



WOMEN'S
LITERATURE

IN KENYA
AND UGANDA

THE TROUBLE WITH
MODERNITY

MARIE KRUGER

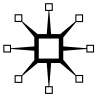


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Marie Kruger

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For the Writers



Ugandan women writers outside the FEMRITE office (November 2, 2002).
Front row, from right to left: Beatrice Lamwaka; Mildred Kiconco Barya; Beverley Nambozo Nsengiyunva; Monica Arac de Nyeko; Jackee Batanda; Middle row: Lilian Tindyebwa; Goretti Kyomuhendo; Ayeta Anne Wangusa; Glaydah Namukasa; Philo Nabweru; Jemeo Nanyonjo; Goretti Bukombi. Last row: Unidentified visitor; Winnie Rukidi; Rose Rwakasisi; Florence Ebila; unidentified FEMRITE member.

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INTRODUCTION



KENYAN AND UGANDAN (WOMEN'S) LITERATURE

THE TROUBLE WITH MODERNITY

For nearly a decade, writers' collectives such as Kwani Trust in Kenya and FEMRITE, the Ugandan Women Writers' Association, have dramatically reshaped the East African literary scene. This dramatic shift is evident in the success with which Ugandan women's groups have collaborated with local publishing houses to steadily increase the literary presence of female authors, or in the efforts of *Kwani?* magazine to promote the work of Kenyan scholars and writers, journalists and visual artists in an innovative print format. Though some of the women writers have been honored with prestigious literary awards, their works have not received sustained critical attention.¹ This book provides the long overdue critical inquiry that these writers and their nuanced narrative representations so urgently deserve. I demonstrate throughout my work that Anglophone Kenyan and Ugandan women's writing constitutes a vital, yet often overlooked, part of the cultural and creative exchanges in Eastern Africa, and that it continually extends its focus to include the larger historical and political events in the African Great Lakes region (Tanzania, Burundi, Rwanda, and Eastern Congo).² As new literary networks operate across national spaces and freely exploit the digitized modes of global communication, the works of their writers revisit and significantly expand the recurrent concern with modern institutions, subjectivities, and sexualities in East African writing. In fact, the writers' simultaneous interest in gender dynamics within local communities and in social exchanges between two neighboring East African nations allows for a unique

examination of the relationship between modernity, gender, and the complex cultural and political networks of the region. In my analyses of the texts of prominent and emerging East African authors, I establish a dialogue between several challenging narratives that examines the writers' complex engagement with the discourses of modernity and the extent to which such concerns either traverse national boundaries or remain invested in the politics of particular national and ethnic communities.

The Trouble with Modernity acknowledges the continued popularity of narrative prose in English for Kenyan and Ugandan women writers. FEMRITE publications and magazines feature the fictional narratives and life stories of Ugandan women, while *Kwani?* magazine offers an eclectic diversity of testimonials, travelogues, journalistic reportages, and creative writing. This interest in narrative, as I explain elsewhere in this introduction, not only reflects on the continued relevance of narrative as a medium of social change, especially for the gender mainstreaming programs of Kenyan and Ugandan gender and literary organizations, but also relates to the pivotal role accorded to literacy in English and the role of the educated writer in the discourses and practices of modernity. Other studies will have to address how East African authors writing in different genres and in languages other than English have contributed to the understanding of modernity. Certainly, the efforts of FEMRITE to recuperate the oral testimonies of Ugandan women in Acholi and Langi, the linguistic diversity in *Kwani?* as well as the Kiswahili texts of Tanzanian writers deserve further scholarly attention.³ My study advances this ongoing interdisciplinary debate by mapping the unique visions of the alternatively modern in Kenyan and Ugandan women's narrative prose.⁴

Officially launched in May 1996, the Ugandan women writers' organization FEMRITE developed from an initiative by Mary Okurut. At the time, Okurut lectured in the Department of Literature at Makerere University; since then she joined President Museveni's cabinet, first as the president's press secretary, then as a member of parliament. In the mid-1990s, Okurut began to lobby a group of like-minded women—aspiring and established writers of fiction, journalists, and university lecturers—to establish an institutional outlet for the promotion of women's literature. One of the group's earliest supporters, Monica Chibita, suggested the name FEMRITE to simultaneously signal the gender (fem) and professional identity (w/rite) of its members. FEMRITE is indeed "Mary's Dream," as Hilda Rutagonya, the current coordinator of the organization, explains in a 2006 publication celebrating the group's achievements.⁵

