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A RAIN OF WORDS: A BILINGUAL ANTHOLOGY OF WOMEN'S POETRY FROM FRANCOPHONE AFRICA (2009)

Edited by Irène Assiba d'Almeida, translated by Janis A. Mayes. Caraf Books: Caribbean and African Literature Translated from the French (University of Virginia Press), 293 pp.

“**T**ranslation is never truly over,” writes Janis A. Mayes in her translator’s note for this first-ever anthology, which brings together the work of forty-seven women poets from a dozen African nations who share a common language, one legacy of French and Belgian colonial days. Most of this work has never been translated into English or published on this side of the Atlantic. There is a long oral tradition among the women of West and Central Africa, but both their poetry and fiction have appeared in print comparatively recently.

Besides “establishing this poetry’s existence as a fact,” as the anthology’s editor d’Almeida says in her introduction, *A Rain of Words* provides us with ways to think about translation, poetry, and the fluidities of both language and nationality that are provocative and intriguing. And the timing is right: at long last, because of the parallel rise of spoken-word poetry performance in the U.S., many audiences here may now be more able to receive and appreciate this work.

A Rain of Words is the collaboration of two formidably well-prepared and well-matched colleagues. Mayes teaches in Syracuse University’s African American Studies Department, directs the University’s Paris Noir program abroad, and over nearly two decades has been developing an approach to translation that she calls “TransAtlantic (or sAlt) translation,” about which more below. Her work includes renderings of the Ivorian writers Bernard Binlin Dadié (*The City Where No One Dies*, 1986) and Véronique Tadjo (*Blind Kingdom*, 2008).

D’Almeida, originally from Benin, teaches at the University of Arizona in Tucson. Her *Francophone African Women Writers: Destroying the Emptiness of Silence* (1994, 2001) is the first single-author study in English of literary prose by French-speaking African women, examining memoirs and novels by nine writers. Several of the nine have poetry in the present anthology too—Véronique Tadjo, Werewere Liking, and Nafissatou Diallo (whose *A Dakar Childhood* was the first published autobiography by a francophone

African woman)—as does d’Almeida herself. Essential to understanding the importance of this collection is an appreciation of the context of traditional orature, with mothers and grandmothers acting as community storytellers who scaffold their stories with proverbs and folk tales. In light of this, d’Almeida calls the emergence of these women’s prose work in print one of the most significant developments in all African literature. She dates the “creative explosion” of the 1980s from the 1969 publication of Thérèse Kuoh-Moukouri’s novel *Rencontres essentielles/Essential Encounters* in Cameroon. (A reciprocal positive effect on European French literature is evident. For example, in November, France’s top literary prize, the 105-year-old Prix Goncourt, was awarded for the first time to a woman of African descent for the prolific French-Senegalese writer Marie NDiaye’s novel, *Three Strong Women/Trois puissantes femmes*.)

The parallel history of published poetry by such women is “very short,” says d’Almeida, dating from Annette Mbaye d’Erneville’s 1965 collection *Poèmes africaines* (reprinted a year later as *Kaddu*) in Senegal. There are three of d’Erneville’s poems in *A Rain of Words*, including “Kassacks”—the title refers to songs celebrating male circumcision—written in 1958 for her son, William, when he was six. In praising the boy for facing this ritual without weeping, she declares:

You’re a man, this night!
You’re a man, my son!
 By your beautiful flesh
 By your spilled blood
 By your cold look
 By your unshaken thighs.

And your mother remembers
 The night of love
 Her torn womb
 Her silent moans
 Her aching loins
 The envious looks of her evil rivals
 The greedy suckling of your flower-mouth
 The miraculous gris-gris that
 —with the help of Allah—
 Guarded your steps to this happy day.

Now a successful filmmaker, William Mbaye released a documentary about his mother last year.* A scene late in the film embodies much of what is so important about this book's appearance and how it draws on the still vital oral tradition and role of elder women in particular in passing that teaching along in both families and communities. D'Erneville sits with her grandson, who is maybe fourteen, teaching him to recite "Kassacks" as Mbaye, the boy's father, films them together. She demonstrates a line with verve, drawing out the phrase with a sweep of her hand, then relishes a laugh with her grandson over the thought of the "blood gushing!"

D'Erneville—now in her 80s and the oldest living of the poets in this collection—exemplifies the pivotal nature of the decade of the 1960s, when a wave of newly independent African states replaced colonial regimes. D'Erneville spent more than a decade in Paris at mid-century. There, she trained as a radio journalist. One of her tutors was the poet (and Senegal's first president) Léopold Sédar Senghor, who exhorted Senegalese ex-pats to participate in building the newly freed nation. D'Erneville returned to Dakar in 1959 and launched a remarkable, multi-genre and multi-cultural career in service of her national culture.



Annette d'Erneville Mbaye of Senegal, known as "Mère-bi" (mother of all).

Particularly in Central and West Africa, there was a return home of a generation of intellectuals, students and artists who—like d'Erneville—had gathered in Paris since the 1930s, along with their counterparts from the French Caribbean, and participated in the Pan-African cultural movement of Négritude.

