“Doc P”: Critic, Writer, and Teacher: An Interview with Professor Eustace Palmer

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Professor Eustace Palmer (“Doc P” as he is fondly referred to by his students) is one of the most accomplished scholars from Sierra Leone. A distinguished writer and critic, “Doc P” is believed to be the youngest Sierra Leonean to have obtained a Ph.D. at the time he did from the University of Edinburgh where he earned both his master’s and doctoral degrees. At Edinburgh, he took a Master of Arts honors degree in English Language and Literature and wrote his doctoral thesis on “The Relationship between the Morality of Henry Fielding’s Novels and their Art.” On his return home, he became one of the pioneers in the study of African literature and published his groundbreaking work, An Introduction to the African Novel, to worldwide acclaim. Professor Palmer is a member of various professional organizations, including the African Literature Association of which he is past president; for a long time, he was Co-editor with Eldred Durosimi Jones of African Literature Today. He also served as: Professor and Chair, Department of English, Fourah Bay College (FBC); Dean of the Faculty of Arts, and the first Dean of Graduate Studies at FBC; Public Orator, University of Sierra Leone; Warden of Students, Solomon Caulker Hall, FBC.

Professor Palmer’s record of teaching and administrative experience is rich and exciting. He has been Professor of English, Coordinator, Black Studies Minor, and Coordinator, Africana Studies Minor, at Georgia College and State University since 1994 and for four years was Chair of the Africa Council of the University system of Georgia. In August 1992, he was Visiting African Scholar in Residence at Randolph-Macon Woman’s College, Lynchburg, Virginia. Before that, Professor Palmer was Visiting Professor and Senior Fulbright Fellow, Department of English, University of Texas at Austin between 1986 and 1987.

Beyond his significant contributions to the criticism and study of literature and his vast teaching and administrative experiences, Doc P has published fiction as well. In my email conversations with him, he revealed that his research activity during the past forty years and more, in the fields of African Literature and the English Novel, has resulted in the publication of four books on the African Novel, one on the English novel, and over sixty articles, book chapters and reviews in internationally respected journals published in Africa, the USA, Canada, Europe, India, Australia and the United Kingdom. He also noted that his latest research project, which is a study of the trends in the African novel during the last twenty-five years, brings his coverage of the African novel up to date. This, he affirmed, resulted in the publication of a third book on the subject.

It is important to point out that Doc P’s ongoing research also focuses on the literature of Sierra Leone, to which he has made tremendous contributions. During the last several years, he has led a team of Sierra Leoneans teaching at American universities, and who have been conducting research into Sierra Leonean literature, to bring their work to the notice of the literary world. As such, every year since 2000, he has led his former
students, all of whom he taught at FBC, to panel presentations on Sierra Leonean literature at the annual meeting of the African Literature Association. A good number of these have now been compiled and published into a book, (Wey Dehn Sey? Dehn Sey Kapu Sehns Nor Kapu Word) Knowledge Is More Than Mere Words: A Critical Introduction to Sierra Leonean Literature, which he jointly edited with a colleague from Drexel University, Professor Abioseh Porter, himself a former student of Doc P. In addition, the result of his work on Sierra Leonean Literature has also recently come out in the form of articles in six journals and anthologies. Professor Palmer’s research into Sierra Leonean theatre resulted in a leading article published in the Routledge Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theatre (1997). The project was sponsored by UNESCO and was coordinated by the University of Guelph.

Professor Palmer is a prolific author of the critical study of literature. To date, he has published, including his pioneering text An Introduction to the African Novel, the following scholarly books: Studies on the English Novel; The Growth of the African Novel; Of War and Women, Oppression and Optimism: New Essays on the African Novel; (Wey Dehn Sey? Dehn Sey Kapu Sehns Nor Kapu Word) Knowledge Is More Than Mere Words: A Critical Introduction To Sierra Leonean Literature. Most recently, he coauthored, with Ernest Cole, Emerging Perspectives on Syl Cheney-Coker. In addition to scholarly books, Professor Palmer has also written creative works, particularly fiction. To date he has published four novels: A Hanging is Announced (2010), Canfira’s Travels (2010), A Tale of Three Women (2011) and A Pillar of the Community (2012).

