

Call for Papers: International Conference

Université Paul Valéry – Montpellier 3 (EA741 EMMA: Études Montpelliéraines du Monde Anglophone - <https://emma.www.univ-montp3.fr/fr>) / University of Cape Town, Department of English Literary Studies - <https://humanities.uct.ac.za/departement-english> School of Languages and Literatures <https://humanities.uct.ac.za/school-languages-literatures>

University of Cape Town
25 – 27 March, 2026

Making and Remaking the Contemporary Novel: Novelists in Dialogue

This colloquium seeks to explore the rich array of criticism, theory, and reflection authored by contemporary novelists about their practice, and to place in dialogue different creative and critical traditions across the world. Writing by novelists about their chosen form provides, we suggest, a rich body of work on the transformations that the novel has undergone through space and time.

The aim of the colloquium is to extend the scholarly study of this critical corpus derived from practitioners' insights and to explore its far-reaching implications – while holding in mind what it means to read novelists on the novel from a place like southern Africa. The work of J. M. Coetzee – in *Doubling the Point* (1992), for example, and many other collections of criticism – constitutes a deep and sustained meditation on how representational strategies of the realist and modernist novel are challenged and extended by a politically charged, transitional or postcolonial context. Drawing inspiration too from Wole Soyinka's *Art, Dialogue, and Outrage: Essays on Literature and Culture* (1988), we are reminded of the importance of dialogue—not merely as a narrative mechanism within novels but as a fundamental process underpinning both the creation and interpretation of literary works. The colloquium seeks to explore the insightful, at times reserved, intimate dialogues contained within the writings of contemporary novelists, questioning how they engage dialogically in a reflection on the evolving form of the novel.

Deadline to submit proposals to the organisers (300 words + working bibliography):

31 August 2025

Chief lines of inquiry will include:

1) Novelists in dialogue with their peers and their works.

We invite contributions that illuminate the dynamic dialogues between novelists and their milieu—how they converse with, respond to, and evolve alongside their contemporaries and the luminaries before them. This section seeks to unravel the layers of interaction where contemporary novelists reflect on, critique, and build upon the thematic, narrative, and stylistic legacies of their predecessors. We are interested in submissions that delve into novelistic innovations prompted by such dialogues, incorporating case studies that spotlight novelists in the act of literary discourse through public forums, interviews, and debates. Further, we encourage analyses that examine the reciprocal thematic and stylistic influences between writers, the evolving ethics, and practices of reading in addressing today's quandaries, and the role of novel not as a mere reflection of its historical context, but as a place of dissonance and resistance, and a realm of possibilities.

Zadie Smith's essay "Two Directions for the Novel" in *Changing My Mind* (2009), serves as a prime example. Here, Smith engages with *Netherland* (2008) by Joseph O'Neill and *Remainder* (2005) by Tom McCarthy, showcasing them as models for divergent narrative futures. Smith's critique opens a dialogue not only with these contemporary works but also engages with the wider literary canon and the evolving potential of the novel. Her advocacy for a literature that values diversity in form and content is further explored in her collection *Feel Free* (2018) which traverses several topics from writing practices to reader engagement.

Within a southern African context, novelists like Coetzee, Nadine Gordimer, Es'kia Mphahlele, Lewis Nkosi, Njabulo Ndebele and Zoë Wicomb have all engaged their contemporaries in seeking to theorise the possibilities of narrative prose within a complex and uneven social terrain, and to understand the interplay of the informational/journalistic and narrative/storytelling 'ambience' (Ndebele, *The Rediscovery of the Ordinary*) within a literary system where certain forms of sociopolitical reporting have been privileged. The questions of novelists thinking and theorising the novel assumed a particular importance in an apartheid context where the most important intellectual work generally took place in marginal, non-institutional or unaffiliated spaces. While drawing on this established corpus, we also seek to ask where the conversation is now: whether in Mphuthumi Ntabeni's reflections on the historical novel in the Eastern Cape, Mohale Moshigo's reflections on African speculative fiction or Masande Ntshanga's reflections contemporary dystopia in the postcolony.

