Outline of research project

Generic innovations, intermedial aesthetics and the circulation of African literatures: Togo in a comparative perspective

The research project that I intend to carry out if I am granted the scholarship of the Bayreuth Africa multiple cluster, links up with former Alexander von Humboldt sponsored institutional partnership on "Media changes and intermediality in Togolese cultures" (2013-2016) with the University of Lomé. During this project, I carried out several research stays in Lomé and got a good insight into the cultural scene and book market in Lomé. More recently, I have coupled my interest in the intermedial aesthetics of contemporary Togolese literature with a research agenda on the uses and transformations of popular literary genres such as romance and crime fiction. This also implies that I have moved beyond the internationally recognized Togolese authors of the diaspora to include locally published authors and forms of literature.

In spite of being a small country, Togo has always had a prolific postcolonial production of literature as well as a vivid scene for the visual and performative arts such as painting, photography and theatre. While Togo does not yet have a well-developed film industry of its own, given its central position in West Africa, Togolese are assiduous viewers of Ghanaian films, Nollywood films and ‘Francophone’ films and international TV-formats. The harbor city of Lomé is also one of the largest marketplaces in West Africa where a multitude of people meet: beyond the local variant of Ewe-Mina, Akan languages, Yoruba and Hausa are very present and link Togolese cultural flows back to Ghana, Benin and even Nigeria. At the same time, through the structures of la Francophonie, French is still the dominant literary language and close cultural connection with francophone West Africa at large are maintained. Furthermore, there is a constant dialogue between the large Togolese diaspora with its high proportion of intellectuals who fled the political circumstances in the country, not least through the use of digital social media. Considering this context, I understand Togolese literary and more generally cultural production including its adoption and transformation of genres to happen at the crossroads of transnational media flows and influences. I am in particular interested to compare trends of genre innovation which include remediation or intermedial writing strategies in Togo with what’s going on in other African literary scenes. Beyond the comparison on the aesthetic-textual level, this includes the sociological level of publishing, distribution, marketing and reception of literature across different regional and linguistic literary fields as well.

Though the scope of the project shall not be limited to just one particular genre, the example of the romance novel will serve to briefly illustrate my approach. The romance genre has been part of West African literatures for a long time, but has recently experienced a new boom that points to the trend of an adoption of Anglo-American chick lit patterns with self-confident, career and consumerism oriented young urban heroines at the center. The label of the popular South African series Nollybooks, published in Cape Town since 2010, indicates that the popularity of melodramatic romance in popular African film industries may however be as influential as the Western chick lit brand. The A New Kind of Romance series published in Abuja with settings in Nigeria’s major cities has flourished since 2014, while the more conventional Ivorian romance series Adoras, published in Abidjan since 1998, still strives – and is very present in Togolese book-shops. The publishing house Awoudy, established in Lomé since 2009, promotes a collection of short novels entitled J’aime that features love stories in Togolese settings and which I wish to evaluate in the wider context of African serial romance publishing. Meanwhile, Jeannette Ahonsou who is based in Kpalimé has successfully published novels that combine elements of crime fiction and romance in Lomé, while Chris-Edgar Locoh who lives
in Lomé published *Cunie* in Paris, a novel that strategically remediates e-mailing and short text messages for the purpose of a love-story. The diaspora author Lauren Ekué based in France makes ample use of intermedial referencing to music in her novels published with *Anibwe* in Paris and which can also be labelled as chick lit. Two major dynamics and which I wish to explore further in the research project become visible within this picture: the flows between a worldwide generic trend and its local adoption in different African literary fields; the flows between other media/arts such as film, digital media, music and the writing of the romance novel in Africa today. Similar dynamics can as well be observed with other genres.

The project is based on research questions that unfold on three levels:

1. **On the level of writing**

   How are intermedial references and/or the use of new media formats as aesthetic devices employed in literary writing and embedded in the ‘traditional’ medium of the book?

   In how far do the aesthetic strategies of remediation and intermedial writing offer opportunities for the innovation or even subversion of established genres such as romance, crime fiction, Bildungsroman, the postcolonial realist-socio-critical novel?

