

# reviews

## BOOKS

### Review Forum

.....

*Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism*. By Elizabeth A. Povinelli. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011. Pp. 256. ISBN 9780822350842. \$22.95 (pbk).

.....

Elizabeth Povinelli's absorbing and important new book is about perseverance, endurance, conscience and hope on the cusp of the possible – an 'anthropology of the otherwise' (10), of alternative or imagined forms of life that might offer refuge from the neglect, intrusions and harm of liberal governmentality. The second of a planned three-volume series about 'Dwelling in Late Liberalism', *Economies of Abandonment* calls special attention to social projects that potentially offer new room for manoeuvre both to the dispossessed and to the scholar-activist-critic-ethnographer.

Drawing from years of work in the United States and Australia, and in particular from her friendships and collaborations with indigenous Australians in Darwin and the Northern Territory, Povinelli brilliantly and provocatively reflects on alternative forms of life and their uneven social distribution. Everyone lives between the oscillations of being and not being, between what is and what yet might be, but the conditions and intensity of that dwelling – set down as they are by existing forces and power – are not shared in just or equitable measure. Povinelli's 'sociography' (6–7) of dwelling and potentiality looks at how misery is suffered and endured, at how subjects strive to persevere despite the shabbiness, pain and unreliability of their social worlds. Working without the ethnographer's customary theoretical and methodological attachment to the reflexive views of

.....

individual moral agents, Povinelli aims to find moments when possibilities for new political and ethical concerns emerge from and within horizons of life largely shaped and constrained by the social project of late liberalism. Those possibilities in turn suggest to her restorative possibilities for critical theory and its method of immanent critique.

Two riveting works of fiction frame Povinelli's book, Ursula Le Guin's short story 'The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas' (1973) and Charles Burnett's 1977 film, *Killer of Sheep*. (Though Povinelli offers extraordinarily effective synopses and critical distillations of these works, I do recommend taking the time to read or view them while reading *Economies of Abandonment*.) Le Guin's story opens with a clamour of bells, as the happy and contented people of Omelas joyously begin their Festival of Summer. All their contentment, however, depends on a single, fearful, malnourished and neglected child kept locked in a basement closet somewhere in the city. Nothing can be done for the child, for (to quote the story) 'if the child were brought up into the sunlight out of that vile place, if it were cleaned, comforted and fed ... all the prosperity and beauty and delight of Omelas would wither and be destroyed. Those are the terms ... strict and absolute.' Many of the people of Omelas feel compassion for the wretch but will not sacrifice their joy or their material and ethicopolitical contentment for the sake of this abandoned child. The story ends as Le Guin explains that among those who have seen the child a few occasionally decide to leave Omelas, walking out one by one, to 'a place less imaginable ... than the city of happiness. It is possible it does not exist. But they seem to know where they are going, the ones who walk away from Omelas.' Theirs is an ethics of refusal, a renunciation of a cruel, unchanging and unassailable social form, a 'not this'

enacted with the conviction that there must be an otherwise waiting for them.

Burnett's *Killer of Sheep* follows Stan, a resident of Watts in the 1970s who works in a slaughterhouse, and who for that reason is all too familiar with the fate sure to befall all living things on this bitter earth. There is no way out of the unrelenting poverty that holds Stan and his family, so Stan's is a state of constant striving to endure as life goes on, even as nothing goes forward. Decent, dignified, but worn out and downhearted, Stan refuses the ready temptations of crime, disdains self-pity and summons enough purpose to make futile attempts at restoring a car with the purchase of a used engine, or fixing the kitchen floor, efforts that bring him defeat. Stan and his community lack the material means for exit.

These two works of fiction brilliantly and companionably figure the moods, themes, conscience and predicaments of Povinelli's sociography of late liberalism. Her accounts of ordinary life, vulnerability and sustenance in indigenous communities, and of deeply imaginative and compelling attempts to reinvigorate indigenous geontological traditions with mobile phone and gps technologies, are powerful and persuasive, as are her extensive interrogations of the legal debates and decisions in the United States and Australia through which neoliberalism partly colonizes fields of value, and exhausts 'alternative social projects by denying them sustenance' (134). Povinelli remarks that one reader of her manuscript found her ethnography 'austere', a comment that suggested the book was indifferent to thick description and native point of view. I don't find the book suffering at all for having set aside those ethnographic protocols in order to take soundings of a world-encompassing late liberalism and its techniques of power. Further still, the 'being there' sensibility and discourse of modernist

ethnography would, I suspect, only get in the way of Povinelli's ethicopolitical commitment to the 'hereness' of her dwelling in and with late liberalism, its 'pockets of abandonment and differential belonging' (29), and the discursive mechanisms it deploys to obscure ways of living otherwise.

