

Writing Africa/African Writing

*Moorings: Portuguese Expansion and the Writing of Africa*

Josiah Blackmore

203 pages, 2009, 25.00USD (paperback)

University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, London.

*Dealing with Evils; Essays on Writing from Africa*

Annie Gagiano

Studies in English Literatures, Series Editor Koray Melikoglu

239 pages, 2008, 46.95USD (paperback)

ibidem verlag, Stuttgart.

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We must realize, therefore, that at the very beginning of the modern period, racial terms as used by Iberians and as acquired by the English, were going to refer to part-African peoples who might not only have the features of the Gulf of Guinea (variable as they are) but also every conceivable combination of central African, Ibero-African, Afro-Arabic and American-African mixtures. (Forbes 2, 4)

Using Native American scholar Jack D. Forbes's statement regarding the language of race in the Americas is not to foreground Josiah Blackmore's *Moorings: Portuguese Expansion and the Writing of Africa* (2009) as merely a reference text. Blackmore's work stands on its own considerable merit. However, the latter must also be taken as part of an important conversation about various structures formed by the colonial apparatus in relation to difference. Imperialism's linguistic mirror—turned toward the conquered and the about-to-be conquered,<sup>1</sup> but also revealing the contorted image of the conqueror—is a telling one; and, at the least, it would seem useful to Africanists and scholars with relevant concerns to examine the Iberian antecedents to which Forbes refers.

The phrase “the Writing of Africa,” that Blackmore uses as subtitle, is an interesting one; it conflates the act of writing, and its ability to preserve the representation of an idea, with received wisdom. The “Writing of Africa” then transforms the subject into object and the representation of “Africa” as the “real” Africa. In *Moorings*, Blackmore focuses upon the work of Portuguese writers on Africa “in the first century and a half of maritime expansion,” from court chronicler, Gomes Eanes de Zurara's

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<sup>1</sup> In his book, Blackmore himself entertains an interesting discussion about postcolonial studies vs. imperium studies—I include reference to both as lying along a continuum of predatory intrusion into various cultures and societies by another.

*Crónica da Tomada de Ceuta*<sup>2</sup> about the successful campaign of King João I against the Moorish town of Ceuta, Morocco, on August 21, 1415, to the epic *Os Lusíadas* of Luís de Camões (xv). Blackmore immediately asserts that Zurara's text(s) lie "in the tradition of Portuguese/European writing that foundationally lay[s] out some of the characteristics of the imperial discourse of encounter in non-European spaces and the exploitation of those spaces and the peoples in them" (xv). This does not mean, however, that Zurara's is an Ur-text. Blackmore is far too serious a scholar for that sort of reductionism: his examination of Zurara's and related texts can be better described as an excavation of Europe's (and, more specifically, Portugal's) venture into the non-European world and as such, forms part of a necessary endeavor "to bring Portuguese materials to the fore" in the Orientalist-imperium and in postcolonial studies debates (14).

*Mouro* (in Castilian, *Moro*, or, in English, *Moor*) is at the outset recognized as a troubled term, first rooted in the accumulated othering of adherents of Islam on the peninsula as "foe or foil of Christianity," and then in the attendant justifications of conquest occasioned by the allegedly deliberate denial of the Catholic [Christian] faith on the part of the conquered (4). Blackmore further reviews the association of "Moorishness" with differences in faith, with blackness as the color of sin rather than skin, and with deviant sexual behaviors "before expansion in Africa in the fifteenth century" (*ibid*). It is not clear from his discussion, however, when phenotypical "profiling" based on the perceiver's assessment of skin color enters the discourse. However, the very imprecision of the term, "Moor," as Blackmore points out, helps "construe the term as a marker and principle of difference," as "Africa and the *mouro, negro, guineu, or etíope* became part of an expansionist culture that combines taxonomic observation with chronistic narrative as a foundational mode of imperial discourse" (4-11).

