

## Review

**Review of Margaret Daymond, Dorothy Driver, Sheila Meintjes, Leloba Molema, Chiedza Musengezi, Margie Orford, and Nobantu Rasebotsa, eds. *Women Writing Africa: The Southern Region*. New York: The Feminist Press, 2003.**

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*Women Writing Africa: The Southern Region* is the first historical anthology of African women's writing/orature and it is substantive, presenting 120 oral and written texts in its 555 pages. Because the anthology introduces many unpublished texts, and provides a seminal single source for drawing together previously published writing, it will be a valuable addition to libraries and syllabi. The cover, which has a vibrant picture of women playing music, painting and dancing, captures the celebratory impulse which motivated this collection of women's writing. The painting is called "Celebration", and was done by Gertrude Fester in 1989, while she was detained on a charge of treason for activism and ANC membership.

While the range of included material is considerable, the word "Southern" in the title refers only to Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland and Zimbabwe. Readers expecting works from Mozambique, Angola or Malawi will not find them here. There is only one text from Swaziland, a 1921 speech by the Queen Regent Labotsibeni. Perhaps there was not enough space for more, such as writings by Patricia McFadden, the feminist activist.

Three of the editors (Daymond, Driver and Meintjes) are from South Africa, Molema and Rasebotsa are based in Botswana, Musengezi is from Zimbabwe, and Orford is from Namibia. There are also six associate editors, and hundreds of others contributed texts, translations and the scholarly headnotes that accompany each text. The material is organised into six periods, and ranges from the anonymous seSotho lament "Song of the Afflicted" (1842) to the poem "Generations" by Yvette ChristiansÅ«, who was born in South Africa and has lived in Swaziland, Australia and the United States.

This collection has antecedents in two historical anthologies of women's writing, Cecily Lockett's *Breaking the Silence: A Century of South African Women's Poetry* (1990) and AnnemariÅ« van Niekerk's *Raising the Blinds: A Century of South African Women's Stories* (1990). However, while both anthologies address a single literary genre, this collection contains letters, diaries, petitions, court records, communal songs, folktales, poems, fiction and essays. It is path-breaking in the way it draws on material in a variety of languages. In representing women's writing across national boundaries, the book has an antecedent in *Women Creating the Future: An Anthology of Women's Writing in Southern Africa*, although that anthology focused on Botswana, Lesotho, and South Africa, and was developed through workshops set up with new writers. Its editors, Nobantu Rasebotsa and Leloba Molema, are among the seven editors of this collection. Although no mention is made of this or the other antecedents in the *Introduction to Women Writing Africa: The Southern Region*, all three anthologies are listed in the bibliography.

While there are a range of anthologies representing women's writing on the continent, these tend to focus on a single literary genre, such as Charlotte Bruner's two collections of fiction (1983; 1993), Yvonne Vera's anthology of fiction (1999), and Stella and Frank Chipasula's collection of poetry (1995). Ann Oosthuizen's 1987 anthology of writing by South African women is of interest because it covers a range of genres: fiction, poetry, interviews and linocuts. The strength of *Women Writing Africa: The Southern Region* is in the insights and associations it encourages across genre, language, history and political boundaries. The director of The Feminist Press, Florence Howe, commissioned this collection; she was also responsible for commissioning the wide-ranging work *Women Writing in India* (1991). In the *Women Writing Africa* series, three more volumes are being prepared, focusing respectively

on West Africa and the Sahel, East Africa and North Africa, eventually representing 25 countries on this continent. The project directors and series editors explain that the evocative title expresses the idea of African women making their world through their oral and written words.

The Introduction by the editors includes extensive endnotes and a good selected bibliography of some 400 texts. The editors explain the complexities that underlie their use of the term "women", arguing that women need to constitute themselves as a group so that they can tackle the serious issues they face, with the post-structuralist caveat that they use the term "only in the most provisional, precarious and hypothetical way". There is also the recognition that, given the fractures of Southern African history, "gender must always be defined through race, class, ethnicity, culture, and other coordinates". So even though women may not actually share the same conception of "womanhood", the impact of (different kinds of) patriarchy means that there are a range of overlapping experiences and struggles.

In the section on orality and oral traditions, the editors examine the impact of missionaries, cultural mediation and resistance to colonialism. The focus on oral expression is significant, particularly in areas such as literary studies, where decades of curricula and research still fail to represent the presence, richness and impact of such a corpus. In the section on writing, various kinds of texts and textual interactions are examined. The twentieth century is dealt with in three sections, and there are insightful analyses of women's political speeches and essays from the early twentieth century, the impact of Victoria Swartbooi's iconoclastic and forward-looking protagonist Mandisa, and the recently retrieved poetry of Nontsizi Mqwetho.

