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### Reviews

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## REVIEWS

**Postcolonial ecocriticism: literature, animals, environment**, by Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, London and New York, Routledge, 2010, 250 pp., £18.99 (paperback), ISBN 978 0 4153 4458 6

The last few years have witnessed a vital surge of research at the interface of postcolonial and environmental studies. Special issues of journals, such as *Interventions*, the *Journal of Commonwealth and Postcolonial Studies* and *ISLE*, have been complemented by numerous standalone articles, while two essay collections (edited by Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George Handley for Oxford University Press and by Bonnie Roos and Alex Hunt for Virginia University Press) are set to raise the profile of this critical conjunction still further. Amid this flurry of activity, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism* makes a timely addition and, as the book's re-workings of earlier material by both authors show, Huggan and Tiffin have done much to help elevate this subfield to a position of critical significance.

The book begins with a strong introduction to the challenges of bringing together fields with activist components, while outlining its authors' concerns with examining "the colonial/imperial underpinnings of environmental practices in both 'colonising' and 'colonised' societies of the past and present" (3). If this sounds broad, the effect is intentional: despite its relative brevity, the monograph covers work from Nigeria, South Africa, India, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the UK, the Marshall Islands, Trinidad, and Antigua, and pays attention (albeit unevenly) to novels, poetry, and drama. It also attempts to bridge the apparent division between "environmental and animal-rights activism within eco/environmental studies" (2–3) by covering postcolonial environmental (ab)uses in Part I (especially issues of land development and entitlement) and adopting a "zoocritical" approach in Part II (moving from ivory to cannibalism and ending up with agency, sex, and emotion). Given such scope, it's no surprise that this leads to a "methodologically hybrid, internally inconsistent approach" (24). However, coherence is sustained partly by positing generic transformation (e.g. of pastoral, animal fable, eco-polemic) as a means through which postcolonial writers adapt western-oriented environmental discourses for culturally specific ends. Alongside this, the authors consistently emphasize postcolonial ecocriticism's potential as a form of "advocacy" (11–16) that responds to the complexities of attaining social and environmental justice in local and global contexts.

These strands work well for the most part as organizing principles, and there is much to admire in the book's breadth and usefulness, including pithy and accessible introductions to the politics of postcolonial development, racism's links with speciesism, and the role of post-humanism in a putatively "post-natural" world (206–07). There are also numerous enjoyable readings, ranging from "toxic discourse" (56) in the often under-represented nuclear Pacific to the absence of elephants in *Heart of Darkness's* ivory industry. I did feel, though, that for all its strengths, the book's ambitious scope was also a weakness. Dealing with so many texts meant there were moments when I longed for more extended linguistic and contextual analysis (such as when page numbers were substituted for direct quotations or close readings, and during the whistle-stop tour of Indigenous theatre in the coda to Part I). I also thought

more could have been said on the specific mechanisms through which eco-oriented literary/cultural studies might become politically effective as a type of “advocacy” beyond Humanities departments. Nevertheless, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism* makes a clear case for how all the areas it discusses – from tourism to oil extraction, carnivorousism to animal rights – are central to poco-eco studies’ future growth, and will surely represent essential reading for all concerned with debates raised by these increasingly connected fields.

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**Postcolonial green: environmental politics and world narratives**, edited by Bonnie Roos and Alex Hunt, University of Virginia Press, 2010, 320 pp., £29.50 (paperback), 978 0 8139 3001 5

The contributors to *Postcolonial Green* want literary criticism to recover its social role “by addressing significant ecological issues” (83): social justice should be allied to environmental justice. As many postcolonialists are ecologists and most recent postcolonial conferences have discussed ecology, it is whipping up an argument from small disagreements to claim, as the editors do, that there is a conflict: “Scholars associated with postcolonialism see ecocritics as furthering an unself-conscious settler or colonialist project; scholars associated with ecocriticism see postcolonial critics as alarmingly blind to environmental degradation” (4).

The essays range from New Zealand, Sri Lanka, India, Tibet and the Caribbean to the Arctic. Laura Wright argues that Keri Hulme’s *The Bone People* (in which Hulme refutes a prevalent idea that the Maori were necessarily more in tune with nature than colonial and postcolonial powers) reflects the non-linear, destabilizing environment of a society divided by ecological and political tensions. Sharae Deckard analyses how Romesh Guneskera’s novels bring out the ecological dimensions of the current conflicts in Sri Lanka. But, unfortunately, treating works of literature in terms of the environment can reduce creative writing to a series of theses; for example, Bessie Head’s writing is criticized for not noticing the negative effects of modernizing agriculture; Derek Walcott’s *Omeros* is discussed mostly to make political observations about the effect of tourism in St Lucia.

Are postcolonial writers really models of political thought? Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee quotes Arundhati Roy on the slum dwellers in Mumbai: “true they’re not being annihilated or taken to gas chambers, but I can warrant that the quality of their accommodation is worse than in any concentration camp of the Third Reich. They’re not captive, but they redefine the meaning of liberty” (24). Instead of remarking on the bad taste and trivialization of the Holocaust, Mukherjee comments that Roy is describing the condition of the “global South”.

The better essays are historical, rather than literary. Gang Yue offers a new aesthetic of postcolonial green in which Buddhism in Tibet is no longer seen as “primitive”, but as contributing to Chinese environmental protection. Caskey Russell’s discussion of the Makah whale hunt in Washington State criticizes both white and Native American perspectives. Neil Ahuja criticizes the politics behind GRASP (the Great Ape Survival Project), where Indigenous peoples are sometimes essentialized in legal documents as “close to nature” and even linked to apes (132). Pavel Cenkl shows the value of the Traditional Environmental Knowledge of the Inuit, and their practice of *anijaaq*, “daily morning observation of weather conditions” (150).

