

Book review

Adam Schwartzman (ed): *Ten South African Poets*. Manchester: Carcanet, 1999 ISBN 1-85754-393-9, £12-95 (pbk), pp. 226

And

Yvonne Vera (ed): *Opening Spaces: An Anthology of Contemporary African Women's Writing*. Oxford: Heinemann and Harare: Baobab, 1999 ISBN 0-435-901008, £13-95 (pbk), pp. 186

A commonly used pun in Post-Colonial cultural battles is the use of African literature as “cannons” to fire back at the “canon” of European literature. Less commonly realised is that African literature itself has its own process of canon formation. The heroic period of African literature in the 1960s established African stars such as Chinua Achebe, Bernard Dadie, Nadine Gordimer, Wole Soyinka and Ngugi wa Thiong’o in the literary firmament. The purpose of the two anthologies under review is to provide introductions to some non-canonical African authors. *Ten South African Poets*, edited by Adam Schwartzman and *Opening Spaces*, edited by Yvonne Vera have one thing in common - they provide a selection of quite recent, stylistically varied, relatively obscure African authors, who find themselves in the same company mainly because of the editor’s personal tastes.

It might be expected that an anthology of South African verse published in 1999, five years after the democratic elections, would de-emphasize race. On the contrary, *Ten South African Poets* centres it. Ian Berry’s brilliant cover photograph portrays a conservative white family visibly perplexed by an elegant black man leaning against a wall playing a Kwela flute. The photo is reproduced from a 1958 issue of *Drum Magazine*, well before the earliest poem in Schwartzman’s anthology. It is as if the anachronism is saying that the fractured lives and images in the book all flow from the tragic absurdities of South Africa’s historical racial divisions, even though most of the poems display the dislocation rather obliquely.

In his choice of poets, Schwartzman follows a scrupulous balance, with three “black”, five “white” and two “coloured” authors, to employ the Apartheid labels still used in

post-1994 South Africa. As a result, the mix of poets may appear somewhat eccentric. Clearly the criterion for selection is not the provision of contemporary verse, since the earliest poems by Nortje are from the late 1960s, and there is a more or less chronological progression through the decades to the most recent mid-1990s poems of Seitlhamo Mostapi. The anthology cannot, however pretend to be representative of that period. Nortje is there from the 60s and early 70s, but not Dennis Brutus. Wopko Jensma, Douglas Livingstone and Lionel Abrahams represent very different aspects of white South African verse from the 1970s and 80s, but Stephen Gray and Patrick Cullinan are absent. Wafika Gwala and Mongane Serote display Black Consciousness verse trends of the 1970s and early 80s, at the expense of Siphosiphiso Sepamla and Mbuyiseni Mtshali of the same generation, while Motsapi, a black performance poet from the 1990s is preferred over the more popular Mzwakhe Mbuli or Lesego Rampolokeng.

Schwartzman's introduction throws some, but not much light on his selection. His turgid prose style is short on the kind of socio-historical context, which might have guided readers through the very different genres on display. He opts instead for philosophising from a phenomenological viewpoint in order to explain his criterion for selection, namely to privilege poems wherein "the external world becomes a subtle instrument of perception".

I can forgive the tendencies to obscurantism in Schwartzman's Introduction, however, because of his impeccable taste in selecting verse. Nortje's suicide in exile had the effect of marginalising him in South African literary eyes; a revaluation is overdue. In the early 90s Jensma's reputation disappeared almost as completely as the poet himself, and this anthology coincides with a welcome revival of interest in this fascinating avant-garde social misfit. Gwala and Serote are often now associated with a narrowly hortatory and dated committed verse. This selection of their work, however, shows them to have a much wider range of tones and preoccupations, as in Gwala's "One Small Boy Longs for Summer" with its aching mock naïf celebration of childhood stoicism. Likewise, Serote's "No Baby Must Weep" ranges from threatening ("I am the man you will never defeat") to tender love "your smile ... breaks me/Like a twig."

The oral experimentation of Gwala, Serote, Jensma and Motsapi, as well as that of Tatamkhulu Afrika and Karen Press, sets into fruitful relief the more formal, measured and introspective narratives of Nortje, Livingstone, Abrahams and De Kok. For me the anthology is worth possessing for Motsapi alone, with whose astonishing, edgy, compulsively musical chants I was not previously familiar. The following lines from his

poem “and if” represent the thrust of much of this anthology.

The past that screams at me
 From the rent bellies of weary skies
 The multiple incisions of dead love
 Hurry our hearts into skewed postures.

This articulates the trauma of South Africa’s violent past but links it to a healing power of “breezes that remember our wounds”.

