

Institution:	Goldsmiths, University of London
Unit of Assessment:	35: Music, <u>Drama</u>, Dance and Performing Arts [DRAMA]
Title of case study:	<i>History as Reconciliation – Non-Linear Narratives in African and African Diasporic Performance</i>
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)	

Professor Okagbue's research into modern African theatre, diasporic performance and post-colonial possibility has had impact in African and British communities and in the world of theatre. Founder and first President of the African Theatre Association (AfTA) 2006–2012, Okagbue has built networks between African and UK practitioners and local Black communities through projects, including the Sameboat anti-slavery memorial project 2007–9 and the AHRC-funded research project *Beyond Linear Narratives* at the Pinter Centre, Goldsmiths, for which he was co-investigator. An important impact of this work has been the success of new diasporic writing and performance, including playwrights directly mentored by Okagbue.

2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)
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Osita Okagbue joined Goldsmiths in 2002 and was appointed Professor in 2011. His research focuses on African theatre and performance, Caribbean theatre, postcolonial theatre, and theatre-for-development. He has written extensively about cultural strategies to counter the racist narratives formerly used to justify slavery and colonialism in Africa and the Caribbean, and has held research grants from the Leverhulme Trust, AHRB and British Academy to fund research leave for his research project on indigenous African performances and theatre [1]. This project, 'African Theatres and Performances' conducted 2002 - 2005, culminated in his books *African Theatres and Performances* (2007) [2], *Culture and Identity in African and Caribbean Theatre* (2009) [3], and *African Theatre: Diasporas* (co-edited with Dr Christine Matzke, 2009) [4].

His research has demonstrated that African and African Diasporic theatre portrays a world of social rhythms that use non-linear narrative techniques of 'storytelling theatre', 'ritual-dream theatre' and total theatre to show a distinctly African worldview in which the past, present and future interact. This theatre also enables the present to engage with itself in critical and creative ways. Okagbue's scholarly explorations have been combined with collaborative practice-based projects and workshops. As director of Grigri Zoro's *Mami Wata and the Black Atlantic*, at the heart of Sameboat's 2007 Heritage Lottery Funded project to commemorate the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade, Okagbue's work drew public attention to the historically colonial relationship between the UK and Africa [5].

As well as public intervention in debates on theatre and cultural policy in the UK, Germany, Uganda and Ghana, his role in AfTA connects Africa with diasporic networks, including non-academic practitioners and critics, through an international membership (70% African, 20% UK, 10% other). Okagbue's work is exemplified by the combination of intellectual enquiry and facilitation of the agency he seeks to analyse.

The *Beyond Linear Narratives* project (2009 - 2012) drew on these elements to investigate the connection between cultural and political change, and the new emphasis on non-linear and fractured narrative. If these are a response to the breakdown of the West's grand narratives of progress, what alternatives do they offer? Do they emerge from the increasing interaction of different cultures in the globalised world? The project also explored ways in which diaspora Africans in the United Kingdom can take ownership of their own theatre by shifting the sidestream-mainstream relationship of the British cultural landscape in funding, styles and types of theatre, and places of performance [6].

Based at Goldsmiths' Pinter Centre for Performance and Creative Writing (TPC), the project combined a traditional academic approach with creative practice, plays, performances, readings,

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musical events, post-performance forums, film, video and digital media (29 events and three conferences).

Two doctoral students were attached to the project, with one working with Professor Okagbue on African diasporic theatre and performance in the United Kingdom, and two artists-in-residence: one, Ade Solanke, mentored by Okagbue. Dissemination took a variety of forms, through conferences, seminars and creative events, performed readings, as well as book and journal publication and the recording and archiving of events and performances.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

Evidence of the international quality of the research: The large grant [6] was obtained after rigorous national competition, while the books at [2–4] are published by three highly respected publishers in the field.