More attention to style would have improved the thought and arguments of many essays. Too often one feels as if their authors were looking for something to publish on a fashionable topic. There is much awkward writing. Neruda is praised for “tremendous poetic skills” (215) and “historical situatedness” (217); Bessie Head “underemphasizes” (103) problems; Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians* is said to be “designated” as a postcolonial novel (97). Unfortunately, reading texts as “designated” to postcolonial or ecological categories often weakens the literary analysis in this collection.

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**Forest of tigers: people, politics and environment in the Sundarbans**, by Annu Jalais, London, Routledge, 2010, 245 pp., Rs 645, ISBN 978 0 4155 4461 0

**Postcolonial environments: nature, culture and the contemporary Indian novel in English**, by Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, 204 pp., £50.00, ISBN 978 0 2302 1937 3

In detailing the relationships between islanders and tigers in the Sundarbans of West Bengal, India, anthropologist Annu Jalais’s book frames a central concern of postcolonial ecocriticism; critiquing the ontological differentiation between human and non-human worlds. According to Jalais, conservationists’ efforts to “save the tiger” have become a “badge of one’s own cosmopolitanism”, even if blind to questions of “social justice, human rights, and global politics” (196). While the issue may appear to be a conflict between prioritizing animals *or* prioritizing humans, both texts reviewed here reveal this differentiation as a problematic cultural construct that too often oppresses *both* marginalized humans and the non-human world on which they depend for their livelihood.

In her conclusion, Jalais argues that “we cannot properly begin to address the issue of ‘nature’ without first entering into a study of social relations as rendered through the discourse around non-humans” (206). Because her central concern is to parse the varied meanings invested in tigers by the Sundarbans islanders, Jalais explores the relationship between the natural world (tigers, agricultural land and forest) and the symbolic systems that impact human relationships. For these reasons, *Forest of Tigers* proves an excellent text from outside literary academia for postcolonial ecocriticism.

While the first three chapters can be overly taxonomic to a non-social scientist, the intricate detailing of social structures (between classes, castes, professions, religions) lays a crucial foundation for later chapters, where her ethnographic project emerges more clearly. Most important is the concept of “*jati*” (48–53), which she translates as “‘genus’, ‘kind’, or ‘ethnic groups’ [or] other collective identities such as those established along the lines of religion, regional affiliation and gender” (222). *Jati* proves important as she explains the cosmology of the islanders’ chief idols: Dokkhin Rai, a Hindu king aligned with the tiger who declares the forest his property, and Bonbibbi, who tames Dokkhin Rai’s prerogative over the forest and ushers in “Islamic egalitarianism” between different *jatis*. Jalais’s explication of the deep heterogeneity of village life reveals divergent understandings of the forest: for prawn-seed collectors and poachers the forest is a “big marketplace”, whereas for the forest-fishers it is a “common food storehouse” (134, 75). These perspectives create

very different interpretations about the *meaning* of tigers, and thus produce critically distinct understandings of the relationship between social and natural worlds.

Chapters 6 and 7 most directly examine the socio-natural landscape of postcolonial ecocriticism. At the beginning of Chapter 6, Jalais relates an oral history about the migration of tigers from southeast Asia to the Sundarbans. The narrative of the tigers' migration "permits the islanders to voice their own sense of displacement, their conceptualization of the Sundarbans as a refuge for immigrants, and their feeling of being 'second-class citizens' especially in light of the city-dwellers' view that the Sundarbans is primarily the abode of tigers" (217). This enmeshed relationship between human and non-human tiger, between the forest and its human *and* non-human inhabitants, concisely frames core issues that concern postcolonial ecocriticism.

While Mukherjee's *Postcolonial Environments* roots itself in contemporary India, his theorization of the postcolonial environment has global aspirations. Before focusing on four novels – Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*; Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*; Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*; and Ruchir Joshi's *The Last Jet-Engine Laugh* – Mukherjee offers a comprehensive review of the key debates within postcolonial criticism and ecocriticism. He excavates the "green" in independence-era postcolonial writers such as Gandhi, Kenyatta, Césaire and Cabral, arguing that the academic field of postcolonialism, defined by Said, Bhabha and Spivak, has been too concerned with texts and intertextuality, founded in a misguided belief that history is driven primarily by representation rather than material environments. He similarly frames a debate within ecocriticism between the more dominant vision of deep ecology and "social ecology", rooted in the writings of Murray Bookchin and Raymond Williams.

Building on the Marxist theory of uneven development, Mukherjee draws from an impressive range of disciplinary sources to turn in Chapter 3 "towards eco-materialism". In addition to Jalais's earlier publications, he considers the work of environmental historians, cultural geographers, anthropologists and philosophers of science. Mukherjee suggests that these disciplines can hold in productive tension a discussion of "economic, political and cultural production of the environment" without "anthropocentric assumptions" (81). This "eco-materialist" framework, he argues, can bring together ecocriticism and postcolonial studies to understand the aesthetics of uneven development he sees as endemic to the postcolonial environment. If, as he claims, to understand the postcolonial subject's life one must engage the non-human environment, then postcolonial ecocriticism will necessarily stretch the borders of interdisciplinarity as he has here.

In Chapters 4 through 7, Mukherjee engages the aforementioned novels to practice this integrated reading of "environment, history and culture in their real, mutually interpenetrated condition" (83). Each chapter frames a social history of the novel's human and non-human environment, before turning to a cultural form that Mukherjee argues represents the "uneven style" that defines an aesthetic of uneven development: in Roy, Kathakali dance; in Ghosh, the folk theatre of Dokkhin Rai and Bonbibí; in Sinha, north Indian classical music; and in Joshi, photography. In addition to these particular stylistic questions, Mukherjee engages questions of migration, translation, and the circuits of anglophone literary capital. Mukherjee's readings of the texts are complex and nuanced, moving through the social-environmental histories with which each novel engages, while always framing the formal techniques the novelist employs to represent these troubled histories. Mukherjee is perhaps too suspicious, hostile even, of what he calls the "predictable slogans of 'pastiche', 'hybrid', 'postmodernist' and other by now over-familiar road signs of textualist post-structuralism", but overall his Marxist theorization of eco-materialist aesthetics is rigorous and productive (72).

