

Continuing Diversity:

A Column of Periodical Reviews

By Pamela M. Salela

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This special issue of the *Journal of African Children's & Youth Literature* provides insight into the world of African childhood and youth literature as one of the exigent tools for children's survival, as well as for nation building. The authors examine some of the traditional youth literature created in postcolonial eras, as well as pedagogical uses of literature, both written and oral, in children's identity formation. What becomes immediately obvious in reading each of these articles is the overarching theme of the development of national identity.

There is analysis of children's literature as a pedagogical tool for nation building in colonial, as well as postcolonial, eras ("Ailing Bodies: Afrikaner Nationalist Discourse and Popular Youth Fiction," "From Fairyland to Lived Life: Narrative Transitions in Children's Fiction by David Gian Maillu," "Shall the Lamb Feed together With the Fox? Destroying Race and Gender Stereotypes in Zimbabwean Children's Readers"). In each of these articles, the authors examine works of literature written with the explicit intention of providing a framework to instill within children the intellectual and emotional tools for creating a new national identity. The works featured have attempted to provide, through the vehicle of literature, the means of healing a nation through its children and preparing children to become agents of change. Among the goals these books address are alleviating the AIDS crisis, reducing sexual violence and teen pregnancy, resolving ethnic conflict, and more.

The articles examine the intent of the authors and critique the pedagogical results of their literary products. For example, Tom Odhiambo's examination of David Gian Maillu's children's fiction argues that Maillu's work is specifically written to replace and counter the effects of colonial European texts. According to Odhiambo, *The Government's Daughter* models the government as an agent for change for the girl child and supports the ideal of education as the solution for female liberation. This novel for teens addresses forced child labor and the girl's marginalization within her home environment. Odhiambo is adamant that children's fiction should reflect real social demographics and cultural transitions, such as urbanization and globalization. In *The Poor Child*, Maillu places the child in the role of narrator, giving her direct agency. His intent is, in Odhiambo's words, that "children's agency in a post-colonial world" must be valued and supported (p. 94).

In Robert Muponde's essay "Child of the Rose? Children as Agents of History in African Fiction," he takes a fascinating look at children (fictitious and real) as agents of change in nation formation. He argues against the standard archetype of childhood and children in literature as representing only innocence, vulnerability, and beauty. Muponde reviews the landscape of literary criticism that examines the symbolic representation of the child and points to the "refusal by writers and societies to see childhood as culture-bound, transitory, a social construct and relative to historical epochs" (p. 107), despite evidence to the contrary. His message is clear: The child must be freed as historical agent if the nations of Africa are to build a positive future.

The authors also approach the issue of literature from the standpoint of children's own stories and how they are or are not being woven into the storytelling traditions they are being taught in the classroom. Throughout these essays is the argument that the stark realities of life in these postcolonial nations require realistic messages that incorporate the tools of survival in a world that is often quite brutal. Some of the themes that are represented include sexuality, gender discrimination, violence, teen pregnancy, marriage, death, identity formation in a postcolonial world, rape, childcare, and abortion.

Two case studies of pedagogical intent in the classroom provide striking contrasts of negative and positive approaches. Pinky Makoes's "Children's Oral Storytelling Practices in a South Africa School" examines the use of literature as a tool for denying children's experiences. These young children, ages seven through nine, are encouraged to tell stories from any experience that they want to share. When they do bring the stories that are a reflection of their lived realities, however, they are repeatedly told that these are not real stories, like the ones in the storybooks they are being taught. The story books paint an antiseptic view of life at odds with the children's stories. At one point Makoe suggests that "the teacher's operative frame and probably her teaching philosophy . . . seems to advocate Western traditional oral folktales," which deny the reality of these children's lives (p. 54).

In contrast to this negative classroom experience, Dudu Jankie's case study of a classroom in Botswana, "Connecting Students' Personal and Community Experiences and Knowledge to Literature Instruction in Setswana Senior Secondary Classrooms," reveals a very different approach to children's storytelling. "Post-colonialism has emerged as a theoretical framework/project or tool that critiques and problematizes Eurocentric or Western perspectives of knowledge construction" (p. 67). "Based on the perspective that knowledge construction is not neutral," Jankie goes on to write, "the official policy is that academic knowledge should reflect and acknowledge out-of-school experiences and legitimate the stu-

dents' home language" (p. 69).

Africa is a continent that was dealt a heavy hand in the twentieth century, but one that is finally rising to face the fallout from centuries of colonial exploitation. The countries represented in this special issue of *JACYL* (South Africa, Zimbabwe, Botswana and Kenya), all experienced independence or national rebirth (as in the case of South Africa) in the second half of the twentieth century. As such, all have in common the need to reconstruct their national and cultural identities. And in the case of Zimbabwe, prolonged political upheaval continues to affect the quality of life for its citizens. The prevalence of AIDS is another major concern for the peoples of this continent, with an estimated 25 million adults and children living with HIV/AIDS. Considering the fact that almost three-fourths of all HIV/AIDS child and adult deaths occur in sub-Saharan Africa, it is not surprising that the number of adult cases in the nations represented herein are very high: South Africa (>22%), Zimbabwe (>25%), Botswana (>37%) and Kenya (approx. 7%).¹ The prevalence of social upheaval, economic strife, and the threat of AIDS are paramount realities for many African nations.

