

## “A luta continua”

### Florence Stratton’s *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender* today

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This June, our institute’s book of the month was *Never Again* by Flora Nwapa. A student had recommended it to be highlighted as such on the little screen facing our small seminar room, in which I had taught a class where the book had been discussed. Apart from one student in that class, who was from Nigeria, nobody knew the text initially, even though all participants were interested in contemporary literature from Africa and its (so-called) diasporas. But Flora Nwapa – “our unforgettable Flora Nwapa”, as the Nigerian student had put it – belonged to a generation of African writers that had slightly fallen out of canons, or were not focused on in seminars where more attention was laid on the obvious ‘classics’ by authors such as Ngugi Wa Thiong’o or on more contemporary writers such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Yet, Flora Nwapa’s texts remain meaningful in many ways, as do the writings by other feminist authors of her generation, such as Mariama Bâ or Ama Ata Aidoo. Lots of more books of the month to recommend, and for manifold reasons.

What amazed the students first might have been the pathbreaking characteristics of Flora Nwapa’s writing – the first West African woman to write a novel in the English language (*Efuru*, 1966), and the deeply moving experience of reading her insightful *Never Again*, on the continuation of colonial violence, published only five years after the end of the Biafra War. But there is more to learn from these books, and it is Florence Stratton’s seminal work on *Contemporary African*

*Literature and the Politics of Gender* (1995) that helps us to understand what that might be. In her study on critical theory and the construction of gender with respect to the work of four African women writers, Florence Stratton demonstrates that almost right from the beginning of postcolonial African novel writing, interactions between men and women intellectuals played a significant role in negotiating the roles of women, often in critical conversation with colonial images. At the same time, she argues, have these productive interactions been largely ignored by most late-twentieth century studies and representations of African literature. In work such as *The Empire Writes Back* (Ashcroft, Tiffin & Griffiths 1989), which continues to be regarded a classic in the field, hardly any female African writer is even mentioned, Nadine Gordimer being an exception.

After a critical discussion of a White, male bias that still tends to shape academic discourse and work on African literature and language practices in many cases, Florence Stratton develops her own approach, in three parts: first “Aspects of the Male Literary Tradition,” where she discusses persisting sexism as a consequence of intensively focusing on decolonial struggle in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958), as well as constructions of women as “mother Africa” in texts of the (largely male) Négritude movement. Then, she makes “Room for Women,” where she carefully develops a new gaze at the writings of Grace Ogot, Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta and Mariama Bâ, showing how these four women’s writings interact with one another as well with writings of dominant male authors such as Chinua Achebe. Through these complex intertextual, interpersonal and cross-linguistic interactions, ways of representation of African women and the roles of women in African decolonial societies are negotiated and reformulated. Florence Stratton thereby highlights the interwoven and dynamic character of the works of these writers, instead of presenting them as distinct and closed. In the book’s third and final part, “Men Write Back,” she shows how male writers react to these texts and conversations, by thinking and writing about other possibilities of constructing gender at large and the roles of women in particular. Instead of deploring the

seemingly stagnant construction and representation of women as 'mothers' (of a nation, a people, a place, etc.), as custodians of 'tradition' as pre-colonial 'culture', Stratton consequently arrives at a different possibility, namely women as participants in struggles and conversations that contribute to decolonial dynamics and social change. Not only do Flora Nwapa's literary heroines actively resist colonial systems of domination and patriarchal orders, but the author herself and her contemporaries did so as well. One of the merits of Florence Stratton's book is that it shows that these exciting and intellectually significant contributions did not receive the attention they deserved for a relatively long time, and offers a compelling study that invites readers to adopt a more nuanced perspective in a manner that is both hospitable and fascinating.

Another merit of Florence Stratton's book, which makes it a relevant source until today, is that it also manages to turn our gaze to the underlying traces of ways of producing knowledge in the novels by Flora Nwapa and her peers. There is much to learn about these conversations between writers, also at a metaphorical level, by looking at the relationships between the different figures across their novels and stories: That epistemic hospitality and the porosity of colonial systems of domination can be seen as being reflected upon by these writers, who sought to change society through both their work and the interactions they enjoyed. Stratton (1995: 107) thus concludes her chapter on Flora Nwapa by making a powerful statement about resistance and agency in Nwapa's writing:

In certain important respects, the female *bildungsroman* stands in opposition to the entire African male literary tradition – a tradition to which the very notion of female development is alien. For it is a form which, by its very definition, characterizes women as active and dynamic – as developing. Women are, in other words, conceptualized not as the Other but as self-defining.

Furthermore, their status as historical subjects is given due recognition. This, then, is the form which Nwapa introduces into the female literary tradition: a

form which seeks to subvert the manichean allegory of gender by putting female subjectivity in process.

