

NOBEL SYMPOSIA

Nobel in Africa Nobel Symposium in Literature

RETRIEVING PASTS, IMAGINING FUTURES: CREATIVE FORMS IN AFRICAN WRITING

STIAS, Stellenbosch, 3-7 November 2025

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

In the 21st Century African writing exists as a powerful creative force on the stage of world literature. This symposium invites writers and academics to consider the unique contribution African writing can make to reformulating the destructive narratives of the past and the present. Rather than thinking of Africa as ‘following after’ the developed world, we propose writing from Africa as the site for thinking of alternative paths to the future.

The 204th Nobel Symposium on *Retrieving Pasts, Imagining Futures: Creative Forms in African Writing* will be the fifth symposium in the *Nobel in Africa* series at STIAS. The invitation-only symposium will gather around 40 of the world’s leading scholars and writers, in the field of African writing, with lectures, discussions and an outreach programme.

Convenors: Abdulrazak Gurnah (University of Kent), Maria Olausson (University of Gothenburg), Tina Steiner (Stellenbosch University) and Louise Green (Stellenbosch University)

The Nobel in Africa – NOBEL SYMPOSIA series is a STIAS Initiative in partnership with Stellenbosch University, under the auspices of the Nobel Foundation and the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences with funding from the Knut & Alice Wallenberg Foundation and the Marcus & Amalia Wallenberg Foundation. The NOBEL SYMPOSIA mark is owned by the Nobel Foundation.

Draft programme (18 August 2025)

The motivating impulse for this symposium is to convene a series of open-ended conversations drawing on the rich collective experience of reading and writing African literature. All participants are invited to engage fully in every session. However, each participant has also been assigned a particular place in the programme. This might be on a panel, in a conversation or part of a reading. Most of the sessions will be closed to the public, unless indicated otherwise.

PANEL: The panels will consist of four presenters. If you are part of a panel, you will be allocated 10 minutes to present on your creative and/or scholarly work in relation to the panel's theme. Following the presentations, we will have a 50-minute discussion period for in-depth conversations.

PUBLIC PANEL: Each presenter is allocated 15 minutes for their intervention, because the Q & A will be shorter, given that this panel is open to the public.

CONVERSATION: A conversation between an author and a critic lasts for one hour: 30 minutes for the conversation and 30 minutes for open discussion. We imagine these conversations deepening and extending some of the themes of the panels.

READINGS: Readings will take place on most days from 15.30-16.30. If you have been assigned to a reading session, you are invited to select and read extracts from your work which relate in some ways to the theme of the day. Feel free to imagine this connection in any way that you would like. Each participant will read for 20 minutes, with the remaining 20 minutes for responses.

Day 0 Sunday, 2 Nov		
19:30- 21:30	WELCOME DINNER Welcome remarks by Edward K Kirumira, STIAS Director Opening remarks by Abdulrazak Gurnah, Symposium Co-convenor	

Day 1 Monday, 3 Nov: COUNTERHISTORY		
The theme of this day invites us to direct our gaze at the strange country that is the past. Narrative has a privileged relation to time. It can bring into focus pasts that have been elided, lost, suppressed, forgotten or transformed.		
OPENING SESSION (open to the public & media)		MC/ PROGRAMME DIRECTOR: tbc
08:00 – 09:00	Registration	
09:00 – 09:30	Welcome & Opening remarks <ul style="list-style-type: none">STIAS Director, Edward K. KirumiraStellenbosch University Rector & Vice-Chancellor, Deresh RamjugernathSymposium convenor, University of Gothenburg, Maria Olaussen	
09:30 – 11:00	PUBLIC PANEL: Retrieving Pasts Aminatta Forna, Petina Gappah, Ato Quayson, Njabulo Ndebele	CHAIR: Sarah Nuttall
11:00 – 11:15	COFFEE & TEA BREAK END OF OPENING SESSION	
11:15 – 12:45	PANEL: (Re)writing History Jennifer Makumbi, Leila Aboulela, Maaza Mengiste, David Attwell	CHAIR: Godwin Siundu
12:45 – 14:00	LUNCH	
14:00 – 15:00	CONVERSATION: MG Vassanji & Dan Ojwang	

15:00 – 15:30	COFFEE & TEA BREAK	
15:30 – 16:30	READING: Leila Lalami & Seffi Atta	CHAIR: Tina Steiner
Open evening		