Through the persistent efforts of Okurut and others, FEMRITE was able to secure funding from the nongovernmental Dutch organization Hivos, and, in 1997, the organization established its office in Kamwokya, a neighborhood in Kampala in close proximity to Makerere University.⁶ The small house has since transformed into a hospitable space for emerging writers, a resource center and publication office, a meeting place for the weekly book club, and the monthly assembly of the executive committee.⁷ Although FEMRITE has struggled over the years to obtain adequate funding, the organization has certainly made significant progress toward achieving its objectives. The dramatic increase in women's literature, the national and international reputation of FEMRITE writers, and the organization's strong support for literacy campaigns illustrate its ability "to create an awareness about Ugandan women's writings; promote a culture of reading and writing in Uganda; help women writers improve their skills; network and publish creative works by Ugandan women; as well as serve as a resource and training centre."⁸ Interestingly, this summary of the group's concerns was provided by one of FEMRITE's original members, Florence Ebila, in an article titled "Ugandan Women Watering the Literary Desert." The trope of the literary desert has become commonplace in African literary criticism since 1965, when Taban lo Liyong lamented the inability of Eastern African countries to provide fertile ground for creative writing. For women writers, however, lo Liyong's famous (and often criticized) assessment acquires an added urgency.⁹ By the early 1990s, only four Ugandan women writers (Rose Mboya, Elvania Zirimu, Jane Bakaluba, and Barbara Kimenye) had gained national prominence, while the country's major press, Fountain Publishers, had recently launched the work of Mary Okurut, Lillian Tindyebwa, and Goretti Kyomuhendo, three emerging female authors and prominent FEMRITE members. Though women continue to be underrepresented among Ugandan writers, FEMRITE has had a dramatic impact on promoting "greater equity in literary production."¹⁰ By March 2010, the group's small publishing outlet had released 21 print publications, from novels, poetry, and short story anthologies to several collections of women's life stories, which address such controversial social topics as HIV/AIDS, female genital mutilation, and military conflict.¹¹

FEMRITE's programs and support networks have shaped the careers of young female writers such as Monica Arac de Nyeko, Glaydah Namukasa, Jackee Batanda, and Mildred Kiconco, many of who have won prestigious literary awards, while some of them also contribute to the success of *Kwani?* magazine. In the meantime, Doreen

Baingana and Goretti Kyomuhendo have become the internationally recognized faces of Ugandan women's writing. All of these writers recognize FEMRITE as a major influence on their professional and personal development.¹² The group's objective to operate as a general agent of social change, however, extends beyond providing resources for individual writers. The late Hope Keshubi, whose work will be discussed in Chapter 4, emphasizes FEMRITE's aim to transform Ugandan civic society and "[to] build confidence and a good image of women as a way of changing society's negative attitudes towards women."¹³ To this effect, FEMRITE's magazine, *New Era*, was conceived as a "social magazine" that covered a wide variety of social and literary topics, including the controversial issues of domestic and sexual violence, and that gave ample opportunity to FEMRITE members to showcase their journalistic and creative writing. After a six-year run, the magazine ceased publication in 2002 and was briefly replaced by the biannually published *Worldwrite* (2002–5), which focused primarily on FEMRITE's professional activities and the creative work of its members. Both magazines intended to educate readers on the concerns of Ugandan women and the difficult process of writing and publishing in a country with few publishing venues. The magazines, in particular, and FEMRITE, in general, thus operate within the larger social context of the late 1990s when the Ugandan women's movement stressed the need for gender sensitization programs.¹⁴

These efforts are reflected in neighboring Kenya where nongovernmental organizations such as the Collaborative Centre for Gender and Development (CCGD) rely on creative literature to sensitize local populations to the disadvantaged position of girls and women in a patriarchal society.¹⁵ Officially launched in 1996, the CCGD intends to contribute to the development of democratic and gender-responsive cultural practices and institutions in Kenya through its extensive publication program, workshops, and educational campaigns. The center frequently collaborates with the local chapter of the African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEMNET) to lobby for the inclusion of women in national politics, to increase access to educational and professional opportunities for girls and women, and to encourage the critical interrogation of gender identities and behavior. The concern with the social construction of gender is shared by several Kenyan gender and literary organizations. Studies such as *The Road to Empowerment* (1994), *Delusion: Essays on Social Construction of Gender* (1994), and *Contesting Social Death: Essays on Gender and Culture* (1997) examine how cultural ideologies shape gender roles and relations and how this normative framework is mediated through

social, political, and literary discourses. The case studies included in these edited volumes devote particular attention to social and literary discourses that capitalize on “the authority of tradition” to sanction established cultural norms. As the authors expose the ideological scripts and political interests informing gender identities, they advocate for a “gender sensitization program” that will enable women (and men) to understand and modify the social performance of gender.¹⁶