That women are presented in novels as powerful actors in decolonial struggles and women's writing also serves purposes of knowledge production and transfer, highlighting multiperspective views of events, now has become more common. Reem Bassiouney's writings (for example her *Mamluk Trilogy*, 2022) thereby are an interesting example here, which also shows how writing fiction and at the same time developing a new, critical perspective in academic work also helps to overcome persisting colonial constructs of language and society, from an Arab perspective, an African perspective, a woman's perspective.

Florence Stratton today is a retired professor living in Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada, which is her home town. Her years as an academic were spent in diverse places, such as at the University of Wisconsin where she obtained an MA in English, at Njala University in Sierra Leone, where she taught for nineteen years, and in London, where she obtained a PhD in English at SOAS in 1991. She then worked for the Catholic Worker House of Hospitality in New York and then returned to Regina, where she was a professor at the Department of English from 1997. As a retired academic, she now devotes herself to activism.

In an interview given to writer, researcher and activist Scott Neigh in March 2025,<sup>1</sup> she describes her work for social justice, solidarity and peace. It began to take shape long ago, in her formative years as a young academic, she recalls:

I learned a lot in Sierra Leone, but the most important lessons had to do with colonialism. I recall saying to a Sierra Leonean colleague not too long after I arrived, "Isn't it wonderful that both Sierra Leone and Canada are part of the British Commonwealth." She looked at me with disdain and responded, "The British Commonwealth is just an extension of the British Empire." [] After a number of years of reading and conversations, I gained something of an

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<sup>1</sup> <https://mediacoop.ca/node/119281>

understanding of the colonization of Africa as oppression and exploitation — and not the civilizing mission I had been taught it was in school. I also eventually came to understand that the exploitation had not stopped with independence, but was ongoing.

Her description of how she became a committed scientist and activist is modest and reflective – and just like her scientific writings, there is much to learn from it. She tells about her work in social justice and peace activist groups, where she contributes to ending houselessness and poverty in Regina and beyond, to the preservation of its environment (for example by saving Wascana Park from its destruction by business investors), as well as to peace movements, among other goals and issues. Because her work as an activist is so impressively interwoven with her academic biography, also with regards to what she recommends in the interview as helpful reading and practice, I became interested in how she would view engaged and engaging academic work today, and reached out for a short conversation.

**AS:** My first question is about looking back to your academic training and career, now that you devote much of your time and energy to activist work: Would you study the same subject again and pursue an academic career in the same discipline if you looked at the situation at universities today?

**FS:** In 1959, I began studying for a BA at the University of Saskatchewan as a Math major. I'd had an outstanding high school Math teacher. By my 2<sup>nd</sup> year, Math had begun to lose its lustre. As I had had an outstanding English 100 lecturer, I switched to English.

New Criticism was the dominant mode of literary analysis in Canada and the US from the 1930s through to the 1970s. From a New Critical perspective, a literary text is a self-contained unit, something to be studied in itself and not as part of a larger context. New Criticism also assumes that literary texts have universal significance—that they transcend time, place, and difference. New Criticism was thus

for several decades a powerful marginalizing force in literary studies, as it privileged the white, middle class, heterosexual male subject.

It was not until the 1970s that gender and race studies emerged—and along with them post-or anti-colonial studies. It was then that my real education began.

What would I study if I was about to start university today? Literary studies would, for a better reason than in 1960, be one of my considerations, as it allows for the examination of cultural values and practices. I would also consider Justice Studies. Possibly also Law—so many activist groups need legal advice.

**AS:** Considering the changing conditions of academic work (such as neoliberal politics in knowledge production and transfer, new conservative and reactionary dynamics on campuses and in classrooms, among other processes taking place), how authentic is what is happening at universities / campuses today, perhaps also in comparison to activist movements that you support? In other words, should we be more suspicious than in the past of the way buzzwords are circulated and important debates are co-opted?

**FS:** I taught my last class at the University of Regina in 2011, so I'm not up-to-date regarding "the changing conditions of academic work." However, one concern I have had for a couple of decades regarding all Canadian universities is what I have taken to calling "internal corruption," by which I mean the following:

- The exploitation of sessional or adjunct lecturers—who are paid a pittance
- The exploitation of international students—who pay exorbitant tuition fees
- The excessive salaries of top administrators and upper-level academics

Academic unions should be speaking out against this "internal corruption."

**AS:** And then there are two questions that are about your experiences as an academic and an activist: How does courageous and committed teaching work best? And how does courageous and critical research work?

**FS:** Courageous and committed teaching, like all teaching, should be based on careful research. The teacher should also provide a model of courage and commitment.

All research must be done with care. As for courage, you simply work to uncover the truth and to promote justice.

**AS:** What forms of resistance are effective today when we think of resistance and protest on the university campus? For example, protest marches and camps are increasingly met with violence by the police, and speaking up in the classroom is increasingly feared to be punished by the lecturer or professor, and so forth. Hence, which way forward?

**FS:** I thought freedom of speech was a fundamental principle of universities. Are some universities caving in to the wishes of wealthy donors? Are some lecturers or professors unable to handle healthy debate?

The struggle continues!

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