   On which level(s) – form, content, structure, ideology – does innovation/subversion occur?

2. **On the level of the sociology of literature**

   How is Togolese literature, mainly published in Lomé and Paris, packaged, marketed, distributed and consumed today and what does this tell us with regards to the writers-publisher-audience relationships?

   How does the sociology of overlapping literary fields: national/transnational/local/diasporic, francophone/West African feed into the dynamics of writers’ positionality and posture?

3. **On the level of comparison**

   In how far do Togolese examples of genre innovation and use of aesthetic intermedial strategies echo developments in other African cultural scenes?

   How can cross-readings of Togolese texts with texts from other African contexts and across language divides offer insight into larger intra- and transcontinental dynamics?

   Obviously, the levels are intertwined and will not be dealt with separately, but through an integral approach.

Prior to the planned research stay in Bayreuth I will visit Lomé twice: in January 2020 I will participate in the conference *La littérature togolaise: histoire, poétique et didactique* and during March 2020 a longer field trip will allow me to collect new material and to participate in Lomé’s most important literature festival *Les lucioles bleues.*
Addendum: list of my previous publications with relevance to the project


"Remediating Romance. Functions of New Media in Contemporary Love Stories from Togo and South Africa" in: Africa Today 65/1, 2018, 64-84.

"Le roman intermédiaire à la togolaise", in: Miriam Lay Brander (ed.): Genre and Globalization. Transformación de géneros en contextos (post-) coloniales/Tranformation des genres dans des contextes (post-) coloniaux. Olms, Hildesheim 2017, 137-159.


Statement on collaboration and contribution to the research agenda of the research section “Arts and Aesthetics” in the *Africa Multiple* cluster

My research project responds to many of the issues raised in the research section’s “Arts and Aesthetics” agenda. My major interest is to look at the interference of intermediality and genre innovation with a focus on Togolese literature as a case study, while paying attention to the transnational flows of African writing and audiovisual artistic productions (film, TV, music, digital media) on both the levels of aesthetic strategies inside texts and with regard to the materiality of literature and its distribution in the book format. In the case of Togo, the transnational flows take place between artists in the country and its worldwide diaspora, inside flows of francophone literatures and, as I argue, also inside larger West African dynamics, for instance through consumption of Nollywood films.

An intra-African cum diasporic comparative perspective has been crucial for my research over the last years. Together with Pepetual Mforbe, I am currently working on the edition of an essay volume entitled *Crossings and Comparisons. Exploring Transnational Connections in African Literatures and Media* and which will be the result of a VAD panel and a workshop at HU-Berlin both hold in 2018. Clarissa Vierke is one of the contributors and we have started a fruitful dialogue that I hope to deepen during the research stay in Bayreuth. Although my own comparative perspective is dedicated to African literatures in French and English, I am convinced that an exchange between scholars of literatures in African languages and also in Portuguese can be fruitful for all sides. In this perspective, I would like to collaborate closely with Clarissa Vierke, Ute Fendler and Rémi Tchokothe as PIs of the above mentioned research section.

Together with Maria Ngaté from Indiana University, Ute Fendler and I also co-organized the symposium „New Media in African Artistic Productions: Intersections, Volatilities, Futures“ in Berlin in 2017 in which Ivo Ritzer equally participated. The papers were published in the two last issues of *Africa Today*. This symposium was a major proof how inspiring discussions between scholars of literature, film, arts and media studies can be and I hope to continue this exchange with my colleagues in Bayreuth. An intermedial perspective has also often nourished Ute Fendler’s work and Ivo Ritzer has widely published on question of ‘genre’ in media studies. I strive to get to know his research better and to work with him while in Bayreuth.

While I understand that the regional focus of the research section will be the Indian ocean, I believe that through my West African focus I can strongly contribute to the comparative approach of the section and the *Africa multiple* program at large. Also, the generic transformation taking place in popular literatures such as romance or crime fiction is a phenomenon that takes place across the African continent. Beyond the PIs of the section, Christine Matzke who has widely published on anglophone African crime fiction is another Bayreuth scholar with whom I would like to collaborate during my stay.