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Adele King, Ed., *From Africa: New Francophone Stories*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2004. xx + 150 pp. Bibliographical Essay. \$40.00 U.S.; £30.50 U.K. (cl) ISBN: 0-8032-2578-2; \$15.00 U.S.; £11.50 (pb). ISBN: 0-8032-7810-1.

Review by Lee Whitfield, Wheelock College.

French colonialists took no prisoners in their assault on indigenous language and culture in Africa. Literacy was sanctioned solely in French. Schooling for the tiny fraction who *evolved* was calculated to excise Africa from Africans. In this [colonialism], “we are all criminals,” Sartre charged of his compatriots, “guilty of having destroyed *their* culture while refusing them our own.”[1] The result of having succeeded so well in this deliberate amnesia is that, as Dr. Adele King informs us, independent “Francophone African nations have neither publishing houses nor a market for fiction in their mother tongues” (p. v). If the goal is to be read, contemporary African authors must rely on Europe or the United States, where they can only express themselves in the linguistic universe of the marketplace.

Even in the dwindling moments of colonialism after 1945, France still ignored what was to become of her colonized African millions. No legal or political blueprint emerged to reform the colonial regime or to transfer power, much less to withdraw peacefully. Only after two decades mired in raw brutality did the French concede independence to Africans. No instrument permits us to calibrate the precise impact of history. But African literature can probably help us to decode the past. The pioneering work of Natalie Z. Davis, Robert Darnton, and Keith Thomas has taught us to turn to unexpected sources like peasant folklore and Nuer rituals if we hope to contemplate the otherwise silent *mentalité* of the *menu peuple*. Although we are hard pressed to find it in traditional primary sources, it can be found elsewhere. African fiction can depict the fragile, the disaffected, the often brutal scenes and gritty settings, and sinister plots in Africa’s making. At their best, African writers enable us to grasp in miniature the undocumented everyday life of those young orphans zipping their slingshots in the shelter of grandmothers’ straw huts while they imitate the whirring of diesel engines nearby (pp. 24-25); or the sordid shantytowns glimpsed through the hope of a young woman at dawn (p. 4); and the obscene spectacle of too many murderous leaders.

A multigenerational assemblage of African literature even permits readers to follow the changing flirtations of writers with the continent’s collective memory. African immigrant writers in search of distance still gaze back from the diaspora to their roots, and some unveil Africa shorn of illusion.[2] These portraits speak to the struggling, the silenced, the courageous lives of postcolonial Africans, and behind them, the tyranny and misery of their society. They also transcend that world, causing the reader to think about universal concerns. There is Kossi Efoui’s “Hunting Scene” in which the “silhouette more like a doe than a young boy darting, encircled,” is snared in the burning-tire noose of Togo’s panther-men death squad (p. 106). Whether Jean-Luc Raharimana’s old Fahavolo screams “gesticulating...madly” for the unsung heroes of Madagascar’s nationalist resistance and the trauma that debilitates Malagasy society in the aftermath of the decolonialization, is not clear. But the villains in this stark plot are the black colonial soldiers who desecrated their own ancient rites and have cursed Africa (p. 94). Inspired by and building on the rich anthologies of African short fiction like those edited by Chinua Achebe, Leila Sebbar, and Michel Le Bris, Adele King has brought to us a collection of passion, courage, and talent.

Initially, historians might dismiss a volume of fiction that entangles myth and legend, nostalgia for childhood, current gender relations, and politics as an inappropriate pedagogical tool. That would be a mistake. As a supplement to historical sources, the collection allows our students to imagine the nature of the unfolding drama of Africa. The immigrant writers assembled in King’s edited volume of short stories, *From Africa: New Francophone Stories*, depicts the world of postcolonial Africa and the African diaspora in which the weight of the past shadows the individual, the community, its children and their families, old age, and the soil which bred humanity itself.

