Routledge Handbook of African Popular Culture

Grace A Musila, Karin Barber

Against ‘African Popular Literature’, or: The Weeping Woman

Publication details
Ranka Primorac
Published online on: 16 May 2022

Accessed on: 08 Aug 2023

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT

Full terms and conditions of use: https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
**4**

AGAINST ‘AFRICAN POPULAR LITERATURE’, OR: THE WEEPING WOMAN

*Ranka Primorac*

[W]hat are the categories through which one sees?

Judith Butler (1990, p. xxiv)

**Introduction: Counter-Fitting**

In the last ten years or so, African literature in English has taken the “Anglobal” (Anglophone global) literary scene by storm. The consecrating institution that is the UK-based Caine Prize has consolidated its standing as a key broker of African literary merit, but it has also helped to pave the way for many increasingly influential organisations based on the African continent itself (the South Africa-based Short Story Day Africa, the Kwani Trust and Jalada in Kenya, Writivism in Uganda and many others). Nigeria’s Cassava Republic Press has helped to make an extended range of titles and genres available to trans-Atlantic audiences. A burgeoning festival scene (led by the Aké festival in Nigeria, Abantu in South Africa and London’s Africa Writes) combined with a rise in respectability of literary blogs (James Murua’s African Literature Blog, Brittle Paper, Africa in Words and others) in promoting a new generation of writers and showcasing a fresh repertoire of forms and genres. Nigerian authors (Chibundu Onuzo, Leye Adenle, Ayobami Adebayo and more) are, yet again, in the forefront of international literary visibility, confirming West African pre-eminence in continental canons. But authors from other parts of Africa have also come to the fore – some from nation-states previously internationally unnoticed. Critically praised fiction by Uganda’s Nansubuga Makumbi and Zambia’s Namwali Serpell, for example, brings into view new cultural contexts and new sets of local antecedents. Elsewhere, texts by established and emergent authors (such as Zukiswa Wanner in Kenya and Sifiso Mzobe in South Africa) defy easy genre classification. The anglophone African literary field is now arguably bigger, more nationally and formally diverse and better known to non-specialist audiences than ever before. New scholarly approaches may well be needed to make cultural and historical sense of it. This chapter takes twofold inspiration from Judith Butler’s now-classic intervention into received categories related to perceiving, and thinking about, gender and sexuality: firstly, by re-thinking a set of ossified categories related to the genres of African literature, and secondly, by focusing on visibility and gender in the literary case studies used to substantiate this re-thinking. The parallel emergence of two seemingly unrelated
scholarly ‘turns’ points at possible ways of articulating fresh research questions and new methodologies of thinking.

The recent academic turn towards decolonial versions of world literature has broadly paralleled the global ‘rise’ of African literature. It has taken place alongside an increase in the scholarly interest in African popular culture (of which the African popular literature is commonly regarded as a sub-set) – an established umbrella term for local and non-canonical cultural texts and forms, often placed in opposition to elite or ‘postcolonial’ ones. These broad terms are multiple signifiers: they have the capacity to describe and classify types of textual production, value judgments commonly attached to such production, and the methodological preferences/academic locations of scholars interested in it. Usually institutionally separate and often hierarchically opposed, world literature and African popular literature nevertheless have the potential to speak to each other’s procedures and assumptions, as I go on to argue.

This chapter troubles a key tenet of the study of African popular literature – that popular texts ‘reject legibility through canonical lenses’¹ – via a strategic juxtaposition. The chapter places into the same analytical frame two benchmark academic monographs recently published in the UK, both interested in literature and in Africa, both scrupulously materialist in critical orientation: *A History of African Popular Culture* (2018) by Karin Barber and *Combined and Uneven Development* (2015) by the Warwick Research Collective (WReC).² Such a juxtaposition may seem counter-intuitive – partly because the idea of ‘literature’ is differently positioned in the two scholarly undertakings, and partly because the two monographs mark different stages in their authors’ professional trajectories. *A History of African Popular Culture* is the culmination of a path-breaking project of cultural-anthropological enquiry, initiated in 1987 by Barber’s long essay ‘Popular Arts in Africa’. WReC’s monograph is the initial book-length outing by a collective of Marxist literary/cultural scholars intent on formulating the basic tenets of a materialist theory of world literature. Usually kept apart by institutional and disciplinary boundaries, WReC’s and Barber’s projects resonate with each other in several ways. They share a broad interest in African cultural forms and their socio-economic positioning. Furthermore, both Barber and WReC co-founder Neil Lazarus have long been critical of literary Postcolonialism: Barber has pointed out that the notion of ‘writing back’, conceived as a central mechanism of non-Western literary histories, overlooks entire formations of African texts and genres (1997); Lazarus has shown how Postcolonialism’s culturalist approach to the British Empire occludes its economic (i.e. capitalist) dimension (2004). WReC’s monograph joins an ongoing scholarly debate about how best to combine the perspectives of postcolonial and world-literary studies, by underlining literature’s participation in the capitalist world-system. WReC’s and Barber’s engagements with African literary processes are different in scale: while the Warwick collective is interested in how African texts participate in the global literary system, Barber’s attention is on intra-continental cultural circuits. My contention is that these two perspectives cannot be separated. A contrapuntal pulling together of WReC’s and Barber’s critical perspectives brings into view the possibility of their productive interlocking, or counter-fitting – as Peter Hitchcock has put it in a related context (2017). Hitchcock uses this suggestive phrase to mean questioning the geo-cultural scales through which discourses and genres are normalised. In the present context, its usage signals this chapter’s two-fold preoccupation: (1) the dovetailing of Barber’s and WReC’s disciplinary perspectives despite (or because of) the difference of discursive scale in their engagements with Africa; and (2) an interest in how African literary genres are normalised, classified and labelled across inequalities and differences produced by the world capitalist system.

This chapter devotes sections two and four to a discussion of how African literary texts are approached by monographs by WReC and Barber, and how these two approaches may be combined. The phrase ‘the weeping woman’ refers to an intertextual figure extrapolated from
the analyses of formally different Zambian and Kenyan literary texts, sketched in sections three and five in order to help substantiate the chapter’s key contention: that, as a negatively defined category, ‘African popular literature’ occludes textual/social processes and resonances that merit scholarly attention. Each case study features an interface between gendered temporality and narrative form, which (I argue) becomes discernible only across genres and multiply scaled lines of canonicity. Each features a female subject whose life narrative unfolds in distinct stages, moving from a period of voluntary loyalty to a male figure and towards new and unexpected forms of freedom, through endurance and determination rather than via direct conflict. As a figure of gendered temporality, the weeping woman is legible through conventional forms of literary analysis, though arguably not via the geo-aesthetic scales of text selection conventionally adopted for such analysis. The figure of the weeping woman points at forms of African feminist engagement that deserve more scholarly attention than they have received.