1. Leverhulme Research Fellowship, £10,355, African and Caribbean book project, 2001-02; AHRB Research Leave Grant, £14,438, 'African Theatres and Performances', 1 January to 31 August 2004; AHRB Small Research Grant, £4,760, 'African Theatres and Performances', 24 May to 16 Jun 2004.
2. Okagbue, O (2007) *African Theatres and Performances*, London: Routledge. [available from Goldsmiths Research Office].
3. Okagbue, O (2009) *Culture and Identity in African and Caribbean Theatre*, London: Adonis & Abbey. [REF2 entry].
4. Okagbue, O, and Matzke C (eds.) (2009) *African Theatre: Diasporas*. London: James Currey. [available from Goldsmiths Research Office].
5. Simon Persighetti, *Ablution of Slavery, Sameboat project. Heritage Lottery Fund Evaluation Report*, 2007, especially pp. 8, 9,13,18.
6. AHRC Research Grant, '[Beyond the Linear Narrative](#)'. £351,195, Prof Robert Gordon (PI). 12 January 2009 to 11 January 2012.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)
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The impact of the research was manifest in four connected ways:

i. Facilitating links between African, UK and International communities

Under Professor Okagbue's leadership, AfTA has grown from a new-founded organisation with 20 members in 2006 to 140 members by 2011 (70% African, 20% UK, 10% other) [1]. AfTA's combination of objectives ('for scholars and practitioners to meet and exchange ideas' and 'to provide information on African performance and theatre to the wider public') has been pursued through conferences – held annually, alternately in African and non-African venues, including performance/readings of new work such as Mojisola Adebayo and Mamela Nyamza's *I Stand Corrected* at AfTA in Cape Town, July 2012. AfTA conferences resonate with Okagbue's interventions focusing attention on performance and development, notably his keynote *Managing our Destinies: Culture and the Arts in National Development*, at the School of Performing Arts, Ghana, 19 October 2012 [2].

ii. Raising awareness of colonial history

The impact of the Sameboat project has continued through the documentary film *Mami Wata and the Black Atlantic* (BlackMadonnaFilms 2007), uploaded onto the web on 10 May 2008 – the most viewed section (part 3 of 6) has had 3,459 hits to date (17 November 2013) [3]. Sameboat developed their work the following year with *Black Man Don't Float* (2008–9), a

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performance collaboration on economic migrancy on which Okagbue was consultant, performed at the Pierian Centre Bristol (25 November 2008) and subsequent workshops [4].

iii. Developing African diaspora work with intercultural communities in South East London

The *Beyond the Linear Narrative* project focused on creating a community beyond academia. Holly Pester, a white performance poet and teacher on a BA English Literature, spoke at the 'Transformations of Narrative' conference (November 2010) organised by Okagbue.[5a] She commented afterwards:

'The conference was a valuable experience in terms of locating my practice of poetics and performance outside its usual parameters. The dialogue with practitioners and dramaturges from different disciplines, cultural references and approach was useful for identifying points of ethics and narrative ... Knowing the debates over the political value of the term 'Post-Colonial Literature' has helped create discussion in seminars and provide my students with alternative theories within the field.'

The final conference, 'Reconfigurations: Remaking Narrative' (November 2011) [5b] engaged the participation of schools, with local pupils writing and performing their poems to the conference. A teacher at Deptford Green School, South-East London, wrote:

'On behalf of myself, colleagues and Deptford Green students, thank you so much for the opportunity to partake in the 'Reconfigurations' conference. It is quite overwhelming to perform in front of such a talented audience dedicated to learning ... I am sure you will all have helped the students to gain the best set of results Deptford Green have ever had and developed skills they will need for life.'