Perhaps, though, the attenuated shift in the meaning of the word from a religious connotation to a racial distinction needs some accounting for: in *Slavery and African Ethnicities in the Americas*, Gwendolyn Midlo Hall notes that the trans-Saharan trade linked sub-Saharan Africa's ancient camel caravans across the Sahara with the Mediterranean world even before the birth of Islam in the seventh century (622 AD). It was the Almoravid kingdom (1040-1147), encompassing the ancient kingdom of Ghana as well as the Iberian peninsula, that made Africans a familiar sight in Southern Spain and Portugal. Color prejudice, implicitly understood as a justification for enslaving Africans, was then "relatively more fluid," according to Hall. Instead, gold was the main concern of Portuguese

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<sup>2</sup> The author continues: ". . . followed by three other chronicles on Morocco and the exploration of the West African Littoral" thus covering the same geography as the Forbes quote identifies (xv).

rulers, merchants, and explorers who first sailed down the coast of West Africa; and subsequent Iberian Christian kingdoms sought to bypass the trans-Saharan trade, controlled by Moors, to sail down the West African coast and thus exploit sub-Saharan gold deposits directly (4-7). Blackmore does not mention this, setting aside the problematics of contact from the 15<sup>th</sup> century onward (“a new series of encounters and contacts with Africa and its inhabitants”)<sup>3</sup> by saying that it is not important to distinguish between “modern European imperialism” and “a culminating manifestation of a medieval crusading mentality” as a determinant of “othering”: it is only necessary to know that Portuguese writing of Africa was born out of Zurara’s 1415 chronicle of the conquest of Ceuta and out of subsequent and similarly rooted writings (xv).

In my opinion, one cannot overlook the fact that as the quest to bypass Muslim gold traders developed, a more besieged discourse arose. Medieval or not, the Crusader mentality appears to justify all manner of intrusions. Soon enough, chroniclers of the day inserted a Crusader discourse in the Portuguese imperial project; and such combined rhetorical figures became part of the empire’s propaganda machine, then as now used to justify the control and seizure of coveted resources. Blackmore goes on to situate his discussion by citing Peter Hulme’s “Tales of Distinction,” whereby writer/travelers to the Caribbean assumed the “position of ethnographic authority,” a self/other split “that ‘sees itself (. . . often implicitly) as authorized to make distinctions’” (51). Citing the *Navagazioni*, a 15<sup>th</sup> century travel narrative by Alvise Cadamosta, “a Venetian merchant who . . . became interested in Prince Henry’s expeditions to Guinea and West Africa and . . . rose to a position of trust . . . with the Portuguese prince,” *Moorings* contends that Cadamosta exercised authority not only in descriptions of the African space, but also in “descriptions of the African body” (50, 51). Thus we discover the Lusioiberian, indeed the peninsular, imperial discourse—of the inferiority of a soon to be conquered continent’s people—made whole, not because it appears only in the eye of one astute beholder (Cadamosta in 1454 or, earlier, even Zurara in writing about Ceuta), but because the psychic and intellectual structures of the conqueror’s enterprise cast this interpretation. Indeed, by using Aquinas’s notion of “intellectual memory” and Avicenna’s (Ibn Sina’s) “deliberative imagination,” Blackmore falls back upon an analysis of the cognitive processes as they might relate, he believes, to the formation of the Portuguese conquerors’ opinion and judgment of Ceutan Moors’ intelligence (94-95).

Blackmore closes with an analysis of how Luís de Camões’s 16<sup>th</sup> century *Os Lusíadas* (1572) “relocates Zurara’s ethical Ceuta southward to the Cape of Good Hope, the locale where the eastern enterprise begins”

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<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the newness of these contacts and encounters is something Hall would no doubt contest.

(121). Recall the Papal Bull of 1493, issued by Pope Alexander VI, and the resultant Treaty of Tordesillas of 1494, wherein the Pope simply drew a line more or less in the middle of the world map and declared that half of the physical world was Spain's to explore and claim, and the other half, Portugal's (Fitzgerald 9).<sup>4</sup> Here, in Blackmore's analysis, we begin to see how the Portuguese "writing of Africa," this pen-made Africa, reflects this extravagant claim. Camões created Adamastor, a prognosticating monster who appears to Portuguese sailors and who, with Vasco de Gama, goes round the Cape of Good Hope; he is

. . . the earthbound giant and Titan (like Atlas), the guard of the entrance to the Indian Ocean, which, in the history of nautical exploration as Camões recounts it, had not been breached until the voyage of Gama. Like the Pillars of Hercules, Adamastor represents the *ne plus ultra* of knowledge and travel, now placed in southern, rather than northern, Africa. (121-22)

He is not a happy fellow but a melancholic and choleric one, identified both with the sub-Saharan body and the European conqueror. He must be passed by in an act of will, of daring, despite the future travails ahead. This is, says Blackmore, a masculinist project that arguably capitalizes upon "the Portuguese/European preoccupation with the potent, African male body with its ability to block or impede imperial ambitions" (146). I leave it to the reader to engage Blackmore's brilliant exegesis; *Moorings* is a necessary and important book well worth the reading: dense, scholarly, and packed with careful research and using the lens of contemporaneous sources to interrogate the construction of the Portuguese imperial discourse of the time.