The coming section turns to Karin Barber’s *History of African Popular Culture*, which works with the concept of ‘the African popular’ understood as the kind of cultural and literary production that is denied official sanction. I trace Barber’s handling of the idea of popular literariness, starting with the observation that Barber’s approach to ‘the African popular’ has always been provisional. Barber’s critical apparatus has been extensively critiqued over the years, and she has been consistent in acknowledging such critique. My own approach to this apparatus is intended as a ground-clearing gesture, informed by the recent wave of ‘postcolonialising’ world-literary studies and performed as a prelude to a reconfiguring of the broad African literary terrain that Barber has helped to bring to scholarly visibility under the sign of ‘the popular’.

### Against ‘African Popular Literature’

*A History of African Popular Culture* is ambitious in scope and range: it seeks to re-theorise, systematise and historicise decades of scholarship related to Africa’s cultural and literary production. The book relates such scholarship to specific socio-cultural sites (e.g. mines and towns), economic processes (e.g. migration and trade) and media (e.g. print, orality and the internet). It addresses the time span of about a century (from the early nineteenth century onwards), and aims to include, as a matter of principle, the spatial extent of the African continent. My engagement with it here is at the level of theoretical framing. I argue that the looseness and provisionality of this framing allow for productive re-thinking and re-theorisation – on this occasion, in conjunction with WReC’s emergent research project, which relates African text to its authors’ understanding of world literature.

In the introduction to *A History of African Popular Culture*, Barber underlines that her study is not to be taken as comprehensive or authoritative (p. 19). This is, she explains, in part because the notion of ‘the African popular’ is always already freighted with ambivalence and ambiguity. ‘It’s a slippery, disputed term wherever it is used’, she writes (p. 7). She had sounded a similar note back in 1987, when she began to rely on the qualifier ‘unofficial’ in her understanding of ‘the African popular’ in her field-shaping essay ‘Popular Arts in Africa’, which *A History of African Popular Culture* re-works and expands. The essay operated with a conceptual triad, inserting the notion of ‘popular arts’ as the third, ‘fluctuating, undefined and shapeless’ (9) space into the distinction between ‘elite’ and ‘traditional’ kinds of cultural practice. The provisionality of Barber’s terminology belies a conceptual constant related to literature and literariness that remains in place in her work across decades.

‘Popular Arts in Africa’ aligns the ‘traditional/modern’ binary term with another negative term – an appropriation of Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of the unofficial. The essay thus distinguishes between modern and traditional cultural practice, and between two kinds of African
cultural modernity: elite or official, and popular or unofficial. The producers and consumers of fast-changing and varied ‘popular arts’ are African urban residents; the arts themselves, which include literature, bristle with vitality and adaptability and encapsulate the cultural outcomes of ordinary Africans’ encounters with urban modernity.

‘Popular arts in Africa’ appropriated the idea of unofficial culture from Bakhtin’s 1965 monograph Rabelais and his World, in which he discusses the subversive carnivalesque practice/speech that challenged the moral and social precepts of church and state in sixteenth-century France. Permitted only intermittently, carnival cultures suspended the norms that upheld the hegemonic religious and political orders, temporarily inverting them and thereby ultimately serving to reproduce them. For Bakhtin, as Renate Lachmann (1988–89) explains, the irreverent and de-hierarchising carnival cultures were counter-cultures. They were essentially incompatible with the monologic and hierarchical cultures of the state. ‘Popular Arts in Africa’ retains this implication of incompatibility between what it calls official and unofficial African arts. (In its early pages, the essay suggestively describes the ‘unofficial’ cultural domain as the inverse side of the African social tapestry [p. 3].) Its redeployment of the term ‘unofficial’ in the context of Africa arguably enables the notion of popular literature as not only distinct from, but also opposed to and incommensurable with African literature proper.

By way of defining the institutions that govern Africa’s ‘literary official’, the essay states that ‘official arts’ are produced by authors who have ‘assimilated European languages, forms and conventions more or less thoroughly’ (p. 9), and touches on the consecrating effects of government endorsement and the presence of texts on school syllabi. These cursory remarks appear to point at the canon-making role played by the AWS, which was (we now see) predicated on a Eurocentric understanding of literary genre (Newell, 2006; Primorac, 2018). Writing a decade after the publication of Barber’s essay, Jane Bryce noted that the official/unofficial binary had begun to map onto a single ‘vertical scale of value’ (Bryce, 1999, p. 118), with ‘popular’ texts forming its own counter-canon at the lower end of the scale. Bryce also remarked that a value hiatus had emerged between ‘what is sanctioned as good and enduring, and what is marginalized as cheap, ephemeral and “bad”’ (p. 118) on that scale. ‘The African popular’ and ‘the African literary’ canons thus became susceptible to being construed as discrete bodies of texts. The work of many authors, especially women (as Bryce outlines) disappeared from easy literary visibility as a result of this hiatus.

In 1987, Barber was aware of the intellectual risks involved in taking literary canons at face value. In its opening pages, the essay paraphrases Pierre Macherey’s 1978 Theory of Literary Production, referring to the ‘distinction between literature as a canonical body of texts established by convention but accepted as a natural fact, and literature as an object theoretically constructed in order to permit scientific [i.e. rigorous scholarly – RP] analysis’ (p. 5). Yet ‘Popular Arts’ does not entertain the possibility of such a theoretical (re)construction of the literary in the context of Africa. Instead, immediately following that reference to Macherey, Barber regrets the fact that ‘in our field we do not even have such a canon to start from’ (p. 5, emphasis added). Here, deeply ingrained disciplinary assumptions about the nature of literature and literary study appear to intersect with the Bakhtinian inflection of ‘the unofficial’. ‘Popular Arts in Africa’ set in train an understanding of ‘African popular literature’ as African literature’s constitutive outside.

Today, it is possible to speak about the global spread of what Gayatri Spivak called the burden of English without ‘guilt or recrimination’, as Simon Gikandi puts it in a related context (Gikandi, 1996, p. xx). In an anthological essay on the cultural turn in global studies, Gikandi argues that, inherent in the study of literature as an anglophone university discipline both in the UK and across the world, there is a residual England-centric component traceable to the understanding of literature as an ‘agent of moral meaning and restitution’ (Gikandi, 2005, p. 626).
Propagated by F. R. Leavis, the assumption that great literature has both national and moral value is premised on a conflation of national and university cultures (on this, see also Guillory, 1993, and Amoko, 2001). Together with the ‘EngLit’ curriculum, this conflation was exported to the colonised world and adopted by Leavis’s successors in newly decolonised nations. Thanks to his aphilosophical approach to literary exegesis and his investment in the idea of the nation as an organic community, it was easy for Leavis’s postcolonial successors to ‘substitute for England the new nation that had emerged from decolonisation’, as Gikandi explains (2005, p. 627).