In recognition of his many accomplishments, Doc P has received a lot of awards, honors and citations. In 2013, he was invited to become a member of Omicron Delta Kappa; he received the African Literature Association’s “Distinguished Member Award” for scholarship and services to the association in 2012; in 2011, he was Recipient of Georgia College and State University’s “Distinguished Professor” Award as well as the Irene Rose Community Service Award for 2007-08. He is a member of Phi Kappa Phi, the leading scholarly society in the USA.

Starting in spring 2012 at the annual conference of the African Literature Association and continuing till early fall 2013, I engaged in an email interview with Professor Palmer, the content of which is reproduced below. I am grateful to have been given this privilege by Doc P (my professor, mentor, and colleague who has made such a tremendous impact on my academic career) to be his interviewer.

Ernest: In literary circles, you are regarded as one of the pioneers of criticism of African Literature. Do you consider that an appropriate label?

Eustace: I think it is appropriate because it is justified. When individuals like Eldred Jones, Ben Lindfors, Abiola Irele and I started to write critical works on African literature, there was little else available on African literature, either in the Western world or within Africa itself. Indeed, in many places, African literature was hardly regarded as a legitimate academic discipline. It was hardly taught in Western universities, and not even in some African universities. Almost all of us who started writing on African literature had received our training in Western literature. For instance, Eldred Jones had done his Ph.D. in Shakespearean studies and I
in eighteenth-century English literature. But then we saw that we, particularly those of us who were African, had a responsibility to make the now burgeoning African literature accessible not only to the outside world, but also to Africans themselves and to ensure that it was studied and discussed in all levels of academia, and, for this, solid critical assessment was necessary. My first book, *An Introduction to the African Novel*, was about the first full length work to give detailed attention to the African novel, although, of course, there had been more general works such as Gerald Moore’s *Seven African Writers*, and one must pay tribute to the accomplishments of people like him.

Ernest: *An Introduction to the African Novel* is one of the best-known criticisms of African literature. What were you trying to accomplish in that text?

Eustace: As I have said above, I decided to write that book because I felt that students and readers in general deserved a detailed guide to the developing African novel. Let me first of all state what was not my intention; I did not by any means intend to define the canon, although I am aware that works such as *An Introduction* unwittingly have the tendency to do that, which is why I must make this assertion now. It was not my intention, as has been assumed in some quarters, to assert that the twelve or so novels I discussed in that book were the twelve best African novels. It would have been presumptuous to do so. I had to be selective, of course, and I chose the twelve novels that I enjoyed reading the most and that I would, at that time, include in undergraduate courses. I intended to discuss those novels as works of art, pointing out why they appealed to me, why I thought they were good novels. The work was also intended as a guide to teachers who would be teaching those novels at the high school level and also to undergraduates who would be reading them. I have been tremendously gratified by the numbers of scholars I meet at conferences who tell me that their first introduction to the African novel as students was through that work, and I was pleasantly surprised when one of the most eminent Sierra Leoneans that ever lived (I will mention no names) told me on one occasion that the work had become something of a classic. The book was not primarily directed at academics or professional critics. To a certain extent these considerations determined the tone and the choice of writing style. Of course, I also wanted to demonstrate the relevance of these novels to the African situation in general and to begin to engage in the conversation about the parameters to be used in the discussion of African literature. Remember, this was 1973, and those parameters had by no means been established, but it was necessary to begin the conversation.

Ernest: Some critics of African literature have frowned upon what they consider your “sociological approach” to criticism in place of theoretical constructs and paradigms like deconstruction, post-modernism etc. Is this a fair
comment on your style? What is your approach to literary criticism and what would be its value?

