

## Introduction

*Ex Africa semper aliquid novi* is an ancient saying, reminding us that cultures are always in the business not only of self-mythification but also of the mythification of others. The Latin tag, that out of Africa always comes the new, makes an appropriate starting point for this collection of new work about, and largely from, Africa. However, in our time Africa continues to be mythified in the rest of the world often in negative ways. This legacy of a long cultural tradition originating in the Mediterranean and the Middle East stretches back at least to the beginnings of recorded history, but since the late nineteenth century it is Henry Morton Stanley's global distribution of the coinage "darkest Africa" which has remained influential on perceptions from outside. This has been particularly damaging in its evocation of a powerful double binarism, of chiaroscuro, with its aesthetic appeal, but also of a racialised Manichean ethics. As images from Darfur in southern Sudan fill the world's television screens with the latest iconography of seemingly endless suffering and displacement, it can seem that, contrary to the Latin tag, *nothing* new ever emerges from Africa. It is a powerful metonymy: one dimension of the African reality in all its variety and complexity is mapped up as if it were the only one. African news manifestly becomes world news only when it is bad. It is evident that even the grim story of AIDS in Africa is frequently given coverage only because it is a problem other communities have too, even if only to a fractional degree. In other words, it is only contingency that makes it newsworthy, not the reality on its own terms.

While it might be argued that outsiders' views are their affair, and irrelevant, and that, in the decades since independence, African people have been getting on with running their lives and societies themselves, the broader reality is that the external pejorative mythifications have real social and economic effects, since they underpin

the policies of the powerful, who in the neo-colonial world continue to control, to the best of their ability and to their own advantage, remote peoples and places, such as those in Africa, through mechanisms such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, not to mention the Hollywood film. (The difficulty of finding outlets in Africa for African-made films is a case in point.) The competing neocolonialisms of the Soviets and Chinese of the last half-century have largely melted away. Now, to many Africans it is only Islam which seems to offer any kind of substantial alternative to the West's dominance. Even though some observers might wish to problematise that reductionist term "the West" and to point, for instance, to differences between the policies and attitudes of the USA and those of certain other countries in relation to Africa—the francophone presence in Africa, for instance, is in many senses distinct, and the African American perspective is clearly not to be naively subsumed within the dominant American view—nonetheless there is an observable and perceived coherence to manifests of the West in the diverse African nation-states. The reality of non-African power within Africa is as inescapable as its converse.

The primary task, then, particularly as perceived by those engaged in cultural production, of whatever kind, may be to assert a counter-mythology. The danger of romanticism and distortion is, however, real. Africans need to be able to see themselves on their own terms. An honest self-appraisal is, after all, for all people everywhere, the starting-point of self-knowledge, but those terms need to be premised on a sense of commonality with the rest of the world, not on some kind of isolationist worldview. As Kwame Anthony Appiah writes, acknowledging Kwasi Wiredu, "We will only solve our problems if we see them as human problems arising out of a special situation, and we shall not solve them if we see them as African problems, generated by our being somehow unlike others."<sup>1</sup> The essays and creative work

offered in this edition of *EnterText* are, of course, just a glimpse of the range of possible engagements with these enormous questions. It is pleasing that several different parts of the continent are addressed in contributions from writers living in many different parts of the continent and the wider world (with diverse personal, often migratory, histories), representing several disciplines, though there is a preponderance of literary work. This is, after all, an online journal, which, though it is published from London, implicitly transcends national and geographic boundaries, though not so readily, perhaps, those of economics. Hopefully readers, whether inside or outside Africa, will be stimulated and challenged by what follows.

When the *EnterText* editorial team first proposed a special issue on Africa, it seemed a natural choice to ask our colleague Tim Fernyhough, an Africanist historian, to edit it. Sadly Tim died before embarking on the task. It seems fitting, then, to open the edition with Donald Crummey's contribution, which not only gives a survey of the field in which Tim's research featured, but also comes from his personal friend. It considers the history of banditry in late colonial times. Crummey roots his analysis in Eric Hobsbawm's seminal work *Bandits* which articulates the point at which such agents may rise above a self-serving criminality to become social interventionists. This work, however, does not address African examples, a lack which Crummey made good in a collection of essays he edited in 1986, *Banditry, Rebellion and Social Protest in Africa*, which took a rather different position from Hobsbawm's. It is the papers from this volume which he here surveys, quoting also from an uncollected study by Tim Fernyhough, before examining subsequent contributions to the field. He concludes that a neat association of banditry with anti-colonial agency may be deceptive, and, projecting his argument forward to the present with a brief look at the phenomenon of wildlife poaching today, argues that African history itself provides

many examples of social traditions “in which the bold, the disaffected and the ambitious flourished.”

Susan Akono’s impassioned but carefully argued contribution which follows is, in essence, a critique of the historian Niall Ferguson’s controversial contention, recently given prominence in publishing and on UK television, that Westerners should establish a new “liberal empire” in sub-Saharan Africa, among other places. She situates this in a tradition of colonialist and neocolonialist racial prejudice, and argues that instead of repeating past errors, Westerners should try to win the trust of sub-Saharan Africans by treating them with justice and respect, warning that if they fail to do so, the disillusioned, exploited and increasingly desperate Africans are likely to turn their backs on the West altogether.

Damaging mythifications of Africa have a long history, as William Idowu reminds us in his essay on African jurisprudence. He examines a string of false myths by which the rest of the world, primarily, but also Africa itself, has perceived the continent. His focus is particularly on its philosophy of law. In his detailed exposition of alternatives to the pejorative myths, he challenges the assumption of the difference of the African case and cultural practices from those practised in the West, asserting instead the commonality of the underlying philosophies of law.