A. O. Amoko writes about his experience of just such a substitution when he evokes his time as a student at Kenyatta University in Kenya in the wake of the ‘Nairobi Revolution’ – a Marxist nationalist curriculum reform famously instigated by Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Taban lo Liyong and Henry Ovwuor-Anyumba in 1968. Following Bourdieu and John Guillory, Amoko describes the Nairobi reforms as at once revolutionary and retrogressive in terms of aesthetic ideology (Amoko, 2001, p. 30). He explicitly links the notion of Africanised literary greatness that underpinned the reforms to ‘the attempts by Mathew Arnold and F. R. Leavis . . . to constitute an English National Culture from the privileged locus of the metropolitan university’ (Amoko, 2001, p. 22). In anglophone Africa, such conflations of literature and morality have sometimes entailed corresponding devaluations of textual productions not endorsed by university cultures. In the book on literary value as a form of cultural capital which informs Amoko’s article, John Guillory points out that Leavis’s views on literary greatness were formulated in opposition to the emergence of what he considered ‘a degraded “mass civilisation”’ (Guillory, 1993, p. 139).

In 2011, Stephanie Newell touched on a series of multiply refracted but discernible African uptakes of this view, when she described how locally published literatures had attracted hostile commentary from nationalist scholars, particularly in ‘Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania and South Africa, with their distinctive intellectual traditions combining Marxist literary criticism on the one hand with the production of conscientization literature . . . on the other’ (Newell, 2011, p. 1011). Such scholars (for example, Chris Wanjala, who has castigated locally produced Kenyan novels set in Nairobi) ‘equate popular literature with useless, even morally harmful, reading practices’ (Newell, 2011, p. 1012). Here, traces of neo-Leavisite moralism appear to underlie orthodox Marxist prescriptiveness. Barber’s ‘definition by default’ (Barber, 1987, p. 5) entails no such hostility. But because this provisional definition is also negative (pegging ‘popular literature’ to the canon, however defined), it allows for implicit literary value hierarchies to continue.

A History of African Popular Culture retains this default position. The book was published in a moment of rapid change in the Anglophone disciplinary terrain, in which the UK-centred canon of Commonwealth Literature (in which AWS had participated) had become eclipsed by the more selective Postcolonial one (see Brouillette, 2007; Huggan, 2001; Morton and Primorac, 2015), and, more recently, competing versions of world literature. A History of African Popular Culture drops the concept of ‘traditional’ cultural practice with which ‘Popular Arts in Africa’ had operated, but retains the official/unofficial binary and the equation between ‘the unofficial’ and ‘the people’. The ‘unofficial’, non-canonical, ‘popular’ cultures are now described as cultures that ‘emerge from everyday life on the ground’ (p. 2). They are, Barber maintains, generated by the people, i.e. those excluded from power and privilege. The book’s early pages provide suggestive lists of such disempowered groups, which include petty traders, primary school teachers, taxi drivers, farmers, the unemployed, street children in Congo, parents in Zimbabwe trying to feed their children in conditions of hyperinflation (p. 1), Yoruba villagers, Tanzanian rappers and people using mobile phones (p. 2). Clearly, different kinds of everyday disempowerment are implied in each case, and it is difficult to think of a continent-wide definitional criterion that would comprise them all. The book’s literary examples include locally published fiction from Nigeria, Kenya and Ghana, newspaper and online fictions, out-of-fashion AWS novels and
Against ‘African Popular Literature’

against ‘African Popular Literature’

literature produced by the colonial-era literary bureaux – state-sponsored publishers of ‘native’ literature in indigenous languages. Only in one respect is this list consistent: it comprises the kinds of literary material that are typically not included in Postcolonial/world literature university classes in mainstream UK departments of English.

In a related context, Gayatri Spivak has pointed out the vast semantic range of the term ‘the people’. She writes, “‘Popular’ divides between descriptive (as in presidential or TV ratings), [and] evaluative (not “high”, both a positive and a negative value, dependent on your “politics”), and contains “people”, a word with immense range, from “just anyone”, to the “masses” (both a positive and a negative political value, depending on your politics)” (Spivak, 2005, p. 475). A History of African Popular Culture deploys its key terms situationally, making no attempt to narrow down this range. The book’s main aim arguably lies elsewhere. Three decades after ‘Popular Arts in Africa’, Barber is able to point at a version of the disciplinary canon she had longed for: ‘it can now be said that African popular culture is a recognised subject . . . taught in university undergraduate and postgraduate courses’ (Barber, 2018, p. 6).

This is, certainly, a good thing. Yet Newell was right when she pointed out that binary terminologies are not necessarily helpful in making cultural sense of the vast textual terrain that is the [African] literature hitherto labelled popular’ (Newell, 2011, p. 2016). In order to do that, analytical terminologies related to textual forms, their social embeddedness, the technologies of their production and the scales/media of their circulation need to interlock more precisely with categories related to class, accessibility and cultural capital in specific African contexts. This chapter goes on to argue that some part of this terrain may be approached via current debates about postcolonial world literature. The coming section, which introduces the figure of the crying woman, paves the way for the discussion of WReC’s Combined and Uneven Development in the section that follows, by addressing the interface between canonicity and genre in the context of postcolonial Zambia. These Zambian examples hopefully provide some background to a two-fold claim: (1) that there exist entire formations of elite African literary production in English, which remain non-canonical (both nationally and globally) for reasons unrelated to class; and (2) that materialist approaches to African literature as world literature (such as WReC’s) would do well to pay heed to local African texts and genres, regardless of canonicity.

The Weeping Woman: A Song in the Night

In 1992, a University of Zambia librarian called Norah Mumba published a slim volume titled A Song in the Night, subtitled A Personal Account of Widowhood in Zambia. The book speaks out against the frequently ruthless dispossession of widows in the name of ‘tradition’. In Zambia, until recently, members of a deceased husband’s blood family were able to help themselves to his household’s property and belongings, to the disadvantage of his wife and children who had no say in the matter. A Song in the Night is a rich and subtle text. Yet, for a UK-based literary scholar like me, it is not supposed to exist as an object of scholarly enquiry, for three interlocked sets of reasons.