Povinelli argues that we need to discern and critically interrogate the constellations of tense, eventfulness and ethical substance that help late liberalism do its penetrative work. One way of summing that up is to say she is interested in looking at emplotment – the evocation and constitution of events, their open-endedness or finitude, and their ethicopolitical trajectory, relative to moments of past, present and future narration. (It is perhaps no coincidence that Povinelli chose plotless (or unplotted) fictive works by Le Guin and Burnett as her touchstones in *Economies of Abandonment*. They each suggest a durative aspect with their focus on unfinished and uneventful cruelty or weariness.) As with Rob Nixon's 2011 book, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (see *Interventions* 14(2): 298–308), Povinelli's work raises the question of how to narrate the 'ordinary, the chronic and [the] cruddy' (13), how to give everyday suffering and violence eventfulness, in opposition to late liberalism's teleological discourses and in light of the crises of disparity and futurity already upon us. Wresting narrative ground from those teleological discourses, Povinelli claims, requires us to attend to potentialities and social conditions for other forms of dwelling in the world, despite their continued subversion by prevailing powers, and despite their own contradictions.

Povinelli's sociography of potentiality has admirably romantic and emancipatory aims, and in spirit and method *Economies of Abandonment* seems akin to Nikolas Kompridis's

*Critique and Disclosure* (2006). What her sociography so compellingly demonstrates for me are (1) the importance of endurance as a site of small and sometimes successful miracles of reflexivity and world-disclosure; and (2) the analytic gains that may be had by refraining from normative concepts of culture or cultural difference, concepts that are as likely to harm or entrap as to emancipate and empower the lives of those dispossessed and abandoned under liberal governance. Criticism lodged against immanent critique and critical theory sometimes faults them for failing to stipulate the normative direction or foundations that would secure justice for the abandoned and dispossessed or overturn an oppressive social order, as though the normative is what is needed to assert or safeguard our common humanity. It seems to me that Povinelli's sociographic intervention – with its philosophical roots in American pragmatism – wisely suggests we dispense with abstract or uniform schemes for justice or emancipation, and look instead to emergent coalitions and movements whose robust if 'messy, localized visions of justice' take shape in people's everyday struggles to persevere (Theriault 2012: 1436).

At the close of her book, Povinelli expresses dismay that Le Guin would let some people walk away from Omelas without trying to rescue the child in the basement (187–8). Indeed, their exit and apparent failure of conscience unsettles us. They depart into darkness, preferring the unknown and unknowable to the human community they have left behind. Le Guin is careful, however, to tell us that each departs alone. They do not share each other's company when leaving, and they show no interest in coalescing or mobilizing as a group with a collective politicoethical aim of exit or communal reconstitution. Povinelli ascribes a positive political force to critical theory for saying 'not this' when those

words are addressed to ‘those for whom the world seems to work just fine’ (192). I agree, yet the individuated gestures of ‘not this’ we see from those who leave Omelas lack, I think, the kind of political vision, address and struggle Povinelli sees vested in critical theory. The walk away from Omelas seems to me a bid for radical self-isolation outside of any polis, a wish to no longer be known or recognized or governed, to no longer be counted or counted upon, a bid to persevere in one’s own being and to be left alone to die in one’s own way (see Klausen n.d.).

Povinelli has no such exit in mind. She does not evade or walk away from the cruel disparities of our world, but looks instead to assemble a practical and social-theoretical compass that will see us through into a new positive form of life. *Economies of Abandonment* impresses, to be sure, because of Povinelli’s penetrating analyses and intellectual sweep, but even more so because of her conscience, political passion and willingness to persevere.

