Rizo, Elisa, ed. ***Caminos y veredas: narrativas de Guinea Ecuatorial*****. Mexico City: UNAM, 2011. Print. 164 pp.**

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Among the more notable aspects of the minimal attention given to African literature in Spanish is the dearth of approaches marked by Latin American referents. The publication in Mexico of *Caminos y veredas: narrativas de Guinea Ecuatorial*, the first anthology of hispanophone West African fiction to see print in the Americas, offers as a result an opportunity to alter the basic parameters of academic and popular reception of such texts. That reception, in global terms, is scarce to begin with: few are the literary scholars or general readers who know that Equatoguinean fiction exists. Those who do, however, including the novelists and short story writers themselves, historically have tended to place it in an interior monologue concerned with national or ethnic identity, or in dialogue, implicitly or explicitly, with the cultural and sociopolitical contexts of Spain. That is where the authors often live and work; that is the nation whose literary legacy is repeatedly brought up as relevant. The gaze tends to be northerly or southerly, or some combination thereof, depending on whether a writer, academic or creative, decides to cast it from an ideated Equatorial Guinea or an ideated Spain. The time to transgress that template is now.

The transatlantic and Latin American juxtapositions that may be prompted by the appearance of *Caminos y veredas* could start in any direction. Among the most obvious points of departure might be the contexts of dictatorship, a phenomenon all too resonant with the dead of Latin America and the literatures produced in their wakes. Since independence in 1968, Equatorial Guinea has been run by a hyperbolically tyrannical man and, since a coup in 1979, by his standard-issue tyrannical nephew. For people familiar with major Latin American literary output on such realities, it is impossible to read a text like the one that initiates *Caminos y veredas*, the opening fragment of a novel by Donato Ndongo, without thinking of *La fiesta del chivo* by Mario Vargas Llosa or *El otoño del patriarca* by Gabriel García Márquez. The excerpt by Ndongo begins with the sudden death, during attempted sex with a teenage wife, of a long-ruling, panoptic and murderous despot from whose cadaver

"sobresalía altanero el órgano erecto que taladraba el aire como un desafío a la nada, compendio de su poder, fundamento de su autoridad, símbolo inequívoco de su portentosa virilidad, vestigio de su enérgica dominación secular sobre cualquier ser viviente" (34). An omniscient narrator then takes the reader around the minds of the conniving relatives of the dictator, who are standing in the room, staring at the man who had utterly dominated their lives, each of them weighing their odds at taking his place or surviving the fallout of his fatality.

The fact of dictatorship, however, should not condition automatically the reception of Equatoguinean texts any more than should the ethnological interest that likely will cause some readers to pick up *Caminos y veredas* in the first place. It would be unfortunate if the anthology were read primarily by armchair anthropologists interested in assimilating, at a safe distance, the seemingly exotic: an unfamiliar country with unknown peoples who have produced, seemingly unexpectedly, literature in a language unassociated with Africa. Of course, there is nothing exotic about tyranny and certainly nothing exotic about writers of different ethnic backgrounds with diverse oral traditions emerging from artificially amalgamated African countries to produce fiction in erstwhile European languages. Yet it seems probable that the reason why this book will land in some libraries and reach some readership is because of the novelty, even at this late date of colonial history, of literature in Spanish from Africa. That is the trap that scholars all too frequently set for themselves in this microfield: academics produce prose with the aim of identifying and contextualizing obscure authors in the most traditional of ways for an audience that, though barely in existence, is assumed to expect pretty much the same. A bit of biography here, a bit of semiprofessional sociology there, a consensus valuation of *costumbrismo* all around, and everyone can go home ensconced in more or less the same place as before.

This is too little to ask. The great value of a text such as *Caminos y veredas* is how it initiates the publication of collected Equatoguinean fiction in the Americas with just enough introduction so as to situate a reader desiring of such situation and just enough hints at the larger issues at stake, and then lets the texts speak for themselves and with each other. Elisa Rizo, the editor of the anthology, though a fine scholar in her own right and one of the few to think beyond what usually passes for analysis of hispanophone African literature, limits her own voice here to a brief prologue divided into five sections. The first section suggests the idea, radical even now in Equatoguinean literary criticism, that the aim of reading these

texts is not to reach "cualquier noción esencialista sobre lo auténtico" (13-14). The remaining four sections hone in on the contents of the volume at hand. Rizo provides an overview of the history of the country, followed by outlines of its tradition in the novel and the short story, and then a sketch of the particular pieces in *Caminos y veredas*.