The wide-ranging and incisive assessment of race and gender relations in the section "White Peril" is one of the highlights of the Introduction, and will go some way towards developing a discourse equal to the impact of this complex and muted issue in Southern African life. The next section focuses on the political and cultural developments in the middle of the century, with the final section focusing on the resistance that began in the 1960s. This section considers the impact of oppression and exile on writing, and includes an insightful commentary on gender and Black Consciousness. The section also traces the shift towards renewal, a fitting way of conceptualising not only the end of apartheid, but also the creative turn to life stories that began long before the demise of settler colonialism, through the production of texts that celebrate the heroic struggles of Nehanda, Krotoa and Nokukhanya Luthuli. It is argued that in their praises of Nokukhanya Luthuli, Gcina Mhlophe and Thoko Remigia Makhanya were extending the praise poem "to meet a new purpose: to intervene actively in public, political matters" (51). However, a feminist poet like Rebecca Matlou (the nom de guerre of Sankie Nkondo, who now goes as Sankie Mthembi-Mahanyele) was experimenting with the praise form long before this. But she was in exile, and "A Soldier at War" was published in *Poets to the People* (1983), which was banned in South Africa. Her powerfully integrated expression of political and feminist agency, "The Bivouac", was published only on her return to South Africa in 1990. The difficult experience of gender oppression during the struggle against white domination in Zimbabwe and South Africa is also addressed, as is the representation of experiences of state violence against civilians, and the scourge of HIV/AIDS in the post-liberation period.

The texts themselves are engrossing, and reflect diverse forms of opposition to injustice. For instance, there is the confident claim of the Khoekhoe farmer, Kaatje Nieuwveldt, in 1858. Here she does not only challenge colonial encroachment, but accuses a Cape magistrate of corruption and maladministration of justice. By way of contrast, more than a century later "Three Court Statements" were made in Botswana, one by a woman bringing a rape charge, and two by women accused of infanticide. The statements are harrowing and illustrative of

the range of women's experiences of injustice and civil administration. Further points of comparison and contrast are to be found in the extract from the first novel of the Motswana High Court Judge, Unity Dow, *Far and Beyond* (2000), which addresses how communities deal with the suffering and death of loved ones as a result of HIV/AIDS.

The headnotes that accompany the texts offer very useful information. For instance, the pious and respectful letter that Ureita Kazahendike writes to the missionary Carl Hahn offers no indication that she was very learned and spoke four European languages in addition to her mother tongue, Herero. Nor does it reflect that she translated and edited the Herero-German grammar and dictionary for which Hahn received an honorary doctorate. I was also interested to learn that the famous Charlotte Manye Maxeke studied at a university in Ohio as long ago as 1896, and that she was the first African woman graduate in South Africa. Another early woman graduate was Mrs AC (Adelaide Charles) Dube, who wrote the widely anthologised "Africa: My Native Land". She obtained a BSc (also in the US) in 1904. In the 1920s, Nontsizi Mqgqwetho was the first woman poet to write in isiXhosa (she sent poems to the newspaper *Umteteli wa Bantu*), and she had no reservations about invading the male preserve of the courtly praise poem. While it is a tribute to her skill and spirit that she remains the foremost woman poet in isiXhosa, the fact that there have been so few other well-known women poets writing in isiXhosa is also a symptom of the social and cultural underdevelopment propagated by colonialism, apartheid and neo-liberal globalisation.

I believe that the organisation of the subject-matter in the book is generally effective, although I have one criticism here. It seems to me that one of the basic purposes of such an anthology is to encourage readers to dip into a variety of texts, and to enable them to understand the contexts in which the texts were produced. The scholarly headnotes are very helpful and greatly illuminate the texts, but I don't understand why source information is not included. Take, for example, Thoko Remigia Makhanya's praise poem to Nokukhanya Luthuli (457). If I were a less experienced reader, I might easily have missed the fact that it is from a book I would be interested in reading, *Nokukhanya: Mother of Light* (Rule, Aitken and van Dyk, 1993). Such information is mainly to be found towards the end of this book, in the section "Permissions, Acknowledgements and Sources". Most readers would find source references more useful if they were included with the text.

I also have a few concerns about accuracy. Different dates are given for Yvette ChristiansÅ«'s poem: in the text it is given as 2001 (522), and in the Permissions/Sources section it is given as 2002 (538). Perhaps this is a typographical error that a subsequent edition will correct, along with errors such as the spelling of the name of Devarakshanam Govinden on the title page, Thenjiwe Magwaza's surname (75), Pollsmoor (555), and the fact that Cecily Lockett is the editor of *Breaking the Silence* (75). These concerns are raised in the context of scholarly readers' dependence on accurate information: technical errors tend to give rise to concerns about the factual correctness of other information one is absorbing.

Given our history of deep division and exploitation, it is hoped that this anthology will encourage more cross-regional work. This will considerably increase the depth and breadth of our knowledge of ourselves, and support us in acting as an integrated community. The value of this cross-regional work is evident when we seek to understand the complexity of stories such as Ellen Ndeshi Namhila's account of having to choose exile in Angola at the age of twelve, rather than subjugation in Namibia by the occupying South African Defence Force. The three forthcoming volumes in the Women Writing Africa series will undoubtedly contribute further to the opportunities for comparison and mapping offered by the volume on Southern Africa.

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