

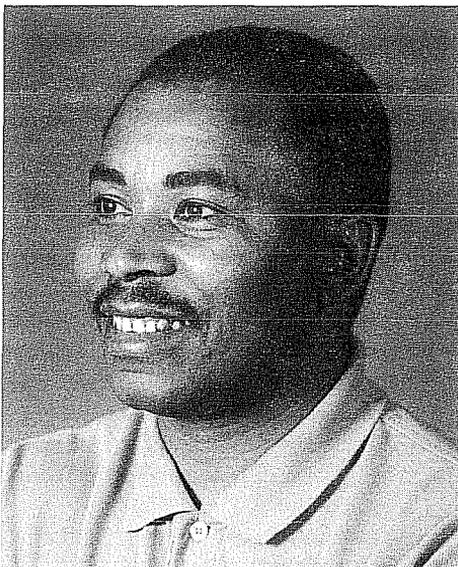
Bordering the Mainstream: The Writing of Tololwa Mollel

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Résumé: Cette présentation de l'œuvre de Tololwa Mollel, qui vient de publier son septième roman, *Big Boy*, est fondée sur une entrevue que l'auteur a accordée récemment: les récits pour la jeunesse de Mollel sont au confluent de la tradition folklorique et des réalités contemporaines. En tant qu'écrivain d'origine africaine inscrit dans un contexte multiculturel, il témoigne d'un métissage socioculturel, à la fois littéral et métaphorique, qui occupe une place bien particulière dans le nouveau paysage de la littérature de jeunesse du Canada anglais.

Summary: This profile is based on a conversation with Governor General's Award-winning author, Tololwa Mollel. Mollel, who grew up in Tanzania and is now living and writing in Canada, published his seventh book for children last summer, entitled *Big Boy*. This widely-acclaimed author describes his children's stories as fusions of contemporary realities and traditional folklores.

But as a writer of colour working within a Canadian multicultural context, Mollel's negotiation of the histories and geographies he literally, as well as metaphorically, crosses extends beyond his narratives and maps a complex and often difficult territory through the racial and cultural politics surrounding the production of Canadian children's literature.



Contemporary Canadian multiculturalism professes a celebration of ethnic diversity. While celebrating diversity is one of many strategies used by writers of colour working in Canada, others choose to take on the inadequacies of Canada's policies of tolerance and acceptance by dealing more directly with this country's historical and current formations of racial inequality. Although there are other possibilities available to contemporary authors, in many ways, any choice made is inextricably bound up with audience reception and the marketplace. My talk with award-winning children's writer Tololwa Mollel this summer at the University of Alberta engaged many of these tensions. What gradually emerged during our two-hour conversation was a mapping out of the often difficult terrain that writers of colour move through to negotiate the

demands of tradition, history, culture, and audience. It was not a map that marked out boundaries, but rather one that tracked across shifting, and often contradictory, locations, and necessarily problematized any easily managed, fixed categorization of the person of colour writing children's books in Canada.

Mollel, a Tanzanian native now living in Canada, has just published *Big Boy*, his seventh book for children. Internationally recognized as a "master storyteller," Mollel attempts to "connect the past to the present" in each of his books by projecting realities of contemporary relevance using African traditional folklore. Although Mollel received a Governor General's Award for his first book, *The Orphan Boy* (which also was recognized as an ALA notable book and an IBBY Honour Book), and his talent as both a storyteller and a writer is much sought after by many Canadian libraries and schools, his work remains to be addressed in a critical light.

As a Canadian woman of colour researching the intersections between children's writing and issues of race in Canada, I looked forward to speaking to Mollel about the ways in which his words, his writing, and his voice are circumscribed by the political realities of race. Yet, situating Mollel as a "writer of colour" hazards reinforcing categories upon which racism relies and fails to attend to his individual specificity. Such an emphasis on ethnicity evokes the racist logic of otherness prevalent in hegemonic discourse. In Mollel's words, "it boils down to who you are . . . like who am I . . . ? A Black person? Like what is that? It's so diverse, people from the Caribbean, and so on. And [in Canada] sometimes, it's such a forced construct, 'black people.' It's really so artificial . . ." Nevertheless, "race" is of inevitable material consequence to people of colour, and thus to ignore "difference" is insufficient. Indeed, it is this "difference" — both from white Canada and Western conceptions of "black" Africa — that Mollel's distinctly African folktales strive to record.