At this point, Rizo withdraws from the stage, save for inserting very concise summaries of the backgrounds and titles of the authors as their fictions come up in turn. She has chosen, judiciously, to not turn the anthology into an academic text complete with footnotes and further glosses. This allows the book to appeal to a general readership that might be willing to enjoy a collection of fiction for its own sake. Expanding the audience for African literature in Spanish is a laudatory goal, since the first order of business for Equatoguinean writers, unlike, for example, their Mexican counterparts, is often to prove that they and their country exist. The lack of additional academic framing devices in the anthology also effects the salutary aim of eradicating the hierarchy implicitly established between footnoter and footnoted. Such discrepancies in power are a persistent issue in academic treatments of Equatoguinean literature, which are usually produced by scholars in comfortable institutions of the West about cultural artifacts created by individuals in conditions that range among exile and dictatorship and poverty. From an aesthetic standpoint of readability alone, the absence of persistent fourth wall penetration by the editor is most welcome.

Caminos y veredas is bookended with pieces by two prolific Equatoguinean writers who, with the possible exception of María Nsue Angüe and her novel *Ekomo*, have attracted in general the most attention in academic circles. These authors are Ndongo, with his novel fragment, and Juan Tomás Ávila Laurel, with two short stories. The texts of three other writers appear in between, including short stories by Justo Bolekia Boleka, José Fernando Siale Djangany and Recaredo Silebo Boturu. The fluid and entertaining texts by Siale, a relatively overlooked author in terms of scholarship produced around his work, are the most pleasant surprise of the anthology. They suggest an author with an eclectic range of narrative skills whose fictions bear several re-readings well.

The opening text by Ndongo is the commencement of a novel, *Los hijos de la tribu*, that when published will be the final installment of a trilogy that began with *Las tinieblas de tu memoria negra* in 1987. The fragment, entitled "Cero," is a polished piece by an author apparently well-versed in literary predecessors who have written on similar themes. The urge

among many readers familiar with Equatorial Guinea and with Ndongo in particular–he has been the most prominent intellectual in hispanophone African literature for decades now–will be to interpret the text as an undisguised indictment of national politics, perhaps even a roman à clef. A far more interesting move, however, would be to read it against the Latin American representations of dictatorship with which it so obviously shares stylistic and topical commonalities. An ethical question that might be considered as well is whether the fragment gains its rhythm and readability from the dramatic tension of which of the profiled characters will seize the power of the dead autocrat rather than from the development of a multilayered assessment of why such tyranny emerges and endures. "Cero," in other words, reads as a mystery thriller at least as much as a depiction of despotism.

The second author in the anthology, Justo Bolekia Boleka, presents a contrast in his two stories to the smooth craftings of Ndongo. Bolekia has many noteworthy academic publications to his credit but his fiction here appears forced. Both his texts open with a first person narrator intent on offering some truism or expounding to the reader, often via stilted parenthetical commentary, on something he just voiced. The flavor of the prose is exemplified by the metatextual moment near the start of "Mi sobrino consorte Anfiloquio," the second text, when the narrator explains, "Me encontraba sentado en mi despacho de profesor universitario, todo un privilegio para un inmigrante ya integrado, asimilado, vinculado, doblemente deculturado, y también condenado a vivir para siempre pensando, comiendo, viviendo y soñando como cualquiera de las personas de su tierra de acogida" (82). Though efficiency is hardly a required or even desirable characteristic of good fiction (whatever that is), subsequent passages such as the following do not seem to gain anything by their verbosity: "mi sobrina Pitusa-Claudia, hija, como ya dije antes, de mi primo-hermano Vicky, regidor que fue – como ya tengo dicho – de la antigua Clarence City, hoy Malabo, y una vez Santa Isabel" (83). The better story, "Los mensajeros de Moka," does have a strong suit: its powerful depiction of the gruesome body count compiled by a venomous regime and its henchmen.

