

Jennifer Browdy de Hernandez, Pauline Dongala, Omotayo Jolaosho and Anne Serafin (eds.) (2010), *African Women Writing Resistance: An Anthology of Contemporary Voices*, Oxford: Pambazuka Press, ISBN 978-0-299-23664-9, 376 pp.

Anthologies of African women's writing have been on the market for several decades. Some famous examples are *Unwinding Threads: Writing by Women in Africa* (1983) and *The Heinemann Book of African Women's Writing* (1993), both edited by Charlotte H. Bruner; *Opening Spaces: An Anthology of Contemporary African Women's Writing* (1999), edited by Yvonne Vera; and, most recently, the four volumes of the gigantic *Women Writing Africa* series, edited by regionally specialised editorial teams and published between 2003 and 2009. *African Women Writing Resistance* follows in the footsteps of these earlier books but also constitutes a landmark in its own right. As the book's subtitle indicates, *African Women Writing Resistance* is not an anthology of critical essays on literary works by African women writers but rather one of "contemporary voices". The volume comprises highly diverse contributions by more than 30 women born in 13 African countries and with several linguistic backgrounds, covering a wide range of subjects under the umbrella of "resistance".

In contrast to the earlier, more comprehensive anthologies of women's writing quoted above, *African Women Writing Resistance* has an overall thematic focus, and the individual contributions are also organised along thematic lines rather than geographically and/or chronologically. The volume is divided into seven sections, framed by two poems and opened by a short preface commenting on the origin of the collection, as well as a general introduction to the contributions. The individual sections, each of which is preceded by a short thematic introduction, are entitled "Engaging with Tradition", "Speaking Out: Young Women on Sexuality", "Challenging the Institution of Marriage", "Focusing on Survival: Women's Health Issues", "Taking a Stand: Women as Activists against War, Environmental Degradation and Social Conflict", "Writing from a Different Place: Perspectives on Exile and Diaspora", and "Standing at the Edge of Time: African Women's Visions of the Past, Present, and Future". Contributions include not only short pieces of creative writing – poetry and fiction as well as the script of a play – but also personal narratives and testimony, letters, critical essays, interviews, song lyrics, and the transcription of a roundtable held at Rutgers University in 2007. While the majority of the texts were originally composed in writing, a few are based on oral, interactive events.

*African Women Writing Resistance* was born out of a spirit of activism and women's empowerment, which certainly accounts for part of its appeal and

strength but also for some ambivalence regarding the editors' ambitions and achievements. On closer analysis, this ambivalence seems to arise in part from the way the book is advertised on the back cover, which makes claims that the editors' introduction largely circumnavigates, despite its activist, programmatic (and, at times, perhaps slightly overbearing) diction. I also felt a sense of uneasiness with regard to certain conceptual aspects of the collection itself, as delineated in the editors' introduction. First of all, there is the issue of how resistance is to be understood. The text on the back cover heralds *African Women Writing Resistance* as "the first transnational anthology to focus on women's strategies of resistance to the challenges they face in Africa today", which suggests a more concerted, deliberate, pronounced, critical and ideally also subtle engagement with conditions of oppression than many of the texts actually achieve. In the preface, the editors point out that the volume focuses specifically on "writing as a tool of resistance" (xiii). In a short but intriguing section in the general introduction, they analyse individual contributors' personal responses to the question "What does resistance mean to you?", observing that "writing is essential to effective resistance" (7). Writing about oppression is thus conceived of as a major act of resistance. If resistance is defined in this way, however, it makes the volume's thematic focus somewhat arbitrary. A lot of African literature bears witness to and critically engages with oppressive conditions one way or another, including gender-based oppression and violence. African literature by women is certainly no exception in this respect; in fact, any of the previous anthologies of African women's literature might also be read as African women writing resistance. While the title of the present volume does place the individual contributions into discourses on women's empowerment, activism and committed literature, what actually distinguishes the collection is not so much its focus on resistance – which, incidentally, remains obscure in some of the texts, which seem to describe oppression rather than strategies, or even moments, of opposition – but the way in which it fuses the voices of so many ordinary women of different cultural, social and educational backgrounds. Many of the contributions are intriguing and achieve a remarkable personal intensity; in many cases, they bear witness to the resilience and discernment of their authors and, collectively, leave a strong and inspiring impression on the reader.

Another source of ambivalence concerns the way in which the focus on African women's resistance mixes with a desire – arising from the same spirit of activism – to bring "the voices of emerging African women writers to a wider audience" (xiii). The wording here carefully limits the project to "emerging" writers. However, the terms in which the history of African women's literature and its critical reception are reviewed and the way in

which the editors account for their decision to limit the pool of potential contributors to “contemporary African women writers who were born in Africa, in order to amplify the voices of African women who might not otherwise be heard in classrooms and other literary circles in the West” (6) seem, more generally, to suggest that the world is more ignorant of African women’s writing than is actually the case at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Finally, the fact that more than half of the contributions are non-literary, that many of them are authored by first-time writers, and that the collection is perhaps less representative than indicated by the editors is inevitably at odds with the notion proposed in the back blurb that the anthology “provides an excellent introduction to contemporary African women’s literature”. The editors do, however, provide an appendix with useful resources for further reading on topical works by and about African women (available in English).

*African Women Writing Resistance* celebrates the voices of African women, raises awareness about certain issues and challenges they are confronted with, and invokes the spirit of women’s empowerment and activist solidarity in the face of oppression. While the anthology should not be mistaken for an introduction to contemporary African women’s literature or a collection of critical and/or literary reflections on women’s strategies of resistance, it opens very personal and enlightening windows on the lives of African women today.

- Anja Oed