As postcolonial ecocriticism continues to develop, it will demand new disciplinary resources and methodologies like those that Jalais and Mukherjee present. These two critical

works mark a rising tide that increasingly is challenging both postcolonialism and ecocriticism to recognize not only a shared history but also an important common purpose for the uneven, globalizing world.

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**Dreams that spell the light**, by Shanta Acharya, Todmorden, Arc, 2010, 69 pp., £7.99 (paperback), ISBN 9781 9046 1461 6

Reviewing Acharya's new volume of poems for this journal raises the vexed question of what constitutes a "postcolonial" writer. As with her previous collections of poetry, Acharya's Indian origins are evident in a number of poems, but it would be erroneous to assume that the writer's ethnicity should necessarily invite a "postcolonial" reading. Indeed, the poems, which engage with a range of disparate themes – from the metaphysical ("Black Swans") to the material ("A Place of All Seasons"), via the amusingly prosaic ("Shaadi.com", ostensibly about the trials and pitfalls of Internet dating sites) – share a refreshingly universalist perspective as Acharya uses her distinctive poetic voice to interrogate life in the 21st century. This notwithstanding, her poems do address subjects which will be familiar to those involved in postcolonial debates. These subjects include travel between what was previously viewed as the colonial periphery and the metropolitan centre; the contemporary realities of migration; and a growing awareness of globalized and transnational formations.

Physical travel and journeys – be it from the Konarka temple to St Peter's ("Italian Prayer"), through the streets of Lahore ("Mosque of Wazir Khan"), or around the mangrove forests of the Sundarbans ("The Sundarbans") – provide vivid settings for several poems. With acute attention to detail, Acharya depicts the various topographies and geographies of the outer world. The inner world and metaphysical journeys, through memory, dreams and emotions are, however, equally present. In "Delayed Reaction", the memory of a childhood incident acts as the catalyst for an exploration of human emotions; the physical mass of a canyon, seemingly appearing and then disappearing in the mist ("Bryce Canyon"), provides an extended metaphor for the relationship between siblings which evolves over time: "One moment appearing solid, unshakable / the next dissolving in the tenuous bond between brother and sister" (14). In "The Great Wall of China", a description of a tourist excursion stimulates a consideration of the intergenerational transmission of stories, "the secrets [which] survive under the skin like viruses" (18).

Collectively, the poems in the volume invite the reader to view the world from a fresh perspective – to see *and* to understand – and this is stressed by the two epigraphs, one by T.S. Eliot, the other by Marcel Proust. Notably, "Midnight Stroll (In the Sabo Quarter of Ibadan)", with its half-title "for Jon H. Stallworthy", and "Lives of Others (On the reading of the *Bhagavad Gita*)" offer new insights as they rework and give a new poetic voice to existing texts. In other poems, specifically "Aspects of Westonbirt Arboretum", with its obvious intertexts with Kipling's "If ...", this is implicit. Yet it is in three poems which utilize contemporary events – "Dispossessed", "Kabul: 14th November 2001" (offering two perspectives, one male, one female, on the physical experience of the end of Taliban rule in Afghanistan) and "Beware" (comprising a diptych of poems questioning how far the information revolution has actually increased knowledge) – that the reader is encouraged to see

with Proustian “new eyes” the issues of the postcolonial world. In light of the recent Transatlantic Trends poll which revealed that 23% of Britons were anxious about immigration, the opening line of “Dispossessed” (“We embarked on this pilgrimage / to the promised land beyond the treacherous seas” [30]) is a timely plea for an understanding of the human stories behind the economic realities of migration.

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**J.M. Coetzee and the paradox of postcolonial authorship**, by Jane Poyner, Farnham and Burlington, VT, Ashgate, 2009, 214 pp., £55.00, ISBN 978 0 7546 5462 9

Jane Poyner has already made her mark on the field of Coetzee studies as the editor of an outstanding essay collection, *J.M. Coetzee and the Idea of the Public Intellectual* (2006). This collection brought together work by leading Coetzee scholars on a range of topics – from censorship to vegetarianism – under the Gramscian rubric of the intellectual in society. As such, it attests to Poyner’s talent for organizing an array of specific research interests around a common theme, giving both direction and momentum to a current that has long eddied the waters of Coetzee criticism.

Her latest book, *J.M. Coetzee and the Paradox of Postcolonial Authorship*, takes up a related topos: the problematic relationship that obtains between the author and authority within a postcolonial context. According to Poyner, the paradox of postcolonial authorship arises from the unhappy tendency amongst “writers of conscience or conscience-stricken writers [to] risk re-imposing the very authority they seek to challenge” even as they endeavour “to bring the stories of the marginal and the oppressed to light” (2). This dilemma, she argues, is repeatedly staged in Coetzee’s fiction and particularly through his compulsive return to the figure of the “writer protagonist” (2). Whereas the essay collection focuses on “the ethics of intellectual practice” within the context of South Africa’s fraught political and social history, then, this monograph could be said to engage with an ethics of *authorial* practice within a broader postcolonial context.

Poyner once again demonstrates her critical percipience by choosing to focus on an integral, yet overlooked aspect of Coetzee’s fiction. From the confessional narratives of Eugene Dawn and Jacobus Coetzee in *Dusklands* (1974) to the opinions recorded by J.C. in *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007), the oeuvre is indeed replete with incarnations of the writer protagonist. Poyner effortlessly negotiates the intersections and tensions that characterize the relation between Coetzee’s literary fiction and his critical writing, to produce nuanced readings of his work as a whole. In particular, her close reading in Chapter 5 of *Foe* (1986) as postmodernist metafiction stands out for its analysis of how Coetzee not only “unravels the ways in which Friday, as character, is constituted by colonialist discourse” (93) by placing him at the centre of the debate between Susan Barton and Foe over “the role of stories and of storytellers” (99), but also imbues the character with a powerful resistance to their attempts to “reduce [him] to a story [ ... ] defined/confined by (Western-centric) discourse” (99).