The anti-canonical tendency of *Opening Spaces* is rather easier to identify and is clearly articulated in Yvonne Vera’s brief preface, namely to prove that “women from Africa have not been swallowed by history ... they too know how to swallow history”. In order to demonstrate women’s determination to be agents, rather than mere objects of a male-dominant historical narrative, Vera has concentrated on recently published short stories. With the possible exception of Ama Ata Aidoo, none could be thought anywhere near approaching canonical status. Better known women writers, such as Mariama Ba, Nadine Gordimer, Bessie Head, Grace Ogot, Shiela Fugard, Flora Nwapa, Rebeka Njau, Miriam Tlali and Buchi Emecheta are conspicuously absent. Since most of these authors are already well anthologised this is a sensible decision.

There is one omission, however, which is unforgivable - Yvonne Vera herself. Since the early 1990s Vera has made an impact with a collection of short stories, *Why Don’t You Learn to Carve Other Animals?*, and a series of elegant, poetically charged novels, *Nehanda*, *Without a Name*, *Under the Tongue* and *Butterfly Burning*, which anatomise colonial and post-colonial themes from a feminist perspective. The anthologist’s modesty deprives the general reader of one of Africa’s most interesting and prolific younger writers of any gender.

Opening Spaces is unrepresentative in other ways. There are no examples of oral memorates transcribed into literary prose, an increasingly popular genre in anthologies of African women writers. At a geographical level, there is a strong bias in favour of Southern Africa, from which region over half the authors originate. By contrast East Africa is hardly represented, and the Maghreb not at all, leading to the exclusion of such significant authors as Assa Djeba, Leila Sebbar, Leila Abouzeid, Ferudja Kessas, Marjorie Macgoye and agoro Anduru. There is also a long list of young West African women whose writing has been neglected.

In the final analysis, Vera's main criterion seems to be her personal enthusiasms and instincts. The result is a very valuable, if somewhat lopsided anthology. There are two stories, which I feel don't quite work, Sindiwe Magoni's rather tendentious piece about AIDS, "A State of Outrage" and the rather unresolved exposition of cross-cultural irony in Chiedza Mwangon's "Crocodile Tears". Otherwise, *Opening Spaces* is an admirably spirited collection. It ranges through an astonishing variety of genres: the leisured first person vituperation of Melissa Myambo's "Deciduous Gazettes", the formal experimentation in Farida Karoda's exposure of child abuse, "The Red Velvet Dress", the tightly textured irony of Anna Dao's "A Pocket Wife", the social realist expose of an illicit urban abortion in Gugu Ndlovu's "The Barrel of a Pen", the psychological precision of Lindsay Collen's peep into the mind of a pregnant teenager, "The Enigma", and the imagistic minimalism of Veronique Tadjó's prose-poem about pregnancy, "The Betrayal".

An interesting feature which emerges from the useful biodata Vera provides, is how many of the authors are exiles, whether political, economic or marital. Not unexpectedly, cross-cultural themes emerge in several stories, notably Leila Aboulalah's delicately paced, "The Museum" about a Sudanese woman negotiating the alienation of her life as a student in Aberdeen. This story underscores one of the themes contained in the book title, the protagonist's rebellion against imposed space.

Several stories in the anthology refer to a trope of confinement and attempts to break out of it—whether the biological confinement of pregnancy or the more generalised closing of space imposed by marriage or male-dominant economic power. An apocalyptic image in Tadjó's "The Betrayal" epitomises the trope. When the almost anonymous, betraying man touches his woman's pregnant belly it explodes in a flash of lightning: "The sky started to slip away and trees let out screams ... smoke heavy with dust surrounded nature which burst into flames. A violent breath of air burned people and knocked down buildings". It is hard to imagine a clearer expression of revolt against the stereotype of the submissively fertile, African woman.

Another type of confinement which women face in *Opening Spaces* is that of history, whether personal or official. Several stories like Norma Kitson's revelation of bigamy in "Uncle" or the juxtaposition of different exploitative strategies in Lilian Momphe's "Stress", disentangle relationships which memory must reconfigure if the narrative is to make sense. Others, such as Dao's "A Perfect Wife" or Monde Sifuniso's "Night Thoughts" take male historical "master narratives" and reconstitute them ironically from a female perspective.

Opening Spaces is certainly not a representative anthology of recent African women's writing; the field has become so big in recent years, such inclusiveness might be impossible anyway. However, the anthology does provide a proactive and varied introduction to the way some African women writers have, to use Vera's words, fashioned themselves into "witnesses in [a] seemingly impossible birth".

Both *Ten South African Poets* and *Opening Spaces* join a long list of anthologies of writing, which can allow readers to engage with powerful and individual African voices. They may also provide useful ammunition in the ongoing struggle to question canons, African as well as European.

David Kerr
Department of Fine and Performing Arts
Chancellor College
University of Malawi
P. O. Box 280
Zomba
Malawi
dkerr@chanco.unima.mw