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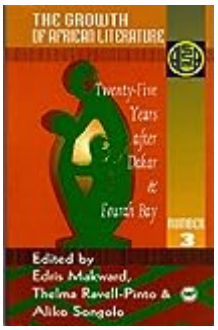

Edris Makward, Thelma Ravell-Pinto, Aliko Songolo. *The Growth of African Literature: Twenty-Five Years after Dakar and Fourah Bay.* Trenton, N.J and Asmara, Eritrea: Africa World Press, 1998. 314 pp. $19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-86543-659-6.

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While it is unfortunate that it took so long (almost ten years) to publish the best papers from the African Literature Association's 1989 meeting, it is good finally to have them available, particularly given the historic nature of the event. *The Growth of African Literature* contains 27 essays and four poems from when the North American-based association met in Africa for the first time–in late March, 1989 in Dakar, Senegal.

The collection's subtitle refers to two pioneering conferences on African literature, held in 1963 in Dakar and Fourah Bay, Sierra Leone, at a time when the field of African literary studies was very much in its beginnings. The editors offer this collection in the spirit–a celebratory one–of assessing the impressive development of African literary studies as a field during the quarter-century since those meetings. The 1989 meeting also marked the fifteenth anniversary of the African Literature Association, and the fact that the association has continued to grow and thrive in the years since is only another indication of the ongoing growth of the field. *The Growth of African Literature* is thus something of a festschrift honoring the evolution of an academic discipline.

Not surprisingly, this collection evidences the strengths and weaknesses typical of any conference proceedings. On the one hand it is rather inchoate, reflecting the diverse interests of the author/participants and never really pulling together a complete or coherent picture of the growth African literature, or of anything else for that matter. There is certainly no thorough appraisal or evaluation of that process. On the other hand, there are some very good pieces here, including some solid analyses of individual works or authors. Above all, the collection does what the editors hoped it would do–namely to demonstrate how, "twenty-five years after," the state of African literary studies has progressed quite dramatically.

The volume is expertly edited and highly selective, featuring only one-tenth of the total papers presented at the conference, most in clearly revised form. Africa World Press's production is typically attractive and professional.

The essays are helpfully arranged under four headings, even if the categorization is a bit strained at times. The first, "Approaches and Literary Theory," is something of a misnomer. Readers anticipating a fleshed-out presentation or even a debate on the role and nature of theory in African literary studies (a topic where philosophers seem to be doing the most relevant work these days) will be disappointed. The closest we get is Georg Gugelberger's overview of Marxism and African Literature, which is essentially a defense of his earlier book on the subject. Louis Tremaine makes a pitch for the use-

fulness of new historicism in presenting African texts to non-African readers. Chika Nwankwo offers the sound but less than astonishing argument that contemporary African poetics is rooted in traditional African poetics. Alena Bertoncini documents the use of proverbs in contemporary Swahili literature, and Phanuel Egejuru discusses orality in Obinkaram Echewa's novel, *The Land's Lord.*

The second section, "Language and History," holds together a bit better, offering a reflective retrospective of key developments in francophone African literature. The essays cover authors ranging from V.Y. Mudimbe to Mariama Ba. Most notable for my tastes is Aliko Songolo's evaluation of the legacy of negritude. Guy Midiohouan's essay on Lamine Senghor (no relation to Leopold) does what more of us perhaps ought to be doing: recovering many of the overlooked early creators of works "of a literary character." In another significant essay, the redoubtable Albert Gerard–ever keen to remind us of our frequently limited view of African literary–highlights some of the historical complexities of Maghrebian literature.

Section three, "Thematic Analysis and Broader Considerations," represents something of a catchall for a variety of individual author studies. The considerations are in fact less broad than the section title suggests: Of the eight essays, only one treats a non-West African author (Daniel Gover on Bessie Head–although Thelma Ravell-Pinto also compares Buchi Emecheta to Toni Morrison), and while two of the essays are on drama, none discuss poetry. Indeed, this West African emphasis is true of the entire volume. This is not particularly a criticism, since the editors were not necessarily attempting a representative cross-section of topics, and since the West African location of the conference surely affected the paper topics, but it does suggest that "twenty-five years after Dakar and Fourah Bay," African literary study has seen some uneven development.

The final section, "Africa and the Diaspora in Literature," moves to connections beyond the continent, with essays on folktales (Joyce Hope-Scott finds links between Birago Diop's collections and Br'er Rabbit stories), religious influences (Robert Lima on African gods in Cuban literature), children's literature (by Deborah Allen) and African poetics in the Caribbean (Mark Andrews on Brathwaite). The best selection is the last, where Nana Tagoe-Wilson presents a nuanced evaluation of Caribbean writers' deployment of African symbols and the implications of this deployment. This apt conclusion to the collection highlights how the remarkable growth in African literary criticism has moved well beyond national and regional boundaries. As if in confirmation, of this, four years after this 1989 event the ALA would hold its annual meeting in Guadeloupe, in addition to two more meetings on the African continent since then.

In short, this well-edited collection offers good evidence of the growth of African literature as a discipline. At the start of a new millenium, it would be a good time for some more of our elders to offer a sober evaluation and appraisal of that growth, something that is beyond the scope or intent of this particular collection.

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