D'Almeida notes that using French enabled them "both to deal with the West and [provided] a common tongue among themselves," as well as laying the groundwork for new translation strategies like that of Mayes by the sheer range of creolized diaspora French. Many of the national boundaries that endure in Africa from colonial days were drawn with no regard for indigenous peoples' realities. And many of these poets were born in one nation, educated in another, and live now in yet a third or fourth nation, so "nationality" becomes even more fluid. Following this logic, the book is ordered alphabetically rather than grouped by nation.

*D'Erneville's filmmaker son William Mbaye visited Syracuse last April to screen his documentary, *Mère-bi/Mother of All*, at the 6th Syracuse International Film festival. The film *Mère-bi* is available on DVD by contacting the filmmaker at williambaye@hotmail.com.

D’Almeida gives an excellent, succinct account of the complex set of political and linguistic contradictions faced by these poets, as well as the formulations arising from Négritude about women’s metaphoric identity as “Mother Africa” that had the effect of papering over the actual conditions of many women’s lives.

Mayes’ approach to translation as transformational builds on that of pioneers like Howard University’s diplomat-scholar Mercer Cook, who increasingly employed what Mayes calls a “jazz aesthetics”; Ralph Ellison, who used improvisations (also from jazz); and, more recently, Kwame Anthony Appiah, whose notion of “thick translation” attends to sound patterns and conventions of meter, rhyme and alliteration at least as much as to literal meaning. When Mayes speaks of “reverberations” and asserts that translation is not a literal “copy” of the poem, she is replacing a visual image of language as object, fixed and hardened on the page, with a sound image of language that moves, breathes and transforms, made vivid by a stirred memory of, in this case, Atlantic crossings of the Middle Passage. This is only intelligible so long as any poetry remains within shouting distance of its spoken origins.

This collection’s subjects range from mothers’ feeling for their children, to an intimacy with the land, to historical events that suggest a strongly international bent to women’s solidarity about their roles. A number of poets reference the historic slave port at Senegal’s Gorée Island—Benin’s Thécia G. Bénissan writes hauntingly of

*Gorée, my island lost at the end of the ocean
You were chosen among islands.*

—or about the Middle Passage, what d’Almeida calls the “Atlantic of a Thousand Crossings.”

Dominique Aguessy, who was born in Benin but lived for many years in Senegal before finally settling in Belgium, writes intimately of poetry as a living thing—

*The poem seeks its own way
Nestled in the parchment’s heart*

and

*I entered poetry
As you enter resistance
Against the denial of dignity*

Senegal's Nafissatou Dia Diouf writes similarly in "Tell me..."

*If what you have to say
Is not as beautiful as silence
Then, say nothing
Because nothing is more beautiful
Than your mouth half-open
On a hanging word.*

There is a vivid intimacy with the land throughout this work, such as in the Democratic Republic of the Congo's Cleméntine Nzují in her poem, "Kasala":

*I come from this black and luminous land
land of sun and water.*

*In my country, trees talk to poets
the breeze to lovers
and the shower of rain to beloved women
In my country, the harp existed
before David did
I am from the land where hands work
and the heart speaks.*

Additionally, much of this work is wry or playful—some written for children, certainly, but offering much to adults. One of my favorites is Véronique Tadjo's "Crocodile," about a vegetarian with a "holy horror of blood" who seeks a pen-pal to assuage his loneliness:

*It's not easy to be a crocodile
Especially if you don't want
To be a crocodile
The one you see*

*On the opposite page
Is not happy
In his croc's
Skin
He would have liked
To be different
To attract
Children
Play
With them
Talk
With their parents
Walk around
In
The village
But, but, but*

*When he comes out
Of the water
Fishermen
Throw spears
Children
Take off
Young girls
Abandon their water jugs...*

This poem ends with a plea to please write and address your letters to:

*Nice Crocodile
Bay No. 3
Niger River*

Until the early 90s, when d'Almeida began working on the project that became *A Rain of Words*, what such women wrote—particularly the poetry—was rarely reprinted, anthologized or translated, hence receiving even less critical attention than their prose.

D’Almeida made the first trip to Africa for this volume in 1993, visiting Togo, Côte d’Ivoire, Senegal and Benin. In 1995, after a meeting at the African Studies Association convinced her the anthology should be bilingual, Mayes joined the project. In 1996, there were visits to archives in Paris and Brussels, then to Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, and in 1998, Mauritania. Cameroon, Guinea, Congo and the Democratic Republic of Congo (during Mobutu’s regime, Zaire) are also represented. By far most poets here are from Senegal—more than a dozen—though four of these are now lost to contact. Three of the contributors have died; a handful now live in France, Belgium, French-speaking Canada and the U.S. There are college professors, teachers, a pediatrician, a pharmacist, an agronomist, artists who write and perform in other genres and art forms, journalists and a press attaché, a Minister of Culture, one of Art and Tourism, one of Education. Some are prominent and have published prolifically, others are as yet little known. But spend any time with this volume and—whether you can read the French on each facing page or not—you will quickly find yourself listening and—not content—even speaking aloud. ☞