Firstly, it is a local publication. Like many other African literary nations post ‘Economic Structural Adjustment’, Zambia has no stable publishing sector. A Song in the Night was published by Multimedia Publications in Lusaka, one of a group of small independent publishers that appeared in the 1990s, in the early years of economic liberalisation. It is now out of print. Secondly, Zambia has little international visibility as a literary nation-state. When Namwali Serpell’s 2019 novel The Old Drift recently became the toast of the Anglobal literary world, her wry joke, reproduced on the book’s cover – that this was the great Zambian novel readers didn’t know they were waiting for – played on precisely the absence of Zambian texts from the African
version of the ‘great’, internationally-consecrated, literary tradition. Thirdly, the moralism with which Norah Mumba’s narrative is imbued is not secular. When she says, in the preface to *A Song in the Night*, that her book tells a tale of suffering, Mumba is signalling to her readers the possibility of a coming alignment between a representation of a gendered subjectivity, some version of moral instruction and some version of nationalist pedagogy.

The system of prose genres that governs locally-produced Zambian literature in English (i.e. the local economy of prose forms, how they are related to one another in terms of social functioning and the manner in which they derive from other forms) revolves around their practical and moral usability, without formally separating texts meant for aesthetic enjoyment from those for practical or moral use. This local system does not map easily onto the Anglo-actually consecrated vertical value hierarchy of ‘African’ genres, discussed in the previous section. In Zambia, *any* book in English has the potential to be treated as a desirable, hard-to-get cultural object, or a bearer of elite cultural capital. Because hardly any Zambian texts have made it to the international literary markets, most literature produced by local middle-class authors are not consecrated as ‘African literature’, either in or outside Zambia.

Yet *A Song in the Night* presents scholars with rich grounds for various kinds of literary enquiry. The book narrates (in a witty and moving prose style) the protracted illness and death of leukaemia of Norah Mumba’s husband, Dr. Stanley Mumba. As Norah and Stanley – a young, educated, upwardly mobile Zambian couple, blissfully happily married, with three small children – return from a period spent in the UK, Stanley develops a series of medical symptoms which get progressively worse. At this stage, the story of upward social mobil-ity becomes a narrative of ordeal. The narrator states at the outset that she feels life is like a book – a text which unfolds incrementally, in clearly marked sections or chapters. From her own chapter titled ‘Diary of an Illness’, readers learn about the progressively worsening set of symptoms that beset Stanley: mucus that invades his throat and ears, diarrhoea, vomiting, hot flushes, weight loss, phenomenally intense headaches, abdominal swelling, a diagnosis of pulmonary tuberculosis; and then: itchy skin, aching joints, weight loss, fever, more head-aches, ringing and pain in the ears, dizzy spells, sores around the mouth, mental impairment and finally death.

This progression has obvious allegorical potential. The ailing Stanley is a saint of sorts. His illness amounts to torture – but it also amounts to a systematic testing of his moral strength and devotion to his family, and, in parallel, of Norah’s love and support. His death, when it finally comes, thus paradoxically amounts to a victory – proof of their love, endurance and faith. The narrator makes this explicit: ‘I know that we could not have handled our situation the way we did, had we had the foreknowledge that death was waiting for him around the corner. No, emphatically no. You see, we got by through our faith’ (Mumba, 1992, p. 16).

Narratives about the testing of Christian virtue via increasingly intense stages of suffering abound in southeastern Africa, where missionary translations of Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* were introduced at the turn of the twentieth century (Hoffmeyr, 2004). Mumba’s memoir maps the temporal structure of a Christian pilgrim’s ordeal onto a segment of its author’s biography, turning it into a literary tool for an effective critique of how patriarchal understandings of ‘tradition’ enable gendered economic dispossession. Her nocturnal song is a lament, her narrator – a mourning, suffering, weeping woman, whose self-empowerment comes only after she has undergone another round of protracted testing, this time at the hands of Stanley’s rapacious relatives. The book’s very existence is premised on the fact that its author has gone beyond the ordeals she describes: the preface refers to the Intestate Succession Act No. 5 of 1989, which outlaws the dispossession of widows in Zambia, and which Mumba helped to bring about after she published her memoir.
A Song in the Night evokes formal literary precedents – non-canonical, yet elite – that go all the way back to the Christian publications enabled by the Zambian literature bureau, the official literary agency of the colonial state. There are many reasons why scholars of African literature and world literature might be interested in this lineage. One of them is the furthering of research agendas related to the ‘politics of aesthetics in which generic authenticity is put into question by the very [global – RP] unevenness of cultural contact and expression’ (Hitchcock, 2017, p. 160). Given the contrast between its current Anglobal prominence and its apparent dearth of Zambian predecessors, The Old Drift provides a handy example.

Namwali Serpell is a Caine Prize winner, a tenured academic and a daughter of a former Vice Chancellor of the University of Zambia, where Norah Mumba spent her working life as a librarian. The Old Drift is an appropriation of the historical novel that pointedly ‘plays with genre’ (Saint, 2020): its characters’ layered life stories are plotted against the temporal conventions associated with fairy tales, realist fiction and science fiction. The novel, furthermore, weaves a dense web of literary allusions. It summons, in an assured and light-footed way, the intertextual spectres of Leo Tolstoy, Vladimir Nabokov, Helen Oyeyemi, Colson Whitehead, Toni Morrison, Zadie Smith and Jennifer Egan (among others). Framed by chapters titled ‘The Falls’ and ‘The Dam’ (referring to Victoria Falls and the Kariba Dam as geographical limits and symbols of the modern Zambian nation), the book has been garlanded with prizes (the most prestigious among them being the 2020 Windham Campbell Prize for fiction) and symbolically consecrated by the grand old man of Postcolonial literature, Salman Rushdie, in a glowing New York Times review.

A constitutive part of The Old Drift’s worldliness, anchored in the novel’s central chapters that deal with the arrival of political independence, is a temporal trajectory that corresponds with that of Mumba’s narrative of her widowhood ordeal. It features a weeping Christian woman, here contextualised as part of the idea of a global as well as personal and national (as in Mumba) emancipation. In 2017, Serpell published an article on the historical figure of Zambia’s ‘Afronaut’, Edward Mukuka Nkoloso. A nationalist fighter who may have satirised both the arrival of independence (for which he had sacrificed) and the Cold War space race, Nkoloso devised a playful and ramshackle, yet also earnest and aspirational moon landing programme for Zambia. One of the central characters in The Old Drift is Matha Mwamba – the fictionalised version of a female member of Nkoloso’s team, whose life, the novel insists from the start, had been ‘entwined with Edward Mukuka Nkoloso’s like a serpent that twines around a staff in a symbol for medicine’ (Serpell, 2019, p. 140). Matha is a devout Christian and reader of the Bible. She knows Nkoloso’s space programme is mad, yet benefits from it by learning to uncap her aspiration – only to be let down by her mentor when she becomes pregnant. Branded a witch, living in poverty in an urban township, Matha becomes an eternally weeping woman: she develops a medical condition that forces her to shed constant tears.