Eustace: First of all, let me say that my approach is not purely sociological, although I think that a sociological approach to African literature is important. A lot depends on one’s conception of the role of the critic, particularly the African critic or the critic of African literature. I have always felt that the role of the critic of African literature is to mediate between the work in question and the readers, to make that work accessible to the reader, and to point out the relevance of that work for the reader, especially the African reader for whom the work was primarily intended. If this is granted, then a sociological approach is essential, because one cannot otherwise demonstrate how the work has emerged out of the dynamics of African society and how relevant the work is to African society and African readers. The great African critic, Abiola Irele, whose work I greatly admire, has gone so far as saying that a sociological approach is the most useful for the elucidation of African literature; and I agree. But I also think that the critic has a duty to point out why the work is a good work of art, why it appeals to people. One therefore has to be concerned with artistry, with form and structure. African art in general has never been oblivious to the importance of form. Therefore, I also use what some people might describe as a formalist approach. In fact, some of my critics would say that my approach is more formalist than sociological. A historicist approach would also be relevant because a lot of African literature has emerged out of a peculiar historical context. However, I think we must be aware that African literature emerged out of circumstances that were quite different from those from which Western literatures emerged and we must not therefore feel that all the theories and critical approaches that are used in relation to Western literatures should also be applied automatically to African literature. This would be a kind of cultural imperialism. I am aware of the fact that a number of current critics of African literature went to universities in the West where they were exposed to theories like deconstruction and postmodernism and in order to get their Ph.D.s they had to be familiar with those theories and the leading names associated with them. However, applying those theories to the discussion of African literature is quite another matter. We can talk about modernism in the discussion of English literature because there was a modernist phase that was associated with certain historical and cultural developments in the West, such as the breakdown of values before and during the First World War. And we can therefore talk about a postmodernist phase. But did Africa also experience this breakdown of values at that particular time? What does modernism mean in relation to Africa, and what would postmodernism mean? African literature, even modern African literature, emerged out of a completely different set of circumstances and attitudes, and to apply these theories to the discussion of African literature seems to me to be quite irrelevant. How would the
application of deconstruction to an African work help the critic to mediate between the work and the reader and make the work accessible to the African reader? How would it help to bring out the author’s intention? Of course, certain theories like feminism and Marxism are absolutely relevant and where one sees that they help in elucidation of the meaning and significance of particular works one uses them. One must not use theory for the sake of using theory. The theoretical approach should emerge out of the work itself; it should not be imposed on the work because it is the fashion of the day. One should also realize that some of these theories are passing fads that, in a generation or so, would probably be forgotten.

Ernest: In spite of its success, An Introduction to the African novel did receive its share of criticism; foremost among which was the comment on the “Eurocentric” perspective of the text from Adeola James. Given the benefit of hindsight, do you see any merit in James’ criticism?

Eustace: I can understand why some people might accuse me of being too “Eurocentric” in my critical practice in that book, since, as I have already hinted, my approach was partly formalist. But, again, one should remember that we were all striving to establish the parameters that should govern the discussion of African literature at a time when those parameters had not been definitely established. It was inevitable that some of us would be influenced by our academic background and training, but it was necessary to have the conversation, and out of that conversation, a consensus has been arrived at. What was important was that the discussion should be conducted with decency, humility and courtesy, and none of us should have behaved as though we had the monopoly of wisdom. My experience as a scholar and teacher of literature has shown me that literature has a civilizing influence and this civilizing influence can be seen in the tone of literary critics even when they disagree. What bothered me about Adeola James’s piece was the tone she used. It almost seemed as if she was motivated by personal considerations, and I would not be the least surprised if personal considerations were at work here. I may say at this point, and this is something I have never said before, that we were both students at Edinburgh University at about the same time, and knew each other quite well. I need say no more.

Ernest: In the Introduction to the text, you excluded both Wole Soyinka and Cyprian Ekwensi as writers whose works deserve a place in a serious discussion of criticism of African literature. Do you still stand by that view?

Eustace: Let me stress once more that my intention in that work was to discuss the twelve African novels that appealed to me most. Soyinka’s The Interpreters and Ekwensi’s Jagua Nana were not among them. This does not necessarily reflect my total estimate of the stature and contribution of
those writers. Indeed, I consider Wole Soyinka to be one of the greatest writers of all time. Though I think that there are problems with the *Interpreters* (and quite honestly, if we are going to be truthful, we must admit that our students find it tough going) I think that *Season of Anomy* is a great novel. I am constantly overwhelmed by Soyinka’s achievements as a dramatist and poet. He is truly one of the greatest. I also believe that Ekwensi made a very significant contribution to the development of the African novel as a whole and in my next book I gave him the praise he deserved. I even believe that there are some of his works that demand more critical attention than *Jagua Nana* but which have been overshadowed by that novel.