In these publications, oral and written literature is viewed as playing a vital role in consolidating or transforming dominant gender scripts. Benjamin Odhoji, for example, summarizes his research on Luo orature by emphasizing that “[f]olktales . . . operated in the field community not just as genres of entertainment, but also as ideological tools which reflect, justify and enhance sex differential patterns of the male dominated economic base” (57). In *Contesting Social Death*, a study of the Kenyan Oral Literature Association (KOLA), he and other scholars examine how patriarchal norms are integrated into a culture’s narrative traditions and the extent to which such literary idioms can be contested and changed. KOLA shares this interest in the relationship between narrative and cultural identity, and in creative writing as a tool for social change, with other Kenyan gender and literary organizations, including the now-defunct association of Kenyan women writers, FEMART-Kenya. With the support of the prominent Kenyan writer and publisher Asenath Odaga, FEMART-Kenya published a literary magazine, proceedings from a conference on Kenyan women’s literature, as well as several anthologies of short stories. The titles of these publications—*Moving to the Centre* and *The Survivors*—already demonstrate the group’s objective to employ women’s writing, and especially narrative prose, to address the gender inequities in Kenyan society.

If the turn toward multiparty politics in 1992 aided the Kenyan women’s movement, then the overthrow of the Obote regime by the National Resistance Movement (NRM) signaled a similar political change in Uganda. Susan Kiguli and Florence Ebila credit “the National Resistance Movement’s general philosophy of affirmative action for women and the acknowledgement of women’s participation in the guerilla war” for creating the social climate in which women’s organizations could thrive.¹⁷ That these changes, at best, are only a first step toward gender equity is demonstrated in the backlash against women writers whose explicit representations of sexual violence have been denounced as pornographic. The controversy surrounding Gorette Kyomuhendo’s *Secrets No More*—a novel that recounts the rape of women during the Rwandan genocide and also in

the seemingly protected space of domestic relations—serves as a poignant example of how easily women writers are shamed into silence.¹⁸ Kiguli and Kyomuhendo both emphasize that the need to conform to social expectations encourages a pervasive form of self-censorship that prevents women from claiming writing as a legitimate profession. To counteract these socially imposed interventions, FEMRITE engages in a host of activities, from weekly book clubs and writers' workshops to radio and television programs, to provide aspiring writers with opportunities for training and networking.¹⁹ In its effort to promote a culture of reading and writing in Uganda, FEMRITE continues to collaborate with educational institutions and teachers, with representatives of the media and the book industry, and with policy makers and academics. "To instill the value of literature and reading amongst children and students in various parts of the country," FEMRITE has instituted children's reading festivals at several Ugandan primary and secondary schools.²⁰ In the organization's activities and the statements of its members, literature—and literacy in general—are continuously emphasized "as tools for national development," and women writers are perceived as making a substantial contribution in this realm.²¹

Every year, FEMRITE hosts a week of literary activities during which members have an opportunity to network with internationally renowned African writers and critics. Three of these events invited discussions on the Ugandan publishing industry (2001), the role of literature in sustaining a reading culture (2005), and "writing the unfamiliar story" of socially marginalized populations (2008). The presence of Keresia Chateuka from the Zimbabwean women writers' organization at the 2008 Week of Literary Activities, and a transnational workshop for African women writers later the same year, both demonstrate FEMRITE's commitment to work together with "writers from across the continent to create a sense of belonging for African women writers' groups."²² Though the organization might still fall short of its intention to stage a literary revolution in Uganda, its activities have effectively promoted local writers in the hope that these writers contribute to the development of a gender-sensitive national culture and engage in sustained dialogue with African and diasporic writers.²³

These overlapping local, national, and regional agendas are shared by Kwani Trust, "a Nairobi-based literary network committed to the growth of the region's creative industry through publishing and distributing contemporary African Literature."²⁴ Founded in 2003 by the Kenyan writer Binyavanga Wainaina, Kwani Trust—not unlike FEMRITE—profited from the vision of its founder; the support of a

group of Kenyan writers, filmmakers, and journalists; and the significant sociopolitical changes after 1992, when the country transitioned toward multiparty politics. Associated with the success of the literary collective—and especially the international reputation of its journal *Kwani?*—are artists such as the late Wahome Mutahi, Judy Kibinge, Yvonne Owuor, Parselelo Kantai, and Muthoni Garland, who, in 2007, established Storymoja, a further publishing venue for Kenyan creative and noncreative writing.²⁵ Prominent Ugandan writers like Doreen Baingana, David Kaiza, and Kalundi Serumaga are actively involved in Kwani Trust, as is Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye, a well-known Kenyan writer of Anglo-European origin.