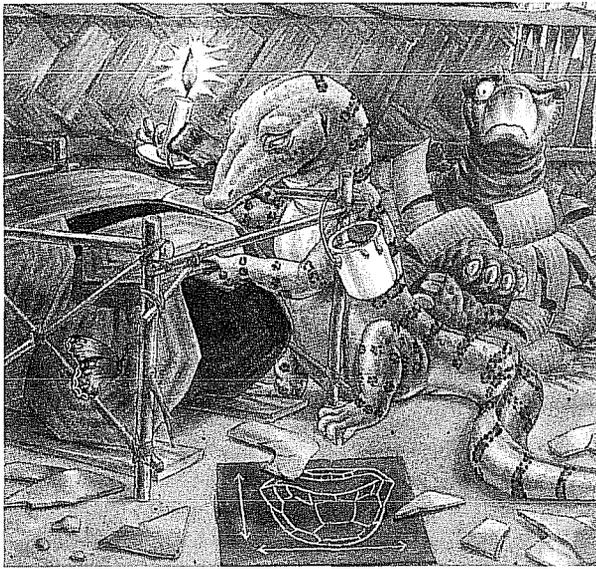
Growing up in Arusha, Tanzania, and attending university, first at Dar es Salaam and then at the University of Alberta as a graduate student, Mollel's life has been one of literally crisscrossing geographies. After receiving his Master's degree from the University of Alberta in drama in 1979, he returned to the University of Dar es Salaam and lectured in drama until 1986. The decision to pursue his doctorate brought Mollel back to Edmonton, where he has now crossed yet another border from the academic to the "creative." Becoming a writer is a destination towards which Mollel has journeyed for a long time: "I have always had an interest in literature, and books and stories. I grew up in Tanzania in an oral culture and my grandparents always liked to tell stories. I think that I carried that with me into school, and, with my love of books, it was just a matter of time before I tried my hand at writing. I started actually writing after the birth of my first son. I started reading to him children's stories that I used to enjoy as a kid and what struck me about these stories is that the really good stories were very, very simple. In addition, they were written in a memorable language with vivid imagery. And I remember saying to myself, this is really something, to be able to do that. I thought that I would like to try it and it started from there."

Mollet finds himself variously occupying the sites of teacher, spokesman for Africa, entertainer, author, and cultural bridge. This is a complex navigation for Mollet, as it is for many Canadian writers of colour who both resist containment by any one of these identities and who simultaneously struggle to mobilize these categories in order to intervene in the way meaning is produced. Although Mollet's work maintains traditional folktale narrative structures, his depiction of images rarely seen in their own right defies the colonialist images that dominate mainstream cultural narratives about Africa. Accordingly, Mollet's artistic strategy is one that seeks to impart "a different view of Africa. If my books do that for kids, that would really help. In *Big Boy*, my most recent book, for example, I tried to make tradition contemporary. It is based on a folktale, but I wanted to show the kid in a modern setting. The boy is wearing white sneakers and white shorts and, in his home, there are some modern things. So I tried to show children that Africa is not just grass huts. These are things I usually get asked by the children, about whether there are houses, and this and that. So I feel that my writing is a way of answering all these questions without beating kids on the head with it."

Mollet says that he feels deeply the urgency of dismantling mainstream representations that consistently construct Africa as the monolithic "dark continent" easily portrayed and consumed through stereotypes. Because he is aware that most of his audiences will not have escaped the mass impact of films like the *Lion King*, Mollet hopes that his folktales will work to correct the inaccuracies of such popular productions: "In *The Lion King*," Mollet observes, "the filmmakers tried to pull things together from different regions, like the South African character who speaks Swahili, and no-one [western audiences] really noticed." In fact, one book Mollet is presently working on, *Simba's Roar*, involves "the lion who is always the king of the animals. But this story will involve a twist. The king is taught a lesson by the animals because he is very autocratic." Talking about this story with schoolchildren, however, evokes the inevitable, "Yeah! That's the Lion King. And I say, well, that's 'Simba,' a word that comes from Tanzania. It's a Swahili word, not one that originated with the movie!"¹

There is always the danger that Mollet's folktales will be recuperated into mainstream reading practices as a romantic portrait of a distant land. Indeed, the decision to write folktales is an interesting one in the context of Mollet's allegiance to the larger political project of challenging racist discourses. Mollet's choice requires him to constantly negotiate the expectations of his primarily Western audience, who might read his tales as fixed, unchanging cultural artifacts, of little relevance in a modern context, rather than as fluid narratives with ongoing cultural and political significance. But, in his work, Mollet disrupts perceptions of folktales as fixed by changing "traditional" elements: "You can twist [the story] and you can manipulate your way around a tale to bring about that element of the disruption of the 'natural' order of things...."