Furthermore, Caribbean Francophone novelist Édouard Glissant's concept of *relation* offers a framework for understanding narrative interconnectivity; Canadian author Nancy Huston attributes novelistic fiction a particular role when reinvesting the anthropological theory of *homo fabulator*; Patrice Nganang from Cameroon calls for "pre-emptive" forms of writing due to the existential disaster caused by the Rwandan genocide; and Congolese writer Alain Mabanckou reimagines African and French literary conventions within the global narrative landscape. Fruitful dialogues within the Francosphere show in Mabanckou's various coauthored essays and critical *abécédaires* with Djiboutian writer Abdourahman Waberi, or in the complicity between Togolese novelist Sami Tchak and Mauritian writer Ananda Devi materialising in significant forms of literary echoes (prefaces, postfaces, etc.). At the same time, French novelist Camille de Toledo deconstructs the famous manifesto of 44 writers advocating for the demise of the label "Francophone" in favour of a "world literature in French", provides a singularly critical case of such dialogue between writers. How do these and other Francophone writers—such as Patrick Chamoiseau, Maryse Condé, and Léonora Miano—engage in this evolving discourse with their literary predecessors and contemporaries across languages?

2) Novelists in dialogue with other art forms

This segment seeks insights into novelists' reflections on the interplay between their craft and other artistic disciplines, as articulated in essays, interviews, and non-fiction works. We invite contributions that explore how novelists perceive and articulate the influence of visual arts, music, film, and beyond on the novelistic form. Emphasising the novelists' own words, submissions should highlight discussions on how these encounters inspire novelistic innovation, inform thematic development, and challenge conventional narrative structures. This exploration aims to uncover the novel as a nexus of cultural and artistic dialogue, showcasing the novelists' role in navigating and redefining the boundaries between diverse forms of creative expression.

In his exegesis on the kindred forms of music and fiction, Milan Kundera deploys the concept of "novelistic counterpoint" to interlace philosophy, narrative, and reverie, striving towards a cohesion evocative of a musical composition. As discussed in *The Art of the Novel* (1986), this approach accentuates the structural and thematic affinities shared between the literary and musical arts. Kundera draws comparisons between a novel's architecture and a musical score, advocating for thematic unity, variation, and clarity of form—where chapters hold as much distinct intentionality as measures in a sonata. He underlines the significance of "fundamental words," likening them to Schoenberg's tone rows, which serve as narrative vertebrae, granting coherence. His advocacy for brevity and the artful employment of ellipsis ultimately serves his pursuit of "architectonic clarity"—ensuring the novel remains impactful from its opening notes to final cadence.

Teju Cole's oeuvre seamlessly fuses the literary and visual arts, reflecting extensively on the fertile interplay between these modes of expression. In his essay collection *Known and Strange Things* (2016), Cole muses on literature, photography, travel essences and politics, proffering critiques, and ruminations on creations by an intellectually eclectic mix of artists and writers, classic, modern, and contemporary. His meditations often seek out an intimate dialogue with the works of kindred literary spirits like W.G. Sebald, whose amalgamation of narrative and photographic forms indelibly influenced Cole's novel *Open City* (2011) (a novel which can in turn be placed in dialogue with various post-apartheid returns to layered colonial past within South African writing). Through his essays and salient social media presence, Cole participates in contemporaneous cultural dialogues revolving around the evolving role of artistic and literary production, exploring how these traditions can meaningfully respond to and illuminate the multifaceted complexities of our modern world. Francophone authors like J.M.G. Le Clézio and Marc Alexandre Oho Bambe provide striking examples of literary works interwoven with visual and auditory aesthetics, creating novels that resonate as multimedia explorations. Umberto Eco has famously defended comics as an independent art form since the 1970s and written various critical texts on the semiotics of graphic literature.

Tom McCarthy stands as a pivotal figure for examining the novel's dialogue with other art forms, particularly through his non-fiction and public discourse. In *Tintin and the Secret of Literature* (2006) McCarthy delves into the world of Hergé's Tintin comics, treating them as serious literature, engaging deeply with literary theory, and demonstrating how comics intersect with and influence narrative structures and themes within traditional literary forms. His essay "Transmission and the Individual Remix" in the collection *Typewriters, Bombs, Jellyfish* (2017), explores themes of technology, transmission, and the avant-garde, touching upon how these elements influence literary creation and the form of the novel.