What we have here are writers whose vantage points are formed by their early years in Africa, transformed in their experience spent as immigrants to democracies in Europe or the United States. Like other immigrant “authors from

countries where a book can result in the author's imprisonment or exile, they are distrustful of authority, ironic, and attuned to the grotesque, the lost, and baffled." [3] King's anthology is among the first to bring together the work of two generations of African expatriates born in the 1950s and 1960s. Their tapestries, woven of multiple, interlocking threads, make it difficult for the editor to structure her text thematically. And the categories--new myths, nostalgia for childhood, modern perspectives, politics, and outside Africa--uneasily pigeonhole their occupants. Like their authors, Waberi, Efoui, and Nimrod, the stories that fill the collection defy classification. The protagonist Marwo in Waberi's "A Woman and a Half" is inspired by feminist playwright Kateb Yacine's historic heroines, La Kahina and Saint Ennissa. To redeem herself (and Africa) from its modern enemies, Marwo escapes the sadistic patriarchy and tawdry life of the shantytown. But this narrative which combines myth, feminist critique, history, and politics elides the tyranny of category.

Stories too reminiscent of Africa's martyrs and dislocated orphans to elude historical meaning, both Patrice Nganang's "Our Neighborhood Fool" and Benjamin Sehene's "Dead Girl Walking", each compress collective tragedy into a tightly cropped single image. In the former, the sense of foreboding comes in the way Nganang has arranged his sparse prose in snippets of forbidden gossip in this place where "there was a total ban on speech" (p. 99). "People are saying that Kamga the Fool is dead" (p. 97). "... Kamga was a talker, a real loudspeaker" (p. 99). In his proud and naked humanity, Kamga the Fool kept moving forward, singing "Freedom, freedom, soon we will be free (despite) the blue line of order and all those gun barrels, like grass snakes, lying in wait to spit out death" (p. 103). What a fitting emblem to Nigeria's slain poet, novelist, and environmental activist Ken Saro-Wiwe or South Africa's slaughtered medical student turned activist Steven Biko. The latter story, Sehene's barely fictionalized, semiautobiographic Rwandan genocide, pares down to miniature the solitary violences beneath the grotesque whole of a civil war that ravaged a country.

Part of the power of this story comes from the unsettling feeling that we have seen this frame before. Sehene's tale first attracts us to an unexpectedly compassionate Hutu; Kanaka had sheltered his five-year-old neighbor after her Tutsi parents were massacred. Then we turn to the consequences of the horror, in particular, on the impairment of Mbabazi's cognitive memory. And we learn about her rescuer's less good deed. He only took a watercolor when the Samaritan found the Tutsi child, ostensibly a mundane matter. Not so banal for an orphaned child, nevertheless, for the painting of her mother was the solitary thread that entwined the orphan to her. And so the petty theft had unfurled further tragedy; it "assured" Mbabazi's memory loss under a veil of sadness. The day the artist, Mbabazi's aunt, recovered the painting for her niece, the child beamed, "That's the picture Kanaka took when he brought the militia men to the house." The simple souvenir triggered the immediate recovery of the child's memory. For the looter, the consequence was impunity. Her aunt shrugged, "Who's going to believe the testimony of a little amnesiac?" (p. 121).

Less apparent in these Francophone stories are the linguistic strategies seen notably in the work of Anglophone writers such as Nigerians Chinua Achebe and Ken Saro-Wiwa. Their work shows the vernacular codes they have developed to rewrite Africa and "nation language" into the postcolonial African experience. They use pidgin English in their texts, a language which reflects the way English is actually used by some Nigerians. [4] In King's anthology, a play on this notion can be found in Koffi Kwahulé's "Babyface." Here potent metaphor comes in the form of linguistic dichotomy. The unsuspecting Mozati's pidgin lovesong, "I am. Like a crazy woman. I. Finally. Float. I. Fly. Woman. I am." (p. 58) provides a counterpoint to the perfect English its slick con Babyface deploys to humble, seduce, and destroy his unschooled female prey. Why insert the mother-tongue of Africa into English or French? The writings of Kateb Yacine would have us believe that to possess one's own language is imperative. "The foundation of a nation must be the land its people cultivate and the language they speak." [5] Best to ask our colleagues in linguistics or ethnography to what extent a congenital malady like no language might cripple a young nation's development.

