

ALEXANDER FYFE — MADHU KRISHNAN (eds.): African Literatures as World Literature

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The anthology *African Literatures as World Literatures* was published as part of the Bloomsbury series “Literatures as World Literature”, whose pragmatic approach could be described as “doing world literature”. The series promises to leave behind the more theoretical and abstract treatments of what world literature is and should be. Instead, in the more than 20 anthologies published so far, scholarly material has been created for concrete areas in the broad field of literary and cultural production globally, according to regional, genre or linguistic categories, as well as the work of individual authors, with a view to a truly pluralistic, polyphonic, and multi-perspective understanding of world literature. This same pragmatic approach is taken by Alexander Fyfe and Madhu Krishnan, the editors of *African Literatures as World Literature*.

One of the achievements of this volume is presenting and naming global inequalities and power asymmetries in the creative, distribution, and circulation processes of literature itself, as well as in the academic visibility of certain literatures. Fyfe’s and Krishnan’s introductory questions accordingly concern the conceptualization of “world” itself and what this term means from Africa-centered perspectives. These are fundamental questions about the legitimacy with which one speaks of “Africa” and in which languages, and the editors recall the heterogeneity of Africa itself when they ask: “Can there be a unified geography that we consider under the sign of Africa when its referent is the second-largest continent

in the world, one of unparalleled geographic, ecological, cultural and demographic diversity?” (1)

This notion of a “unified geography”, so common how the extra world sees Africa, is effectively opened up in the collected contributions. In doing so, the editors are concerned to map the diversity of literary landscapes on the continent in the past and in the present, to show their entanglement in broader regional, geopolitical, transnational, pan-African, colonial, and postcolonial contexts, as well as the active engagement of writers in thinking and “worlding” African localities and specific experiences in these larger contexts.

When it comes to modern literature in Africa, the focus is usually on the internationally most visible genre, which literary scholar Eileen Julien has described in a widely cited article as “the extroverted African novel”, written in European languages and released by publishing houses in the global North. Its most authoritative and representative authors, from Chinua Achebe and Chimamanda Adichie to Nobel laureate Abdelrazak Gurnah, often live in the diaspora. This, according to Kenyan author Billy Kahora in his chapter “Can Nairobi ‘World’ without the ‘Great Kenyan Novel?’”, is also still the ticket “for a place in world literature” (44), the centers of which are still in the “Western publishing capitals of the world” (40). The editors deliberately shift this focus to what Doseline Kiguru’s chapter “Contemporary African Literature and Celebrity Capital” terms an “alterna-

tive literary geography” (204), from where emerges not only a more realistic picture of literary and cultural realities on the continent itself, but also decolonial, innovative, and forward-looking conceptions of a pluralistically and polyphonically conceived world. In the editors’ words: “[R]ather than placing the onus of theorizing the ‘world’ on any particular theory of world literature, we are concerned with how literature stages questions of worldliness in ways that may be irreducible to the conflation of the ‘world’ and the ‘global’” (7).

The twelve contributions are a mix of literary-historical, interpretative, and literary sociological works. Likewise, in addition to scholarly articles, the anthology includes voices of writers and literary activists on the continent – namely, the Nigerian author, publisher and festival organizer Lola Shoneyin, with a contribution on the annual Aké Arts and Books Festival she organizes in Lagos; the Kenyan author Billy Kahora, formerly the editor of the legendary literary magazine *Kwani?*; and Munyao Kilolo, the former editor of *Jalada*, the digital magazine of the pan-African writers’ collective of the same name and a member of the Itũka publishing project which promotes writing in African languages. Three more chapters are situated at the intersections of literary activism and academic research, namely Doseline Kiguru’s illuminating discussion of the utility of “celebrity capital” in fostering innovative literary landscapes in South Africa and Kenya, Bhakti Shingapore’s discussion of Nairobi’s potential for the emergence of new forms and genres of literary “worlding”, and Zamda R. Geuza’s and Kate Wallis’s chapter on “New Cartographies for World Literary Space: Locating Pan-African Publishing and Prizing”.