All this is to say that when approaching the topic of children's and youth literature in Africa, it is critical to keep in mind the very real conditions that young people face. The prevalence of AIDS orphans is frighteningly high, with the numbers in South Africa at more than 1.2 million and Zimbabwe at more than 1.1 million. Many of these children are the victims of sexual violence and forced labor, which only compounds the devastation. Carlotta von Maltzan examines Lutz van Dijk's children's novel *Stronger Than the Storm*, a novel that was written to address the issue of AIDS and to present ways of dealing with this crisis. In the novel, the girl child contracts AIDS as the result of a gang rape, and the final resolution is a reflection of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's approach of forgiveness regarding the contraction of the AIDS. The violence and insult of the rape itself, however, are not addressed. In critiquing this novel, Professor von Maltzan questions the wisdom of the lessons being taught to the children of South Africa if the original insult—the gang rape—is downplayed to highlight the AIDS issue, and if the subjectivity of the child is sacrificed to the “greater good.”

The spirit of a people cannot survive without imploring the heart to play. The tradition of children's storytelling in Africa is rich, and Mickias Musiyiwa's “The Dialectical Relationship between Children and the Storyteller in Ngano Aesthetics in Zimbabwe” is a delightful ethnographic expose of the Shona oral literature tradition, which is centered on song and the participatory give-and-take of the storyteller and the children. The tradition parallels social and religious activities such as courtship and marriage. Dance is another critical element of the storytelling, and the best storytellers are *vanambuya* (grandmothers). Their pivotal role is a result of cultural placement through marriage. By learning about the cultural construction of the Ngano tradition, one automatically learns much about Shona family structure.

Betsie van der Westhuizen provides an examination of the historical circumstances surrounding the publishing of the delightful and uplifting oral tales in her article, “On the Wings of a Story by Aggrey of Africa: Fly Eagle Fly!” She examines the universal

appeal of this “evergreen” story, which can find meaning within any culture and is not bound by time. It is such a resilient tale—an eagle raised as chicken who must be encouraged to believe that he/she is an eagle—that it transcends cultural and circumstantial barriers. The story currently serves as a metaphor for the lifting of a post-apartheid nation to achieve its true noble stature. In a careful examination of the symbolism in the story, van der Westhuizen reveals the outcome of the eagle's true identity formation (its ability to fly) as representing many different things—real home, inner or spiritual space, cultural imagination, national identity, and hope.

Journal Contributors

The global interest in *JACYL* is reflected in its international editorial board. The editors hail from universities in numerous countries including South Africa, the United States, Germany, England, and Nigeria, representing such institutions as the University of Ibadan, University of Exeter, University of Nigeria, Illinois State University, and more. In addition, the corresponding editors include representatives from the International Youth Library in Munich, Germany, as well as the Board of Children's Literature for children in Peachtree City, Georgia.

The authors in this issue represent a spectrum of educators and scholars, many of whom are based on the African continent. These include Margaret Baffour-Awuah, a former teacher and librarian at the Botswana National Library Service Headquarters in Gaborone; Professor Michelle Commeyras, a former Fulbright lecturer and faculty member at the University of Georgia; Bren Danielle, a fifth-grade teacher with experience in both Florida's and Georgia's public schools; Bevelyn Dube, a doctoral candidate in the Department of English at the University of Zimbabwe; Dudu Jankie, a lecturer at the University of Botswana; Pinky Makoe, an Applied English Language Studies instructor at the University of Witwatersrand, in Johannesburg, South Africa; Carlotta von Maltzan, associate professor of German in the School of Literature and Language Studies at the University of Witwatersrand; Robert Muponde (*JACYL* guest editor), a researcher at the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research, University of Witwatersrand, former Head of Literary Studies at the Zimbabwe Open University, Harare, and the author of a textbook on children's literature among other publications; Agrena Mushonaga, a primary school teacher who taught for many years in Zimbabwe; Miickias Mmusiyiwa, a lecturer in the Department of African Languages and Literature at the University of Zimbabwe; Tom Odhiambo, a research at Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research, University of the Witwatersrand and an author of fiction set in Kenya; Osayimwense Osa (*JACYL*'s founder and editor), professor in the Department of Languages and Literature at Virginia State University; Irma du Plessis, researcher at the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research (WISER) at the University of Witwatersrand; and Pippa Stein, English teacher and educator in the School of Literature and Language Studies at the University of Witwatersrand; and Betsie van der Westhuizen, associate professor in the School of Languages at the Potchefstroom Campus of

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