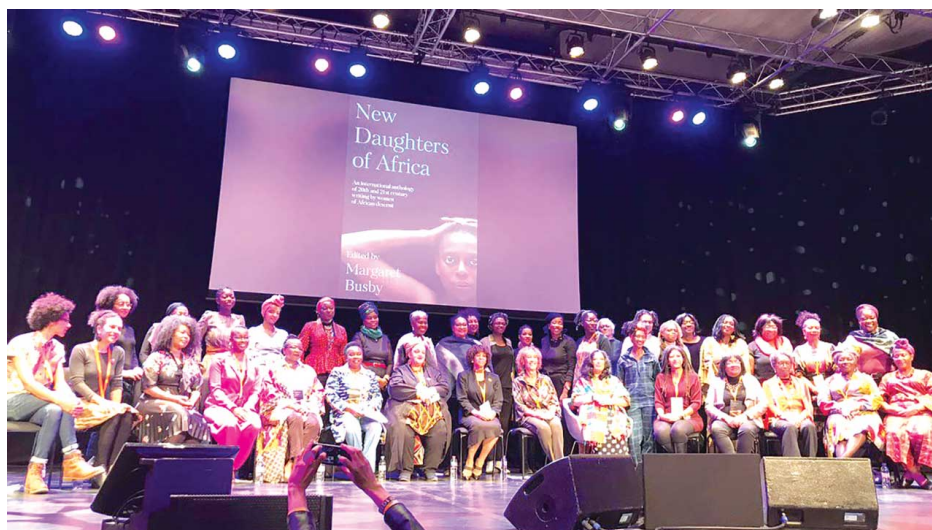


Literature

After seminal anthology, Busby celebrates New Daughters of Africa

By Olatoun Gabi-Williams
21 April 2019 | 4:19 am



New Daughters of Africa at the WOW Festival, International Women's Day 2019

Reports online are increasing about projects in the creative industries aimed not only at countering fear of the 'other' and resentment about the growing number of 'others' in our midst but at highlighting ways 'others' enrich and strengthen us. As nationalism and nativism rise across the globe, my cyber world is under siege. I am not complaining. Powerful images posted online from art biennials have stayed with me: Venice, Berlin, Dak'Art (Dakar, Senegal) and Art X in Lagos, Nigeria. Memorable, startling art, love-infused, aiming to transform the way I, we, see all kinds of difference: gender, race, culture and ability. Rarely can art claim immediate transformative power; what it can do is capture the imagination and plant seeds for a conversation and perhaps – ultimately – a conversion.

In this essay, I turn my thoughts away from arresting visual art to focus on a landmark union: Margaret Busby OBE with Candida Lacey of Myriad Editions (UK) and 200+ women from Africa and its diasporas. It is a great literary assembly put together for the purpose of reconstructing perceptions about Africa and her women, celebrating African women in literature and showcasing the dazzling range of their work. Importantly, the women have assembled for the purpose of making a difference in black women's lives through the inauguration of the Margaret Busby New Daughters of Africa (NDOA) Award. Myriad Editions' media statement explains that the £20,000 award has been made possible by the support of School of Oriental and African Studies and the generosity of the writers who each waived their usual fees.

The award will support a black woman who has been offered a place on the Master of Arts (MA) programme at the SOAS in African Studies, Comparative Literature or Translation (in African languages). The candidate must be African and must have a particular interest in studying African literature.

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My first meeting with Margaret Busby (Nana Akua Ackon) seems a long time ago now. A reading event held at Terra Kulture, the Nigerian Cultural Centre to promote the Etisalat Prize for Literature, then in its second edition, but recently dormant (though an immensely popular and useful prize). Busby was an active patron.