With its programmatic name *Kwani?*—which translates into English as “so what?”—this group of writers pursues an ambitious project of supporting creative expressions outside of the public spaces “defined by the church, the state, the media and universities.”²⁶ Their dislike of official narratives and institutions is reflected in Wainaina’s terse assessment of academics as “unwanted gatekeepers” who operate within an elitist context that remains hostile to popular culture.²⁷ Instead, Kwani Trust intends to promote a new generation of fiction and nonfiction writers who “are generally interested in expressing themselves in *a more modern way* that questions political, social and economic structures” (emphasis added).²⁸ In the five volumes of *Kwani?* published to date, these “more modern ways” are synonymous with popular modes of expression, with Internet-based forms of communication such as email and text messages, and with linguistic innovations like Sheng, the mix of Kiswahili and English that is popular among Kenyan youths.²⁹ As *Kwani?* aims to reflect contemporary sociocultural and linguistic practices in Kenya—“the language of the Kenyan streets” rather than the clichéd talk of politicians and academics—its editors Kahora and Wainaina celebrated the emergence of a new national identity driven by the versatile creativity of younger Kenyans.³⁰ The events following the presidential elections in December 2007, however, were soon to demonstrate that frustrated and poor Kenyan youth are not impervious to ruthless political manipulation and that national identity easily fractured along ethnic lines. I will return to these events and their impact on Kenyan writing and society shortly. For now, it is important to note that, even as *Kwani?* models itself on other African nonacademic journals committed to youth culture (*Chimurenga*) and narrative diversity (*Transition*), it shares the concern of FEMRITE’s more conservatively presented magazines when advocating for the transformative impact of writing and writers on civic society and political culture.³¹

To promote East African writers and, in general, employ creative and nonfictional writing to address socioeconomic inequities and foreground the situation of marginalized populations, Kwani Trust engages in several activities similar to FEMRITE's programs. Short story and poetry competitions that encourage aspiring writers to reflect on "the Kenya they live in" (2009) or the meaning of masculinity (2007), monthly spoken-word performances and literary salons—in addition to an annual literature festival featuring book readings, discussion forums, and exhibitions—have consolidated the group's impact on the Kenyan popular art scene. Kwani Trust's publication program now includes not only a literary magazine of international repute but also a series of shorter, more affordable monographs, including Wainaina's and Owuor's award-winning short stories and (auto)biographical accounts of prominent Kenyans like David Sadara Munyakei, who, in 1992, exposed high-level corruption within the Kenyan government.

While FEMRITE aims to cultivate literacy in schools, Kwani Trust examines Kenyan history and urban culture through a variety of digital projects. The *24 Nairobi* project intends to showcase the Kenyan metropolis through the perspective of photographers who claim Nairobi as their home, either by birth or by choice. In contrast to "the narrow lenses and stories of missionaries, career war photographers and aid workers," *24 Nairobi* aims to provide "an alternative, innovative, realistic and professional African perspective" of the Kenyan capital.³² *Generation Kenya* shares a similar objective when compiling the photographic portraits and biographical narratives of 45 influential Kenyans born since the country's independence in 1963. The intention of the curators is to work toward a visual archive of Kenyan identity that questions Western readings of postcolonial history while also foregrounding the contradictory processes through which ordinary Kenyans transform into publicly recognized figures of success.³³

This interest in new forms of visual communication is also evident in the multiple editions of *Kwani?* Published annually since 2003, the journal combines the creative writing of Kenyan and, to a lesser extent, Ugandan and other African authors with journalistic and scholarly essays, interviews and biographies, travelogues and personal memoirs. As the journal traverses multiple genres, unafraid to blur the lines between fact and fiction, it addresses such controversial issues as the colonial construction of "settler" and "native" (volume 1), the political manipulation of ethnic identity (volume 4), and the sexual violation of young girls in the seemingly safe space of boarding schools (volume 3). Its generic trespassing includes a fondness for the

visual arts; for photographic narratives and political cartoons; for stories unfolding in the cyberspatial realm of text messages, emails, and blogs; and for a range of Kenyan linguistic idioms that signify on the status and residence of its speakers. From Sheng, the preferred sociolect spoken by Kenyan urban, and often poor, youths, to Engsh, the version of English associated with upper-class young Kenyans, to the ridicule of “Kiongoso,” the deceptive talk of government officials, *Kwani?* astutely observes the linguistic stratification of Kenyan society.³⁴

Remarkably, these innovative verbal and visual expressions are framed by the repeated return to two significant historical events. The frequent references to the Rwandan genocide in several *Kwani?* volumes are juxtaposed with the iconography of the Kenyan liberation movement, as represented by the silhouettes of dreadlocked men on the cover of the first two editions and the photographs of Dedan Kimathi and other freedom fighters in later issues. What emerges in these historical narratives is a more complicated landscape of national and regional identities, of anticolonial resistance and postcolonial culpability, than the one suggested by the editors' enthusiastic embrace of popular youth culture. Focused on the problems they inherited from the previous generation, *Kwani?* writers are outspoken in their critique of failed nationalism, corruption, and censorship.³⁵ The violence following the 2007 election in Kenya, though, made it necessary to consider that “national identities suppress and mask other identities that could be potentially explosive if found in the mix of political manipulation, economic deprivation, corruption, limitations of freedoms, and violation of rights.”³⁶