Ernest: You also published two other books of criticism: *The Growth of the African Novel* and *Studies on the English Novel*. In what ways do these texts mark an advance on your artistry as critic?

Eustace: In both of these books, particularly in *The Growth of the African Novel*, I allow myself to be influenced by some of the criticism that had been directed at *An Introduction to the African Novel*. I am less of a formalist and more of a sociological critic, doing my best to fill in the context from which the works emerged. Where *An Introduction* gives a detailed critical account of the twelve African novels that appealed to me most, in *The growth of the African Novel* I attempt to be more comprehensive and to give readers some idea of how the African novel has developed over the years. This means that I discuss a number of figures I do not deal with in *An Introduction*, and I try to give a general assessment of their entire work. So I start with Amos Tutuola and then go on to Cyprian Ekwensi, Chinua Achebe, and T. M. Aluko and I discuss the novels of Ousmane Sembene, Wole Soyinka and so on. It was not my intention to show how one novelist influenced the other, which is some people’s conception of growth, and I do not believe that this can be demonstrated in most cases. Nor was it my intention to show that the African novel grew out of the oral tradition, because that is still a contentious issue. I merely intended to discuss in detail the works of all those novelists who had made a significant contribution to the development of the genre.

Ernest: In spite of being an accomplished critic, you decided to start writing fiction. To date you have written four novels: *A Tale of Three Women*, *A Hanging is Announced*, *Canfira’s Travels*, and *A Pillar of the Community*. What motivated the switch from critic to writer?

Eustace: I won’t say that I have switched from being a critic to creative writing. In fact, since I started writing novels I have published two other works of criticism—*Knowledge Is More Than Mere Words*, which was jointly edited with Abioseh Porter, and *Of War and Women, Oppression and Optimism: New Essays on the African Novel*. I still consider myself to be a
critic as well as a budding novelist. I do not think that the two preoccupations are mutually exclusive. Throughout the history of literature notable critics have also been notable creative writers and vice versa, like Dryden, Samuel Johnson and T.S. Eliot, to name only a few. I decided to take to creative writing because there were things I thought I needed to say about Sierra Leone and to Sierra Leoneans, and that could be said only through the medium of fiction. The First work I wrote was Canfira’s Travels, which is a satirical account of life in modern Sierra Leone. The others followed quickly, and I even have a fourth entitled A Pillar of the Community. I had always had the urge to do a creative work, and I think there is a bit of the creative writer in all of us. In fact, this is one of the ways I explain dreams. I think that when we dream the creative writer in us takes over and constructs scenes and scenarios; it may be to help us confront certain problems and issues; it may be to bring to the fore certain things that were submerged in our subconscious like our real attitude towards certain people such as parents and friends. But it is the creative faculty in us that has taken over. We know, of course, that some great works have been caused by dreams, like Coleridge’s “Khubla Khan” for example. Anyway, the point I am making is that dreams demonstrate that we all have the creative capacity within us. Some of us, because we are more facile with language, can then actualize this and put stories down on paper. I think this is what happened to me. I thought I had the creative flair within me and the sooner I put things down on paper the better.

Ernest: I was privileged to teach A Tale of Three Women to my students of Modern Global literatures last semester and some noted, among others, the stylistic connections between Emily Bronte’s exploded chronology method in Wuthering Heights and A Tale of Three Women. Do you agree with this reading of your work?

Eustace: I think there are similarities between A Tale of Three Women and Wuthering Heights in so far as both are first person narratives told by solid women who span the generations and in the process tell the story of several lives and an entire community. In both works, this woman is reminiscing, and the end point is several years later than the starting point. In this sense, I suppose you could say that both works do strange things with time, since they start by going backwards and then move gradually forwards.

Ernest: Other students pointed out the elements of magical realism; the supernatural, especially in the death of Dinah, sorcery, the macabre and grotesque in the novel. Would it be fair to categorize you as a magical realist in the same vein as Syl Cheney-Coker in The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar?
Eustace: Although there are magical elements in the work, I am not sure that I would categorize myself as a magical realist writer. I am not sure that Syl Cheney–Coker would like to be categorized as a magical realist writer either. You see, what a lot of people in the West would regard as magical, is considered part of the “real” in many African societies. It is part of reality for Africans. A lot of Africans will tell you that it is possible for someone to go to the medicine man and get that medicine man to kill one’s enemy without physically touching the person. They would say there is nothing magical about this; it is part of the African reality. Including such episodes in a work makes the work even more realistic. It is something to which a lot of Africans can relate. Some would say that some of these episodes are even grounded in scientific fact, like the use of “allay” for instance. Others would say that most traditional African religions posit the existence in the world of a force that some people have the ability to manipulate for good or for ill. It is not magical; it is part of the African reality.