However, for this reviewer, these strengths are marred by a failure to integrate the specific into a coherent whole, which the author accomplished to such effect in her previous capacity as editor. The study’s theoretical framework is positioned somewhere between postcolonial theory (Fanon, Said), psychoanalysis (Freud), and deconstruction in the broadest sense of



the term (Barthes, Derrida, Foucault), but lacks the rigour required to make this work. Contextual issues are also at stake: in this regard. Poyner's failure to address the insufficiency of the term "postcolonial" with respect to South Africa – a state whose independence from British rule coincided with the rise of an authoritarian, white regime – is a significant omission. Consequently, we find here a monograph that attests to Poyner's many strengths, but falls just short of organizing these strengths into the kind of incisive, thorough, and sustained critique that Poyner facilitated so well in her previous publication.

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**The myth of the silent woman: Moroccan women writers**, by Suellen Diaconoff, Toronto, Buffalo and London, University of Toronto Press, 2009, 269 pp., £42.00, ISBN 978 1 4426 4005 4

This is a splendid book: meticulously researched, yet so informatively and stylishly presented that it is an absorbing – indeed, educational – reading experience. While readers of anglophone African writing will know Fatima Mernissi and Leila Abouzeid, Diaconoff's fine text provides access to Moroccan society and politics as these developed over a 20-year period, during which women's writing burgeoned to produce an impressively various body of work (including some brilliant texts), enlighteningly linked by Diaconoff.

She structures her text's eight chapters as a narrative rather than a catalogue of Moroccan women's writing. Diaconoff contests "the myth of the silent woman", showing how these authors have engaged with political oppression (her examples include paradoxically beautifully written accounts of imprisonment and maltreatment); culturally sanctioned denigration of women (such as the right of husbands to divorce faithful wives); postmodern, surrealist and daringly detailed *female* erotic writing. Mernissi remains the presiding spirit and reincarnated Scheherazade of the ongoing task to democratize Moroccan society for female citizens – but while she uses wit, charm and play to mask her authority and her challenge, each of the other authors (including Fatna el Bouih; Malika Oufkir; Yasmina Chami-Kettani; Siham Benchekroun; Touria Oulehri; Rajae Benchemsi; Nadia Chafik; Houria Boussejra; Nedjma and of course Leila Abouzeid) uses their own strategies, creating "story-telling [that] can initiate reform" (4).

Diaconoff demonstrates convincingly (by means of citations and references) that her chosen authors are artists as much as social reformers. She validates her concentration on texts in French rather than Arabic in a social context where *no* author can write in her mother tongue, since at present neither demotic Moroccan Arabic nor the Berber languages are literary languages. Yet she shows how authors like those discussed "have become the voice of many silent voices" without "speak[ing] with a single voice or compos[ing] narratives that resemble one another", constantly emphasizing how "layered and complex" is the context in which they live and work (195). While she sees most of the texts discussed as "examples of democratic enquiry by means of fiction" (190–01), it is the richly textured quality of the chosen citations that entices the reader.

Diaconoff's chapters are sequenced carefully to convey how Moroccan women's writing (men's pre-dated theirs by about 50 years) grew along with, out of or in challenge to the society forming its setting and the pre-existing body of religious and secular writing. Female

authors in particular (in contrast to several internationally acclaimed male writers) have had to struggle to gain recognition in a society with such low readership. Hopefully, Diaconoff's perceptive, nuanced, judicious, yet passionate endorsement of this body of writing will help to gain the cited authors more readers. Diaconoff's examples – ranging from the moving account by El Bouih (compare Oufkir) of imprisoned, silenced women secretly communicating by “writing” encouraging words on one another's palms or flanks under the glare of their guards, and narratives by women (Abouzeid; Chami-Kettani; Oulehri and others) overcoming spousal rejection and domestic ejection to the joyously detailed erotics of Nedjma's *The Almond* – are powerful and memorable. Diaconoff's modest manner serves her study well, but that it took “years” to write this impressive study is understandable and admirable.

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**Arab voices in diaspora: critical perspectives on anglophone Arab literature**, edited by Layla Al Maleh, Amsterdam and New York, Rodopi, 2009, xii + 491 pp., £95.00 (paperback), ISBN 978 9 0420 2718 3

Anglophone Arab literature has recently captured the attention of readers worldwide, and universities in the West and the Middle East have begun to include courses in their curricula that incorporate anglophone Arab writings which disseminate images of hyphenated Arabs and issues related to the Arab people as a whole. Al Maleh's introduction to this collection of essays provides an impressive overview of the development of anglophone Arab literatures, defining three trends: “the *Mahjar* (early-twentieth-century émigrés in the USA); the europeanized aspirants of the mid-1950s; and the more recent hybrids, hyphenated, transcultural, exilic/diasporic writers since the 1970s scattered all over the world” (11).

The 18 chapters reflect the diversity of critical perspectives on “hybrid”, “exilic”, and “diasporic” questions and coherently delineate their relevance to the variety of different ethnic Arab experiences in Britain, North America, Australia, and elsewhere. The thematic critical perspectives deployed here extend debates on hybridity and double-consciousness, in-betweenness, transcultural singular experiences, as well as issues of stereotyping, ethnic representation, and reception. The contributors analyse how anglophone Arab writers became the first real mediators between East and West using the medium of English to dispel misgivings about each culture; revealing how the agony of intercultural dislocation and displacement characterizes postcolonial hybridity and negotiates identity politics through memory and belonging; and how cross-cultural memoirs of migration, diaspora, and settlement in new host countries express an apologia to justify the abandonment of homelands.