In addition to issues of nation, Mollet's "disruptions" also focus on gender, as is demonstrated in *Rhinos for Lunch and Elephants for Supper*, where he has replaced the male frog of the original folktale with a female frog who smokes a pipe



Illus. ©1994 by Barbara Spurrll. From *The Flying Tortoise*.

and carries a walking stick: “I thought this choice would work well with the underdog theme of the story. I thought it [the story] would be well served if the frog was a female frog. For me, this seemed natural, but I thought it would carry an element of surprise for the readers.” Another female character whom Mollel writes as a strong presence is the lizard Ngwele. She is the skilful craftsperson in *The Flying Tortoise* who, alone, has the ability to mend the trickster tortoise’s shattered shell. To date, however, Mollel’s female characters have been animal, rather than human, characters. “As far as female human characters go,” Mollel promises, “I’m working on that now as a way of compensating, if you like, for writing only stories about boys in *The Orphan Boy* and *Big Boy*, and also as a way of doing something new. I want to see if I can imagine, if I can conjure up, or if I can bring the right feelings to this character and I can make it full. It will be a new kind of story.”

The disruptive nature of Mollel’s tales is also mediated by the texts’ illustrations. Thus far, Mollel has written his folktales as picture books, and it is the publisher, and not Mollel, who selects the illustrators. The relationship between Mollel and his illustrators is one that Mollel describes as a “risky collaboration.” But, as he constantly negotiates his entry into the mainstream, Mollel views “having to work with someone from a different culture,” as a necessary risk in order to reach a mass audience. Many times, the pictures coincide with Mollel’s original vision, and he used an example from *The Flying Tortoise* to affirm the productive alliance that can exist between author and illustrator: “I was really happy that the illustrator chose to depict the lizard as fixing the tortoise’s shell using scaffolding and glue. She is an engineer! I had

originally seen her as a sort of craftsperson, but I was happy that the illustrator extended that a little more.” At other times, the collaboration is less successful, as in *Rhinos for Lunch and Elephants for Supper*. Mollé describes one of the book’s pictures showing a leopard reading to his children as one that “really leapt out at me. The book he is reading from clearly shows a castle, the symbol of European civilization!” Significantly, the text accompanying the illustrations makes no reference to castles at all.

The stories Mollé writes are not solely derived from his Maasai cultural inheritance. Collections and reports of African stories and legends also serve as useful resources, not only for a “good story,” but also, according to Mollé, for the possibility of achieving a sense of community with other cultures through shared motifs and themes. Thus, although his earlier work is rooted within the Maasai tradition, his more recent books include *The King and The Tortoise*, a tale from Cameroon, *The Flying Tortoise*, a retelling of an Igbo tale, and his latest, *Big Boy*, a story partially inspired by a Haitian tale. “I borrow sometimes, but it’s very tentative ... I don’t try and generalize. Africa is not all the same thing. There are distinctions and I am aware of this when I write. I turn the stories around in my mind for a long time and take copious notes about the characters, and then I make it my own.”

He responded to the question of cultural appropriation by describing his borrowing as a means through which he can participate in a continuity and tradition vital to the project of oral histories: “It is important to work on a story to make it my own so that I feel like I am one in a long line of storytellers who have kept that story alive from ages and ages and ages ago, and I try and bring my own contribution to it, otherwise what would be the point?”

At the same time, what distinguishes Mollé from these storytellers is his transformation of the oral into the written. Expressing oral storytelling as written text definitely changes what Mollé calls the “economy” of the tale: “I think it’s almost like you’re bringing a new technology into it, the technology of writing into the oral story ... an oral story can have all sorts of repetition, but try that in writing! You can only have so much repetition before it becomes boring.”

Mollé’s priority is to write tales with “universal” appeal, and hence his attraction to the folktale’s style and structure. But, whereas Mollé desires to write universally-appealing stories, he maintains that his stories are kept “distinctly African” by his African settings. To what extent, however, does such representation of traditional African landscapes and cultures risk perpetuating prevailing stereotypical depictions? “It’s a risk one runs of crossing cultures” Mollé acknowledges. To him, it is a risk worth taking as it affords an opportunity to genuinely engage in cross-cultural understanding.

