



**AFRICAN WOMEN
WRITING RESISTANCE**

Contemporary Voices

Edited by Jennifer Browdy de Hernandez, Pauline Dongala,
Omotayo Jolaosho, and Anne Serafin

African Women Writing Resistance

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*An Anthology
of Contemporary Voices*



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*To the generations of strong African women
whose lives and writings inspire and animate this book*

A woman writer must have an imagination that is plain stubborn, that can invent new gods and banish ineffectual ones.

Yvonne Vera,
from *Opening Spaces*
(1999)

Listening to the hopes and dreams of our people, I recall the words of a Mozambican poet who said, "Our dream has the size of freedom." My people, like your people, believe deeply in freedom—and, in their dreams, they reach for the heavens.

Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, president of Liberia,
from an address to a joint session of Congress,
Washington, D.C.,
March 13, 2006



Contents

<i>Preface: Roots of the Collection</i>	xiii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xv
<i>Foreword: A Song in Seven Stanzas for Our Granddaughters</i> Abena P. A. Busia (Ghana)	xix
African Women Writing Resistance: An Introduction Jennifer Browdy de Hernandez with Pauline Dongala, Omotayo Jolaosho, and Anne Serafin	3
Part One. Engaging with Tradition	13
The Day When God Changed His Mind Eve Zvichanzi Nyemba (Zimbabwe)	15
The Old Woman J. Tsitsi Mutiti (Zimbabwe)	22
	vii

Interview with Kaya a Mbaya (Congo), a Babongo Woman Pierre Piya-Bouanga (Congo-Brazzaville)	27
Interview with Elisabeth Bouanga (Congo-Brazzaville): Remembrance of Things Past Pauline Dongala (Congo-Brazzaville)	33
Part Two. Speaking Out: Young Women on Sexuality	39
Woman Weep No More Sibongile Mtungwa (South Africa)	43
Letters to My Cousin Catherine Makoni (Zimbabwe)	50
Story of Faith Mamle Kabu (Ghana)	59
Lovesung for a Father, with Poet's Note Zindzi Bedu (Nigeria)	75
It's Not Rape If . . . Ann Kithaka (Kenya)	84
To Be or Not to Be a Lesbian: The Dilemma of Cameroon's Women Soccer Players Sybilie Ngo Nyeck (Cameroon)	85
My Name Is Kasha Kasha N. Jacqueline (Uganda)	90
Cosmo Africa and Other Poems Cheshe Dow (Botswana)	93
Part Three. Challenging the Institution of Marriage	97
Child Ann Kithaka (Kenya)	101

Contents	ix
Hailstones on Zamfara Sefi Atta (Nigeria)	104
The Good Woman Patricia Chogugudza (Zimbabwe)	118
Ngomwa Ellen Mulenga Banda-Aaku (Zambia)	131
They Came in the Morning Iheoma Obibi (Nigeria)	140
The Battle of the Words: Oratory as Women's Tool of Resistance to the Challenges of Polygamy in Contemporary Wolof Society Marame Gueye (Senegal)	149
Part Four. Focusing on Survival: Women's Health Issues	167
Tell Me Why: Two Poems Ann Kithaka (Kenya)	171
Surviving Me Janine Lewis (South Africa)	174
The Struggle to End the Practice of Female Genital Mutilation Nawal El Saadawi (Egypt)	192
Slow Poison Makuchi (Juliana Nfah-Abbenyi) (Cameroon)	198
Just Keep Talking: Two Poems Cheshe Dow (Botswana)	210
Tell Me a Lie Ann Kithaka (Kenya)	212
Prayers and Meditation Heal Despair Pauline Dongala (Congo-Brazzaville)	214

Part Five. Taking a Stand: Women as Activists against War, Environmental Degradation, and Social Conflict	219
A Poem Written in the Ink of the Blood Shed in Rwanda, with Poet's Note Nathalie Etoké (Cameroon)	223
Excerpt from <i>Biography of Ash</i> Khadija Marouazi (Morocco)	228
Women's Responses to State Violence in the Niger Delta Sokari Ekine (Nigeria)	235
Excerpt from <i>Child Soldier: Fighting for My Life</i> China Keitetsi (Uganda)	248
Don't Get Mad, Get Elected! A Conversation with Activist Wangari Maathai (Kenya) Danielle Nierenberg and Mia MacDonald	259
Part Six. Writing from a Different Place: Perspectives on Exile and Diaspora	265
Musings of an African Woman: Excerpts from a Memoir in Progress Kuukua Dzignbordi Yomekpe (Ghana)	267
A Moroccan Woman in the Glocal Village: Reflections on Islam, Identity, and Cultural Legacies Touria Khannous (Morocco)	273
Knowing Your Place Diana Adesola Mafe (Nigeria)	281
Letter to Clara Susan Akono (Cameroon)	285