As a textbook intended to introduce readers to the field of anglophone Arab studies, the book unfortunately promotes both an Anglocentric approach to the field and a polarized Eurocentric worldview that continues to justify embracing imperialism as a point of reference. The unresolved tension between the bilingualism of anglophone Arab literatures and the authors' adoption of hybrid cultural identities – even while giving value to a compelling critique of that approach, and the entirely unsound defence of binary oppositions as a conceptual approach to the subject matter as one of the principles of colonial and ethnic / racial discourses – are thought-provoking flaws. The problematic theoretical framework

makes for a counter-productive reading assignment in an introductory course, but as the first sustained discussion of Arab anglophone literature the collection is useful for scholars and teachers who need a quick overview of the subject matter. The integration of new and republished work marks the book with fine editorship. Although significant omissions mentioning any anglophone Arab writers from North Africa and the Gulf countries suggest that diasporic anglophone Arab voices are limited to Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Palestine, Iraq, and Egypt, the collection is well researched within the established boundaries of the field.

Read in a post-9/11 context, this book demonstrates that global politics do indeed impact racialized experiences around the globe. As one of the few studies to focus exclusively on anglophone Arab literature, this book not only contributes to the debate over challenging identity constructions in a postcolonial and global world but also represents a critical platform for the development of further research in this area.

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**Afro-Europe: texts and contexts**, by Sabrina Brancato, Frankfurter Kulturwissenschaftliche Beiträge 7, Berlin, trafo, 2009, 117 pp., €19.80 (paperback), ISBN 978 3 8962 6724 5

Brancato's study opens a new and long overdue area of enquiry: the comparative study of literature by writers of African descent who live and work on the European Continent and write in European languages. As heterogeneous as the texts they produce, these authors may be immigrants writing in a second language – so-called second- or third-generation “immigrants” with varying degrees of connectedness to their ancestral “homeland” – or authors of mixed-race descent. So far, African diasporic literatures in Europe have largely been associated with a number of other academic categories: black British literature, for example, or Beur literature in France. Brancato draws particularly on black British writing, but goes beyond the national contexts she discusses – predominantly Italy and Spain (with some close readings from the UK) – in order to work towards the establishment of the new discursive concepts of “Afrosporic” writing, a term borrowed from Marlene Nourbese Philip, and “Afro-European literature”. Largely transnational and transcultural in character, Afro-European literature is “de facto already a constitutive element of the cultural heritage of the continent [ . . . ] which can contribute to the internal decolonisation of the European continent and to a revision and reformulation of the understanding of European identity towards a more inclusive notion” (13). The idea of the “Afrosporic” not only connects Afro-European writing with other African and African diasporic (con)texts, but also allows it “to go beyond the notion of diasporic” (105) which, according to the author, “risks reinforcing dynamics of othering and ghettoising certain groups” (105–06). “Afrosporic” texts, then, include any “scattered (re)productive traces (‘spores’, germ cells) of an African connection” (106) and should be understood as part of a “transcultural paradigm” rather than as “essentialist articulations of identity and culture” (110).

In nine chapters and an introduction – most of which are previously published – Brancato offers us a tour de force through a largely under-researched area of cultural expressions. Chapter 1 maps the overall framework of the study in search of “a new discursive category” by looking at the plurality of Afro-European literatures, their commonalities and diverging patterns in four national contexts: Britain, France, Italy and Spain. This is followed by three highly illuminating overviews on African/“Afrosporic” literature in Spain

and Italy, respectively, with the third devoted to intercultural Afro-Italian theatre. Chapters 5–8 offer thematic close readings, some comparatively across language (largely English and Italian), others within specific national and/or linguistic contexts. “Beyond Ghettos”, the final chapter, serves as a platform to argue for a “transcultural paradigm”, and the “institutionalisation of Afro-European Studies” (105) in which literature plays a central part. Brancato also tentatively offers some new analytical categories around the notion of “sporic” which, in their rather biologist connotations, seem at a relatively early stage of development.

This book brings no closure to the subject, but introduces readers to an emerging and exciting field of literature and cultural studies. At times I had wished for more nuanced theoretical underpinnings with regard to “transculturality” and “transnationality”, or the occasionally interchangeable usage of terms such as “exile”, “diasporic”, “migrant”, “refugee”, “asylum seeker”. I also do not concur with all of Brancato’s readings – her cursory handling of so-called “Nigerian traditional beliefs” (92) with regard to twins, for example – but overall I am full of praise for this book which, though short, is rich in detail.

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**Christopher Okigbo: thirsting for sunlight**, by Obi Nwakanma, Woodbridge, Suffolk, James Currey, 2010, 276 pp., £55.00, ISBN 978 1 8470 1013 1

This dense and fascinating account of the flamboyant lifestyle, range of activities and capacity for loyal friendship of the poet Christopher Okigbo is a moving literary biography. Obi Nwakanma’s profoundly empathetic study of the personality and poetic growth and stature of Okigbo is nevertheless no mere hagiography. The finesse of Nwakanma’s writing, the carefully balanced judgements, the ability to demonstrate intertwinements between socio-political developments and inner growth without reducing one to the other, make this the study of a tumultuous time in a nation’s political history as much as a literary study. Nwakanma sees Chris Okigbo as “an artist whose significant political involvement within the post-colonial society was both aesthetic and active”, naming him “the most important poetic chronicler of his time and milieu” he believes that Okigbo’s “search for a more humane social order, which he eventually discovered through poetry, flows from his early political activism as a student in the crucial years of decolonization” (90).

