

Book Review

The World Turned Upside Down

by Leo Zeilig

Ibadan: Books Farm House & Publishers; 2021; 342 pages.

Reviewed by *Heike Becker*

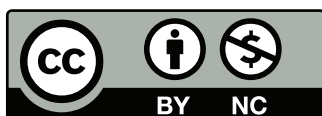
Department of Anthropology, University of the Western Cape

Bianca Ndour, the protagonist of Leo Zeilig's *The World Turned Upside Down*, is a celebrated author of Senegalese-Scottish descent. A sought-after speaker, she travels from her London academic life to Africa, where she addresses packed audiences in cities like Cape Town and Dakar. While the ostensibly progressive bourgeoisie celebrates her books on regeneration and rebirth, Bianca gazes at these audiences with as much disgust as she looks back on her own earlier attempts at changing the world through personal inner transformation. Now she is sure of one thing only: the re-awakening and rebirth of the world has to start with the critique of political economy and violent revolution. We see little of her in practical revolutionary action in the novel though. For the most part we see her doing what academics of international fame have done, at least in pre-pandemic times: she teaches in packed lecture theatres, does book presentations, travels by air, stays in hotels, and meets up with other members of global intellectual and social elites.

The novel's storyline has speculative qualities. There is a series of dicey murders that target speculators, financiers, and industrialists – in other words, the “1 per cent” of global capitalism. An anonymous blog appears where “The Revealer” comments on the

killings in a language that is politically and personally passionate, angry, and virulent; they call for the obliteration of the rich who have devastated the earth with their greed. Bianca's travels follow the assassinations of the mighty wealthy. Or do the murders follow in her tracks? *The World Turned Upside Down* is not a whodunit, but the mystery grows and makes Zeilig's third novel a real page-turner.

With his new fiction writing, Zeilig, a widely published researcher and author of African political history, re-centres the world from the African continent. He does so brilliantly, in terms of both the personal and the political: the protagonist's deceased Senegalese mother, her traumatic childhood experience in Nigeria, and her ways of connecting with the world are profoundly African. The reader also gets to see how contemporary Africa shapes and reshapes the contours of global capitalism, just as much as the international political economy configures neoliberal Africa. It is Bianca's trip to Cape Town that unravels the hypocrisy of the (neo)liberal intellectual bourgeoisie in South Africa, on the African continent, and beyond. The big fires start on the mountain while Bianca mingles with publishers and senior academic executives. These are members of the flourishing post-apartheid establishment, who thrive in



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.

the face of the challenges presented by student uprisings, with close allusions to the Fallist movements of 2015–2016 and the country's unrelenting glaring inequality. The inferno sparks, the flames burn. Blazes rekindle every day and eventually devour the elites' segregated affluent paradise of Constantia, which is really a purgatory for the excluded "99 per cent". All the while, the streets are teeming with the poor. People dance and celebrate the rage and the beautiful destruction of the 1 per cent.

As he narrates Bianca's travels, Zeilig brings to the fore the interconnected-divided world of the 21st century, shaped as it is by the ever-increasing instability of global capitalism, austerity, and climate emergency. Radical change is inevitable. The novel's title is drawn from *The World Turned Upside Down*, originally an English ballad from the 1600s, and more recently the title of a protest song, written by Leon Rosselson in 1975, which tells the story of the diggers' commune of 1649. The novel's title alludes to the song's radical clarification call that "the earth was made a common treasury for everyone to share".

Brilliant, fierce Bianca is a fascinating, complex protagonist. She is a contrarian who likes to fight. She is a troubled character, a black lesbian with a trail of failed, even abusive relationships, a runner and work out fanatic with a messy inner life. Bianca only feels alive in the knowledge that there are no promises, no private joy. She finds joy only in the fires that ravage the obscenely wealthy neighbourhoods, beginning to decolonize the mountain space as the flames spread to Cecil

John Rhodes' former estate in Cape Town. She finds a deeper joy of a more positive essence in Dakar though, where she feels accepted and is free to embrace her Blackness, her African being, her completeness, something she cannot do in London, and cannot hold onto in Cape Town either. Both these cities continue to render her invisible as a black person in a white world – despite the fame and overt celebration flung at her. Aptly, it is the music of Nina Simone that accompanies Bianca in both her London life and her African travels. It is 'Nina' that moves her the most.

The World Turned Upside Down is a novel of, and for, the interconnected, divisive world of the 21st century. As the reader follows Bianca, we gain a deeper sense of the world poisoned by exploitation and desolation, and how the violence and greed have played themselves out at their most devastating in Africa. Bianca's intense rage goes back, we are made to understand, to her traumatic childhood experience on a Shell oil estate in 1970s Nigeria.

Although the novel defies any romantic notion of revolution, *The World Turned Upside Down* is also a beautiful appreciation of Toni Cade Bambara's well-known statement that "the role of the artist is to make revolution irresistible". The glowing though disturbing rage exhibited by Bianca, "The Revealer", and the young comrades that she meets in a secret location in Cape Town, exemplifies the urgency of a different world. In the here and now, however, true joy and freedom can be found only in the sound and lyrics of Nina's music.