

Old Love Skin: Voices from Contemporary Africa

Mukana Press, Editor

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Old Love Skin is an eye-opening poetry collection that is shaped by Africa's inescapable past and that celebrates its rich multiplicities.

Old Love Skin, an egalitarian anthology edited by Nyashadzashe Chikumbu, introduces over fifty prizewinning and emerging poets from the African continent.

Africa's literary profile, according to Chikumbu's concise introduction, has been raised by its novelists, short story writers, and essayists. In part because of "a liberation history against colonialism" that may be inferred to have fostered prose, and because poetry is sometimes viewed as a private "high art," less is known about African poetry, he asserts. Seeking to address this lack, this new anthology gathers a fertile cross-section of poems.

Without topical divisions, the poems are organized back to back, free and unencumbered by pronounced connections. Each poet is represented by two to three poems—enough space to present a clear sense of their voices. Earnest language binds the work, though the poems vary in their technical proficiency. Indeed, several contain loose line breaks and favor transparent messages. Others obscure their meanings with abstractions, and a few are rudimentary. But there are also incisive titles and apt images, as with "Echoing Loss as a Prelude to the Opera of Bad Regimes," a poem about facing a cousin's disappearance. The entries that treat womanhood as their subject are also frank and emotive.

Though free verses dominate the book, a handful of other forms are represented too. There are examples of the haibun, cento, and sonnet. The poets' visions range from reflections about inhabiting Black skin to prayerful supplications and queries about identity to explorations of modern love. They are shaped by Africa's inescapable past, but they celebrate rich multiplicities too: here, the continent is defined not only by its encounters with whiteness—which one poet encapsulates in the blistering observation, "The colonialists came / with a rifle and a Bible"—but in terms of its own resurgent hopes.

There are haunting lines throughout. In one poem, drowning leads to surfacing, "only to find the rope as a necklace." A poet from Ghana meditates in the aftermath a murder, revealing the conflicting emotions that arise in a country that cannot be unloved even "when it kills me." Challenges including rape, COVID-19, stigmas against LGBTQ+ people, and colorism are covered in direct manners in entries that center resilience. But there are also references to pop culture (Billy Porter's red-carpet tuxedo gown, for instance), cuisine, and nature, pleasures that anchor everyday lives. Such minute attention to moments of reprieve is hope-filled, reflecting people's ability to endure.

Old Love Skin anthologizes African poetry with a focus on fresh, unadorned voices.

KAREN RIGBY (August 22, 2022)

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