iv. Supporting new diasporic writing and performance

Building from Okagbue's research focus, Goldsmiths has become a platform for new Black writing. AHRC Creative and Performing Arts Fellow and AfTA member Gabriel Gbadamosi developed his prizewinning novel *Vauxhall* (Telegram, 2013) while based at Goldsmiths 2006-2009 [6]. As part of the Pinter Centre project, Okagbue mentored Ade Solanke in developing her plays *Celebrate!* and *Pandora's Box*. [8] The latter was performed at the Centre's 2011 'Reconfigurations' conference, followed by a panel-audience debate featuring Okagbue and Diane Abbott, MP, who said: *'I have been very impressed with Professor Okagbue's work. I think he plays a vital role supporting black writers.'* [7]. The play was nominated for Best New Play in the Off West End Theatre Awards, and ran at the Arcola Tent theatre in East London from May 9th to 26th 2012. The performance on May 12th was followed by a discussion, the panel again including Okagbue and Diane Abbott with Richard Taylor OBE, the black British community leader and father of Damilola Taylor, who said *'This play...address an issue at the heart of contemporary British society.'*

Solanke considers Okagbue's work to have been crucial both to her success and the new audiences for African diasporic writing [9]:

'One of the ways the new wave is having an impact on British-African writers is in terms of practical support for their work. Another development is partnerships between experienced 'home-grown' artists and diaspora producers / artists / storytellers [...] An important impact of the new wave is psychological. It's been inspiring to see audiences flocking to the African plays and films that have been on in London over the last few years. This May there were three British-Nigerian plays on in London (my debut, Pandora's Box, included). This success is due in no small part to the Arts Council's investment in developing new writing and new theatre audiences. Professor Osita Okagbue and Goldsmith College's Pinter Centre for New Writing were also sources of great support.'

On 23 February 2011 the project hosted a first rehearsed reading by another writer mentored by Okagbue: Janice Okoh. Her play, *Egusi Soup*, went on to be produced professionally by the Menagerie Theatre Company at the Soho Theatre from 23 May to 9 June 2012, with a post-performance discussion panel involving Okagbue, Janice Okoh, the actors and audience members

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on 29 May. Okoh later won the Bruntswood Award for new playwrights in November 2011, for her other play *Three Birds*.^[10]

Okagbue's emphasis on performance in the politics of African diaspora identity has further impact through an actors' collective developed in collaboration between Goldsmiths, Heavy Wind Media/ Bubbles FM, to produce *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again* which toured London between December 2012 and June 2013. This production provided much needed work to British actors of African descent. More of such actor/director collectives are envisaged, with Goldsmiths serving as an incubating / launching space.^[11]

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

1. [AfTA conference](#) 'Performative Trans-Actions: Innovation, Creativity & Enterprise in African Theatre' (Swansea, 21-23 July 2011) attendance figures [details available on request].
2. Book of Abstracts, *Creative Arts Pedagogy in the Context of Development Challenges*, International Conference, University of Ghana School of Performing Arts, 19-20 October 2012.
3. [Mami Wata and the Black Atlantic](#) on [youtube](#).
4. [Black Man Don't Float](#):
 - [Pierian Centre](#) performance (Bristol).
 - Black Man Don't Float: Performance at AfTA in Northampton (2009). *African Performance Review* (2009), Vol 3 (2&3), p.152.
5. [Beyond the Linear Narrative event programmes](#):
 - a) *Transformations of Narrative in the Postcolonial Era*, 11-13 November 2010.
 - b) *Reconfigurations: Remaking Narrative, Reinventing Genre in Postcolonial and Diasporic Writing and Performance*, 10-12 November 2011.

Copies of correspondence from attendees is available on request from Goldsmiths Research Office.
6. Gabriel Gbdamosi:
 - Association with the Pinter Centre (see [here](#))
 - [Vauxhall](#) (prize-winning novel)
7. Copy of correspondence available on request from Goldsmiths Research Office.
8. Cover notes, Ade Solanke, *Pandora's Box* (Oberon Modern Plays, 2012), foreword by Osita Okagbue.
9. '[Winds of Change](#): Writer and producer Ade Solanke on the African new wave' (22/10/12)
10. [Bruntswood Prize](#) to Janice Okoh.
11. [Lookman Sanusi interview](#) on the production of *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again*