As frustrated male youths were coached in violence by politicians of both parties, Billy Kahora wonders—in his editorial to the first of two issues of *Kwani?* volume 5 dedicated to the postelection violence—how Kenyanness fractured into a series of sharply divided ethnicities. He asks, “What are our, or will be our defining texts in the light of what happened during those 100 days of 2008?”³⁷ When the dreaded 100 days of genocidal violence in Rwanda haunted the postelection clashes in Kenya, *Kwani?* writers found themselves in search of explanations, of common ground, and, ultimately, in search of a nation.³⁸ New civic organizations emerged, such as the Concerned Kenyan Writers Group, to whom the second issue of *Kwani?* volume 5 is dedicated.³⁹ Yet even these more than 400 pages of eyewitness testimonials, journalistic reportages, travelogues, photographs, and creative writing are prefaced by Kahora's anxious question about the state of Kenyan democracy. Interestingly, it is Mbembe's pessimistic assessment of the African postcolony that shapes Kahora's vision of “the strange carnival

in which a pervasive atmosphere of macabre conviviality binds the potentate and the dominated in a drawn out orgy of violence and death."⁴⁰ Can the nation be redeemed if not only an autocratic government but also, more importantly, the educated middle-class writer has failed to prevent systematic human rights violations?⁴¹

The vision of the writer's social responsibility inevitably leads us back to earlier critical paradigms that, in the postindependence period of the 1960s and 1970s, insisted on the role of the intellectual in building the postcolonial nation. That the educated writer is still expected to invest her skills for "the greater good" is apparent in FEMRITE's support for writing as a tool of national development, in Storymoja's promotion of a reading and writing culture as "patriotic duty," and in Kwani Trust's willingness to contest official power and examine "the country's big, current issues, such as unfair distribution of wealth, land and resources."⁴² With the imperative of responsibility comes the fear of failure that speaks to the ambivalent position of the intellectual between political dissidence and bourgeois co-option. Its tainted colonial legacy turns literacy, and the institutions of formal education in general, into a shape-shifting vehicle for national renewal and social divisions. Not surprisingly, these concerns translate into prominent literary themes.

From *Nervous Conditions to Weep Not, Child*, the protagonists of African fiction have had to reconcile individual aspirations with the needs of larger social collectives. For women, literacy has always been of particular appeal, for it promised an escape from the confining grasp of poverty and patriarchal domination. The desire for social mobility through education informs the novels of FEMRITE writers, from Barungi's *Cassandra* and Wangusa's *Memoirs of a Mother* to Kaberuka's *Silent Patience* and Kyomuhendo's *First Daughter*; it dominates the fiction of established Kenyan writers, beginning with Grace Ogot, Asenath Odaga, Pamela Ngurukie, and Margaret Ogola; and it resurfaces in the work of new writers (Wairimu Kibugi Gitau and Florence Mbaya).⁴³ I will further discuss this interplay of gender, culture, and modern institutions in Chapter 2 on "Historical Modernities: Epics of Love and Literacy." As the nation struggles with corruption and violence in the fiction of Margaret Ogola, Jane Kaberuka, and Mary Okurut, what remains of the role of education in shaping a progressive subjectivity and a democratic society?

But it is not only the familiar figure of the intellectual and the crucial role of literacy in colonial and nationalist modernities that provide a better understanding of how Kenyan writers responded to the postelection violence. Equally important are the narratives that

chronicle the construction of ethnic and racial identities in East Africa. In response to Kahora's question as to "[w]hat texts can we turn to for an explanation of the first few weeks of 2008?"⁴⁴ Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye pointedly remarks that "the consciousness of violence is present in most Kenyan novels and drama, even where it is not the main theme, but we have often shirked the communal aspects of conflict. After all, what happened in January was neither unprecedented nor unanticipated. What shocked was the scale of it."⁴⁵ To the list of works cited by Macgoye, I would add Likimani's examination of Gikuyu identity at the time of the liberation war, Owuor's discussion of the Rwandan genocide, Odaga's and Macgoye's concerns with building a nation out of diverse ethnic identities, as well as the rejection of ethnic stereotypes in the romances of Adalla and Ngurukie.⁴⁶ In Ugandan women's fiction, the discourses of race and ethnicity inevitably implicate the dictatorial regimes of Obote and Amin and the protracted civil war in the north. Kyomuhendo's novels on genocide (*Secrets No More*) and civil war (*Waiting*), Kiguli's and Oryema-Lalobo's poetic laments of militarized violence, and the short stories of Monica Arac de Nyeko, Jackie Batanda, and Waltraud Ndagijimana, to name only a few, reflect on the inability or unwillingness of the postcolonial state to protect vulnerable populations. These literary representations are echoed in the life stories of Northern Ugandan women, which are collected in two edited volumes published by FEMRITE.⁴⁷ In Chapter 3 on "The Dark Sides of Modernity" in the narrative prose of Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye, Yvonne Owuor, and Goretta Kyomuhendo, I will therefore examine the extent to which colonial fictions of race and ethnicity haunt postcolonial nations in their struggle for ethically responsible ways of living with "strangers."