Ernest: Of the three novels you have published, which do you consider your most accomplished and why?

Eustace: I think it’s for the critics to say which is the most accomplished. I would rather point to the one I enjoyed writing the most, and that is *A Tale of Three Women*. It’s also the one that has proved the most popular. It’s an epic work that encompasses a lot of Sierra Leone’s history and foregrounds the history and cultural practices of the Creoles. However, intertwined with this are the fortunes of three very different types of women, one of whom is modeled on my mother and my grandmother. Maybe that’s the reason why I like it the most. I must say, though, that I also enjoyed writing *Canfira’s Travels*, which, as the title suggests, is modeled on Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* and is a satirical work. I laughed quite a lot even while writing it, and I remember an American lady whom I gave a chapter to put on disk for me several years ago saying that she could not stop laughing and was waiting to see the whole finished product.

Ernest: A lot of people were quite surprised at the publication of your creative works. However, I suspect that your engagement with creative writing did not start with your published novels.

Eustace: You are quite right about that; it had started earlier with the translation of a play about life in 18th century England into Krio that reflects contemporary issues in Sierra Leone in the 1980s.

Ernest: Why did you translate *Volpone* into Krio?

Eustace: I decided to translate Ben Johnson’s immortal play *Volpone* into Krio (“Ojukokoro”) for two main reasons: Firstly, I’d always thought it was a
magnificent play. I’d loved it since my student days when I found it not only extremely well-constructed and absolutely meaningful, but also very hilarious. It was truly one of the funniest plays I had ever read and in its treatment of corruption and man’s enslavement to the power of money, man’s readiness to do whatever it takes to get financial gain, I saw it as being absolutely relevant to the situation in Sierra Leone at the time. This was a period when people were quite prepared to prostitute themselves and their professions for money, especially for foreign exchange, and this happened in all circles of life.

The second reason was that when I attempted to teach the play to my students at Fourah Bay College, I found that many of them found it difficult and were unable to get at the humor, humor that I thought was so obvious, particularly in the scenes involving dramatic irony. So I came to the conclusion that the impediment must be the language. Ben Jonson’s language, though very rich and full of very meaningful imagery, can be very dry, unlike Shakespeare’s. At times it is intentionally so, for purposes of characterization, in the characterization of the jealous Corvino, for instance. So I decided to translate the play into a language that all the students would understand. One long vacation, therefore, when I had nothing else to do, I translated the entire play into Krio, making use of local situations and names for the Venetian ones. When we put the play on the stage, it was one of the most popular things we had ever done on the Mary Kingsley stage and some of the actors made their reputations on it. The students, and, indeed, the entire community, saw the play’s relevance and got the humor completely. We repeated it several times. I am now working on a revision of my translation.

Ernest: I take it translation, as creative art, did not start with your work on Volpone.

Eustace: There is a long tradition of translating English plays into Krio. There is certainly a Krio translation of Julius Caesar by Thomas Decker and a Krio Bible. Of course, translations of Shakespeare’s plays like The Merchant of Venice were being done by Dele Charley at about the same time as I did “Ojukokoro.”

Ernest: Do you see yourself as more of critic than writer? Or better rephrased, do you want to be remembered more as critic than as writer?

Eustace: I think I am more of a critic than a writer. Some of my novels have not yet achieved wide circulation, particularly because of the practices and methods of the publishers who have not done a lot towards promoting them. However, I would like to be remembered as both writer and critic. As I have hinted above, I am always amazed and rather pleasantly surprised by the hordes of scholars who greet me at conferences and say they’ve read my works or that my works constituted a major part of their introduction to African literature and wish to take photographs with me.
Ernest: Do you think there is a corpus of work that deserves to be labeled Sierra Leonean literature? Is there a “national” literature in Sierra Leone? If so, who are the contemporary writers?