The three narratives by Siale really anchor the anthology in its middle. The first and most substantive story, "La visitante de la bahía," is according to Rizo inspired by a local narrative about a sea goddess (26). Rizo describes Siale as possessing "an ojo crítico y lúdico" and this seems accurate at various levels (26). When "La visitante de la bahía" opens, the story appears to revolve around a young couple. The sea goddess only slips into the

narrative in mid-paragraph a few pages later, an entry so subtle that a first-time reader might easily take her as just a colorful background character in a micro-parable about development. She then disappears in the text, seemingly never to return, as the focus swings back to the young couple. The surprise ending allows for an entirely new read of the story, almost compelling thereby a return to the opening page to understand the tale in a new light. This narrative playfulness is generally absent in the equally skillful but more straightforward text by the much more famous Ndongo that begins the anthology. The reception of "Cero" seems unlikely to change between a first reading and a second because the possibilities of relatively discrete interpretive frameworks appears less ample. "La visitante de la bahía," in contrast, can be read as an attractive legend in its own right, as an adept reimagination of an oral tradition, and/or as a critique of changing economic and sociopolitical orders in Equatorial Guinea. The only weak moments are its somewhat cumbersome attempts at erotica. "La visitante de la bahía" is followed by two other, much shorter texts by Siale that feature the entirely different tones of satire and faux academicism. These brief narratives, "El mandato" and "El Negruzco," read as perhaps partially inspired by Borges, though without the abstractions: their subjects stay rooted in African contexts.

The fourth writer featured in the anthology, Boturu, offers in "La danza de la abuela" a folk tale complete with a concluding moral. The story is nested by a grandmother who narrates it to her grandchildren. Of all the texts in *Caminos y veredas*, this one has the most circumscribed ambitions as a literary endeavor. Perhaps it is meant to be read as a plea for fraternity across a larger fractured society, but otherwise it does not seem particularly compelling. The narratorial tone is uneven and the storytelling is somewhat wooden.

The final author, Ávila Laurel, offers two pieces that demonstrate his dexterity in assuming unusual perspectives. "Mi boda mozambicana" is a quasi-journalistic sketch voiced by a dryly amused first-person narrator who wanders away from an official summit of international cultural cooperation and into a church where a wedding is being held. The narrator decides to pass as a wedding guest and, in a mix of observational playfulness and intellect, comments the goings-on to the reader. In a rather deep emotional contrast, "De cuando Cecilia era nadadora" is a viscerally compelling short story narrated by a recently conceived fetus. As the narrator grows in the womb, her perspective on matters such as intercourse, masturbation and abortion are powerfully conveyed in tones of wit as well as pathos. Together, the texts by Ávila Laurel have the virtue of disassembling the expectations

of readers who would approach the anthology with anticipations of stories featuring Equatoguinean dictatorship and ethnography.

Caminos y veredas ends well with these texts because their diversity in form and function suggests an open-endedness to the types of narratives that might emerge from Equatorial Guinea. If the polish of Ndongo in "Cero" indicates that African literature in Spanish can match in achievement that of canonical Latin American literature on the same theme, then the adroitness of Ávila Laurel reveals that Equatoguinean literature can surface on canvases as varied as human life itself. The lack of a valedictory comment in the anthology by the editor or someone else is a wise move, for that absence thereby proposes that the African voices in consideration do not need a final word administered by academics from beyond. Introducing unfamiliar voices in the Americas, which is what the publication in Mexico of *Caminos y veredas* accomplishes, is a move toward opening space; so too is leaving to readers whatever thoughts they may carry away. Perhaps some people might take "De cuando Cecilia era nadadora" as an opportunity to align Ávila Laurel aside Carlos Fuentes and the fetal narrator of *Cristóbal Nonato*. Perhaps others would juxtapose "Mi boda mozambicana" to assorted *crónicas* of Latin America. Whatever the readings that come out of *Caminos y veredas*, the result, hopefully, will be to allow African fiction in Spanish to circulate with the same possibilities of reach and influence as short stories and novels from, say, Mexico itself.