Born in Ghana to parents with Caribbean links, she achieved renown in 1967, when with Clive Allison, she co-founded Allison & Busby whose author list featured such notables as, Nuruddin Farah (Somalia), Ishmael Reed (USA), Carlos Moore (Cuba) and Buchi Emecheta (Nigeria). She was the youngest and first black female publisher in the United Kingdom. She left Allison & Busby in 1987 and became a broadcaster (radio and TV); as a playwright (radio and stage) and as the woman who gave us Daughters of Africa (DOA, 1992), the magnum opus and seminal anthology that provided a platform for Words and Writings by Women of African Descent from the Ancient Egyptian to the Present.

We owe Margaret Busby an immense debt of gratitude for this 1992 work. Its chronological arrangement — by date of birth — enables us, to quote her, “to try to chart the development of a literary canon over the years, to restore links and show the continuity of expression that against all odds still exists in much of the material.”

At an earlier point in the Introduction, she emphasises that however vast, the collection is not a “definitive work, implying that everything excluded merits lesser consideration. I prefer to see it as a contribution to the cause of reclaiming for women of African descent a place in literary history. If its effect is to spur others on to what we have achieved its purpose.”

This year, on March 8, 2019 International Woman’s Day, her much-anticipated new Daughters of Africa: An International Anthology of Writing by Women of African Descent was released by Myriad Editions (UK). On 7 March, the eve of Women’s Day, Myriad and editor, Margaret Busby, threw a party attended by a good many of the 200 contributors from Africa and her Diasporas, 36 of whom are mentioned in this tiny Nigeria dominated sample. It also features their pre-NDoA credentials for entry into the pantheon of writers. They are arranged in the volume (not in this sample) according to decade of birth primarily, writes Busby, “to give context to the generational links” and to continue to chart the black feminist literary canon:

Andrea Levy (UK/Jamaica) (Small Island, The Long Song), Olumide Popoola (Nigeria) (When We Speak of Nothing), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (Nigeria) (Americanah, We Should All Be Feminists), Zadie Smith (UK/Jamaica), (White Teeth; On Beauty), Edwidge Danticat (Haiti) (Breath, Eyes, Memory), Yewande Omotoso (Nigeria/South Africa) (The Woman Next Door), Hilda Twongyeirwe (Uganda) Co-Editor, (Nothing to See Here; Beyond the Dance), Kit de Waal (British/Irish) (My Name is Leon), Goretti Kyomuhendo (Uganda) (The First Daughter), Donu Kobara (Nigeria) (All Africa Journalists), Bernardine Evaristo MBE (UK/Nigeria) (The Emperor’s Babe), Zukiswa Wanner (South Africa) (The Madams: A Wildly Provocative Title), Ellah Wakatama Allfrey (Zimbabwe/UK) editor, (Safe House), Adhiambo Owuor (Kenya) (Dust), Chika Unigwe (Nigeria/Belgium) (Night Dancer), Ayobami Adebayo (Nigeria) (Stay with Me) and Juliane Okot Bitek (Uganda) (100 Days).

Others are, Wanjiku Wa Ngugi (Kenya) (The Fall of Saints), Hawa Jande Golakai (Liberia) (The Lazarus Effect), Yaba Badoe (Ghana/UK) (Jigsaw of Fire & Stars), Taiye Selasi (Ghana/Nigeria/USA) (Ghana Must Go), Lola Shoneyin (Nigeria) (The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives), Nnedi Okorafor (Nigeria/USA) (Sunny and the Mysteries of Osisi; What Sunny Saw in the Flames). Sade Adeniran (Nigeria/UK) (Imagine This), Sarah Ladipo Manyika (Nigeria/UK) (Like A Mule Bringing Ice Cream to the Sun), Noo Saro-Wiwa (Nigeria/UK) (Looking For Transwonderland: Travels in Nigeria) Leila Aboulela (Sudan/Egypt/Scotland) (Elsewhere, Home), Chibundu Onuzo (Nigeria) (Welcome to Lagos), Sefi Atta (Nigeria) (News from Home) – Interlinks Books, Minna Salami (Nigeria/Finland) (Ms. Afropolitan blog; Sensuous Knowledge: A Radical Black

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ZENITHBANK ZENITH	
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Warsan Shire cannot be excluded from my sample. She is the Somali-British writer whose poems about the female body, failed romance, sexual imposition, sex workers, migrants, are shot through by a searing, palpable sense of loss, dislocation and disorientation. In her poem, Home, Shire speaks of the violence and anguish of the condition of refugees fleeing war in images that will leave you gasping.

