

African Women Writing Resistance: An Anthology of Contemporary Voices

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African Women Writing Resistance: An Anthology of Contemporary Voices collects writings of thirty-six women from thirteen African countries, providing a metaphorical megaphone to those women and a clear, unflinching look at what it's like to be female and oppressed in their respective countries. The picture thus drawn is anything but pretty, but contains the seedlings of hope and change.

The writers aren't hapless victims begging for hand-outs. On the contrary, they're strong, determined, and fierce defenders of their right to choose their own paths in life. One of the most memorable stories of feminine resistance is in "Women's Responses to State Violence in the Niger Delta" by Nigerian-born freelance writer and social justice activist Sokari Ekiné. She relates events in Nigeria's Ogoniland during the 1990s, as documented between 2000 and 2003 through fieldwork by the Niger Delta Women for Justice and the Ijaw Council for Human Rights.

Multinational oil companies were essentially handed the Niger Delta's petroleum resources in exchange for arms and money for Nigerian military and police forces. The resulting environmental disaster caused by unchecked gas and oil extraction led to several groups forming to oppose it and the Nigerian government's inaction. The Federation of Ogoni Women's Organizations (FOWA) comprised a cross-tribal membership, and began protesting via the Federation's member groups. Their actions were met with repeated, numerous daily beatings and sexual assaults perpetrated by the military.

Thousands strong, FOWA women then occupied eight oil company facilities in the Delta. They threatened their opponents with a rarely-employed but highly effective cultural calling-out called the Curse of Nakedness. In Delta cultures, public nakedness by women—especially married and elderly women—is considered a shaming of the men at whom it's directed. Many men in the region believe that madness or other serious misfortunes will befall them if they see it. The FOWA women's willingness to use it was proof of their determination and outrage. One only has to imagine the scene to realize the powerful effect it would have on those witnessing it.

Editor Jennifer Browdy de Hernandez also edited the *Women Writing Resistance: Essays on Latin America and the Caribbean* (South End Press, 2004) collection. That project led her to form a college-level course and anthology focusing on African women. She and her co-editors sent a 2005 call for papers which, as she notes, prompted an "almost [immediate] flood of writing." She notes in the preface, "We send it out into the world in the hope that it will be the inspiration for ever-expanding rings of 'women writing resistance' in Africa and worldwide."

The heart-rending experiences which many contributors relate are also stories of renewal, survival, and continuing on. In a world that delivers nearly instant evidence of humanity's transgressions, resistance is now harder to silence. The topics covered include environmental destruction, genocidal conflicts between tribes and ethnic groups, ineffective legal protections for women, forced marital arrangements, the life-altering effects of religious and social customs

(especially female genital cutting), emigration, and exile. That's an enormous amount of material to cover in one book, but it all needs to be more widely known, by those in African countries as well as in other nations.

Distance breeds disinterest, and it's easy for Westerners to take less notice of far off conflicts. But editors Browdy de Hernandez, Dongala, Jolaosho, and Serafin work to focus the world's attention on the vicious reprisals against protest that African women—both in their home countries and abroad—have endured on a daily basis. They also show that African women look for and create alternatives to the injustices they've suffered, within and apart from traditional forms of protest.

Education is a necessity, as the writers in this volume know very well. Such an education must include the history of contemporary struggles for justice in other countries in response to decades of oppression. Anyone interested in African and women's studies, world literature, and human rights efforts would do well to read *African Women Writing Resistance*; it turns the sensory assault of media reporting on violence into human faces, lives, and aspirations for the future.

Resistance, when effective, brings change. Reading *African Women Writing Resistance* will erase disinterest and ennui, and perhaps that is the first step toward supporting these writers' admirable goals.

J. G. STINSON (September / October 2010)

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