Okigbo was born in rural Igboland in a family that carried the priesthood of the goddess Idoto – a role the poet had been destined for and which he eventually saw himself as fulfilling through his poetry, which he began writing seriously quite late in life. The early loss of his mother left a wound that Okigbo never overcame – Nwakanma suggests that his womanizing ways and his apparently sybaritic and dilettantish qualities masked a certain lostness and loneliness that was seldom exhibited by the supremely sociable Okigbo. The vividness of his personality, his wide learning and his immense personal warmth earned Okigbo the undying love of an impressive range of talented people; despite the fact that he did not achieve high social or political status (and, indeed, suffered social and financial disgrace at times), he was clearly seen by many as the brightest star of his generation. And what an impressive generation it was!

Nwakanma's biography takes us on a tour of the English-educated Nigerian elite that were groomed to take over from the British in 1960; we learn fascinating details such as the fact that the Okigbo and Soyinka's lifelong friendship began when they encountered each other as cricket-playing schoolboys. Undoubtedly brilliant, Okigbo excelled more at sport and in self-fashioning (translating Greek and Latin poetry into English as a hobby, or teaching himself to drive in some hours, out of a textbook; starting clubs with elaborate rituals) than scholarship. He seemed cut out for the high life of a career socialite and could often be utterly selfish and exploitative, especially towards women, but was the sort of man always forgiven for his lapses. After a humiliating dismissal, a friend employed him as a teacher in a rural school; this removal from city life ensured his devotion to his poetry, which he took immense pains in crafting. Nwakanma's text is especially enlightening in showing that the facts and details of Okigbo's life clarify many obscure images in his work.

The poet's decision to involve himself in the Biafran war effort, which finally proved his deeper seriousness and humane courage, is most sensitively conveyed by Nwakanma. One leaves the text convinced of the aptness of the description of Okigbo by his widow Safi Attah, who calls him a "very good man" (167).

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**Frameworks: contemporary criticism on Janet Frame**, edited by Jan Cronin and Simone Drichel, Amsterdam and New York, Rodopi, 2009, xxvii + 227 pp., €50.00 (hardback), ISBN 978 9 0420 2676 6

According to its editors, Jan Cronin and Simone Drichel, one of the aims of this collection of essays is to appraise the current state of Frame scholarship: "where are Frame studies today? What are its major concerns?" (ix). In an attempt to avoid reproducing the potentially problematic features of some earlier strands of criticism – which either randomly applied theories to the work of the New Zealand writer or, adopting biographical or social-realist approaches, promoted an image of Frame as a "marginalized visionary" (xi) – Cronin and Drichel explicitly express the wish for their volume to "cultivate a high degree of methodological self-reflexivity" (x). The result is an accomplished book with a remarkably clear sense of direction but which, perhaps inevitably given the collection's metacritical focus, occasionally teaches us more about contemporary Frame studies (or, more accurately, about the way in which the editors "consciously [re-determine]" them [xi]) than it does about Frame's work itself.

The collection is divided into three parts, entitled "Meta-Critical Frame(s)", "Metaphysical Frame(s)" and "Beyond the Frame(s) of Representation". A stimulating dialogue is established from the first section onwards, in which Jan Cronin's and Jennifer Lawn's essays, which respectively examine the internal dynamics of Frame's texts and her engagement with Freudian theory, reach opposite conclusions on the advisability of self-contained readings of the author's work. In the second section, all articles share an overarching concern with Frame's metaphysical views, which are confronted with those of philosophers such as Heidegger (Lydia Wevers) and Sartre (Anna Smaill), read through the trope of migration (Isabel Michell), and explored in their poetic manifestations (Valérie Baisnée). Taking an ethical turn, the final part of the volume proposes an essay on the role played by violence in Frame's aesthetic

(Marc Delrez), and concludes with two pieces that aim to show how the writer's work reflects and further enlightens theories by Baudrillard (Chris Prentice) and Levinas (Simone Drichel).

The nine long essays contained in the collection are, on the whole, well crafted and well researched. Even though some do not entirely live up to their promising introductions and a few others tend to be overly theoretical, all articles ultimately have something valuable to contribute to Frame scholarship. Perhaps slightly less convincing – despite the interesting echoes between the different contributions – is the sum of these parts. Indeed, a substantial proportion of the volume obsessively addresses Frame's metaphysics – admittedly an important aspect of her work, and one whose analysis may provide illuminating insights into her texts (Smaill's existentialist reading is a case in point), but surely not the only facet of Frame's extraordinary oeuvre still in need of critical attention (features relating to form, for example, come to mind).

Despite this reservation, it must be mentioned that all the essays contained in *Frame-works* are thought provoking in the literal sense of the word – a fact rare enough to be underscored – in that they elicit responses from the reader, make him or her reflect on the validity of the sophisticated arguments deployed, and often open up avenues for further research. This, I believe, augurs well for the future of Frame studies.

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**Ob-scene spaces in Australian narrative: an account of the socio-topographic construction of space in Australian literature**, by Pablo Armellino, Stuttgart, Ibidem, Studies in English Literature, 2009, 278 pp., £34.90, ISBN 978 3 8982 1873 3

This book sets out to read Australian fiction in terms of Henri Lefebvre's notions of the "scene", where everything acceptable and licensed takes place, and the "obscene" space, to which everything else is banished. In the obscene space, norms are questioned, tested, defied, ridiculed or unpacked – precisely the sorts of things that much literature does, certainly that which has survived in those texts approved of by the contemporary literary establishment. Any establishment, however, by definition belongs within the scene, which suggests that the current spaces within the literary establishment constituted by universities either contradict the scene-obscene model in their support for the literary obscene, or, more charitably, that they exist as a type of interface between Armellino's two zones.