In the hilarious and moving climactic episode of Serpell’s novel, crowds of young, cyber-aware Lusakans gather together for a revolutionary meeting led by a group of young activists and Matha Mwamba – now a grandmother, still wearing her biker jacket from the Afronaut days, but no longer weeping. “‘Revolution now!’” Jacob shouted. He grabbed his gogo’s hand and punched it high again, so their fists were raised together’ (Serpell, 2019, p. 539). Matha’s biography comprises the distinct and consecutive life stages (high aspiration, protracted hardship, social debasement and final vindication) of Norah Mumba’s version of Christianity-infused gendered activism. This resonance contributes to the culturally specific ways in which The Old Drift articulates emancipatory futures. Serpell’s novel constantly alerts its readers to the cosmic importance of small, seemingly insignificant and invisible events and beings. It models this conviction by incorporating a local formal template into its complex textual architecture.
Drift does not combine textual elements ‘across the social and economic and racial spectrum’ (Saint, 2020) only at character level, as Lily Saint points out (Saint, 2020). It goes further, in combining formal elements across global economic divides. In doing so, the novel goes beyond ‘multiplying genres or combining them . . . by questioning the scales through which genres may be normalised’ (Hitchcock, 2017, p. 162).

Cultural imaginaries generated via distinct and seemingly incommensurable circuits of African literary production and circulation can and do overlap. The popular/elite, official/unofficial binaries cannot do justice to this multi-scalar and networked literary and cultural dynamic, as this section has sought to demonstrate. The coming section turns to analytical issues related to world literary systems. It contains a summary of WReC’s Combined and Uneven Development and its partial critique, informed by Karin Barber’s understanding of genre.

World Literature and Africa

In 2015, Combined and Uneven Development made a contribution to the growing body of research and debate that seeks to combine the perspectives of literary Postcolonialism and world literature (Euro-America-centric in its traditional versions), following the benchmark early interventions by David Damrosch (2003), Pascale Casanova (2004) and Franco Moretti (2013). Nathan Suhr-Sytsma rightly points out that the place of African literature in such debates remains under-theorised (Suhr-Sytsma, 2018, p. 1096). Local and ephemeral African texts are, furthermore, excluded from such debates as a matter of course; I am about to argue that such routine exclusion is unmerited. Combined and Uneven Development consists of two ground-clearing chapters (one outlining the key concepts that underpin the book’s understanding of world literature, the other on questions of literary realism) and four chapters devoted to literary case studies from Sudan, Russia, Europe’s economic peripheries and South Africa.

This section brings Combined and Uneven Development into dialogue with Barber’s work, not via her understanding of ‘the African popular’, but by way of her problematisation (throughout A History of African Popular Culture) of the notion of genre. As I go on to show, WReC and Barber’s shared interest in the global spread of Euro-capitalist modernity accounts for unexpected and illuminating confluences of their ideas and forms of expression.

For the Warwick Research Collective, Postcolonial world literature (or: world-literature) is the literature of the world capitalist system. It registers the global spread of capitalist modernity, and is constituted via a network of economic centres, peripheries and semi-peripheries, whose relative economic positioning is encoded by the recurring fragmentation and various kinds of stylistic and semantic discontinuity in the literary texts they produce. Readers of Combined and Uneven Development familiar with Barber’s ‘Popular Arts in Africa’ will have no trouble recognising in some of her formulations what the collective, following Trotsky and Wallerstein, call the combined and uneven spread of capitalist dis/possession. Writing about the social conditions inhabited by the early generations of urban African authors, Barber describes them as ‘sandwiched between the rural hinterland . . . and the colonial countries and their agents’ (Barber, 1987, p. 14). She underscores that the ‘syncretism of their art, drawing as it did on both indigenous (hinterland) and imported (metropolitan) elements was therefore an expression and a negotiation of their real social position at the point of articulation of two worlds’ (Barber, 1987 p. 14).

Barber is here making a world-literary statement. The trope of ‘a meeting of two worlds’ which recurs in African writing of the 1960s and 70s is easily legible as an index of the violent origins of Africa’s literary modernity. Although they do not articulate this point explicitly, WReC’s definition of world-literature allows for a disciplinary repositioning of scholarly
discussions of non-globalised texts and forms. As Clive Barnett points out, the contexts of African literature’s production and reception have always been ‘geographically dispersed and socially fractured’ (77) – in WReC’s parlance, combined and uneven. Like WReC’s ‘world-literature’, Barber’s ‘African popular literature’ probes, critiques and examines the workings of capitalist modernity. Yet WReC’s African case studies are taken from the international Postcolonial African canon, while Barber’s focus is on local African texts and forms. Scholars interested in African literatures and cultures have everything to gain from counter-fitting these two differently scaled critical perspectives.

WReC’s focus on the unevenness of modernity within, as well as among, nation-states underlines the validity of Barber’s decision to omit the notion of ‘traditional arts’ (always already included in capitalist modernity, together with the rural hinterlands where ‘tradition’ ostensibly resides) from A History of African Popular Culture. The collective’s materialist critical apparatus has other potential uses for scholars of African writing. Following Wallerstein, WReC emphasize that a ‘world-system’ need not be global in scale. Any bounded social universe whose functioning is relatively autonomous may be designated as a world system. African literature can thus be approached as a world-literary sub-system, with centres and peripheries of its own. WReC do not adopt this approach to Africa, but their terminology is applicable to the economic and cultural terrain which Barber addresses. This terminology helps us to see that Norah Mumba’s memoir is internationally invisible partly because of the gendered value hiatus that Jane Bryce has noted, but also because Zambia is an African literary periphery. De-homogenising Africa along national lines is helpful in analysing how the mechanisms of international ‘African’ literary canonisation are related to a text’s positioning within the continent’s literary systems as well as to class, language, gender and race.

Two of WReC’s four case-study chapters are African. In their analyses of Tayeb Salih’s Season of Migration to the North (read in translation) and the work of another canonical African author, South Africa’s Ivan Vladislavić, WReC treat the formal and semantic fragmentation and hybridity of each writer’s work as symptomatic of the violent semi/peripheral economic conditions to which the texts are related. Serpell’s The Old Drift (with its explicit critique of capitalism and ‘combined and uneven’ character trajectories) and Mumba’s A Song in the Night (with its emphasis on how patriarchy engineers acts of gendered accumulation/dispossession) would have worked equally well as examples. In the chapter on Vladislavić, the collective underscores the South African author’s use of ‘disparate idioms, languages, genres and forms in order to meditate upon ordinary lives captured by the dark magic of history’ (WReC, 2015, p. 145). On occasion, A History of African Popular Culture resonates closely with WReC’s train of thought and turn of phrase here. Referring to Nigeria’s Onitsha market literature of the 1950s and 60s, Barber notes that the ‘bricolage’ typical of Onitsha texts is echoed in the novels of Cyprian Ekwensi, featured, since their publication in AWS, ‘in university literature courses and literary histories’ (Barber, 2018, p. 93). The Onitsha pamphlets are here historically positioned as one of the beginnings of modern African literature as world literature – propelled (I would add) by Nigeria’s emergent petty bourgeoisie, rather than the ill-defined ‘African people’. Regarded as a world-literary intervention, the example of Onitsha (as well as Mumba and Serpell) becomes useful in foregrounding the fact that there is nothing obvious about generic expectation. If “[w]hat is literary about genre is precisely the space of postcolonial contestation” (Hitchcock, 2017, p. 160), then local tastes and convention should be taken seriously as agents of such contestation.