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Annie Gagiano's *Dealing with Evils: Essays on Writing from Africa* is a thoughtful book coming from the world foreshadowed by the Blackmore volume, though transcending the strictly Lusophone world with which the latter deals. Where Blackmore's work notes how writers living contemporaneously with early Portuguese expansion into Africa were complicit in "writing" a certain Africa for European consumption, Gagiano's work presents the dilemma of *African* writers' efforts to free themselves from that Eurocentric, racialized discourse. The evils of the title above, of course, begin with the racism and devastation—social,

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<sup>4</sup> Pope Alexander VI was originally Rodrigo Borja of Spain. "His uncle was elected Pope Calixtus III in 1455 and, when he moved to Italy, changed the spelling of the family name to Borgia. Rodrigo was elected Pope Alexander VI in 1492 with the strong support of Ferdinand and Isabella." He was the father of Cesare and Lucretzia Borgia (Fitzgerald 9). On the subject of the Treaty, see also David W. Koeller, "Treaty of Tordesillas," WebChron. 1998. 19 Sept. 2003. <<http://www.thenagain.info/WebChron/Americas/Tordesillas.html>>

political and geophysical—wrought in the wake of European colonialism.

Fittingly, Gagiano starts her book with an essay on a volume of *Dwaalstories* “with the name of Eugène Marais as author . . . recently reissued (in Afrikaans) . . . simultaneously with the first published complete translation into English of this collection . . .” (7<sup>n</sup>). This one footnote metonymically signifies the already complex issues of language and imposition of European culture that have beset the Khoisan peoples of South Africa, as well as other languages and other peoples on the continent. At the same time, as the essay deals with the loss of San (or Bushmen)<sup>5</sup> cultural/linguistic wealth that *Dwaalstories* represents, the author also takes us through the debate surrounding the use of Afrikaans, a language which in the 80s was regarded by many anti-apartheid intellectuals as the linguistic arm of oppression. Today, only a minority of current Afrikaans speakers are white; no less a literary figure that Breyten Breytenbach promotes Afrikaans as a genuine Creole language; and, on the other hand, all but one of the country’s universities have adopted English as the second language of instruction. That indigenous languages have languished is an unresolved—perhaps irresolvable—issue that makes the decolonization of the mind in South Africa a dizzying project, if that is a project to which its citizens aspire (A. C. Jordan’s *Tales from Southern Africa* looks at the Xhosa novel, *Ingqumbo Yeminyanya*, and covers the language issue further.) Indeed, though Ngugi wa Thiong’o rightfully laments that “we never give anything back to our own languages” (*Penpoints* 126-27), South Africa is a country where, as Edward Said has said, “there are now eleven official languages, which educational institutions must somehow take into account” (24). Thus, Gagiano’s choice to begin her series of essays with this article appears to be both wise and necessary in order to avoid a binaristic analysis of languages (English vs a selected Other among others) and, as further essays demonstrate, a binaristic analysis of much of anything else in postcolonial Africa.

The placement of Gagiano’s next essay, “Marecheran Postmodernism: Mocking the Bad Joke of ‘African Modernity,’” is also judicious. Gagiano distinguishes *modernity* as the socio-political and global impact of late capitalism, with its essentializing racism and Eurocentrism, from its literary and philosophical critique, *modernism*, which, in turn, gives way to *postmodernism*. Having developed this argument, Gagiano then considers Marechera, the Zimbabwean writer, in the light of what Otolith, one of Marechera’s characters in *The Black Insider* says, that “[t]o live in the twentieth century . . . [means] to be ‘born black in a white environment’” (qtd. in Gagiano 39). Indeed, Marechera’s work appears to resist the anticipated categories; and the

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<sup>5</sup> The use of “San” (pejorative in Khoikoi) is also fraught with debate and, as Gagiano points out, this has caused some to revert to the old van der Post era “Bushmen” (3).

straight jacket in this case, as the essay amply describes, is what a “Eurocentric, closed [literary] circle” (41) might like to impose upon *Africans* writing Africa. There is not space here to enter into a full debate about humanism<sup>6</sup> and its penchant for projecting itself as a measure of “universal” values; ethnocentric projection most often reflects the ways in which European colonizers imposed their categories and strictures upon non-Europeans. How are those imposed upon able to throw off the projectionist yoke? Can someone like Marechera write out of the “ethnic box” and beyond what an undisclosed readership, presumably Anglophone in this case, and quite likely not African, expects of a Zimbabwean writer?