Part Seven. Standing at the Edge of Time: African Women's Visions of the Past, Present, and Future	293
“We Are Our Grandmothers’ Dreams”: African Women Envision the Future	295
Pauline Dongala (Congo-Brazzaville), Maramé Gueye (Senegal), Omotayo Jolaosho (Nigeria), Nimu Njoya (Kenya), and Abena P. A. Busia (Ghana)	
Liberation	313
Abena P. A. Busia (Ghana)	
<i>Suggestions for Further Reading</i>	315
<i>Contributors</i>	327



Preface

Roots of the Collection

The four sister editors of this anthology came together in September 2005 with the goal of bringing the voices of emerging African women writers to a wider audience. With its specific focus on writing as a tool of resistance to the multiple challenges faced by African women today, *African Women Writing Resistance* is the product of the collective vision of the editors and the thirty-one women from thirteen countries and many linguistic backgrounds who contributed to this groundbreaking pan-African volume.

African Women Writing Resistance answers the clarion call of an earlier collection published by Jennifer Browdy de Hernandez, *Women Writing Resistance: Essays on Latin America and the Caribbean* (South End Press, 2004), which collected essays and poetry from that region's well-known and emerging women writers. Editing this first collection launched Jennifer on a global quest to follow the trail of women's resistance across cultural and geographic boundaries, always looking for clues as to how she, as a white American feminist teacher and activist, could become the most effective ally for women in very different circumstances from her own.

In 2005 Jennifer was thinking about putting together a class and an anthology on contemporary African women's writing. As events have a way of crystalizing when the time is right, she was also at this time getting to know Pauline Dongala, an exile from Congo-Brazzaville who became one of her students at Bard College at Simon's Rock; another Simon's Rock student, Nigerian Omotayo Jolaosho, who was then finishing her B.A.; and Anne Serafin, an African literature specialist whom she met at a Modern Language Association panel on female genital mutilation (FGM) in literature in 2004. Pauline, Omotayo, and Anne became enthusiastic partners in the *Women Writing Resistance in Africa* project, sharing with Jennifer a common vision of a book that would bring together many strong contemporary African women's voices, women writing about their lives, their challenges, their hopes, and their dreams.

The newly formed editorial group sent out a call for papers for the anthology in the fall of 2005, soliciting personal narratives, testimony, interviews, short stories, poetry, short plays, folktales, and lyrics by African women that concerned resistance to particular challenges or oppressions faced by women in Africa today. We suggested topics such as the effect on women of HIV/AIDS; female genital cutting; Sharia law; women's poverty and lack of access to education, health care, credit, and political power; armed conflict and rape as a weapon of war; displacement and exile; women's oppressions within heterosexual relationships; resistant sexualities; and intergenerational conflict and the tension between tradition and modernity. Submissions had to be written by women born in Africa, no matter their current location of residence.

Almost immediately a flood of writing began to arrive in our e-mail inboxes, dealing with all the above-listed topics and more. It was obvious that the call for papers had tapped into a powerful, pent-up stream of African women writing resistance that was only waiting for the right channel to reach a world audience. With hundreds of pages worth of submissions in hand, the work of selection began, to which each of us brought her unique perspective. The book you hold in your hand is the collaborative result of many hands, hearts, and minds and of many hours of thought and labor. We send it out into the world in the hope that it will be the inspiration for ever-expanding rings of "women writing resistance" in Africa and worldwide.



Acknowledgments

Jennifer Browdy de Hernandez would like to thank all the women across the world, far too numerous to list individually, whose courageous and ongoing struggle for better lives for themselves and their families provides such an inspiring model of positive resistance. Closer to home, I would like to thank my parents, Joe and Sue Browdy, whose steady support and guidance continue to give me strength; my sons, Nico and Eric Hernandez, who have been patient with the hectic lifestyle of a mother who is also a professor and writer; and Sam Ruhmkorff, dean of academics, and my colleagues at Bard College at Simon's Rock, for their support of my ongoing work in comparative literature and gender studies. I would especially like to thank my friends and activist partners Vera Kalm, Judy Nardacci, Sharon Meyer, and Zoe Dalheim, in honor of our many hours of collaboration on nearly a decade of annual conferences celebrating International Women's Day; and my sister editors, who have made the demanding process of editing a big collection like this a joyful and stimulating labor of love.

Pauline Dongala would like to honor all the courageous women in the world who have experienced war, especially women who are still living in war zones. My work is dedicated to these strong women who have inexplicably lost their lives on the battlefield and to those who have lost their parents, children, husbands, brothers, and sisters. My thanks go to my mother, Elisabeth Bouanga-Milondo, who has always been my mentor, motivating me with her constant love. I am deeply appreciative of her for sharing her ideas in her contribution to this volume, which spans from colonial to postcolonial Africa. I would also like to thank Mr. Pierre Piya for interviewing Kaya a Mbaya in a remote forest village in the Congo. I know it was not an easy task. My thanks go to my sisters and brothers for our mutual support in times of despair and for sharing our joys. I am grateful to my deceased grandmother, Suzanne Nzobo, whose gifts of healing, prayers, and rituals brought great help to those around her. She still continues to positively affect the people she worked with and helps me to embrace life fully. My thanks go also to Emmanuel Dongala, my dear husband, who gives me strength and his loving support in many ways. I would also like to thank my friend Vera Kalm, who has helped to launch a sewing studio for single mothers and widows in Kinkala, Congo Republic, so that they can rebuild their lives. Thanks also to Sam Ruhmkorff and John McClaren for allowing me to pursue my bachelor's degree at Bard College at Simon's Rock and to Professor Jennifer Browdy de Hernandez, who has taken my hand to walk the path of my education and made me more aware of women's issues. Finally, I thank my coeditors for the joy of working together and bringing this project to fruition.

