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Author(s): Toivanen, Anna-Leena

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“The Original Explosion That Created Worlds”: Essays on Werewere Liking’s Art and Writings

Edited by John Conteh-Morgan and Irène Assiba d’Almeida

363 pages, 2010, 97 USD (paper)

Amsterdam & New York, Rodopi

Reviewed by Anna-Leena Toivanen

Werewere Liking, an Ivory Coaster of Cameroonian origin, is a truly versatile artist. Besides her literary career as a novelist, poet and playwright, she has also become known for her work in the fields of visual and performance arts. What is more, she has established a center for African artists, which eventually became an entire village that has specific ethical and developmental goals for supporting disadvantaged youth from Abidjan’s ghettos. It is probably this project that best reflects her longstanding engagement in the social well-being and development of her community. Despite her long career and her wide and diverse artistic production, the recently published essay compilation, *“The Original Explosion That Created Worlds,”* is the first volume entirely dedicated to Liking’s work. In this sense, the volume fills a void by giving this innovative African artist the critical attention she so richly deserves. One of the bilingual volume’s goals is obviously to bring this Francophone artist to the attention of Anglophone audiences. This objective is most concretely represented by the inclusion of English translations of Liking’s plays in the book.

The collection of essays acknowledges and honors the versatility of Liking’s oeuvre by discussing not only her literary works but also her other artistic undertakings. The introductory chapter is somewhat brief yet, nevertheless, it successfully sets the context for the subsequent readings that comprise the volume. The introduction by John Conteh-Morgan and Irène Assiba d’Almeida highlights the originality of Liking’s experimental work on the African literary scene and draws attention to the various sources that inspire the author’s technique and artistic vision, acknowledging also the difficulties that these multiple sources may engender in the process of interpretation. Indeed, many of the essays share this sense regarding the difficulty of Liking’s texts and consider it important to shed light on the culturally specific structures of knowledge and belief that inform her work in general. In a way, then, the volume provides the reader with interpretative instructions for Liking’s oeuvre.

The volume is divided into six different parts that deal respectively with the artist’s relation to culture and politics, as well as her prose works, drama, and poetry. The essays discussing her drama and poetry are particularly important in the sense that, until recently, studies on Liking’s texts have been mainly focused on her prose work. This tendency to

privilege prose over drama and poetry, of course, marks the whole postcolonial literary field. The collection's last two parts focus on questions related to translating Liking's work and on her reception. From the viewpoint of a literary scholar, these sections are particularly interesting, not to say refreshing. Moreover, the first part, which deals with Liking's complex engagements as a postcolonial artist, is a salient reminder that, often in the context of the Global South, art forms other than literature may have a greater importance by providing a more direct sounding board amidst the local audiences. Indeed, the volume succeeds in drawing attention to the important question concerning the relevance of artistic activity in a postcolonial context by addressing Liking's authorial and artistic position and the politics of her work. In this sense, one of the most insightful essays of the whole volume is Michelle Mielly's piece, which discusses the principles of Liking's project, the Ki-Yi village, contextualizing it between the tensions of the local and the global. Mielly's article draws attention to the challenges and possibilities of art in the postcolonial world and highlights the importance of creativity in surmounting and/or resisting disenfranchised conditions and envisaging future alternatives.

It is thus surprising how little the essays resort to the theories of postcolonialism. One exception is Peter Hawkins' contribution in which he applies Homi K. Bhabha's writings on cultural difference to Liking's work. For a reader familiar with postcolonial theoretical discourses, there is nothing particularly innovative or new in this sort of reading. However, as the introduction maintains, Hawkins' approach represents "a little-studied aspect of the author's work" (18). Indeed, a glimpse at the volume's bibliography confirms that, within it, postcolonial theoretical discourses have only been scarcely used as analytical tools. This suggests that postcolonial theory might be somehow inadequate when it comes to critically approaching Liking's work; could this be due to the strong influence of indigenous cultural elements in her art? Another theoretical field that one might have expected to hold a more visible role in reading Liking is feminism. Some of the writers go as far as adopting an overtly negative attitude towards feminist scholarship. This is a problematic approach given Liking's concerns for women's subordinated conditions. Yvette Balana's article on the different dimensions of Liking's language claims that the author moves beyond feminist (and Francophone) problematics, promoting instead a reading informed by elements from traditional Bassa culture. As such, Balana's reading is insightful and informs the reader about the complex influences behind Liking's work. Simultaneously, however, it is highly problematic to suggest that a feminist reading and a reading drawing from the Bassa culture must be somehow mutually exclusive. Unfortunately, sometimes it seems easier to resort to homogenizing arguments against the faults of (Western) feminisms than it does to try and establish a genuine dialogue with them.

The fifth part of the book approaches Liking's work from the viewpoint of translation, thus contributing to a continuously growing

subfield of postcolonial literary studies. Taken together, the essays convey a sense of the complexity of Liking's language and highlight the importance of the translator in the creation of meaning. At the same time, the section is symptomatic of the Anglophone hegemony of contemporary postcolonial literary scholarship: if Liking wrote in English, translation might not represent an equal "problem."

The last part of the volume is constituted of a single essay, which suggests that something might have been done differently when it came to organizing the articles. The essay in question is Irène Assiba d'Almeida's analysis of Liking's critical reception over the last three decades. D'Almeida's observations concerning the changes in Liking's reception and the varying focuses and interests of different types of criticism are enlightening and draw a picture of the local and global dimensions of the reception of this postcolonial artist. In this sense, it sets out to engage in a dialogue with the opening essay by Mielly. It is vital that critical attention is given to issues related to reception and the ways in which authorial/artistic images are constructed in different media, since, ultimately, artists and their work only truly come into being through the involvement of audiences.

The volume undoubtedly suffers from some unevenness in terms of the length of essays and the quantity of footnotes. In general, however, the essays are very readable and provide illuminating and, above all, varying insights into Liking's complex body of work. What adds to the legitimacy of the volume is the fact that, among the contributors, there are a couple of texts by scholars based on the African continent. It is particularly important that the voices of Africa-based researchers are heard in Western scientific arenas discussing African writers. As such, one of its strongest features is the way it promotes a complex image of Liking's artistic undertakings and engagements. It is a study that inspires the reader to find out more about those aspects of Liking's unbelievably varied artistic career with which s/he might not have been so familiar. The bibliography that maps out relevant material on Liking is thus a particularly valuable tool for researchers.

Were Liking is an engaged artist who aims at imagining a better future rather than just criticizing what has gone wrong before. Given the various crisis-driven conditions on the African continent, this sort of future-oriented approach is essential. The idea of healing and imagining alternative realities is probably the most important aspect in Liking's artistic vision. That "*The Original Explosion That Created Worlds*" is successful in conveying this message is to its great credit.