This is the sort of issue that arises in the application of binary models with respect to how the two terms of any such model communicate with each other, but it remains largely unexamined here. In fact, it soon becomes apparent that Armellino scarcely needed this type of framing model to articulate what is more a guide to Australian fiction of the last 140 years. The earnest insistence on the model betrays the scene of the doctoral thesis and gets in the way of what becomes a useful summary of the central issues of many canonical and lesser-known books from Marcus Clarke and Henry Lawson to Vivienne Cleven by way of Barbara Baynton, Peter Carey, Joan Lindsay, Patrick White, David Malouf, Katharine Susannah Prichard, Xavier Herbert, Mudrooroo, Kim Scott, Alexis Wright, Christos Tsiolkas, Peter Robb, Melissa Lucashenko, Archie Weller, William Dick, and Janette Turner Hospital, in that order.

Generally speaking, the readings become stronger as the book progresses, with few surprises among the sections dealing with more well known or older texts, and more interesting analyses of more contemporary books, particularly Kim Scott's *Benang*, Alexis Wright's *Plains of Promise*, Peter Robb's *Pig's Blood and Other Fluids* and William Dick's *A Bunch of Ratbags*. The large number of books examined means that the theoretical apparatus is put in place somewhat hurriedly, combining an odd mixture of dictionary definitions, Coetzee, Foucault, Lefebvre, Baudrillard and Raymond Williams. Odd mixtures and connections are among the strengths of the humanities, but more up-to-date theoretical material is largely missing here.

*Ibidem* is a newer member of a growing number of Continental European publishers producing scholarly books in English. Readily available via Book Depository or Amazon, unlike many publications by Continental university presses, the level of editing and proof-reading nevertheless needs to be vastly improved, with numerous misspellings, incorrect phrase constructions or words, repeated typos like "were" instead of "where", words joined together, italics wrongly used, and a very messy bibliography. All of this could have been avoided by proper editing.

Overall, despite these flaws, as the book goes on it builds up momentum and becomes a lively one-volume introduction to Australian literature, encompassing a wide variety of the central issues in Australian culture in a handier format than many publications by heavy-weights in the area. Students wishing to get an idea of Australian literature could do worse than read all of Armellino's quixotic, even heroic, attempt to cover the history of literary writing in Australia, or, failing that, his single-chapter syntheses of the principal concerns in the texts he deals with.

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**Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: in other words**, by Sangeeta Ray, Chichester, Wiley-Blackwell, 2009, 160 pp., £17.00 (paperback), ISBN 978 1 4051 0318 3

This book both is and is not well titled. Clearly a play on Spivak's *In Other Worlds* (1987), Sangeeta Ray addresses in her opening discussion the particular difficulty of writing about a critic who engages significantly in so many aspects of the contemporary literary/critical scene. Starting from the perception of Spivak as a "collection of texts" (6), Ray asks herself and her reader:

How would I tackle the vast subject that is Spivak, the collection of works that arrive in every page in a dense prose that seems often impossible to parse? And then how would I write her without diminishing her presence – always excessively present – in that prose. [ ... ] Would I vanish in trying to write Spivak, reduced to an emulating disciple, whose role would be to enable an "accurate" reading of Spivak? (1)

This latter concern is not reduced by the choice of subtitle, "In Other Words", which may seem to offer the reader looking for an introduction and explication of Spivak's work precisely that: a transformation or paraphrase into more accessible words of Spivak's complex theoretical vocabulary and equally complex ideas. Of course, as with other

theorists who are accused of deliberate obscurity, Spivak's verbal style is an essential dimension of her thought. As she thinks through alternative ways of understanding post-modern, postcolonial "other worlds", conventional naming conventions and common-sense verbal formulations simply will not do. Ray does an admirable job of preserving this dimension of Spivak's work, the essential complexity of a theoretical lexicon that demands of the reader that we reorient our intellectual perspectives in order to think "otherwise".

Similarly, Ray avoids the other pitfalls that she so clearly identifies: she does not simplify, she does not paraphrase, she does not allow the material to dominate her own discourse. She does this by arranging the book into three chapters, each of which deals with a constellation of ideas that relate to one of the dominant themes to which Spivak returns: "Reading Literature, Teaching Literature: Whither Soul Making?", "Reading Singularity, Reading Difference: An Ethics of the Impossible", and "Reading Woman, Reading Essence: Whither Gender". As the chapter titles indicate, the emphasis of Ray's account of Spivak is the activity of reading and the process of constructing meaning. She traces the development of relations among Spivak's writings from different periods of her career. This does not make for easy reading and the reader coming to Spivak's work for the first time would do well first to work through Stephen Morton's 2003 explanation of Spivak's engagement with such issues as globalization, Marxism, Third World/First World feminism, and poststructuralist and postcolonial legacies, in his contribution to the Routledge Critical Thinkers series. Ray's book is addressed to a more informed readership of scholars and advanced postgraduate students and, together with Morton's 2007 *Gayatri Spivak: Ethics, Subalternity and the Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, provides a valuable resource for those who are looking for a sophisticated development of more introductory engagements with Spivak's work.

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**Transcultural English studies: theories, fictions, realities**, edited by Frank Schulze-Engler and Sissy Helff, Cross/Cultures 102, ASNEL Papers 12, Amsterdam and New York, Rodopi, 2009, xvi + 469 pp., £92.00 (hardback), ISBN 978 9 0420 2563 9

As Europe starts to take on the problematics of internal migrations, multicultural communities and the global movement of peoples and cultures under its relatively new "commonwealth" formation, so it looks for models of critical analysis that will explain a post-national dynamic without exacerbating tensions. Scholars of English literatures have taken up post-colonial studies and their moves into diaspora and globalization studies, but in the aftermath of Soviet power and with the spectre of urban terror from disaffected ethnic minorities, the Marxist conflictual binaries of postcolonial identity politics may seem inconvenient as well as called into question by more complex multiple interactions of cultures within and across individuals, communities and nations. Along with a turn to considering "transnational" circulations of texts and readers, there is now a shift away from difference and contestation towards "transcultural" complexities and interactivity.