In this context, we discussed some of his audience’s responses to *The Orphan Boy*, a story of a mysterious boy who comes into the life of a lonely, old man. The young boy, who is named Kilekun, takes care of the old man and his cattle so successfully that the old man becomes increasingly determined to discover the source of Kilekun’s power. Kilekun refuses to tell his secret, and the old man,

unable to completely trust the boy, ends up betraying him and loses him forever. For Western audiences, it seems only too easy to “fit” this Maasai tale into Judeo-Christian models of Christ, or the punishing God of the Old Testament, or the Genesis story, the latter since it also encompasses the desire for forbidden knowledge. While these readings obviously support a decidedly Western gaze, Mollé contends that he is not really “bothered” by such responses. While it is difficult to discount Mollé’s emphasis on accessibility in order to reach as wide a readership as possible, the fact that Mollé defines his audience as primarily “English speaking,” reveals the way in which this accessibility is economically and politically regulated. Notwithstanding the fact that Mollé’s tales are vulnerable to appropriation, his work opens up an important space from which an African-Canadian presence in Canadian children’s literature can be articulated. In other words, Mollé’s stories can potentially set into motion possibilities for re-imagining ways of thinking about “here” and “there.”

Still, Mollé says he believes in the importance of troubling this appropriating impulse and attempts to offer alternative cultural knowledges that cannot be completely manipulated into a Western paradigm. He returned to *The Orphan Boy* to illustrate how he meant his stories to exceed the bounds of conventional preconceptions and responses by insisting that his audience recognize the stories as more than simply variations on a European refrain. *The Orphan Boy* deploys specifically Maasai themes in ways that affirm African values: “In the book the old man is somebody doomed by his own curiosity,” Mollé notes. “There are certain things that we shouldn’t know. There are certain things that you can find out and there are certain things that you should be content not knowing. In the Maasai culture, like a lot of African cultures, there are certain defined laws. For example, you’re a boy and you should be content with being a boy until you are a man, a warrior. Don’t try and know about that until the right time. Girls also have their initiation, and men are not allowed anywhere near. You are chased away with a stick, because [males] are not supposed to know certain things. [*The Orphan Boy*] is about ... boundaries.”

Mollé refuses to collapse his tale into an elegiac rhapsody that sentimentalizes clichéd truths. While the old man is punished for his breach of trust, it is difficult to read the story and remain unmoved by the deep sadness experienced by the old man when he loses his adopted son. Communicating the same ambivalence he experienced upon first hearing the tale was crucial for Mollé, who says he felt that rather than preaching any lofty maxim, this story reflected the complexities of human reality: “I felt sadness for the old man too ... the inability to connect ... the sense of waste.... The man’s curiosity was like a hole. He had to fill it. It’s all too human. Sometimes in life, we have everything we want. But there’s still that one thing ... I consider his curiosity a weakness and a strength, too. The fact that you want to know things is a strength. So if there’s any message, it’s that it is a human weakness and strength to be curious and to cross boundaries.”

All this being said, Mollé acknowledges that, as a folktale writer, he is perceived as “safe” because his stories tend to promote a celebration of cultural diversity,

rather than directly focusing on the racial and political conflicts between cultural communities and identities. His concern is with the way he has been categorized by reviewers and critics and he is ready "to be considered as something more than a writer of folktales." Mollel hopes some of his work dealing with more contemporary African realities will, once published, counter this narrow response, and he also anticipates basing some of his books on Canada: "I would like to write something about here. But I realize that for one to do that, one has to have a sense of community," a sense that Mollel says he does not yet feel as a writer of colour in Canada. Perhaps writing books that encompass a Canadian context will provide Mollel with the chance to deal more directly with issues of race: "I really envy other writers I have read who can really grasp the issues [surrounding racism and anti-racism] and who can deal with them in a way that I have not been able to do. All over the world literature has dealt with issues that cannot be ignored. One is part of society. If I found an incident that really touched me and would make a good story, I'd deal with issues of race and anti-racism. I definitely wouldn't shy away from it..." Indeed, crossing this last border is, arguably, one of the biggest challenges facing a writer of colour in Canada today.

NOTES

I would like to thank Jennifer, Scott, and Eugene for their extremely valuable assistance with this project.

- 1 In addition to *Simba's Roar*, Mollel is presently working on several new tales, including one about Ananse the spider pitted against the trickster turtle. He is also writing two companion stories about a young boy and his grandmother in Tanzania. The first of these, based on Mollel's own childhood experiences, traces the adventures of the boy as he looks for eggs for his grandmother; the second, *My Piles and Rolls of Coins*, will focus on the same boy saving the money he receives from his grandmother after a successful day at the market to buy something special.

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A Promise To The Sun. Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1992.

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Rhinos for Lunch and Elephants for Supper. 1991. Don Mills, Ontario: Stoddart, 1994.

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