What They See is What We Get: African Images in Juvenile Literature (Book Review)

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African Images in Juvenile Literature: Commentaries on Neocolonialist Fiction (1996), McFarland & Company
By Yulisa Amadu Maddy and Rae McCann
154 Pages

In a thought provoking work that focuses upon neocolonialist fiction, Sierra Leonean author and playwright Yulisa Amadu Maddy and American-born author and professor (University of Iowa) Donna Rae McCann have developed an interesting lens through which to view the newly-popularized genre of Children’s/Young Adult Africana Literature. The collaboration of these authors has led to the creation of a work that at once explores imagery, context, and history in literary works deemed praiseworthy by Western reviewers, a work that exposes the unhealthy and entrenched commitment and tendency of the West to “trivialize racism” by upholding derogatory stereotypes about Africa and Africans in juvenile literature. The authors seek to oppose this “force that colonizes the mind, inhibits group freedom, rationalizes exploitation, and generally enfeebles a person’s sense of worth as a human being” (page 2). Through eight chapters that examine works whose subjects include coming of age, distortion, environmentalism, messaging (both subliminal and surface) and visioning, the authors manage to take the reader on a journey that concludes with a prescription for developing discourse and fostering change. African Images in Juvenile Literature (Commentaries on Neocolonialist Fiction) challenges the reader to look beyond elements of entertainment to the deeper cultural, historical, and political constructs that exist in this literary genre.

With regards to stories that focus on coming-of-age, this work explores Crocodile Burning (1992) by Michael Williams, and Wake Up Singing (1990) by Jane Rosenthal. Both of these novels are set in South Africa during the time of protest and resistance to the oppressive political system known as apartheid. While reviews of these works laud the authors for their “realistic portrayal” of a
traumatic time in the history of South Africa, they nevertheless mix pro- and anti-apartheid arguments, they depict black-on-black aggression, and they portray Africans as incapable of advancement or development without the help of the West. According to the authors, the formerly mentioned novel “represents the ever-increasing capitalist profiteering that has become Africa’s cancer” (84), because the main characters demonstrate behaviors that are shrewd as well as sadistic. The young people in the novel are depicted as brutal murderers who prey on their fellow Africans, while the adult “protagonist” come off as exploitative, intimidating and manipulative. In the latter novel, the association of “white” with “good” creates a dichotomy that compromises the assignment of responsibility for apartheid itself. Chinua Achebe states: “White racism against Africa is such a normal way of thinking that its manifestations go completely unremarked” (88). I agree with the authors when they highlight the impossibility of “dialogue when exploitative methods become instruments of education.” (88) These novels almost completely deny White complicity in the problems that Africans faced during this time.

Distortions abound in many Western works that depict Africans, and the genre of juvenile literature is not exempt from this phenomenon. This work explores distortions of Kenyan culture and history as well as distortions of the history of Africans written by authors from Great Britain and South Africa. The three books analyzed in this section are The Year of the Leopard Song (1992) by Eric Campbell, Into the Valley (1993) by Michael Williams, and AK (1992) by Peter Dickinson. Eric Campbell’s novel is replete with the idea of metamorphosis, and he attempts to render palatable for his Western audience a Kenyan creation myth that celebrates the leopard as the representative of creative spirit. Instead, he “reduces [it] to mindless magic…or [a] homicidal cult” (17). This novel supports old myths about Africa as ‘primitive’ and ‘savage’, as historian Lasine Kaba writes (25). The novel also contains subplots that deal with homelands and possession rights, the Mau Mau, and Black Racism. Ironically, it is the African man who is annihilated in this novel, the “beast” destroyed, and the colonialist settler mentality remains protected and intact. Other distortions include portrayals of Africa and Africans as “largely chaotic, disorganized, irresponsible and devoid of common sense and common humanity” (69). Into the Valley actually seems to discredit the personality of Steve Biko, the South African writer and political activist who died while in police custody, by using the same name for a character described as a “boy-guerilla leading boys” (70). The book is about a young white boy who takes it upon himself to act as a mediator between the warring factions of the African National Congress and the Inkatha Party. AK, though depicting a fictional African nation, nevertheless makes tribalism the enemy of Africans, and negates the reality of the liberation struggles
that led to ultimate independence from European colonization. The novel also supports the popular view that Africa is incapable of modernizing, denying historical evolution and dynamic social consciousness.

