally, in Africa,

examined memoirs as crucial contributions to African ideas about memory but also as a specific mode of writing, which has become so critical to Western ways of understanding Africa, ways that often elide the complexities of contemporary Africa with the authority of personal memory. We studied these narratives as a literary and commercial movement that reveals its own historical construction; looking at how memory and writing about oneself reveal new and local modes of 'explaining' Africa, of mediating the complexities of being in Africa through a circulation of textual practices in and out of Africa.

To look at the transformations, reception and circulation of memoirs and autobiographies, the workshop included participants who have approached memoirs from different perspectives. Papers were presented by scholars who have written about memoirs or edited memoirs, scholars, journalists and novelists who had written their own memoirs. The workshop was held September 13-14 2012 and featured a keynote by Zakes Mda, papers by Douglas Rogers, Stephen Davis (UF 2010), Gary Burgess, Leonard Wantchekon, Gregory Mann, Leonard V. Smith, and the organizers Alioune Sow and Luise White.



**OUT OF AFRICA:**  
THE WORK OF MEMOIRS IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICA  
SEPTEMBER 14-15

<b>FRIDAY   SEPTEMBER 14</b> 404 Grinter Hall 10:00am-5pm	<b>SATURDAY   SEPTEMBER 15</b> 05 Keene-Flint Hall 9:00am-4:30pm
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Participants include:  
Gary Burgess, Stephen Davis, Gregory Mann, Douglas Rogers, Leonard Smith,  
Alioune Sow, Leonard Wantchekon, Luise White

Keynote by Zakes Mda  
Zakes Mda is a South African playwright, poet, and novelist. He is professor of Creative Writing at Ohio University and is the author of 17 novels and plays. He is the recipient of many awards including the Commonwealth Writers Prize and the Sunday Times Fiction Prize.

This workshop is funded by the Center for Humanities and the Public Sphere, the Center for African Studies, the Florida-France Research Institute, and the Department of History. This event is free and open to the public. A full program can be found at [www.africa.ufl.edu](http://www.africa.ufl.edu). For additional information contact Alioune Sow ([sow@ufl.edu](mailto:sow@ufl.edu)) or Luise White ([luise@ufl.edu](mailto:luise@ufl.edu)).

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and those which are now sold at Starbucks or reviewed on NPR. The aim was to explore the relationship between the two, and the ways in which the success of commercial publishing in North America stimulates local publishing in Africa, and the extent to which the reverse is true. We argued that memoirs are deeply political, texts written in specific and critical contexts, and while they are local in their production they are distinctly transnational in their circulation. The workshop

*Alioune Sow is associate professor in the Department of Languages, Literatures and Cultures and the Center for African Studies. Luise White is professor of history and affiliate faculty in the Center for African Studies. Funding for this workshop provided by the Center for Humanities and the Public Sphere, the Center for African Studies, the Florida-France Research Institute, and the Department of History.*