Omotayo Jolaosho would like to thank the generations of women whose lives engendered and continue to nurture mine: my mother, whose determination and perseverance constantly motivates me; my grandmother, Victoria Adebanke Bedu, who was the first to initiate me into an African childhood and womanhood and who remains my preeminent teacher; and my late great-grandmother, Marian Olapemo Odetola, whose spirit guides my path. The experiences of these elders and ancestors animate my life's work. Then there are those women who extend my family, my sister editors among them. I am especially grateful to Dorothy Hodgson, my graduate advisor at Rutgers University, who has been an invaluable resource in bringing forth this collection. Also at Rutgers University, Ousseina Alidou, Abena Busia, Fran Mascia-Lees, and Renee DeLancey provided a forum for us to discuss the collection in progress at the Center for African Studies. Finally, I would like to thank Ruth Hearn, Vernice Miller, Mary King Austin, James Sterling King, Okey Ndibe, Carlton Rounds, Suncadm Bey, and the many other individuals whose love, support, and commitment form the foundation upon which I stand as a scholar, artist, and human being.

Anne Serafin would like to thank everyone who has supported her study of African literatures. Several individuals and programs have been especially

important. The National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) provided the initial impetus for my interest with a Teacher-Scholar Award in 1991 to read and research African literatures in general during a sabbatical year. Then an NEH Summer Seminar in 1995 focused on African literature, politics, and film, guided by Leonard Markovitz of Queens College of the City University of New York. Barbara Brown invited me to lead and participate in numerous workshops as well as attend lectures and programs at Boston University's African Studies Center. Barbara and BU have been invaluable resources for my work in this field. In 1996 Beth Purcell of the Newton Free Library asked me to begin a monthly discussion group in African literatures. I am extremely grateful to Beth and to the ardent members of the group who have eagerly explored this topic with me for thirteen seasons. In the late 1990s, the Ghanaian writer Ama Ata Aidoo befriended me when I attended her class in African literature at Brandeis University. She served as a powerful inspiration as we sipped Zimbabwean tea in her little office, where I learned firsthand about some of the thoughts, emotions, and experiences that influence her writing. In 2006 Jennifer Browdy de Hernandez invited me to coedit, together with Pauline Dongala and Omotayo Joloasho, an anthology of African women writing resistance. This project allowed me the pleasure of reading the wealth of submissions following our call for papers and of working with Jenny, Pauline, and Tayo to shape our book. Lastly, I must thank James O'Hare for his unflagging interest, his astute observations, and his generous support and encouragement as each stage of our book has unfolded. Throughout our project, my esteem has continued to grow for the power, persistence, and talent that women around the world, particularly on the African continent and in its diaspora, possess.

Collectively, we extend our deep appreciation to Professor Abena P. A. Busia of Rutgers University for hosting the roundtable "African Women Envision the Future" at the Center for African Studies in April 2007 and for contributing in so many other ways to the strength of this collection. We would also like to thank the editors of the Women in Africa and the Diaspora series, professors Stanlie James and Aili Mari Tripp, as well as Gwen Walker, our editor at the University of Wisconsin Press, for their belief in and support of our project. We are particularly grateful to all of our contributors, whose hard work and clear-eyed vision this volume celebrates and honors.

Earlier versions of the following pieces have been previously published and are reprinted here with permission: Sybille Ngo Nyeck, "To Be or Not to Be a Lesbian: The Dilemma of Cameroon's Women Soccer Players," *Witness Magazine*, October 2003; Sefi Atta, "Hailstones on Zamfara," *News from Home* (Northampton, MA: Interlink Books, 2010), copyright 2010 by Sefi Atta; Nawal El Saadawi, "The Struggle to End the Practice of Female Genital Mutilation,"

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Foreword

A Song in Seven Stanzas for Our Granddaughters

Abena P. A. Busia

1.

Tradition and the remembrance of things past,
Are a re-discovered country
Of things we struggle against;
Where as pygmy women we stand tall among the Bantu
And name ourselves Babongo.
We stand here, compassionate witnesses,
To witches who are just mothers, to mothers who are just loyal,
To those who wrestle snakes to feed their children,
And to grandmothers who keep faith enough with girls,
To make god change his mind.