

Interview with Joanna Woods about her recently published book “From Home and Exile: A Negotiation of Ideas about Home in Malawian Poetry”

Recently, the Centre of African Studies had the pleasure of interviewing Joanna Woods, a former Masters student here, to talk about the process of transforming a Master’s thesis into a book. This is a process that Joanna herself has been through since she graduated from CAS in December 2013, resulting in the release earlier this year of her book *From Home and Exile: A Negotiation of Ideas about Home in Malawian Poetry*, published by Langaa Research and Publishing Common Initiative Group.

As the title suggests the book is about home and ideas of home in Malawian literature. More specifically, it is about the poems of five different Malawian poets who all touch upon and are marked by a life in exile.

The meaning of home in Joanna’s book is twofold: on the one hand it is something very personal in your mind, but on the other hand it is connected to a certain physical or geographical place. At the same time home and the meaning of it is non-static as it constantly changes for people.

Joanna felt this change herself when, in 2006, she left her family home in England to live and work in Malawi for some time. The choice of Malawi was actually a coincidence since Joanna applied for a volunteer job in Kenya to work with elephant conservation. She was then contacted and asked whether she would teach in a school in Malawi instead, which she said yes to. The interest in elaborating on the concept of home stemmed from this first stay in Malawi, when Joanna experienced leaving one home to create a new home, in a place far away. Since then Joanna has been back and forth to Malawi.

As is often heard, Joanna recognizes Malawi as ‘the warm heart of Africa’. According to her this is true both because of the kindness of Malawians and the geography of the country. She will continue to work with Malawi in the future.

Joanna has always loved literature. Since an early age, she has been interested in literature on Africa and African literature. According to Joanna, literature and poetry are important for any discipline, including African Studies, because they foreground culture and reflect actual lives being lived. This helps us to understand people in a way that theory makes more abstract. Everyday philosophies can be learnt through reading the smallest of depictions in creative literature. While it is important not to be biased in the reading of one story, in her book Joanna works with the idea that every society is made up of many selves and that we can still learn a great deal from reading individualized stories.

We asked Joanna about the process of writing her book. She told us that after she had defended her thesis in December 2013 she was contacted by two professors who she had been in touch with during her studies. They thought it a good idea, and asked if she was willing to elaborate on some of the ideas in the thesis in order to produce a published piece from it.

The task then was to transform her thesis into a book, which meant deconstructing the thesis, expanding the content and changing some parts of it, such as the style and structure. In this process Joanna made substantial use of the feedback she received from defending the thesis, to make the content

even better. One aspect she paid specific attention to was the advice she had received about expanding and improving the conclusion. It took 6-7 months to rewrite, extend and review the manuscript before several months of editing began.

Joanna's advice to students who are thinking about publishing the work they completed as a Master's thesis – as a book, a journal article or for a blog - is to 'get out there', to talk to the people in your specific field and to network all you can. Creating links and

contacts should not be underestimated: it is all about networking. Amongst other considerations, she added that it was of course important to think about audience and, depending on the medium - book, journal, online blog - to change language appropriately.

Joanna Woods was a student at the Centre of African Studies from 2011 to 2013.

Her book is now available for loan at the library of the Centre of African Studies.