Environmentalism could very well be the new “civilizing mission” of the West. In two stories that utilize the children’s literature traditions of the family story and the adventure tale, “the conservation theme is coupled with the assumption that save-the-earth programs must be primarily the domain of Europeans” (45). Betty Dineen’s Lion Yellow (1975), and Eric Campbell’s The Place of Lions (1990) are about control. They support the imperialistic idea of Manifest Destiny and the myth that whites are ordained to rule the world. While both novels explore the protection of game reserves, they do so with the intention of depicting Africans as incapable of learning about or handling new machinery, as well as destroyers of natural wildlife habitats. Both novels can be seen to promote environmental imperialism and the politicization of geography. Jonathan Crush is quoted in this work as stating ‘…imperialism itself was an act of geographic violence through which [African] space was explored, reconstructed, re-named and controlled’ (51). The history of the decimation of wildlife is invariably connected to colonialism, for it was the hunting parties of colonial lords that actually created the overarching desire for game reserves and preservation parks all over the world. Since the senseless slaughtering of wildlife is no longer politically correct, Europeans have chosen to create these reserves and parks for tourism purposes. Westerners again denied complicity by blaming their colonized victims, when the reality was that natural grazing routines were constricted by the formulation of such parks. Isn’t “blaming the victim” a hallmark of neocolonialism? In Lion Yellow, greed becomes the impulse behind “Africa for the Africans”, for in the depiction of the Wageni people’s claim to land rights, they are shown to be simply greedy for grazing land. Simultaneously, “Africa for the Europeans” seems to represent pure altruism, and the Wageni claim is denied. Likewise, The Place of Lions portrays Africans as “subservient, ridiculous, cruel and lawless” (54). In these works, the ways in which young readers are exposed to socio-political ideas such as environmentalism are biased and ethnocentric, for they fail to address the prominent themes of over-consumption and pollution that threaten the environment in a contemporary context.

The anti-apartheid novels of Sheila Gordon and Margaret Sacks, Waiting for the Rain (1987) and Beyond Safe Boundaries (1989), contain surface and subliminal messages that send mixed signals about apartheid. On the one hand, the novels attempt to display evolution beyond neocolonialism through multi-cultural treatments and historical relevance, but ultimately, they fail to establish equality or foster multicultural understanding. Instead, they
staunchly uphold pre-established notions and stereotypes that can be seen in the use of words like “magic”, “secret” and “mysterious” to describe African religious artifacts and ceremonies; they assign names to the African characters that belie no identity or cultural linkage; they do not suggest any means by which Blacks can begin to reconstruct their families after enduring the horrors of apartheid. In fact, these novels sustain the status quo by suggesting that the Black revolutionary is a threat that must be subdued, for in Waiting for the Rain Gordon portrays the student protestors as “tsotsis”, young terrorists. She then goes on to characterize the adult Blacks as “bewildered, indecisive, and unable to cope with new situations and environments” (99), which suggests that apartheid was good. Equally, Margaret Sacks contradicts any idea of progress in her novel by validating the fears of white South Africans with regard to Black rule. It is clear that neither author trusts that Africans are capable of true progress, for “to the colonialist mind, Africans are frozen in time and not psychologically stable enough to endure social change” (100).

