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Derek Wright. *New Directions in African Fiction (Twayne's World Authors Series).* New York: Twayne Publishers, 1997. xiii + 201 pp. $33.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8057-4556-6.

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Derek Wright's *New Directions in African Fiction* is an excellent addition to the Twayne's World Authors Series, fulfilling the Series' aim admirably in devoting itself to critical interpretation and discussion of no fewer than twenty-one novels by fifteen authors from nine countries while addressing itself lucidly to its readers. Sensibly, given the scope of the book, Wright acknowledges that his work "is not intended as a comprehensive history of the African novel in the last quarter of the twentieth century," nor does it "attempt any general survey of the field" (p. ix). Instead, his book aims to give informed readings of selected texts from sub-Saharan Africa written from 1965 to the present.

In so doing, Wright offers valuable reconsiderations of some of the usual suspects (Armah, Soyinka, Ngugi, et al.) while consolidating the status of a new generation of African writers (Dangarembga, Chinodya, Okri, et al.) and indicating how the changing circumstances of postcolonial Africa are reflected in these latter writers' works. Not only in the opening and closing chapters ("The Postcolonial Predicament, 1965-1970" and "Prospective: Into the Nineties") but also by implication in his selection of texts for detailed study, Wright sets out a couple of very significant positions concerning language, nationalism, and gender.

First, although the study includes white and Indian writers (J.M. Coetzee and M.G. Vassanji), Wright limits himself--with the exception of Yambo Ouologuem--to discussion of writers of sub-Saharan origins writing in English. There are clearly cogent and justifiable reasons for this selection, but given that so much of the detailed work of the book is given over to questions of nationalism and post- or neo-colonial dependence, it seems to me that Wright might have given greater prominence to his grounds for inclusion and exclusion. Indeed, while the opening chapter comments on the lingering nationalist illusions that fed the *dis*illusion of writers like Ayi Kwei Armah (pp. 11-12), and the last chapter comments on the "irreversible cultural hybridization" of writers like Ben Okri, 'Biyi Bandele-Thomas, Kojo Laing, and Syl Cheney-Coker (p. 178), Wright tantalizingly declares it "beyond the scope of the present work" (p. 179) to pursue further whether either nationalist race retrieval or postcolonial hybridity are

shaped by imperial values. Tacitly, however, despite his attention to Armah (who even in exile has resolutely remained on African soil), Wright privileges anglophone African writers with access to international markets. Freed from the brief of the Twayne's Series, maybe Wright will go on to make the case that his book suggests: that "African fiction" at the end of the twentieth century has by and large moved away from two of Abiola Irele's three "Dimensions of African Discourse," those shaped by racial consciousness and by a sense of the commonality of Third World experience, to the third dimension, that which is shaped by, and which in its turn refashions "international" literature.[1] The consequences of that move, and the implications for academic study of such African literature outside Africa, are profound.

The second position that Wright's book sets out is closely related. Almost all of the texts that he treats--even the "post-"est, most hybrid ones--would seem to confirm Jameson's much-contested claim that Third World literature takes the form of "national allegory."[2] From West Africa, Wright selects the stylistically innovative Ben Okri and others over Festus Iyayi or Ken Saro-Wiwa, while in Zimbabwe he selects Tsitsi Dangarembga and Shimmer Chinodya over "the more flamboyant Dambudzo Marechera" on the grounds that where national upheavals have had a more profound impact upon literature, history has been privileged over style" (p. ix). In fact, in both cases, Wright has picked texts whose central thematic concerns (the ***abiku*** of ***The Famished Road***; Chinodya's harvest of thorns or Dangarembga's nervous conditions) lend themselves to national-allegorical interpretations. And since African nationalism has been so bound up with patriarchal control, it is perhaps not surprising that Dangarembga is the only woman writer Wright treats at length.

As in all of the essays in the book, Wright's comments on ***Nervous Conditions*** are incisive and insightful (especially his detailed analysis of the book's "unusual and complex treatment of the bodily functions that have to do with the eating and processing of food" [p. 111]), but since, as he admits, "Tambu's story is a story of the 1960s" (p. 122), and since what is "new" about ***Nervous Conditions*** is less its form--the ***bildungsroman***--than the gender of the main character within that form, Wright pessimistically[3] leaves his readers with the impression that the new directions in African fiction are pretty exclusively male-determined. While the idiosyncrasies of Bessie Head's writing may make the new directions of her work difficult for later writers to follow, what Rob Nixon calls her "rural transnationalism"[4] ought surely to have been worth more than a single reference. Likewise, if Wright was prepared to include a francophone writer in this book, then why not prefer Assia Djebar, who is still writing in extremely innovative ways and challenging the male-centered histories both of colonial and post-colonial Algeria, over Yambo Ouologuem?

These and similar questions of selection aside, however (and nobody would be able to please everybody in such a book), ***New Directions in African Fiction*** is still tremendously wide-ranging, and Wright's clear, careful analyses of individual texts and his forthright judgments will be extremely valuable to teachers and students of anglophone African literature as well as to any other readers interested in updating their image of Africa.

Notes

[1]. See Irele, Abiola. "Dimensions of African Discourse" in ***Order and partialities: Theory, Pedagogy, and the "Postcolonial"***. Eds. Myrsiades, Kostas, and Jerry McGuire. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995, 15-34.

[2]. See Jameson, Fredric. "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism." ***Social Text*** 15 (Fall 1986): 65-88.

[3]. Wright is open about his pessimism and sets out valid reasons for it; in his opening paragraphs in the chapter on Dangarembga he com-

ments generally on the post-independence reinforcement of Zimbabwe's "dominant patriarchal values" and specifically records that in 1987 "only 30 out of a total of 212 published Zimbabwean writers were women" (pp. 108-9).

[4]. See Nixon, Rob. ***Homelands, Harlem, and Hollywood: South African Culture and the World Beyond.*** New York and London: Routledge, 1994.

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