Her career was launched in 2013 when she won the inaugural Brunel African Poetry Prize. Three years later, she catapulted to international fame with her collaboration with Beyoncé. Lemonade, the R & B singer's Grammy Award-winning album, features lyrics by Warsan Shire, who is one of 10 poets selected for Complete Works II, a national development programme promoting diversity and quality in British poetry.

Occupying positions of pride on my list are Spanish-language writers Agnes Agboton (Republic of Benin) and Trifonia Melibea Obono (Equatorial Guinea). Agboton is long established. Translated pre-NDoA by the gifted American Lawrence Schimel, three poems from her collection, Songs of the Village and Exile, originally written in her native Gun, sit in this anthology alongside Let the Nkúkú má Speak, a translated short story by Trifonia Melibea Obono. She is author of La Bastarda, which was published in 2018 by Feminist Press (USA) in its original Spanish. In the same year, South Africa's Modjaji Books published the novel in English.

Lawrence Schimel served as translator for both Obono's NDoA short story and her novel, which is the first book by a woman from Equatorial Guinea to be translated into English. About lesbian rebellion in Fang society, unsurprisingly La Bastarda has been banned in Obono's home country.

Banned books have power: in 2018 Trifonia Melibea Obono won the Global Literature in Libraries Initiatives (GLLI) Translated YA Book Prize.

A major achievement of Daughters of Africa is its power as an advocacy tool for indigenous-language orature. Busby's introduction contains a quote from June Jordan, an American contributor to the original volume: 'If we lose our language, we may irreversibly forsake elements of the spirit that sustain our survival.'

Using translations of indigenous-language poems to kick off the anthology, is Busby's means of demonstrating that the creative output of African women has 'roots that extend beyond written records'.

In New Daughters of Africa translated works underscore the case for dismantling, through the translations of texts, barriers erected by Africa's breathtakingly diverse ethnicities and those barriers created by colonial imposition of European languages. An impressive consensus has emerged across the continent and its Diasporas that we need to speak and listen far more to one another through our writings. Sharing stories across our borders, comparing our experiences in the world as African women — and men — will help us know one another.

In an article published in The Guardian UK on March 9, 2019, a day after the launch, Margaret Busby quotes translator Renée Edwige Dro, director of Danbé at L'Harmattan, Cote d'Ivoire, and contributor to the book. "It was as if the daughters of Africa featured in that (original) anthology were telling me, their daughter and grand-daughter, to bravely go forth and bridge the literary gap between francophone and Anglophone Africa."

Busby also quotes Phillipa Yaa de Villiers, South African Commonwealth Poet (2014), whose response to the original Daughters of Africa, is particularly moving:

"We were behind the bars of Apartheid — we South Africans had been cut off from the beauty and majesty of African thought traditions, and Daughters of Africa was among those works that replenished our starved minds, connecting us to the Black planet of memory and imagination, correcting the imbalance of information and awakening our own potential in ourselves...(the anthology) brings our separate spaces on the planet into each other's purview, our experiences accented by our geographical and historical conditions, a text that creates solidarity, appreciation and reminds us that we are never alone."

And these social and intergenerational considerations can yield economic good: badly needed revenue from books translated and traded not only to the Global North and

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In May 2017, Myriad Editions merged with New Internationalist, a long-established Oxford (UK) based co-operative and publisher of the anthology of The Caine Prize for African Writing. The merger is a testament to Myriad's subscription to the campaign for increased visibility for African writing in the world's biblio-diversity. In 2018, the Myriad First Drafts Competition focused on women of African descent. The two winners have contributed writings to New Daughters of Africa. Publishing Director Candida Lacey is an English woman. Her collaboration on the first DoA while working for Jonathan Cape and the publication of NDoA by Myriad Editions, which she leads, are a statement of her support for increasing diversity in the publishing industry, something Busby has championed, notably as founding member in the 1980s of Greater Access to Publishing (GAP), which sought to increase black representation in British publishing. And today, she is still advocating the cause.