The novels critiqued in this work that focus upon visioning are centered in South Africa as well. Consistency is a challenge for both author and critic that must be addressed. Critics who profess ideals with regards to children’s/young adult literature must hold the objects of their praise to a level of conformity that illustrates lack of bias and multicultural tolerance. The problem of the 20th century (as defined by DuBois in 1903) is clearly delineated in the works of this section. MacCann states:

“How can ‘mythological elements’ act as agents of cohesion when they have been taken out of their context, their very origins obscured? In a racially divided society, it is necessary to go the very root causes of the racial divide. To capitalize on elements of the oppressed culture and still expect to get a healing result is to paper over the deep-seated scars and unhealed wounds inflicted by the colonizer. It is to evade the colonial dynamic.”

In Ann Harries’ The Sound of the Gora (1980), the spirit world of the African tradition is treated as “freakish mythology” (110). Writers of western descent who try to introduce indigenous traditions in their works often end up bastardizing them through incorrect interpretation. Harries takes an anti-apartheid stance and has a vision of a shared cultural identity between Blacks and Whites, but the novel’s focus on Black-on-Black aggression makes apartheid seem to be the protector of benevolent Whites from criminally-inclined Blacks. It also demeans Blacks to such a degree that government officials lifted the ban that was previously placed on the book because of its treatment of the student protests. Apparently, the book was deemed, in hindsight,
“safe” and “a healing force” for South African society (115). It completely denied the students’ agency in their rebellion against the system. The other novel, Janet Smith’s Streams to Rivers (1980) takes an anti-apartheid stance as well, but this vision is clouded by several examples in the novel that betray the author’s neo-colonialist mindset. One such example is her trivialization of the significance of African masks, which illuminates Western ignorance of the functionality of African art. Smith also characterizes the Black woman as the contented slave, hopelessly devoted to her enslaver. Because institutions that actually focus on this genre of literature are so rare, I tend to agree with the authors when they posit that it is important for all vestiges of the White superiority myth to be denied validation, especially in an international context. They say “serious consideration needs to be given to the way young white minds are being nurtured to think that white is superior and invincible, and young black minds are being instilled with the myth that an endemic primitivism characterizes people of African descent” (80).

All of these novels create avenues for continued colonialist dialogue and negate the possibility of African agency and/or autonomy. They consistently win an inordinate amount of praise for the way they represent Africa, or rather misrepresent it. They are called “the best”, and the proof that they are such is supposedly related to the rave reviews and literary awards that they have won. These reviews and awards simply support the author’s statements: “Neither the Western author nor the Western critic is interested in halting the age-old stereotype of the threatening (the implicitly evil) African.” (26), and, “Reviewers seem to concur with the authors impression that indigenous African cultures and institutions are obstacles to progressive change, …they leave Africa ill-prepared for good government, civic order, and/or social harmony” (78). The reviews and awards aforementioned are insidiously Western, belying the cultural arrogance that has characterized depictions of Africa since Westerners began writing about it.

In an effort to prescribe a solution to the continued negativity that pervades Children's/Young Adult Africana Literature, Yulisa Amadu Maddy, when asked to establish a frame of reference about Africa, advised the West to cease treating Africa as if it is not a part of the rest of the world. Because Africa represents the ultimate mystery of Man and is a disturbing phenomenon to the Western mind, it has been misrepresented to the world not just in writing, but in pictures as well. He speaks of the ideas that Africans will squander all they have on European things, that Africans have low expectations of themselves, that Africans are backward, poor and born to serve. In his opinion, “real equality...cannot be achieved without confrontations...with bigotry, with materialism, with neocolonialism” (128). He also highlights the advent of those who call themselves
“experts” on Africa, after having spent what can only amount to a minute of their lives there. In essence, the only frame of reference that has any relevance with regards to Africa is survival. Despite several efforts to annihilate, denigrate, subjugate and oppress, Africa remains the gift that keeps on giving. Maddy invites all of us who “feel the concern to find out about the African ethos” to boldly see for ourselves what the world is in such danger of losing, that is, to “unravel the phenomenon of the Dark Continent” (136). He challenges authors of Children’s/Young Adult Africana Literature to give more than what the Western world has shown Africa to be.

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