Eustace: Yes, I think that over the years a considerable body of literature has emerged that we can justifiably refer to as Sierra Leonean literature. We can trace it right back to the pioneers, people like Jacob Stanley Davies, Crispin George and Gladys Casely Hayford; we can then move forward to figures like Delphine King, Abioseh Nicol, and Raymond Sarif Easmon; we then move even further forward to writers like Lemuel Johnson, Gaston Bart-Williams, Yulisa Amadu Maddy and Syl Cheney-Coker; and then there are the latest writers like Sorie Conteh, Delia Jarret Macauley, Yema Lucilda Hunter, Elvis Gbanabom Hallowell, Aminatta Forna, not to mention others like Pede Hollist and your humble servant. What is more, as with other African literatures, we can see the differences among these various generations of writers. While the pioneers were concerned with racial matters, the consequences of imperialism, or a nostalgic celebration of home, and wrote in styles dictated by their education, religion and upbringing, the younger and the more contemporary writers are concerned with social comment and the nature of contemporary Sierra Leonean society and, most importantly, the impact and consequences of the brutal civil war. Their styles are more experimental and more akin to the styles of other modern African writers. They are also much more ready to incorporate aspects of magical realism into their works. It is also possible to talk of a Sierra Leonean “war literature” emerging from the works of the contemporary writers. We can see this in Delia Jarrett-Macauley’s Moses, Citizen and Me, Yema Lucilda Hunter’s Redemption Song which is arguably the most sensitive treatment of the war that I have read, and Aminatta Forna’s The Memory of Love. Both Yema Lucilda Hunter and Aminatta Forna are emerging as very important African writers, each with about four novels to her credit. Indeed, Aminatta Forna’s The Memory of Love won the Commonwealth writer’s prize for fiction and it has been very well received throughout the world. Some of these writers, of course, now live in the Diaspora, and they raise the very interesting issue of what constitutes African or even Sierra Leonean literature.

Ernest: Syl Cheney-Coker is arguably the most prolific and proficient writer from Sierra Leone. He has recently published a novel Sacred River and a collection of poems Stone Child and Other Poems. Is Cheney-Coker the face of Sierra Leonean literature?

Eustace: I think he is arguably the most important Sierra Leonean writer at the moment. He has a considerable body of excellent work, both poetry and the novel genres, His works are read and studied all over the world and
discussed at all kinds of conferences. He has won a considerable number of awards, and he is still going strong. His novels are the most massive novels to have come out of Sierra Leone and he goes about the task of novel writing with great artistry. He is not only Sierra Leone’s leading poet, but one of Africa’s greatest. His oeuvre taken as a whole communicates the entire history and condition of Sierra Leone.

Ernest: What do you think of the works of Sierra Leonean writers in the Diaspora like *A Woman of Conscience: A Novel of Political Chicanery and Hope* and *Leaves from the Calabash* by Hassan Baraka and *Journey to Dreamland* by J. Sorie Conteh?

Eustace: I admire the work of J. Sorie Conteh. I think *The Diamonds* is a very fine novel and I have written extensively on Conteh’s work and done conference presentations on him.

Ernest: Aminatta Forna is emerging as a formidable and unique voice in Sierra Leonean and Diaspora writings. What do you think accounts for her uniqueness? How does she fit into the corpus of Sierra Leonean literature?