In the Acknowledgments section of NDoA, Busby tells us that she met Candida Lacey in 1989. She was working at that time at the feminist publishers, Pandora Press, which had just brought out An Anthology of British Women Writers. She and Lacey '...talked of the need to rectify the absence of black women from the literary canon...'

Jonathan Cape in 1992. Myriad Editions in 2019. Candida Lacey is not fighting for us; it is the feminist press that is standing with us. Why this matters is summed up in the 2017 Bloomsbury publication Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race, Reni Eddo-Lodge's fierce, moving polemic. The chapter entitled The Feminism Question is the challenge she has thrown to her readers. They include white people who dare to brave her text. The chapter demonstrates why the inclusion of black women is imperative in the fight to protect women's rights to participate in relevant spaces. Responding to the controversy generated by an all-white all-women TV show in 1990s Britain, this is the statement Reni Eddo-Lodge has made:

'When feminists can see the problem with all-male panels, but can't see the problem with all-white television programmes, it's worth questioning who is fighting for.'

Once again my cyber world is under siege and I am celebrating. (New Daughters of Africa and their networks of friends; photographs from the book) Links to traditional media publications around the release of NDoA have been pouring into my inbox and my newsfeeds:

Irish Times journalist Sally Hayden recognizes New Daughters of Africa as broaching the neglected 'feminist lineage' that is a fact of African history. She quotes Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie speaking about her great-grandmother, 'who she is sure was a feminist, whether or not she used that word for it.' Hayden quotes Minna Salami: 'When someone says that feminism isn't African, we are reminded that we do not have the historical proof to show how continuous our presence is on the continent.'

Nigerian anthropologist and author Ifi Amadiume contributed a piece to the first Daughters of Africa anthology, from her work *Afrikan Matriarchal Foundations*, aiming to demonstrate and provide such proof. But the excerpt is minimal. As reinforcement what she should have provided was a selection from *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society*, her exciting study published in 1987 by Zed Books (UK). The Foreword by Pat Caplan explains how on arrival in South-East Nigeria, colonial rulers and missionaries found existing gender-fluid systems 'baffling and sometimes abhorrent... As a result women in areas like Nnobi lost much of their former power, (for example) the ability of an older woman to marry "wives" whose labour she could command, was curtailed. Women were increasingly domesticated and rendered invisible, a situation exacerbated by the increasing importance of the cash economy, which was largely dominated by men.'

The first Daughters of Africa is dedicated to Margaret Busby's mother. New Daughters of Africa as a follow-up testifies to the importance she has placed not only on tracking a canon of black feminist writing but additionally, mapping the canon through intergenerational connections.

That Angela Davis should participate in the Women's Day 2019 events launching the New Daughters of Africa; that Gladys Casely-Hayford alongside her mother, Adelaide Casely-Hayford, should feature in the original Daughters of Africa; that Zadie Smith and her mother, Yvonne Bailey-Smith, should both feature as New Daughters of Africa; that Rebecca Walker should be a contributor to the follow-up of the first Daughters of Africa through which her mother, Alice Walker, speaks to her – these facts look like stardust

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inescapable reference point in the British-Caribbean nexus...Stories of mothers separated from offspring, and the resultant psychological effects...’

