

Book review

M. J. Daymond et al., eds., *Women Writing Africa : The Southern Region*. New York: The Feminist Press. 2003, 554 pp. ISBN 1-55861-406-0.

From its conception to its publication, it took over ten years, but the result was worth waiting for. Realized by a group of high-powered women well known in international feminist scholarly circles, who acted as editors, consulting editors, project co-directors and series editors, translators and authors of introductory entries to the primary texts, Volume One of the “Women Writing Africa Project” is dedicated “[t]o the women of Southern Africa who fought and continue to fight for democracy: in admiration and with thanks. And to the memory of the thousands of women whose voices remain unheard, as well as those whose voices are presented here.”

This dedication is also the book’s programme. In chronological order, starting with the nineteenth century, it offers “significant testimony to the literary presence and historical activity” of women from Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland, and Zimbabwe (p. xvii). Malawi will be included in a subsequent volume of the series.

The editors point out that it was important to them to begin and end the volume with texts by black women. They “also wanted to make clear that orature, an art form in which black women dominate, is not frozen in some particular period of time but a continuous tradition with roots going back many hundreds of years.” Therefore, “[o]ral texts appear throughout the anthology, placed according to the date of collection or publication. Thus their location insists that oral composition, although utilizing ancient techniques, always re-creates itself in the present” (p. xxiv). One of the goals of the editors, beautifully accomplished, was the inclusion of oral testimonies “that allow the reader privileged insight into experiences rarely made public” by women who, because of their illiteracy, otherwise may have remained “invisible” or “inaudible” (p. xxiv). The organization of the book posed numerous difficulties to the editors, which is to be expected in any pioneering project, such as the potential of a disproportionate representation of texts from settler colonies, such as South Africa with its proportionally higher number of available documents.

As a long overdue corrective to the privileging of male texts, this anthology includes a broad range of texts, crossing genre boundaries. Literary critics might be puzzled to

find court records included, lawyers might be equally puzzled to find texts by such well-known authors as the South African Nadine Gordimer. With its generous inclusion of a wide variety of sources, the anthology aims at paying "attention to women's voices, and in many cases, their agency" which in turn "changes the contours of Southern African literary and political history" (p. 1). In their 82-pages scholarly introduction to the primary records which includes extensive notes and a rich bibliography, the editors cover five main themes, namely "Women and Orality," "Women and Writing," "Early Twentieth-Century Transitions", "Mid-Century Political and Cultural Transitions," and "Resistance, Continuities, Rupture, and Renewal: 1960s to 2000s." Each main theme is divided into sub-themes which include "Missionary Attitudes to Songs and Stories," "Issues of Cultural Mediation in Oral Texts," "Colonized Women: Forms of Resistance," "The Early Court Records," "Letters and Mission School Essays," "Settler Fiction and Memoirs," "Textual Interactions and Hybridities," "Approaches to Public Discourse: Letters, Diaries, Pamphlets," "Early Political Speeches and Essays: Women's Assessment of Modernity," "Fiction and Poetry by Black Women in the 1920s and 1930s," "The White Peril," "Women's Sexuality and the 'Drum Decade,'" "Vernacular Literature in the 1960s and Later," "Exile and Excommunication," "Black Consciousness Writing," and "The Resilience of Orality: Life Stories and Women's Legacies." The introduction features extensive notes and a long bibliography, a treasure for researchers from a variety of disciplines.

In the main body of the book each of the authors of the primary documents is briefly introduced by a "Headnote Writer." All texts indicate in what language they originated, from Afrikaans to isiZulu. The entries range from songs to folktales to women's perspectives on different wars, on details on their daily lives in different countries, different classes, different ethnic groups and different walks of life. They concern themselves with "private issues" such as marriage, motherhood, widowhood and health as well as "public issues" such as land distribution, inheritance laws and racism. Social historians, literary scholars, and other interested readers will all find fascinating illuminations of Southern African women's lives.

Louisa Mvemve's pamphlet from 1916 can serve as an example for the 120 documents. An enterprising South African herbalist, she published pamphlets in English advertising her services and medicines. Mvemve, placing herself in a line of traditional healers both matrilineally and patrilineally, thus claiming authority, offers solutions against childlessness, nervousness, how to strengthen "delicate children" and adults, as well as recipes against sexually transmitted diseases. "The Little Woman" assures men that

No man need suffer from the bad effects of associating with immoral women, for there is a certain herb which will remove the poison from the blood and will kill the germs. It removed the pimples which form in the water passage, and will cure the ill-effects of strain, it will even cure the worst form of syphilis. "The Little Woman" will cure this disease and make the man well and strong again. Take her medicine and don't drink any other drink, avoid meat and vegetables; live on porridge without milk. You will soon be quite cured and the sores will be healed. Take sour milk with ground bread-crust twice a month; a tablespoon of it cures any blood poison; even if it is poison that has been given to you in food, tea or coffee. Many people lose their lives through blood poisoning.

Don't cut yourself, but paint yourself with the special powder; take the medicine lukewarm. Those people who take this medicine will never suffer. Every night and morning you must paint yourself. Keep away from women (or if a woman—keep away from men). (p. 164)

Independent of whether or not Mvemve's advice had the promised effect, it exemplifies women's familiarity with STDs and their contagiousness, and their willingness to put a stop to them through medicines and behavioural changes. As the "headnote" informs the reader, Mvemve was "keen to have Western science confirm the efficacy of her cures so that she could patent them and be licensed to practice. She was, however, up against a growing body of legislation that sought to regulate medical work by those 'nonqualified'" (p. 163).

While all those who put this project together need to be commended for their accomplishment, some criticism needs to be expressed. While the introduction organizes the entries thematically, the actual chronological organization of the anthology does not easily allow one to find entries belonging to a specific theme, or get a regional impression of women's concerns. As an example of the latter, a text from Botswana ("We will be Leasing for Ourselves," p. 484-88) stands next to one from Zimbabwe ("Writing Near the Bone," p. 488-91), which in turn stands next to one from South Africa ("African Wisdom," 491-94), and so forth. While providing a regional impression of concerns and developments in women's lives may not have been the main interest of the editors, it would have been helpful to those who wanted to use the book as a scholarly resource. The appended list of authors organized by country, but without page numbers pointing to their entries, is only a limited guide.

The series, "Women Writing Africa," as "a project of reconstruction that aims to restore African women's voices to the public sphere . . . documenting the history of self-conscious expression by African women throughout the continent" includes "oral and writ-

ten, ritual and quotidian, sacred and profane” sources as well as dance songs and private letters, legal depositions and public declamations (p. xviii). The editors “hoped to foster new readings of African history by shedding light on the dailiness of women’s lives as well as their rich contributions to culture. In the end, seeing through women’s eyes, [they] expect to locate the fault lines of memory and so change assumptions about the shaping of African knowledge, culture, and history” (p. xviii). While this is surely an ambitious goal, Volume One of “The Women Writing Africa Project” is a good beginning and awakens curiosity about the hopefully soon forthcoming volumes.

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