

Cutting through exclusion



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York University students rarely get the chance to study with visiting scholars from the Third World. Like most other North American universities, York has done little to broaden its classroom horizons: while American and British professors become household names and draw large audiences and salaries, the best minds of Africa and Asia are regularly overlooked. As a result, students rarely get to hear critical views from Third World scholars first-hand.

A powerful antidote can be found in Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie. A visiting scholar from Nigeria, she is currently teaching a fourth-year Humanities course at York. With a lengthy career in poetry and criticism behind her, Ogundipe-Leslie is an active member of the African literary community. Her scholarship offers an intimate view of modern African society and a critical view of Western academic traditions.

by Patrick Knight

Finally a strong African woman's voice will be heard at York University: Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie has arrived.

Born in Nigeria, Ogundipe-Leslie completed her early education in that country and also studied at Harvard, Oxford, Columbia and Cambridge. Her scholarship offers a

to civilization, you have no history, your roots go back only to slavery.

It also seems that Canadian society has a more exclusionary attitude. More work has to be done to penetrate, unify and inform people about traditions that are not anglo-american.

In one of your essays you claim that many African women writers are not

Attitudes towards motherhood and human life, and [the question of] whether we have the right to take like life or not remain issue[s] of controversy in the West, but I think most African women would say that the survival of the species is the most important ethic in human life. They would say it is why we are here, why we are on earth. They see their roles in relation to what part women can play in the survival of the species; they do not see their identity as something autonomous and separate from the other gender or the child.

It is for this reason that we do not share the antagonism towards men. Perhaps this is why many African women prefer to say they are womanists rather than feminists.

Has racism had any influence in African women moving towards this womanist position?

Race is a serious problem because of white hegemonic impulses. Some white women want to adopt the same attitudes that white men have adopted towards the rest of the world. They want to be in the leadership of the women of the world. They have a patronizing attitude and they are exploitative.

They feel threatened by Third World women working with them academically because they always want to be the experts on the Third World. Some even argue that

Third World women cannot talk about their experiences as well because they are too close to it; they lack objectivity.

This is just part of the politics of power and academia — white women carving out

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Women's Studies as their own turf where they can play the same power games as men.

I am not speaking about all white women; there are many white sisters struggling against this sort of thing.

Discreet discrimination has become the forte of many Canadian universities. Do you think this has influenced how the academic community has received you? I came to a university that was in crisis over their African Studies program...

That was the University of Toronto?

Yes. In fact I arrived during the ROM [Royal Ontario Museum] crisis over the African exhibition. I could see that it had to do with the whole view of Africa in Canada and the insensitivity to what could offend Black people.

I saw a lack of concern for what Blacks might feel.

My position, which was in the Women's Studies program, resulted from an anonymous donor who requested the money be used to bring women of color into the program yearly, for five years.

This was very marginal — it was not the University of Toronto that endowed the position. The Women's Studies program has been there for over fifteen years and has had only one black woman professor and a few black teaching assistants and so I found this peripherality to women of color.

You have to realize that the world is larger than the Anglo-American tradition.

What advice would you offer to those struggling against prejudice and racism in academic institutions?

It's a matter of commitment and seriousness and having an enduring attitude. We must all be long-distance runners. Too many people start a protest and then after a month or two become discouraged, hopeless, saying "Nothing can be done, the institutions here are too strong," and so they revert to bitterness, name-calling or theatrical performances.

People tend to practise much theatre, public speaking, rallies — public ceremonies of sorts, like a ritual cleansing. Then everybody goes home to rest and forget about it.

Professor Ogundipe-Leslie will be teaching "Gender, Race and Class: Representation of African Women," a fourth year course in humanities, beginning this fall.

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much-needed alternative to the Anglo-European academic perspective.

As writer and scholar Ogundipe-Leslie has spent twenty-seven years teaching issues confronting people of the West and the Third World.

Knight: In Canada the Black community is so disjointed. Black people seem more concerned with expressing differences as opposed to commonalities, whereas in America Afrocentricity has become a unifying influence...

Ogundipe-Leslie: Yes! Even in Black middle-class organizations we now find a strong African-centred perspective. I think this is an index of how far Black America has gone to recognize that its Africanity is central to any sense of dignity.

People here still need to get that political perspective; that sense of themselves needed to claim a heritage. Particularly in the face of people who devalue you by saying you have made no contribution

willing to call themselves feminists. For those who do, what is the price they must pay?

They are stigmatized and called parrots of Western women. They are considered to be simply regurgitating the ideas of Western feminists. They are considered people who want to destroy African culture because others want to keep an uncritical view and say that African heritage advocated polygamy and submissive women: the women who is mother, who accepts all suffering, living only to make everything possible for others.

This view of the ideal African woman is not even true. It is a constructed reality that modern African men assert.

Sometimes they say feminists are anti-nationalist because they think political and constitutional liberation should come first. They do not see political liberation as encompassing social justice and empowerment of women.

How would you compare North American feminism with African feminism?