The entire DoA project is a towering achievement but the roll call of standout names in its first edition is spectacular in its reach. Creative writers, scholars, activists, abolitionists, monarchs: women who have helped, with varying degrees of renown, to shape human history: Hatshepsut (Ancient Egypt 1501 – 1447); Makeda, Queen of Sheba (Ethiopia); Harriet Tubman (USA); Sojourner Truth (USA); Bessie Head (South Africa/Botswana); Ama Ata Aidoo (Ghana); Maryse Condé (Guadeloupe); Buchi Emecheta (Nigeria); Mabel Segun (Nigeria); Nella Larsen (USA); Zora Neale Hurston (USA); Efua Sutherland (Ghana); Toni Morrison (USA); Flora Nwapa (Nigeria); Zulu Sofola (Nigeria); Jamaica Kincaid (Antigua); Ntozake Shange (USA); Mary Seacole (Jamaica/UK); Phyllis Wheatley (Senegal/USA); Audre Lorde (USA); Molar Ogundipe-Leslie (Nigeria); Tsitsi Dangarembga (Zimbabwe). In my sample from Busby’s pantheon, women sharing experience through the pages of the first anthology with Africa’s new daughters, I have already mentioned American civil rights icon Angela Davis and The Colour Purple author Alice Walker.



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Historically, women on the frontlines of religious, intellectual and political life have populated swathes of Africa. Women have led the family and the economy and have been fighters in armed conflict. Those who succumbed to the hype around Marvel Studio’s Black Panther in 2018 will remember actress Danai Gurira as a soldier of the Dora Milaje.

A redeeming feature of a facile composition, these Wakanda warriors, ‘the adored ones’, are modelled on the Dahomey Amazons, an all-female military regiment of the Kingdom of Dahomey (now Republic of Benin).

In the Fon language of Dahomey they were known as Mino, ‘Our Mothers’. Reputed for the courage and audacity they displayed in the First and Second Wars, the Amazons disbanded at the end of the 19th century when the Kingdom became a French protectorate. The sample I have provided is a window on a lineage: Mino of African and Diasporic history. When Africa’s new daughters inherit it is in their memory. As women, as writers at home and in the Diaspora, their inheritance: the transformational power of what they have written and their acts, fuel us as we journey.

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In her Guardian UK article of March 9, 2019, Busby points out that the anthology starts: “... With some important entries from the 18th and 19th centuries – a reminder that later generations stand tall because of those who have gone before. Nana Asma’u (1793–1863), a revered figure in northern Nigeria, spoke four languages and was an educated and independent Islamic woman whose life and work can be considered a precursor to modern feminism in Africa. Sarah Parker Remond (1815–1894), abolitionist, lecturer, suffragist, demonstrates many of the themes and serendipitous connections that characterise this anthology... Elizabeth Keckley (1818–1907), her life bridging the 19th and the 20th centuries, describes first-hand the trauma of enslavement in her autobiography, Behind the Scenes: Or, Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House, published in 1868 – exactly 100 years before the “mould-breaking year” that (writer) Delia Jarrett-Macauley refers to, when “on university campuses from Paris to New York, students were protesting against the old order, against bureaucratic elites, against capitalism, sexism and racism and all forms of authoritarianism.”

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Ifi Amadiume’s contribution in the original DoA from Afrikan Matriarchal Foundations contains an interesting sub-section entitled, Patriarchy Versus Matriarchy. Here she describes the activities of the Aho Cult of the Nnobi community of South East Nigeria

right it, challenging reductionist perceptions of 'others' and the racism bequeathed by Western imperialist thought. So, *New Daughters of Africa* is political: an orchestra of responses to Mino of our history who took the fight to slavery, colonialism, to all forms of oppression and exclusion. The writings are part of the consensus around 'non-colonising feminist solidarity across borders' advanced by Indian scholar Chandra Mohanty.

In Myriad and Busby's 200-strong literary army this solidarity has found a powerful African expression. As its arsenal, 800-plus pages of memoir, short stories, speeches, novel extracts, poetry and journalism. The totality advances an intergenerational, transnational feminist agenda.

At once a war-front, a home-front and a sanctuary for our souls, the page is where Africa's literary daughters wield our pens like swords to stake our claim to a true feminism whose power, urgency and truth can be found only at gender's intersections: colonialism, race, culture, class, sexuality, history and nation.

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