Not only, however, in situations of political conflict and war is East African women's literature concerned with violence against women. In their review of patriarchal institutions and practices, the writers often devote special attention to the sexual abuse of women and to the rape and incest suffered by young girls whose guardians fail to protect them. This failure to protect also implicates the lack of sexual education that alienates female protagonists from their bodies and proves especially disastrous in the time of HIV/AIDS. The production of modern sexual bodies is a prominent theme in several anthologies of short stories—as well as in the texts of Florence Genga-Idowu, Shailja Patel, Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye, Rebeka Njau, and Carolyne Adalla—and often serves as a critique of unequal access to knowledge and power. The titles of some anthologies—*The Survivors*, *Our Secret Lives*, *Reversed Dreams*—already speak to the disadvantaged

position of women within patriarchal social and political systems.⁴⁸ In Uganda, the concern with gendered violence is even more explicitly linked to the advance of a sexually transmitted, and still terminal, disease. The novels of Mary Okurut, Hope Keshubi, Doreen Bainyana, Glaydah Namukasa, and Lillian Tindyebwa; the short stories collected in FEMRITE's anthologies; and the life stories published in *I Dare to Say* provide ample testimony to the literary preoccupation with sexuality, gender, and AIDS.⁴⁹ As I will explore in Chapter 4, "Mapping Global Modernities: Property and Propriety in the Time of AIDS," the plight of those infected with HIV often translates into a general metaphor for postcolonial anxieties and the failure of the nation to responsibly provide for its citizens. In my analysis of the texts of Carolyne Adalla, Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye, and Hope Keshubi, I foreground how representations of HIV/AIDS offer a critique of capitalist economies when they link the desire for sex to the seductive appeal and excessive consumption of material goods.

In the age of global capitalism and disease, when literary collectives such as FEMRITE and Kwani Trust freely move between the space of the metropolitan capital and the global modes of digital communication, the nation has not completely lost its significance as a political and symbolic structure. Even as Kenyan and Ugandan writers condemn the failure and corruption of the state, they continue to search for a government and citizens who responsibly negotiate rights and obligations. When Wainaina laments the failure of the writers "[to] separate our reasonableness from the unreason and power games of a cynical political class," and when Kahora emphasizes that Kwani Trust "wants to allow for and start off a debate that enables democracy and creates an economy that everybody can take part in and benefit from," then these visions of social transformation unmistakably revisit the language of modernity.⁵⁰ The search for justice seems destined to traverse the familiar territory of order and reason, democracy and prosperity, while fearfully guarding against the state's monopoly on violence and the construction of ethnic others. The writers of *Kwani?* might have more in common with academic debates than they care to admit. In December 2006, at a conference at Moi University (in Eldoret, Kenya), participants discussed how African intellectuals have modified the institutions of modernity to establish independent modes of self-writing and the extent to which these local appropriations of colonial modernity continue in the contemporary period of globalization.⁵¹

What these debates neglect to consider is how East African women writers have engaged with established representations of gender, race, and modernity in an effort to define their own visions of the

alternatively modern and to recover the emancipatory promises of social reform from the fraudulent practices of the colonial intervention and the often equally ambivalent gender rhetoric of nationalist programs. How do their texts respond to the double erasure of women of color in discourses and practices of modernity? How do they reflect on the antithetical portrayal of African women in both colonial and nationalist rhetoric as either a moral antidote to the corrupting influence of social change or an embodiment of hedonistic impulses that contrast unfavorably with the rationality of men? As their texts suggest new ways of imagining gender, they offer multidimensional, and often ambiguous, literary scenarios that fundamentally rewrite the potentialities of modernity. Each chapter of my book thus expands the critical paradigms of modernity when I interrogate how the selected texts reclaim the modern institutions of church and school (Chapter 2), position gender in the rapidly transforming narratives of ethnic and racial identities (Chapter 3), and reimagine the production of modern sexual bodies in the age of global capitalism and disease (Chapter 4). I will explore these questions within the larger theoretical context of recent discussions of alternative or critical modernities, which have displaced the Western monopoly on modern subjectivity and culture, even as they failed to account for the complex dynamics of gendered experiences. While the next chapter will provide a more comprehensive survey of these interdisciplinary debates, for now, I will offer a definition of the alternatively modern that acknowledges the crucial role of individuals and social groups in the negotiation (and contestation) of modern institutions (church, school, nation), categories (rationality, temporality, subjectivity), and phenomena (migration, ethnicity, sexuality).