Publishers have increasingly seen the richness and potential in connection literature and other arts, creating specific collections to allow for such intermedial engagements. A significant example comes from Paris-based Actes Sud which has invited Congolese novelist Wilfried N'Sondé to contribute texts in conversation with photography, such as Jean-Michel André's visual narratives on migration (*Borders*, 2021) or Stéphane Gladieu's images on waste (*Homo detritus*, 2022). There is no doubt that such cross-artistic and intermedial collaborations have shaped, in turn, N'Sondé's novel writing over the years.

3) Novelists in dialogue with academia

How do novelists challenge or interrogate the concepts and methods of institutional literary criticism? How can these writings fertilise the methodology of academic criticism? The relationship between novelists and academic theorists has undergone significant transformation. The era before 1945 was

marked by novelists themselves engaging deeply with theoretical discussions about the novel. This period was characterized by a rich dialogue where the act of writing and the act of theorizing were intertwined and mutually informative (Baldick 256). For instance, James Joyce's stream of consciousness has marked narrative theory and the study of narrative structure and temporality. Marcel Proust's contribution to understanding memory, time, and narrative perspective in literary studies remains unrivalled. Studies on Virginia Woolf have contributed to the development of narrative approaches that emphasise the internal perspective of characters and temporal fluidity, which are key elements of contemporary narratology. The period post-1945 saw a pivotal shift where the discourse around the novel increasingly moved into the academic realm, led by scholars and critics rather than practitioners (Baldick 258). As a result, many writers whose literary production is highly regarded by critics offer extremely rich perspectives on the novel as an art form in their non-fictional writings that are often overlooked. Novelists have a distinct perspective on the novel, which can often be at odds with that of academics. While it is now widely believed that criticism should not be left solely to writers, the strongest objections from writers to academic methodologies are often ignored or dismissed. Milan Kundera regretted academic criticism that was too focused on historical, political, and social contextualisation. In his essays, he emphasised the existential inquiry of the novel. Similarly, Italo Calvino's *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (1988) conceive of literature in terms of literary values, underscoring certain formal aspects, linguistic innovation, and the imaginative potential of literary works.

There is, of course, another aspect to the relationship between the novelist and academia. The trend of novelists taking on academic roles (like Chinua Achebe, Zadie Smith, Teju Cole, Salman Rushdie, Will Self, Patrice Nganang, Alain Mabanckou, Véronique Tadjo, or Felwine Sarr) and academics becoming novelists (Umberto Eco, David Lodge, J.M. Coetzee, Namwali Serpell or David Diop) has been observable for several decades, gaining momentum in the latter half of the 20th century and continuing into the 21st century. This period coincides with the expansion of creative writing programmes in universities and the increasing recognition of creative writing as a field worthy of academic study and professionalisation (Guillory).

During his 2015 chair of "artistic creation" at the prestigious Collège de France, Alain Mabanckou has associated several novelists, such as Dany Laferrière, Gauz, and Sami Tchak in a dialogue with academics around the globe to "think and write today's Africa" (Mabanckou 2017). Projects like these in the larger African and Afrodiasporic Francosphere have contributed to further and increasingly interdisciplinary engagements, such as the 'Ateliers de la Pensée' in Dakar, initiated by Achille Mbembe and Felwine Sarr in 2016 leading to various publications where Global South Francophone writers (e.g. Hemley Boum, Raharimanana, Abdouramane Waberi, Sami Tchak) build on their creative practise to nourish larger scholarly and intellectual concerns around political imagination, social utopias or

decoloniality (Mbembe & Sarr 2017, Mbembe & Sarr 2019). With her essay in favour of a post-Western and Post-racist “Afropean” identity (2020) which has gained some prominence within academic discourse, Cameroonian novelist Léonora Miano is another striking example of such dialogue; significantly, her critical and theoretical reflection resonates with and sensibly informed her fictional and novelistic practice.

This intersection of novel writing and academic scholarship has raised an intriguing question: has the presence of novelists who are also academics changed or influenced the practice of academic literary criticism? But the convergence of those roles prompts a compelling counter-question: has the academic role influenced how novels are written, and can a case be made for novels that are crafted to satisfy academic criteria?

We welcome papers on anglophone and francophone literature.

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