



## Fare Thee Well Champion of the African Imagination: F. Abiola Irele (1936-2017)\*

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“*In its polemical stance, then, African discourse presents itself as a thorough-going deconstruction of the Western image of the Native, the Black, the African*” – Abiola Irele on ‘*The African Imagination*’

The African literary community has lost one of its illustrious son, F. Abiola Irele. It is Harry Garuba who introduced me to his work when I

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was a student at the University of Cape Town (UCT). He asked us to unpack a quote from Irele’s book on ‘The African Imagination:

Literature in Africa and the Black Diaspora.’

I did not understand it. But after reading its chapter on the ‘*Dimensions of African Discourse*’ it became clear. The underlying message that proved to be Irele’s lifelong mission is that the striking – and indeed primary – aspect of our discourse as Africans has been its “character as a movement of



contestation” (p. 68 ) Borrowing from Samora Machel, one may ask: ‘*Contra o Que?*’ (Against What?)

For Irele, it has been against “the negativizing premises of Western racist ideology” (p. 69) He was writing in 2001, way before ‘Black Lives Matter’ reminded us that the ‘West’ has not yet become post-racial let alone post-racist. “In whatever accents African response has been given expression”, he aptly noted then, “whether in an openly combative form or a discreetly pathetic one – with gradations in between – the discursive project has taken the form of an ongoing, principled dispute with the West over the terms of African/Black existence and, ultimately, being” (Ibid.)

My personal encounter with Irele had been brief, albeit profound. I first met him in a graduate summer school where he received harsh criticisms from some students for what appeared to them as an ‘essentialist’ stand on – and exposition of – the ‘African/Black condition’. For him, the explanation was straightforward: They were

invoking ‘postmodernism’ with its ‘relativism’ that borders ‘absurdity’. With what is continuing to happen to the ‘African/Black body’ in the ‘reactionary West’, I wonder what they think now of Irele’s take on the ‘stark realities of the Black experience” (Ibid.)

Pan-Africanism is essential in this struggle. When he moved back to Ilorin in Nigeria to run the College of Humanities at Kwara State University as a Provost, he wrote: “Can you please send me the curriculum of your course on Pan African Thought? We want to see if we can use it as a model for a course on Panafricanism here at Kwara State in Nigeria.” He was referring to a new course that the Mwalimu Nyerere Professorial Chair in Pan-African Studies had introduced at the University of Dar es Salaam in 2011. “Thanks”, he promptly responded after receiving the course outline, “for your offer to help with our curriculum at Kwara State University.”

He was as generous as he was grateful. “Glad to hear you’re

writing on Negritude and citing my work”, he once wrote to me before poetically answering my otherwise simple question about his bio: “My year of birth is 1936, the month and day May 22.”

Irele was not an essentialist. But he knew that the ‘West’ has been attempting to ‘essentialize’ us. Hence African Discourse, “though not by means uniform, univocal, or homogenous, is nonetheless coherent, centered as it is upon a dominant issue: our historic encounter with and continuing relationship to the West and the varied implications of our modern experience as it has been determined by this historical encounter” (p. 68).

His point is: The African Imagination needed an essentially unified discourse of resistance to articulate our “sense of historical grievances” (p. 69). Do we still need this now? Yes, indeed!

#### Note

\* First published in the USA *Africa Dialogue Series*, 8 Jul 2017 6:42 am