Its treatment of genre is the area in which A History of African Popular Culture is able to make a further contribution to WReC’s discussion of Africa’s literary modernity. How new genres emerge, stabilise (or not), transform and/or dissolve as a result of the spread of capitalist
modernity in Africa is of central interest to Barber. Her study has the potential to reinforce and refine WReC's in underlining that new forms emerge around changed economic processes via specific social sites and institutions (she mentions railroads, townships, churches, state policies and more), not by springing directly from formless 'lived experience' but by borrowing elements from already existing forms. 'All . . . cultural forms have a past', Barber writes; 'they have precedents, models and resources their creators drew on' (Barber, 2018, p. 8). And elsewhere: 'New forms engender new kinds of public competence, thus helping to “create new social and intellectual pathways and forge new kinds of social constituency, and these in turn shape historical developments” (Barber, 2018, p. 3) – which may, in turn, help to engender other forms. This description of the dialectical process whereby cultural forms participate in social change is indebted to Bakhtin’s critique of Russian Formalism. It is true of literary as well as other cultural forms, in Africa as elsewhere. Now is as good a moment as any for researchers of African literary histories to abandon the vertical value scale that Bryce writes about, and take a closer look at how the continent’s literary systems overlap and intertwine across scales of textual circulation and canonicity – that is to say, Africa’s literary systems. It is also a good time for scholars of Postcolonial world literature to recognise the specificity and variety of the social, cultural and literary institutions that participate in the making of African texts, and are registered by them. Materialist approaches to literature need not concentrate only on economic processes and relationships.

In an astute response to Combined and Uneven Development, Sarah Brouillette and David Thomas offer a critique of the collective’s analytical model by suggesting that Marxist scholarship might want to short-circuit rather than legitimise the globally received idea of literature, by remembering that ‘the industries that produce it and facilitate its circulation are vastly underdeveloped in many of the world’s regions’ (Brouillette and Thomas, 2016, p. 511). Africa is, clearly, one such region. Its modern literary ‘industries’ are often small entrepreneurial outfits or variously subsidised publishers that cannot compete in global markets. But Africans have never produced their own institutions of literary modernity. Often (but not always) catering to local audiences and tastes, these institutions have re/produced new textual forms, genre systems and public competences. Local publishing outfits such as Lusaka’s Multimedia Publications, or, differently, the Onitsha publishers/booksellers (and many others) have worked with authors and publics who rely on distinct sets of formal and aesthetic “precedents, models and resources” which are not, in an absolute sense, illegible via canonical literary-analytical lenses. The texts they produce often entail explicit critiques of capitalist modernity. They are not incompatible with ‘wanting to be literary’ (Brouillette and Thomas 512, emphasis in the original). Simon Gikandi is right when he insists that cultures of modernity are the result of the transformation of institutions of knowledge production and enunciative situations in both the global economic centres and semi/peripheries. He writes, ‘Global culture is a result of the transformations in both “First” and “Third Worlds,” and especially a transformation of the institutions of knowledge production, and even the enunciative situations, in both zones’ (2005, p. 623). This remains true even when peripheral literary institutions and enunciative situations seem insignificant or non-satisfactory to professionally trained cultural gate-keepers.

Local peripheral texts and forms are cultural agents of modernity in their own right. In African contexts the necessary short-circuiting of ‘literature’ (as a form of neo-Leavisite ‘great tradition’ as I outlined earlier) envisaged by Brouillette and Thomas is impossible without them. This chapter contends that African literature is not legible as world literature without local texts, genres and circulation networks being taken into account. To say this is not to want to mechanistically translate everything conventionally termed ‘popular’ into a ‘world-’, but to...
take seriously (in forging future comparative research agendas) the cultural and institutional impact of uneven and combined development on the production and circulation of African texts and cultures.

This chapter’s concluding section turns to Kenya, where I trace the unexpected presence of the weeping woman in the internationally acclaimed novel Dust (2013) by Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor and in two local classics, My Life in Crime and its sequel, My Life with a Criminal, by John Kiriamiti. In contrast to multiply peripheral Zambia, Kenya is East Africa’s economic and literary hub and a global semi-periphery. Many of its print authors in English are internationally visible, albeit in a polarised manner described by Bryce. ‘The Nairobi novel’ (a collective designation for locally published Kenyan novels with urban settings, which emerged in the 1970s) earned particular censure from Kenya’s nationalist critics, as I briefly outlined via Newell in section two. Recent generations of scholars (Siundu, 2016), public intellectuals (see Murua, 2020) and authors (as discussed by Musila, 2014) have resisted such censure. In referring to Kiriamiti as an example of Kenyan realism, however, the coming section follows the example of WReC’s Neil Lazarus. As early as 1987 (the year when ‘Popular Arts in Africa’ was published), Lazarus discussed an iconic Nairobi novel, Meja Mwangi’s Going Down River Road (published in AWS in 1976), as an example of African naturalism (Lazarus, 2007). His world-literary usage points to the fact that the epistemic quality rightly ascribed to much local African fiction – its capacity to generate knowledge about the everyday experiences of ‘common people of the street’ (Newell and Okome, 2014, p. 3) – is shared by realist and post-realist literary prose world-wide.

The Kenyan ‘weeping women’ in the coming section embody gendered temporalities homologous to the Zambian ones I described earlier, but realised via different, and differently ‘combined and uneven’ formal and generic means. They underscore both the diversity (rather than polarity) of textual forms that embody them, and the distinctiveness of their respective national contexts. Together, these four texts (whose selection is based on my research interests) may be read as a network, possibly one that can be augmented by adding nodes situated within other African contexts and languages. The network traverses national contexts, authors’ class positioning, gender and generation, as well as differently scaled circuits of textual circulation and consecration. This chapter regards all of these texts as world-literary.