Eustace: I think Aminatta Forna’s works are also commendable. I enjoyed reading *The Memory of Love* and recently did a conference presentation on it. However, I think writers like her and Delia Jarrett-Macauley raise the issue of what constitutes Sierra Leone or even African literature. Does the Sierra Leonean writer have to have been born in Sierra Leone? Does he or she have to have grown up in Sierra Leone and imbibed aspects of Sierra Leonean culture and the Sierra Leonean spirit? Are writers like these Sierra Leonean writers or Diaspora writers? These are issues that need to be addressed. All this was the subject of a paper I recently presented at the last conference of the African Literature Association held in Johannesburg, South Africa, entitled, “Defining the Sierra Leonean Writer: the case of Aminatta Forna”. I was concerned with what defines the Sierra Leonean writer, or the African writer for that matter. Of course, the latter is an issue that has concerned critics of African literature for years. Is it a matter of geographical space? Does the African writer have to have been born in Africa? Does the Sierra Leonean writer have to have been born in Sierra Leone? If we insist on this, that would automatically disqualify someone like Aminatta Forna. She, as you know, was born in the United Kingdom, but of a Sierra Leonean father and a British mother. She came to Sierra Leone as a little girl and stayed until she was about eleven. Thankfully, she had already left Sierra Leone with her father’s wife long before her father was executed by the Siaka Stevens regime. Since then she divides her time between Britain and Sierra Leone. Well, is she a Sierra Leonean writer or a British writer or a writer from the Diaspora? The same questions can be asked of Delia Jarrett-Macauley. In so far as African literature is concerned, I have always believed that race is
not a determining issue, otherwise Nadine Gordimer would not be considered an African writer, which she definitely is, nor is it merely a matter of subject matter, otherwise Conrad would be considered an African writer, which he definitely is not. Up till recently, I have believed that an African writer should have been born in Africa and should manifest a spirit or attitude that is demonstrably “African,” a spirit or attitude that has been imbibed as a result of long years of residence in and association with Africa. The same can be said about Sierra Leonean literature. But then we come up against the case of Aminatta Forna who was not born in Sierra Leone and has lived most of her life outside Sierra Leone. So, are we left with the manifestation of a spirit or attitude that is demonstrably African or Sierra Leonean? Although she was not born in Sierra Leone and has spent most of her life outside Sierra Leone, does she write about Sierra Leonean matters with the sensitivity and knowledge that suggest that she has imbibed and does manifest that spirit or attitude I am talking about? Some people would say that the jury is still out on this, although my personal view is that in her treatment of the impact of the war at least, she does. Maybe we should increasingly talk about literature of the Diaspora or global literature. At times it might simply boil down to how the writer sees himself or herself. However, it’s an issue we have to confront and discuss.

Ernest: Other writers like Yema Hunter in Redemption Song and Delia Jarrett-Macauley in Moses, Citizen and Me have been working on interesting issues on post-conflict Sierra Leone. What would you say is the future of Sierra Leonean literature?

Eustace: Let me also say that I greatly admire the novels of Yema Lucilda Hunter and I think she is one of the most important Sierra Leonean writers writing at the moment. My personal view is that her Redemption Song is the most compelling treatment of the Sierra Leone civil war that I have read. I would say that the future of Sierra Leonean literature is very bright indeed.

Ernest: Which writer(s) best represent the future of Sierra Leonean writing?

Eustace: This is a difficult question to answer because one does not know which of these writers will continue writing, and we have, of course, to sort out the whole issue of what constitutes Sierra Leonean literature. At the moment I would say that Syl Cheney-Coker and Yema Lucilda Hunter are still formidable forces.

Ernest: Turning to African literature, and given the works of Ben Okri, Kojo Laing, and Syl Cheney-Coker, is magical realism the “future” of African literature? Are African writers still writing “back to empire”?
Eustace: I don’t think that magical realism is the future of African literature although I believe that African writers will use it when they think fit. I also do not think that African writers are still writing “back to empire”. That was an important motivating force at one time, but we have gone past that. African writers are now concerned with all kinds of issues.

Ernest: Apart from writing and criticism, you were also a great teacher and Hall Warden at Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone. Could you share some memorable moments either as teacher or Hall Warden at FBC?

Eustace: Some of my most memorable moments as a Hall Warden were the inter-Hall sports competitions and the tremendous rivalry involved. Of course, it is well known that I rewarded my sportsmen in Solomon Caulker Hall by giving them rooms facing the sea. But I also rewarded those who participated in my dramatic productions in similar fashion. The dramatic productions were among my most memorable moments. As far as sports was concerned, the amazing thing was that after all the rivalry, all the students danced together on their way down from Kortright to campus and rivalry was forgotten. It was an amazing thing. This is a spirit of togetherness that seems to have been forgotten in the current situation at FBC.

Ernest: How do we come to know you as “Doc P”?

Eustace: I honestly don’t know how the name came about. It was a term of affection devised by the students. I liked it, and it stuck.
Notes
“Allay”: corrosive powder-like substance believed to have destructive supernatural powers
“Ojukokoro”: excessive greed or avarice

Works Cited