Day 2 Tuesday, 4 Nov: REINVENTION		
Reinvention addresses the transformative power of creativity. On this day we will pay attention to the shifts and nuances of literary form that allow us to perceive our relation to language and place in new ways.		
08:30 – 09:30	Arrival coffee & tea	
09:30 – 11:00	PANEL: Writing Place Jamal Mahjoub, Zoë Wicomb, Dorothy Driver, Jopi Nyman	CHAIR: Maria Olausen
11:00 – 11:15	COFFEE & TEA BREAK	
11:15 – 12:45	PANEL: Publication and Circulation Mkuki Gboya, Lola Shoneyin, Bhakti Shringarpure, Meg Arenberg	CHAIR: Lynda Spencer
12:45 – 14:00	LUNCH	
14:00 – 15:00	CONVERSATION: Akachi Ezeigbo & Steph Newell	
STELLENBOSCH UNIVERSITY CHANCELLOR'S PUBLIC LECTURE, Adam Small Theatre		PROGRAMME DIRECTOR: Dr Katlego Letlonkane, Stellenbosch University
17:30	Transport to Adam Small Theatre	
18:00	Welcoming	Prof Deresh Ramjugernath Rector and Vice-Chancellor: Stellenbosch University
	Opening Remarks	Lesetja Kganyago Chancellor, Stellenbosch University and Governor of the South African Reserve Bank
	Introduction of guest speakers	Prof Vasti Roodt Dean: Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Stellenbosch University
	Lecture: Africa Writes the World	Emeritus Professor J.M. Coetzee Emeritus Professor Abdulrazak Gurnah
	Conversation with the Nobel Laureates	Facilitator: Professor Stefan Helgesson Dean: Faculty of Humanities and Vice Rector for Human Science Stockholm University
	Word of Thanks	Prof Stella Viljoen Vice-Dean (Research): Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Stellenbosch University
20:00	Cocktail reception	

Day 3 | Wednesday 5 Nov: OUTREACH

A small number of invited participants to offer lectures, conversations, creative writing master classes at the three Western Cape universities

08:00	Transport from STIAS to outreach venues
	Outreach 1 (tbc)
	Outreach 2 (tbc)
	Outreach 3 (tbc)
18:00 – 20:00	BRAAI at STIAS

Day 4 | Thursday 6 Nov: INCANTATION

The theme for today is a little enigmatic. It directs attention to the musical, ritual aspect of language and the power it has to evoke, to disturb, and to rearrange the world. It invites consideration of the materiality and magic of language and the way it interacts with the materiality of the world.

08:30 – 09:30	Arrival coffee & tea	
09:30 – 11:00	PANEL: Oceanic Writing Rogaia Abusharaf, Ida Hadjivayanis, Clarissa Vierke, Jacky Kosgei	CHAIR: Dan Ojwang
11:00 - 11:15	COFFEE & TEA BREAK	
11:15 – 12:45	PANEL: Intimacy Dinaw Mengestu, Chris Abani, Godwin Siundu, Susanne Gehrmann	CHAIR: Grace A. Musila
12:45 – 14:00	LUNCH	
14:00 – 15:00	CONVERSATION: Abdulrazak Gurnah & Tina Steiner	
15:00 – 15:30	COFFEE & TEA BREAK	
	READING: Susan Kiguli & Gabeba Baderoon	CHAIR: Ashleigh Harris
18:00	SYMPOSIUM DINNER (venue tbc)	

Day 5 | Friday 7 Nov: RECOGNITION

Recognition represents a key mode through which readers connect with fiction, offering a sense of resonance with various aspects of the narrative. It invites us to consider both the possibilities and limitations of recognition, particularly in relation to the challenges posed by genre and the representation of more-than-human worlds.

08:30 – 09:30	Arrival coffee & tea	
09:30 – 11:00	PANEL: Inviting Forms Lynda Spencer, Ashleigh Harris, Suyi Okungbowa, Louise Green	CHAIR: Stephanie Newell
11:00 - 11:15	COFFEE & TEA BREAK	

11:15 – 12:45	PANEL: More-than-human perspectives Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor, Maria Olaussen, Sarah Nuttall	CHAIR: Louise Green
12:45 – 14:00	LUNCH	
14:00 – 15:00	CONVERSATION: Tsitsi Dangarembga & Grace A. Musila	
15:00 – 15:30	COFFEE & TEA BREAK	
15:30 – 16:30	Closing Roundtable	CO-CHAIRS: Abdulrazak Gurnah, Maria Olaussen, Tina Steiner and Louise Green