Throughout my work, I establish that the understanding of modernity and gender in East African women's literature requires a simultaneous concern with various spatial configurations: with the nation-state and its promise of liberation from colonial legacies, with the transnational exchange of ideas and the displacement of people in Eastern Africa, and with the local cultural practices that determine the intimate details of gender identities and relations.⁵² This emphasis on East African cross-cultural encounters, on the collaboration of literary collectives, and on the recurrence of literary themes also shifts attention away from an exclusive preoccupation with the interaction of European and African cultures. The translocal networks of the African Great Lakes region are of particular importance in Chapter 3, when a "Tutsi prince" finds himself displaced across the border to Kenya, when Jewish immigrants seek exile in colonial Kenya, and when Congolese

refugees are trapped in Amin's violent Uganda. At a time when a global disease exhausts the resources of East African nation-states and exploits the prejudices of those overwhelmed by a deadly pandemic, these texts imagine new discourses of rights *and* responsibilities that postcolonial studies can ill afford to ignore. As East African women writers write themselves out of the biased representations of the West and into their own, often equally conflicted narratives, they reveal the strategic silence of the West on the colonial violence that enabled its material progress and epistemological hegemony and its denial of the transcultural encounters through which the modern has always been the product of many rather than the monopoly of one. In the works of Kenyan and Ugandan women writers, modernity emerges as a process of mutual negotiation inside *and* outside the colonial orbit rather than the diffusion of a single cultural formation.

In spite of its prominent place in Western history, modernity has been the subject of a bewildering array of often conflicting narratives, all eagerly aspiring to find a workable definition for the elusive experience that has shaped Western understandings of subjectivity and culture, and of self and other. Shuttling between chaos and order, between the thrill of rebellion and the stifling grip of bureaucratic efficiency, between confident optimism in the opportunities afforded by a constantly changing world and nostalgic longing for the security promised by the relationships of the past, modernity presents itself as a shape-shifting vision that generates ambiguous responses rather than conceptual clarity. If modernity is "[the] characteristic intellectual and social formation of the industrialized world," inspiring conflicting views of hope and fear, then what does it mean for Africans to be modern, forced as they were into the institutional apparatus of colonial modernity while excluded from its epistemological privileges as the West's nonrational other?⁵³ Does any, even tentative, embrace of modernity amount to the surrender to hegemonic paradigms, or does it suggest the possibilities of the Black Atlantic, of the global modernities and alternative centers of cultural authority only belatedly recognized in the West? Is the debate of African modernities hopelessly "untimely" given the circulation of other spatial and theoretical formations in the humanities (postmodernism) and in the social sciences (globalization)?

Even a cursory review of recent publications in African studies and of the works of African philosophers and literary critics reveals modernity's lasting legacy for the relationship between Western and African cultures, a relationship still trapped in the ideological short circuit that prefers to contrast Western "progress" with African "traditions."⁵⁴

As Victorian myths of the Dark Continent are obsessively recycled in the tropes of “tribal savagery” that haunt *The Last King of Scotland* and the James Bond franchise, it is obvious (yet again) that modernity indeed always requires an “other” and an “elsewhere.”⁵⁵ While popular representations render old stereotypes palatable for twenty-first-century audiences, academic discourses on modernity have undergone frequent transmutations. In their introduction to an edited volume devoted to *African Modernities*, Deutsch, Probst, and Schmidt chronicle the scholarly debate in African studies that emphasized “modernity as contagion” in the 1930s and 1940s before insisting on “modernity as necessity” in the 1950s and 1960s. However, it is the current emphasis on “modernity as contingency” that has significantly contributed to the understanding of modernity in its culture-specific manifestations.

Since the publication of Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* (1993), an increasing number of interdisciplinary works have challenged the conceptual monopoly the West believed to have defined securely in its favor. As postcolonial and diasporic studies—such as David Attwell’s survey of South African literature (*Rewriting Modernity*, 2005) and Peter Geschiere’s anthology *Readings in Modernity in Africa* (2008)—contested modernity’s political narratives, the myth of the modern as a singular cultural and historical formation began to shatter, while the crucial role of African cultures in the formation of Western epistemologies finally received attention. Feminist theorists, meanwhile, wondered whether the gender of modernity is indeed white and male, and whether these gendered and racial preferences are expressed in conventional notions of modern subjectivity that link the desire for autonomy and freedom to the need to subjugate the other and the fear of dependence on the feminine.⁵⁶ Missing from the theoretical debate, however, is a critical examination of literary representations of modernity that engages with the intersecting narratives of race and gender in specific cultural idioms and locales. My study addresses this significant theoretical blind spot by inquiring how women writers have reinscribed modernity into the cultural fabric of particular geographical sites and, in the process, attempted to situate gender outside not only of colonial but also of African versions of authority.