The Weeping Woman: Blood in the Desert

Like Namwali Serpell, Yvonne Owuor rose to international literary prominence via the mainstream international canon-making mechanism that is the Caine Prize for African Writing, which she won in 2003. Part of a recent wave of internationally acclaimed historical novels authored by African women, Dust’s many intertwined plot lines feature two interconnected families, the Ogandas and the Boltons, whose multi-strand narratives the novel maps onto a version of Kenya’s national history. Dust contributes to Kenya’s social imaginaries via a form of crime narrative. One of its protagonists, Odidi Oganda, is a state corruption whistle-blower turned gangster. The novel opens with an account of his slow death on Nairobi pavement, at the hands of the police whose officers his gang had been in the habit of bribing. Odidi was once among Kenya’s best and brightest, a guarantor of an emancipatory national future that has, yet again, been derailed by the real criminals – the country’s comprador ruling elites. This opening (replete with the sights and sounds of the city street) arguably gestures towards the Nairobi novel. But Owuor’s novel also initiates a dialogue with the work of Ngugi wa Thiong’o, still Kenya’s most prominent literary export. Dust revolves around the chronotope of a family house which becomes the basis of a national allegory, prominent also in Ngugi’s Matigari.
In Ngugi’s novel, the Christ-like figure of a former freedom fighter searches out the weak and the dispossessed of an unnamed postcolony whose internal economic unevenness the novel underscores. *Dust* stages a literary dialogue with *Matigari* by returning to the questions that Ngugi’s novel asks its readers to contemplate: who built the house that allegorically represents the nation, who owns it, and who is entitled to it? To these questions, *Dust* adds another: is the house, in its current state, worth keeping? Owuor scuppers the clear-cut distinction between colonial-era collaborators and national heroes drawn by Ngugi. In the end, a European character receives the title deeds to Wuoth Ogik, the crumbling, surreal house made of pink coral in the far-flung Turkana district. *Dust* is as adamant as *Matigari* in its critique of colonial and postcolonial economic dispossessions. In that sense, both are, in WReC’s terms, world-literary fictions. But Owuor also challenges the patriarchal literary tradition in which *Matigari* participates, in which the gendered figure of a prostitute often comes to symbolise both national betrayals and patriarchal power (on this, see Nicholls).

Wuoth Ogik is built and maintained by the fathers of Kenyan and British families whose intertwined histories the novel narrates. For this reason, the house is, in the end, not worth keeping. It burns down in a late chapter as part of the novel’s happy ending. In *Dust*, it is a female character – Odidi’s sister Ajany – who undertakes the detective-like social survey that resonates with Matigari’s futile search for freedom and justice. She ends up activating the chain of events that causes members of the two families to come together and begin to rearrange ‘the ways [they] imagine their social existence’ (to paraphrase Charles Taylor, 2004). ‘What endures? Starting again’, asserts *Dust*’s impersonal narrator (Owuor, 2013, p. 361, emphasis in the original). This capacity of Kenya and Kenyans to start again – to reimagine themselves as a political community – is predicated on the story of a woman from a Kenyan periphery (whose life straddles the moment of flag independence) finally being heard. This story turns out to follow the temporal trajectory I described earlier as that of a weeping woman.

Writing about literary and social forms, Caroline Levine underscores the need to pay analytical attention to the sheer length of novels organised around character networks (Levine, 2015, p. 127). *Dust* is arguably one such novel: the number of its networked sub-plots runs to double digits, its length to nearly 400 pages. Pages away from the novel’s end – close to being buried by the sheer weight of the novel’s complex narrative architecture – the final one among *Dust*’s many long-withheld secrets is revealed, and readers learn how and why the fierce and independent Akai Lokorijom, Odidi and Ajany’s AK 47-wielding mother, chose to entwine (as *The Old Drift* puts it) her life with the lives of the novel’s two patriarchs: Hugh Bolton and Nyipir Oganda, master and servant, the coloniser and the colonised. Scorned as a prostitute by the former and turned into a wife by the latter, Akai is able to move beyond a life with either man and on to a new kind of independence only after telling her daughter about a period of intense suffering she has had to endure after giving birth for the first time.

This episode resonates with the apocalyptic quality of Zambian gendered ordeals evoked by Mumba and Serpell. Banished into the desert, Akai opens up her own veins in an attempt to keep her children alive: ‘Etir was looking into her eyes. She picked up a sharp-ended rock and started scraping her wrist. Then she managed to tear the skin at the back of her hands with her teeth. She placed the vein near the child’s mouth’ (Owuor, 2013, p. 349). Only after the novel’s readers have, together with Ajany, ‘taste[d] the sorrows woven into Akai-ma’ (Owuor, 2013, p. 341) can *Dust* move towards a narrative resolution. This resolution is saturated with hope: the novel’s final sentences cast the city of Nairobi as a place beauty and hope, as they cite the lyrics of a love song by the much-loved Kenyan musician Fadhili Williams, overheard in ‘a
downtown bar behind River Road’ (Owuor, 2013, p. 365). The weeping woman’s ordeal is the price of such hope.

Like Mumba’s narrator and Serpell’s Matha, Akai-ma represents the kind of gendered agency that avoids both a direct confrontation with patriarchy and a willing submission to it. And if the Zambian versions of the weeping woman invite a comparison with male-authored representations of meek femininity in nationalist literary classics by Dominic Mulaisho and Gideon Phiri, then, in Kenya, Akai-ma may prompt a rereading of independently-minded yet obedient wives in texts by Grace Ogot and Billy Kahora. Occasionally and unexpectedly, patriarchally oriented literature also comes close to recognising such feminist interventions.

In 1989, John Kiriamiti, a real-life gangster who became an author, published My Life with a Criminal: Milly’s Story – a sequel to his first novel, the fictionalised autobiography My Life in Crime (1989a). A combination of Nairobi novel and travelogue, My Life in Crime is an adventure narrative – ‘a catalogue of [its protagonist’s] hair-raising escapes ending in arrest and imprisonment’ (Bryce, 1999, p. 119). The novel has been critically discussed in the context of Africa’s critically denigrated literary counter-canon, yet its consecration has been achieved via the enthusiastic acceptance of the local literary marketplace. Kiriamiti’s version of local realism resembles Meja Mwangi’s. Embedded in its narrative is an unobtrusive but unmistakeable critique of rising economic unevenness and social inequality in postcolonial Kenya that echoes Ngugi’s and anticipates Owuor’s. (The narrator, Jack Zollo, leaves school to become a criminal in 1963, the year of Kenya’s independence. During one of their criminal escapades, Zollo and his gang narrowly escape arrest when the police mistake them for members of the presidential motorcade.) Kiriamiti certainly wanted his books to be regarded as literary: he has said that he became a published author with Ngũgĩ’s help (Gacheru, 2020). Published in Kenya and still in print, Kiriamiti’s novels may be found not too far from Dust on the shelves of Nairobi’s bookshops.