From law to war, and Oladipo Agboluaje’s adaptation of Brecht’s devastating critique of war, *Mother Courage*, prompted by the Second World War, to present-day West Africa. This new drama, which played to enthusiastic audiences in Britain in 2004, is represented here by its opening and concluding sequences. In translating Brecht’s context to the fringes of today’s militarist regimes, Agboluaje shows the tragic human cost that their power drags in its wake. As Mother Courage loses her children one by one, trying to make a living as a camp follower, it is not only Africa

which is brought into sharp focus, but the wider international war-torn world. In particular, the predicament of impoverished women, with few choices but a pragmatic compromise with exploitative realities, is made urgently present to the audience. Like Brecht's, Abgoluaje's play is bitterly serious at the same time as being bitingly witty. It is particularly telling in its address to the issues of brutalisation and double standards in its story of one of the sons, who cannot understand why the violence he is asked to perform in war is regarded as heroic, but when he repeats it outside combat he is punished as a criminal. This updating of Brecht, which is also Brechtian, is very much a drama for our times.

This is followed by two creative pieces of an autobiographical character. Faith Adiele recounts her encounter with Nigeria, as an American returning to her father's homeland, at the time of the worldwide IMF/World Bank riots of the late 1980s, bringing into telling focus the relationship between the local, the national and the international, as she negotiates her way through an academic world in crisis. Dennis Walder, on the other hand, revisits the scene of childhood, in a memoir of South Africa in mid-twentieth-century apartheid. The growing child has to negotiate a culturally diverse heritage, a fracturing family, and a fraught society. What the narrative shows, however, is that a distinctive South African pluralism, now familiar as the mark of the modern, is already emerging, despite the gulfs of apartheid.

Myths of modernity are also central to Susan Gorman's essay on the film, *Divine Carcasse*, set in Benin, which centres on an archetype of commodity fetishism in our time, the private car. Dominique Loreau's 1998 film follows a Peugeot as it is transformed from an expatriate's vehicle, to a neighbourhood taxi, to an embodiment of a village deity, thus ironising conventional trajectories of "progress." (Western audiences may be more familiar with the television advertisement, set in India, which

seems to respond to it by further ironising such a transformation.) In making this metamorphosis, Gorman shows how the car highlights various forms of mythology, and examines how the mythologies of Europe's urban modernity change when confronted with those of an African village.

Traditional African cultural practices are the subject of Olutoyin Jegede's report on field research into court poetry performance in Nigeria. Her analysis of the semiotics of such performances is illustrated both by quotations and by coloured photographs of the scenes described, giving outsiders a vivid glimpse of a rarely seen cultural richness, which is, of course, influential on African modernities even though it is cherished as the scene, par excellence, of a unique tradition.

Tony Simoes da Silva and Ayobame Kehinde both focus on neglected writers of an earlier era. Simoes da Silva reconsiders the work of the Ghanaian dramatist Efuwa Sutherland and Kehinde one of the novels of the Kenyan writer Meja Mwangi, both of whom were relatively prominent in the 1970s but have since attracted only minimal critical attention. Kehinde examines Mwangi's *Going Down River Road* for the manner in which the social and economic realities of postcolonial Kenya are represented, arguing that the social realism it uses, in common with other African fiction, is ultimately disabling. For, in mirroring the neo-colonial betrayal of the nation without problematising it, it serves to legitimise it, even if that is not its intention. It is, he argues, "an implicit endorsement of the established order it appears to be interrogating." The need for African writers to tackle the perhaps harder task of modelling political alternatives and suggesting routes for change is the essay's thought-provoking conclusion. Simoes da Silva, on the other hand, counters the conventional reading of Sutherland in terms of Mother of the Nation, which he situates as a patriarchal and simplistic mythification, asserting instead her awareness

of international concerns and of the plural and shifting cultural identities of her compatriots, particularly of women. The replacement of the reductionist traditional view of Sutherland with this nuanced reading is a welcome new departure for the critical debates around her work, which emerges as more subversive than is usually perceived.

The theme of a feminine culture is also Chielozona Eze's topic in the short story "Plaiting My Mother's Hair," in which a lovingly realised scene of domestic intimacy is eloquently enlarged into an extended metaphor. The concluding essay in this edition also addresses the feminine. Colomba Muriungi examines two female-authored Kenyan novels of the 1990s which tackle the thorny topic of prostitution. Muriungi's reading of Oludhe Macgoye's *Victoria and Murder in Majengo* and Genga-Idowu's *Lady in Chains* shows how the two novels subvert the conventional notion of the prostitute as home-breaker and moral degenerate, modelling instead the benefits which accrue from the resulting financial independence. Muriungi's discussion examines the use of euphemism to sanitize the actuality of prostitution, as compared with coverage by male authors, and considers the implications of the texts' projection of prostitution as a productive economic employment like any other. Once again, the pathways available to the impoverished, whether male or female, involve some harsh realities and can produce some unpopular and testing choices, which are rarely considered dispassionately. The paper is a reminder that the carefully mythified conventions and ethics associated with the dominant are frequently at odds with the actualities of ordinary people, particularly in conditions of crisis, poverty, vulnerability, and the dramatic social changes which these bring in their wake.

Paula Burnett, Editor

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<sup>1</sup> Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House* (London: Methuen, 1992), 220.