To locate Kenyan and Ugandan women’s literature within a highly contested theoretical terrain, my work is premised on the critical interrogation of the episteme modernity and its equally important conceptual siblings: tradition, postmodernity, and globalization. The next chapter, “Promise and Fraud: The Poetics and Politics of

the Modern,” establishes the long overdue dialogue between Western and African philosophers and cultural theorists, which I pursue throughout the subsequent chapters. The work of Kwame Gyekye and Anthony Giddens on modern institutions and social relations of trust (Chapter 2), of Achille Mbembe and Zygmunt Bauman on the capacity of the modern nation-state to target “racial and ethnic strangers” (Chapter 3), and of Sylvia Tamale and Deborah Posel on the production of modern sexuality in an age of globally circulating bodies and commodities (Chapter 4) clearly demonstrates that modernity is “unfinished business.” However, it is less Habermas’s famous assessment of *die Moderne* as a historical process toward personal and social emancipation based on the emergence of an ethically committed, communicative rationality that signifies the incompleteness of the modern for Kenyan and Ugandan novelists. Instead, I maintain that East African women writers perceive “the incompleteness” of modernity in the fraudulent claims of colonial modernity and the failure of the postcolonial nation to adequately provide for its citizens. They remain committed, however, to the promise of social mobility and democratic participation, and of economic prosperity and cultural autonomy. In this interwoven landscape of promise and fraud, I examine the location of modernity through the performance of gender.

In Chapter 2 on “Historical Modernities: Epics of Love and Literacy,” I interrogate the interplay of gender, culture, and modern institutions in novels by the Kenyan author Margaret Ogola (*The River and the Source*), and the Ugandan writers Mary Okurut (*The Invisible Weevil*) and Jane Kaberuka (*Silent Patience*). In the examination of these works, I engage with the theories of the British sociologist Anthony Giddens and the Ghanaian philosopher Kwame Gyekye, who, even though writing from different cultural and disciplinary locations, share a concern with modernity’s institutional and psychological effects when they interrogate how modern institutions have shaped biographical narratives and social relations of trust. Most importantly, Giddens and Gyekye draw our attention to the dialectic between individual agency and social institutions that emerges as the primary concern in the narratives of Kaberuka, Ogola, and Okurut. These novels tend to disassociate the institutions of church and school from their immediate colonial past and instead claim literacy and proficiency in English as highly desirable tools in shaping a progressive subjectivity and society.

As the novels celebrate a bourgeois identity in terms of moral duty, romantic love, and a disciplined work ethic, they, at first, seem to validate the controversial promises of the Enlightenment. Yet the dream

of bourgeois success is carefully balanced with the commitment to an ethos privileging the needs of larger communities. Thus, the texts offer a vision of the alternatively modern that echoes Gyekye's understanding that "the decline and fall of a nation begins in its homes" (293). The prominent role of the educated protagonist and her supportive relatives in these narratives reclaims the family as the pivotal institution through which the reform of the postcolonial nation can be imagined. Driven by the desire for citizenship, sovereignty, and power, the narratives employ the genre of the epic as the opportune narrative template for locating the normativity of the modern present in the East African past.⁵⁷ Once these epic narratives transition from the hereditary status of the chiefs to the bourgeois nobility of disciplined citizens, the figure of the widow emerges as the principal site of change and continuity. Are the heroines of Ogola's, Kaberuka's, and Okurut's fiction "liberated" by romance and education and their enticing promise of individual and social progress? Does the ethos of self-advancement encourage female characters to willingly sacrifice their own needs for those of the larger community? In my analyses of the texts, I examine the vision of an alternative modernity that, in its appeal to a desirable moral and social order, persuades female protagonists to accept the logic of sacrifice.

While the novels in Chapter 2 recover the utopia of progress in a morally redeemed modernity, the texts I discuss in Chapter 3, "The Dark Sides of Modernity: Citizens, Strangers, and the Production of Moral Indifference," are unwilling to claim the modern nation as a vehicle for liberation and solidarity. In the narratives of Goretti Kyomuhendo (*Waiting*) from Uganda, and Yvonne Owuor ("Weight of Whispers") and Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye (*A Farm Called Kishinev*) from Kenya, modern institutions are only able to produce moral apathy toward those who are marked as "different" and who are therefore excluded from the protection of the state. As "difference" mutates into a source of conflict, and even genocide, leaving women and children especially vulnerable to organized hostility, these novels and short stories enter into a productive dialogue with scholars who question the etiological myths equating modernity with the social production of moral responsibility. Of particular relevance here is Zygmunt Bauman's work on *Modernity and the Holocaust*, in which he examines the epistemological preferences and bureaucratic capabilities that enable the modern nation-state to target an "undesirable" population. When the texts portray the displacement of Tutsi refugees ("Whispers"), the despotic rule of Idi Amin in Uganda (*Waiting*), or the anti-Semitic persecution of Jewish settlers in colonial Kenya (*Kishinev*), they