In brief, alongside the problematics of language usage and the shifting foundations of traditional culture, emerges the issue of the uneasy “place” in which the African writer may find him- or herself. Not that language goes away: it is a shadow government here, or, as Said has observed, quoting Richard Poirer,

[L]anguage is also the place wherein we can most effectively register our dissent from our fate by means of our troping, punning, parodistic echoings, and by letting vernacular energies play against revered terminologies . . . Language is the only way to get around the obstruction of language. (29)

Gagiano makes it clear that she is largely focusing on texts rendered (or perhaps “renderable”) in English. Among those considered is Soyinka’s second novel, *Season of Anomy*, one, she writes “ . . . of the few African anglophone novels brought irresistibly to mind when so disparate and wide-ranging a list of topics as bodies, identities, subcultures and repression is mentioned” (45). By now, Soyinka is one of the Elders of African writing, and as such, he is subject to renewed criticism—Soyinka is a “neoromanticist,” according to critic Geoffrey Hunt (qtd. in Gagiano 45) and one who, as many others have remonstrated, offers readers the myth of regeneration through ancient ritual (46). As African letters leave Camara Laye and others of his generation behind—and as Soyinka has come into his own “elderhood”—it seems possible that the allegation of neoromanticism has sprung from a set of old expectations about what an African writer should write about. If this is so, who sets the standards? Further, have African writers themselves been successful in (re-)setting their standards and have they been able to change perceptions of what is the proper subject of African writing? The answers to these questions may not be readily available, but it appears that scholars need to engage in a discussion of them. But to return to *Anomy*: Gagiano sets out to defend Soyinka’s authorial choices, at least in the above-named novel and its depiction of a not-so-nice main protagonist, Ofeyi, by demonstrating that Soyinka is demythologizing certain radical figures:

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<sup>6</sup> An issue raised in Said’s last collection of essays before his death, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*.

. . . the novel takes on the most cherished of the myths of political radicalism: (a) that opposition to repression . . . will eventually succeed; (b) that heroic individuals (say in the Ché Guevara mould) can make a significant difference on the political scene—refuting both, though with a profound, even tragic awareness of the sadness of this recognition. (47-48)

Countering allegations of naïve appropriation of myth, she remarks, though in a rather universalizing, even tautological tone: “It seems inappropriate, however, for literary critics to delegitimize any author’s (re)tellings of old human stories when many of these are the myths we live by.” As Achebe has written: “*Stories create people create stories*” (55-56).

When one speaks of “evil,” obviously one does venture into the realm of morality and so enters a contested ground: accusations of essentializing, ethnocentrism, and universalizing will appear. In his own interrogation of the ghost of “universalist claims,” and issues of morality, South African political theorist Jonathan Allen remarks

Because of the risks of ethnocentric projection, I confine universalist claims to a minimum—a negative or remedial minimum. In my view, universalist commitments perform two—and only two—functions. First, they are facilitatory—that is, they help to make sense of the idea that dialogue and persuasion are generally to be preferred to knocking people over the head. Second, they perform a minimal criterial function in guiding our moral judgments—but this activity is confined to *identifying those experiences that are intolerable for all human beings*, [emphasis mine] rather than bringing us to agree on a set of goods or a comprehensive moral code. (4)

The evils of genocide, the nebulousness of myth, the difficulty of overcoming evil—all these are topics which Gagiano mulls over as she scrutinizes one written work after another’s efforts to address them. Apartheid South Africa, where “[t]he cheap, glaring, paltry trash of a people who are living it up for themselves alone dominates everything, infiltrates everywhere” (Bessie Head’s *A Woman Alone: Autobiographical Novels* qtd. in Gagiano 60), sounds discomfitingly like late capitalism in the United States and other so-called modern states; modernity’s evils, however, are not always akin to *Anomy*’s genocide. Certainly in Gagiano’s “Finding Foundations for Change in Bessie Head’s *The Cardinals*” and in “Two Late-Apartheid Novels,” the evil so described in the Head quote above seems much of the same ilk as that of Hannah Arendt’s famed phrase, the “banality of evil”—the evils of everyday life. Sandwiched between these articles, however, is the intolerable and unmitigated horror of the sex trade in children and in (again often children’s) body parts, in “Blood Gets a Voice: Unity Dow’s *The Screaming of the Innocent*.” As one set of banal but evil situations acts as bookend to another intervening horror, we see the long hangover from the colonial era with respect to the postcolonial body and the postcolonial subject. It is not an attractive picture.

