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Aldemaro Romero Jr.

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Allan explores African literature and its impact on the U.S.

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. *College Talk*

Although for decades now we have become familiar with the vibrancy and impact of African-American literature in this country, little is publicly mentioned about its roots.

Someone who has researched and taught both African and African-American literature is Dr. Tuzyline Allan. A native of Sierra Leone in West Africa, she has been around, academically speaking. Allan obtained her bachelor's degree in English from Durham University in England, a master's degree in English from New York University (NYU), and a doctorate in English from Stony Brook University in New York. Today she is a professor in the Department of English in the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences at Baruch College of the City University of New York.

She says she was really fortunate in her home environment. "Growing up in Sierra Leone, I was fortunate to have a literate father, one who attended college. At the age of three, I remember speaking three languages: my mom's background language, my father's, and English."

She also benefited from her father's library. "I was lucky that after school, when I came home, I was confronted with this library. Most of those works were the literature of colonial England at the time," says Allan. "I was even very fortunate to find a book by Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, in that collection. And then you have the politics of West Africa at the time. From that venue, I came across books about the rising stars of the time in the colonization, not to mention the newspapers of West Africa."

Allan started to experience the transition from oral tales to written literature. "In the evenings, children and women and some men would participate in storytelling in the bright glow of the moon. I loved those sessions, almost every evening, and of course from that very early stage I knew how to perform in storytelling, participate in the kind of back and forth, call and response that I would find across the Atlantic when I came to America," she says.

She thanks her father for instilling in her the



Dr. Allan in her office.

curiosity to read anything. "My dad inculcated in me the value of learning. So, from the very beginning, I was an avid reader; I read voraciously. I stood way ahead of others, my peers in school. I lived in that bubble, so to speak, and my father reinforced somehow that position for me by inculcating in me a sense of absolute autonomy and power. I could be and do whatever I put my mind to as long as I did the work," says Allan.

At NYU, she earned her doctorate in African-American literature. After developing expertise on the masters of English literature, she discovered the African-American female authors. "In the middle of my experience at NYU, African-American women writers burst onto the scene—Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Paule Marshall, and all of these people. I decided to study black women writers, and that's

what I wrote my Ph.D. thesis in," says Allan.

When she teaches what she has studied, Allan has to deal with a lack of knowledge about Africa among many of her students. "When I taught African literature in other schools, students, I discovered, are often taken aback by the extent and the richness and the texture of the literature. And then they wonder from their various backgrounds, 'how is this possible?' Given the colonial experience, given the images of Africa and the perceptions, given the African specter that has haunted the African diaspora for centuries," says Allan.

That is why she feels the context has to be explained. "Context moves beyond even just histories of Africa. It goes to the extent of the influence of Africa as a signifier. It is crucial to understand Africa and to see it through the lens of creative writing

because Africa has been so influential in shaping the West. It is from that perspective that students have to stop and reprocess their own thinking on this issue," Allan explains.

Part of that context has to do with the inner struggle for understanding oneself. "You can't have self or the self without the other. When you create the other, you know that the self is in jeopardy; it cannot stand alone, so I don't like complicating things for them that they, I feel, might find puzzling; but in the end, we all dwell on this point—that in fact African literature is an essential body of knowledge," says Allan.

Allan finds more similarities than differences between African and African-American literature. "The concept of what second-wave feminism did for us as thinkers and readers is to make the connection that patriarchy is not restricted to the West. It is a way of social ordering that you'll find almost universally. That is the privileging of the male subject and the subsequent diminishment of the female. Patriarchy is real and in Africa."

Finding a good publisher for African literature is not easy. "One of the books for which I wrote an afterword, I literally had to hang heads with Florence Howe, head of the Feminist Press at the time, to publish Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes*. Aidoo is one of most renowned African women writers and had a difficult time with her previous publisher. She needed a different publisher, and Florence Howe read the manuscript, and she said, 'I love it, I love it, I love it. Tuzyline, let's work on this.'"

Allan has been working on Virginia Woolf and racism for quite some time. "I am one of the few African or Black American scholars in the circle of Virginia Woolf studies, and I have been rewarded for that with some attention. What I want to do is to read Woolf's modernism alongside Harlem Renaissance modernist voices."

Aldemaro Romero Jr. is the Dean of the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences at Baruch College of the City University of New York. The radio show on which this article is based can be watched at: <https://vimeo.com/202931433> He can be contacted via Aldemaro.Romero@baruch.cuny.edu

Photo by Yulia Rock