For Jack Zollo, the protagonist of My Life in Crime, women fall into precisely the two categories that Owuor’s Akai-ma conflates: prostitutes and wives/mothers. Yet his girlfriend Milly is neither. She occupies a special, ambivalent position in Kiriamiti’s narrative. For Jack, a life of crime is a way of escaping the traps of respectable patriarchal masculinity such as fatherly obligations and the financial burden of raising a family, which he spends the novel avoiding. In her willingness to live with him out of wedlock (unlike a wife) and her ability to criticise his actions without fear (unlike a prostitute), Milly mediates between the criminal underworld and the world of respectable masculinity, enabling Jack to cross between the two at will. My Life with a Criminal is a retelling of My Life in Crime from Milly’s perspective. It revisits the interlocking of criminality and domesticity set up by My Life in Crime from a differently gendered perspective.

Despite its continued insistence on Jack’s patriarchal mastery (executed via Milly’s repeated praise of his sexual prowess), the book renders this insistence increasingly ambivalent by paying its respects to the female lover who moved outside the confines of conventional gendered performance. My Life with a Criminal narrates Milly’s piecing together of the link between patriarchal masculinity and the corruption-enhanced economic unevenness of the Kenyan postcolony. In chapter five, Jack and his gang hold up a Nairobi bank at the exact moment when Milly is in a customer queue there, about to deposit some money that Jack had given her earlier. The split subject position that this moment engenders leads Milly to a realisation that the law and lawlessness in Kenya are not any more separate than they are in her own family set-up: ‘But then, who can tell between the “cops and robbers”. From my present knowledge, the two parties have very much in common’ (Kiriamiti, 1989b, p. 98). In an attempt to stay true to her man, Milly has
become his social equal. My Life with a Criminal narrates this process of gendered emergence as Jack’s gift to Milly. Nevertheless, because it represents a woman who confidently straddles ‘two worlds’ and lives to tell the tale, Kiriamiti’s second novel arguably foreshadows the social transgressiveness of Akai-ma. The finality of the brief closing sentence of Milly’s story – ‘Goodbye, Jack Zollo.’ – pierces the text’s ambivalence and reverberates with grudging but genuine respect. Milly has earned this respect (articulated, as in Owuor, as close as is possible to the narrative’s end; close to spilling over into the silence that follows it) by undergoing the ordeal of Jack’s trial and imprisonment, which turned her, for a while, into a weeping woman: ‘For me, his lover, it was endless tears’ (Kiriamiti, 1989b, p 121, emphasis added). Kiriamiti’s Milly resembles Mumba’s narrator, Serpell’s Matha and Owuor’s Akai in that she chooses not to confront the patriarchal social system head-on. For these characters, the time of weeping is a period of transition, which enables them to move beyond the men whose lives (no matter how lived) have constrained them. In each of the four texts in which I have traced this figure, that time period is construed via different formal means. Each text registers the combined and uneven nature of capitalist modernity. But they also (pace WReC’s insistence on the unmediated causality of the link between literature and the global economic system) transmit and refract the social imaginaries and generic aspects of the networked literary terrain in which they participate.

Conclusion: In Praise of Disciplinary Disobedience

This chapter has asked questions about the continued usability and usefulness of the term ‘African popular literature’ in the present anglophone academic moment. In placing Karin Barber’s A History of African Popular Culture and WReC’s Combined and Uneven Development in dialogue, and in counter-fitting aspects of their respective conceptual apparatuses, the chapter has suggested some ways in which mainstream disciplinary policing of African texts and their cultural and institutional value might be profitably interrogated and re-thought. The textual figure of the weeping woman (visible only across a network of formally different texts embedded in variously scaled circuits of literary dissemination and canonicity) suggests that bisecting Africa’s uneven literary terrain according to the spurious demands of what Apollo Amoko has called ‘aesthetic correctness’ will no longer do (Amoko, 2001, p. 27). Scholars of Africa might do much worse than to learn from this literary figure the value of carefully measured (disciplinary) disobedience.

Acknowledgements

Parts of this chapter were presented as papers at Rhodes University in South Africa and the universities of Birmingham and Leeds in UK; I am grateful for the feedback and comments I received on those occasions. Thanks to Jane Bryce and Grace A Musila for the essays and encouragement they sent during the Covid lock-down of early 2020. I would like to acknowledge the financial support of the Urban Connections in African Popular Imaginaries project at Rhodes University.

Notes

1 A phrase taken from the concept note for the present volume.
2 WReC are Sharae Deckard, Nicholas Lawrence, Neil Lazarus, Graeme Macdonald, Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee, Benita Parry and Stephen Shapiro.
3 For a discussion of the link between time and genre, see Bushnell (2018). Although my discussion involves characters, “the weeping woman” is not a character label adopted by the texts themselves (such
As, for example, “prostitute” or “wife”). It is, instead, a textual figure that combines notions of subjectivity and notions of time, and becomes discernible only after multiple comparative juxtapositions of texts across genres and lines of canonicity – that is to say, by comparing local and Anglobal African texts.

4 During the African Studies Association of the UK conference at the University of Birmingham on 11–13 September 2018, Grace A Musila gave the conference keynote address titled “MaKhumalo’s Spaza Shop, Lena Moi’s Dance”, that resonates with this statement.

5 This statement is informed by my discussions (in August 2018) with members of the Mellon-funded research project Urban Connections in African Popular Imaginaries, led by Dr. Lynda Gichanda Spencer at Rhodes University, South Africa.

6 An editor at the Zambia Educational Publishing House once told me, in an offhand exchange, that a Zambian book becomes “a classic” simply by being published.

7 I am not talking about conscious “influence” here. Serpell had not read Norah Mumba prior to completing The Old Drift, but she had participated in Zambian literary cultures in other ways, and she had done extensive research.

8 See, for example, Tlali (2004), Sibale (1979).

9 For a summary related to the problematic of this chapter, see Guillory, 1993, pp. 64–71.

10 “The ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations” (Taylor, 2004, p. 22).

11 Matigari itself crosses languages and media in ways which are well known to scholars of African literature.

12 Which, in Kenya, crosses fictional genres, as Newell (2011) has noted.

13 I am grateful to James Murua for the translation of the lyrics and an online conversation about Fadhili Williams.

14 In an email exchange of 18 August 2018, Owuor told me she is aware of Kiriamiti who “remains a perennial bestseller” in Kenya. She wrote of “[l]iterature as mirror, for place and a people’s psychic conditions . . . these, the books that one often picks from the street bookshops often touch the pulse of a space in an honest and precise way”. The absence of the term “popular” from her wording seems noteworthy.

Works Cited


Ranka Primorac