On the other hand, Gagiano's "Mongane Serote's *To Every Birth Its Blood: Painting the True Colours of Apartheid*" looks at this same hangover from a different angle, "as the system [apartheid and its particular brand of evil] slowly withers away" (111). The problem here is engaging the project of cultural decolonization and, in particular, countering the epistemology of colonialism: she says, for example, that "[l]iterature is a mode of knowing and undoubtedly those who best know the oppression or apartheid are those within the bruised heart of the country. . ." (113). While conscious white writers like Gordimer and Breytenbach, in a *geste* of what Gagiano calls "authorial tact," have not presumed to speak "on behalf of black South Africans," the "centrality of such voices from within as Bessie Head's, Eskia Mphahlele's, Mazisi Kunene's, Miriam Tlali's, Sipho Sepamla's and Mogane Serote's still needs to be critically *reclaimed* [emphasis mine]" (113). Here then, Gagiano suggests, is the tightrope the African writer must walk: he or she must make what Head has called "a gesture of belonging" (qtd. in Gagiano 114) yet avoid the pitfalls of banality in the Arendtian sense. Then how does a postcolonial African writer talk about evil? Not in the sense of using one particular tongue or the other: indeed, in considering the inadequacy of words when confronted with terror, with evil face to face, this reviewer is reminded of Bajan poet Kamau Brathwaite's "Days and Nights," where he describes the brutal beating of a child slave, Ann, in Barbados, as a puppy sits in her lap:

a fat pappy squeal out when de flicker flack out  
 an it whimper and weal in ann lap  
 nan  
 nan  
 nan  
 anan  
 nvr a nam

gnashlish (30)

What words does one use when the only sane utterance is a howl?

In closing, it is worthy to note Gagiano's discussion "Memory, Power and Bessie Head: *A Question of Power*," a particularly harrowing and illuminating work of words when it comes to, as Head puts it,

The African experience of slavery, colonialism and exploitation [that] arouses feelings of intense anguish and [Head is speaking of herself here] a fear in me that monsters would merely change roles, that black faces would simply replace white faces of cruelty, hate and greed and that the people would bleed forever.

. . . in an internal and private way, I perceived the ease with which one could become evil and I associated evil in my mind with the acquisition of power. (*Woman* 77 qtd. in Gagiano 174)



The following, I believe, is the true focus of Gagiano's concerns regarding evil: How to avoid the situation where "the people would bleed forever"? Head, having encountered a less than warm welcome in her adopted Botswana, attempted to look at evil, as it inhabits the psyche, head on: "Too often the feelings of a victim are not taken into account . . ." (*Power* qtd. in Gagiano 180) and a desire for vengeance is aroused in that person: "So desperate is the victim of humiliation to escape its agonies that she allows the furies of a vengeance-lust to boil up in her soul, *hence re-enacting her torturer's roles*" (180). Such experiences become root memories that resurface at agonizing moments.

Gagiano underscores the emphasized blackness of the narrator's tormentors in *Power*; and the fact that, as Elizabeth, the protagonist, discovers, there is "no escaping from the forces of humiliation" (181). Gagiano continues:

I suggest that the novel rewrites the *social* prevalence of racism that Head wrote about in her letters as a *psychic* persistence. The re-setting occurs because there is no society entirely free of hierarchies, and because the memory of degradation embeds itself in the recesses of the psyche, from which it inevitably resurfaces. (181-82)

This is not to say that the problem of evil of this kind is to be taken as only a *personal* problem that stands apart from the political and social realities of the day; rather its analysis in this painful work exposes how deeply imbedded the experience of humiliation and torment coming from an abuse of power is, individual and collective. Further, as Gagiano points out, Head both "acknowledges evil personally *and* denies it a racist tag" (184). Head does not let perpetrators of evil off the hook: there is "no glib, enduring or certain reassurance of recovery from the damaging effects of harmful power; its truth is not reconciliatory, but demanding and warning" (185). To endure the journey through this torment is an "arduous transcendence" (188). There are no anodynes; and what Gagiano raises in her essays—how to recover from the wounds of apartheid—is universalistic in Allen's very precise sense: *all* South Africans must come to understand apartheid's injustices and, as Victor Honey of the Stellenbosch Negotiating Forum puts it: "listen to each others' stories" (qtd. in Gagiano 130). Colonization has, to paraphrase Gagiano's quote of the Guyanese Walter Rodney, removed many a South African from history, from the Eurocentrically driven story (130); now the current and ongoing project is not only the work of decolonizing culture of the collective mind, but also that of reclaiming the power to tell "the story" as Africa would.

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