The primary literature discussed in the literary-historical contributions include foundational texts of modern literature in African languages written in the early 20th century, which the contributors read both in terms of their reference to indigenous cultural forms and of their cosmopol-

itan character. These are works in Amharic by the Ethiopian author Afāwārq Gäbrä-Iyāsus in Sara Marzagora’s chapter “The First Ethiopian Novel in Amharic (1908) and the World: Critical and Theoretical Legacies”; and early Sesotho, isiXhosa, and isiZulu novels by the South African authors Thomas Mofolo, S. E. K. Mqhayi and John Langalibalele Dube in the chapter by Ashleigh Harris. Clarissa Vierke and Chapane Mutiua’s contribution deals with an early 20th-century Swahili verse epic entitled *Kaisa*, which was recited in oral performances on the Swahili coast of Mozambique and simultaneously translated into the local Eko-ti language. Vierke and Mutiua refer to one of a total of three written manuscripts, more than 300 pages long, whose recital took more than three nights. In this fascinating text, a narrative and interpretation of the events of World War I and the Franco-Prussian War that preceded it was presented from a place that was “peripheral” in the geopolitical order of the time, which Vierke and Mutiua interpret in an equally fascinating analysis as modeling a world consciousness articulated in the Swahili genre of *utenzi*. All three contributions impressively demonstrate how the studied texts articulate a culturally self-confident expression of a transnationally conceived modernity that contradicts the diffusionist center-periphery model of a modernity that spread from the West and to which cultural production and intellectual life “reacted” in the respective peripheries. Thus, in a historically and critically rich reading of the text considered the first Ethiopian novel in Amharic, *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik* (1908), written by Gäbrä-Iyāsus in Italian exile and later republished under the title *Tobbya*, Marzagora demonstrates that “[a] diffusionist reading of *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik* would be flawed on at least two major counts. Firstly, this is not a text that understands itself as ‘peripheral’ in any way; and secondly, this is a profoundly modern text, not a delayed response to an allegedly European literary modernity” (86). Even the genre term “novel” turns out to be not adequate. In fact, as

Marzagora points out, with the title that can be translated as a “story born of the heart”, Gäbrä-Iyäsus created a uniquely innovative Ethiopian genre, which had much less to do with the “influence” of the Western novel than with the conditions of writing in exile, and the phrase is used today as the Amharic term for “novel”. In a similar spirit of a modernity conceived transnationally, Jackson’s contribution investigates the modelling of the “worldly” African as a moral character in the writings of the English-speaking Fante intelligentsia at the end of the 19th century in today’s Ghana.

Next to these more literary-historical chapters, there are the previously mentioned ones that deal with contemporary alternative literary landscapes and their (dis)entanglement with/from Western (cultural) capital. In them, the focus is less on individual texts than on literary and publishing strategies, innovations, and issues.

Penny Cartwright’s chapter “Reversing the Global Media Lens: Colonial Spectacularization in the Writing of Binyavanga Wainaina” analyzes the effects of humanitarian and development industries as a factor in “worlding” African lifeworlds through the writing of an author, who has made “‘the hegemonic order of white privilege’ that continually occur *outside* Western capitals” (215), as, for instance, in the humanitarian field, an issue like few others before him. Cartwright’s contribution reads “the global media’s power of world formation” (230) and the inherent problem of a “colonial specularization” of the othered African through the lens of two of Wainaina’s less-studied texts, the short story “Ships in High Transit (‘ShIT’)” (2004) and *Beyond River Yei* (2006), for which Wainaina himself took on the role of humanitarian reporter in an investigation on the treatment of sleeping sickness in South Sudan. Sarah Arens’s chapter “The Problem with French and the World: Imagining the Province and the Global in Francophone African Fiction” illuminates the relationship between Francophonie and world literature and discusses experiences

of global capitalism and its manifestations in Africa – extractivism, neocolonialism, and transnational capital – in two relatively recent French-language novels by authors from the Democratic Republic of Congo: Alain Mabanckou’s *Black Moses* (2017) and In Koli Jean Bofane’s *Congo Inc.: Le testament de Bismarck* (2014).

Read together, the contributions in this anthology provide more than valuable impetus for overcoming global inequality in the field of literature. One criticism of the selection is that the literary historical and interpretive contributions assembled in the volume focus heavily on men’s writing. More attention could have been paid to the contribution of women’s writing in African or in European languages, whether from a broad scope such as Swahili women poets, or specific cases like the work of Nana Asma’u, the representative of a Muslim reform movement in 19th-century West Africa. It could be interesting to examine alternative literary geographies through Hausa-Fulani women’s romance literature from northern Nigeria, a genre Ousseina Alidou examines in her contribution to F. Abiola Irele and Simon Gikandi’s volume *The Cambridge History of African and Caribbean Literature* (2000). Likewise, writers such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Yvonne Owuor, or Lola Shoneyin, although mentioned in some of the chapters (and Shoneyin herself is the author of one chapter), would have deserved individual chapters dealing more profoundly with their writing as world literature. What the anthology promises and achieves is to free the perception of African literatures from the fixation on the “extroverted African novel” as a subgenre and to gain a “more nuanced understanding of the plurality of world-making processes that obtain in African literary writing” (4).

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