This book brings together seven papers under a theory heading, seven under "transcultural realities", another seven dealing with "transcultural fictions", and six looking at teaching texts from other cultures in the EFL classroom. The focus is Wolfgang Iser's theorizing of transculturality in a quest for universal commonalities that slides from biology



to psychology to culture under the cover of philosophy. Ironically, the argument that we are all now so complexly multicultural that we can no longer think of separate units of cultural difference seems to come from a distinctly German cultural space dominated by Hegel and Herder and sounds very much like a return to Goethe's ideal of *weltliteratur* based on humanist universality. The positive side of this is a thoroughgoing undoing of identity binaries and assimilationism. The negative aspect is the emptying out of any politics of cultural formation: I am a cosmopolitan blend of cultures; you are an interesting mix of cultures, they are just confused (but our collective complexity means we can all be good buddies and there's no reason to feel any grievance, even though the state I identify with behaves as though you are a second-class citizen and they are barbarian intruders). If the test of a new theory is its ability to generate new analysis and praxis, then I would have to say that most of the applications here, good though they are as what they are, fail to do much that is different from previous modes of "postcolonial" readings in English. The most interesting pieces (by Sissy Helff, Kerstin Knoff, Mark Stein and Sabine Doff, to name only four) are in fact ones that point up the limitations of the theory as it has been developed so far and attend to power relations across differences of history, ethnicity, class, national borders. (It's surprising Édouard Glissant gets no mention in the volume, given the credits to Fernando Ortiz.)

Some of the material is new perhaps: for instance, consideration of writing in English from Israel, of how Yiddish is differently registered in Jewish-American writing, and using photos of Africa to generate self-reflexive readings in German classes teaching English. There's a stimulating review of anthropology by Virginia Richter that asks why we still need authenticity when we know it doesn't exist, and a search for "multiple modernities" by Gisela Welz to break with a dominant narrative of unequal development, matched by Dirk Wiemann's study of Kiran Nagarkar to posit a pluralized temporality and a "pervasive permeability" of the present. It's good to see Zulfikar Ghose coming back into view, and other work covers Jackie Kay, Mike Phillips, Caryl Phillips, Shashi Tharoor, Eden Robinson, Tomson Highway, Zadie Smith, Hari Kunzru, Hanif Kureishi, Pauline Johnson, Maori writing, the Ordnance Survey of Ireland, Caribbean poetry, the Inuit movie *Atanarjuat*, Flaherty's *Nanook of the North*, the Black Atlantic and the Merchant/Ivory/Jhabvala movie *Bombay Talkie*.

My sense of this collection is that it rests on a suggestive idea that has yet to fulfil its potential. To do that, some of the writers need to confront their own transculturality, what it really is, and how it relates to the (different) transculturality of others. As a collection of different textual analyses, though, it is full of interest.

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**Word and image in colonial and postcolonial literatures and cultures**, edited by Michael Meyer, Cross/Cultures 116, ASNEL Papers 14, New York, Rodopi, 2009, 379 pp., €84.00, ISBN 978 9 0420 2743 5

The fourteenth collection of papers to be published by the Association for the Study of the New Literatures in English (ASNEL) takes as its theme the relationship between visual and verbal imagery. Drawing explicitly on W.J.T. Mitchell's argument that "the interaction of pictures and texts is constitutive of representation as such" (*Picture Theory: Essays on*

*Verbal and Visual Representation*, 1994, 5), the essays formulate new ways of thinking about colonial and postcolonial visual and textual art, asking: how can images and texts be read together? In what ways do they challenge each other? To what extent does interpretation depend on the culturally contingent gaze of the spectator/reader? These questions are raised by engaging discussions on a wide range of topics, including 18th-century art, Indigenous children's literature, and Bollywood cinema.

Although the volume is divided historically into essays that consider colonial or postcolonial texts, the divergent approaches of the contributors are reflected more explicitly by differing usages of the term "image". Hence while some focus on the visual arts, others consider what Renate Brosch calls "the visual strategies of texts" (280). In her attentive reading of Peter Carey's novel *True History of the Kelly Gang*, Brosch discusses the "affective potential" (294) of figurative language and metaphor, arguing that the fleeting descriptions of the novel's setting invite the reader to assume an active role in producing the landscape of the Australian bush: "representation of visual perceptions [ ... ] depend for their viability on a sense of participating in the scene" (294).

The postcolonial emphasis on "writing back" is developed by essays that present the visual image as particularly counter-discursive. Gisela Feurle's discussion of African studio photography argues that despite the art form's colonial origins, photographers such as Philip Kwame Apagya have successfully indigenized it, stylizing a specifically African sense of identity. Similarly, Sonja Altnöder's essay on the satirical cartoons of the South African artist Zapiro argues that their portrayal of contemporary racial and gender inequalities performs a "discursive reconstitution of the Rainbow Nation" (112).

A more cautious account of the resistance of images is offered by Daniel Jaczminski, whose opening essay introduces the limitations of "intertextual emancipation" (7). In his fascinating analysis of four historical illustrations of Shakespeare's Caliban, Jaczminski evaluates the extent to which each is able to challenge the figure's assignation as the cultural Other. Jaczminski argues that even the most abstract re-inscriptions of Caliban are circumscribed by the ideologies of the original text. However, he urges cultural theorists to "break with the tradition of reading postcolonial texts as opponents to colonial" (18) ones, emphasizing instead the dialectical relationship between visual and verbal representations of Caliban.

Rather than providing an overview of the volume's objectives, Michael Meyer's introduction is a case study of Jean Rouch's film *Les Maîtres fous*. Although this is a well-argued piece, the thematic and theoretical range of the essays would have benefited from an introduction that explained how they relate to one another. However, the essays are of an exceptionally high standard, their nuanced readings of colonial and postcolonial texts making the volume a valuable resource for cultural researchers.

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