Readers might be tempted to discern an indictment of colonialism, neocolonialism, and postcolonial governments in the tales assembled here. These attacks are, as King reminds us, less explicit than those in the African fiction of the 1950s and 1960s. You will not find any of the embittered, near homiletic prose that suffuses Buchi Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen*. Contemporary African writers convey their criticism with more subtlety, in puns, plays with form, and techniques of self-reflection (p. x). The scars and bruises King's writers have carried with them abroad and the disenchantment they feel lends dignity and passion to their portraits of Africans-in-transition. To understand them and Africa, states historian Ali Mazoui, one must be mindful of the *la longue durée*. Africa today is a motif

derived from its triple heritage--Africa that was before Islam, Africa formed under Mohammed's long tutelage, and Africa under the yoke of Europe. If you want to understand Africa, you must penetrate all that is Africa. For other African historians, it is ambiguity that marks current debates, particularly about how to explain why this triple heritage has split them into two camps. One looks essentially to colonialism as causal in the course of African development. Opponents of the European underdevelopment thesis accuse its advocates of neocolonialism by depriving Africans themselves of agency. Africa's making, for better and worse, they argue, owes its authorship to Africans as well. The framing of Africans as innocent victims ignores their choices and negates their potential as agents for change. Whatever the real life forces in shaping Africa, readers will glimpse in Adele King's fictional collection a fresh, pared, and deliberate resource that reflects the unsettling history of Africa.

Adele King's bibliographical essay points to additional anthologies and suggestions for further reading in both English and French for those in search of further work by these and other African writers. Readers might be disappointed if they expect to find here an analysis or an evaluation, or any conceptual framework. It is not there. What King has offered is a helpful introduction in which she delineates the familiar and changing themes, developments, and the evolution in African literature. It is left to her readers to determine in what ways the bibliographical suggestions exemplify the field delineated in the introduction.

Like much of the rich and complex literature that comes to us from African authors, King's anthology is powerful, graphic, and innovative. The stories of these engaged authors, whose personal and professional lives are inseparable from their work, project humanity and, with it, new meaning, onto the historical mirror.

LIST OF ESSAYS

- Abdourahman A. Waberi, "A Woman and a Half."
- Véronique Tadjó, "The Legend of Abla Pokou, Queen of the Baoulé People."
- Tierno Monénembo, "A Fistful of Groundnuts Nimrod My Father's Lamp."
- Kangni Alem, "The Spider's Fart."
- Koffi Kwahulé, "Babyface."
- Caya Makhélé, "The Labors of Ariana."
- Michèle Rakotoson, "The Ballad of a Shipwreck."
- Jean-Luc Raharimanana, "Fahavalo."
- Patrice Nganang, "Our Neighborhood Fool."
- Kossi Efoui, "A Hunting Scene as Observed by a Sentimental Photographer."
- Benjamin Sehene, "Dead Girl Walking."
- Nathalie Etoké, "Bessombé: Between Homeland and Exile."
- Bessora, "The Milka Cow."

NOTES

[1] Jean Paul Sartre, preface to Frantz Fanon, *Les Damnés de la Terre* (Paris: Editions François Maspero, 1961).

[2] Bharati Mukherjee, "On Being an American Writer", in George Clack ed., *Writers on America* (Washington, D.C.: Office of International Information Programs U.S. Department of State), 51.

[3] *Ibid.*, 52.

[4] Edward K. Brathwaite, "Nation Language," in Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin eds., *The Postcolonial Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 311.

[5] Catherine Bedarida, "Kateb Yacine et les femmes de la liberté," *Le Monde*, 2 July, 2004.

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