KENNETH M. GEORGE

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON, USA

## References

Klausen, Jimmy Casas (2012) ‘Reservations on hospitality: contact and vulnerability in Kant and indigenous action’, in Gideon Baker, ed. *Hospitality and World Politics*, London: Palgrave-Macmillan.

Klausen, Jimmy Casas (n.d.) ‘So-called “uncontacted” tribes and the ends of man’, unpublished manuscript.

Kompridis, Nikolas (2006) *Critique and Disclosure: Critical Theory between Past and Future*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Le Guin, Ursula K. (1973) ‘The ones who walk away from Omelas’, <http://www-rohan.sdsu.edu/faculty/dunnweb/rprnts.omelas.pdf>.

Nixon, Rob (2011) *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Theriault, Noah (2011) ‘The micropolitics of indigenous environmental movements in the Philippines’, *Development and Change* 42(6): 1417–40.

.....

*Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism*. By Elizabeth A. Povinelli. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011. Pp. 256. ISBN 9780822350842. \$22.95 (pbk).

.....

In *Economies of Abandonment*, the second in a planned trilogy on ‘Dwelling in Late Liberalism’, anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli considers the modes by which social difference is governed in late liberalism, especially in Australia and the United States. To do so, she analyses and sometimes juxtaposes a variety of projects and discourses, including an indigenous mixed-media endeavour, the notorious Australian state ‘intervention’ in indigenous governance prompted by a report on child sexual abuse, a US Supreme Court decision about a claim for religious freedom from laws governing drug use, and the US radical green movement. With creativity and political punch, Povinelli explains how late liberal governance binds people together ethically and shapes the modes of life (and death) of indigenous people and other others. One important but under-appreciated way, Povinelli argues, is via the socially distributed deployment of tense, which establishes a temporal relationship between the moment of speaking and that of what is spoken of.

With this book Povinelli adds to her important long-term project of exploring the booming echoes and long shadows of liberal recognition in the lives of people who strain, and thereby bring into relief, its logics and limits. In the trilogy’s prequel, *The Cunning of Recognition* (2002), Povinelli showed how

liberal recognition regimes demand that indigenous peoples and others meet an impossible Goldilocks standard of difference: you must be different, so the logic of recognition goes, but you must not be so different as to be really different, lest you appear illegible, repugnant and psychotic. In *The Empire of Love* (2006) Povinelli demonstrated how ideologies of free love and the constrained love of genealogy conjoin to discipline and differentiate lives in settler societies.

*Economies of Abandonment* turns to the question of how late liberalism engenders temporal and material relationships of obligation that are unevenly distributed and felt. Few would disagree that the lives of indigenous peoples in settler societies have been harmed. Povinelli goes further to show how readily available modes of accounting for such lives render such harms understandable and just. This occurs, for example, when public opinion and policymakers project harm back onto indigenous people as if it were the result of their own shortcomings. In Australian political discourse, indigenous self-determination policies increasingly are taken to have failed, as evidenced by the infamous ‘intervention’ in the Northern Territory that ostensibly would rectify child sexual abuse and/but radically curtails indigenous self-governance and social welfare. Late liberal governance, argues Povinelli, operates through tense when present arrangements are viewed from the perspective of that which will have resulted in a better future. So pain caused by the ‘intervention’ will have been a sacrifice worth it in the long run. Thus, harm persists while remedies/responsibilities are deferred in the present.

This also occurs when observers overlook harm as such, especially as this type of harm, Povinelli argues, generally does not take the form of crisis. Whether meditating on a scene

in the film *Killer of Sheep* in which a car part falls off the back of a truck and breaks, or a similar moment in Australia when a washing machine lid flies away on the road, this book evocatively lives in and with the chronic aches and dirt of life that are experienced less as crisis than as things to be dealt with. Her term for such non-crises is ‘quasi-events’. In asking how an analyst/activist/ethical subject can attune herself to quasi-events, Povinelli can be read as levelling a trenchant critique of prevailing scholarship, which more often dwells in crisis (echoes of Agamben) or in the phenomenology of suffering. The latter is accessible via empathy, which Povinelli faults for failing to recognize the shared substance of harm and good as they are distributed in liberal settler societies (162). Povinelli evokes this shared substance by reading Ursula Le Guin’s story ‘The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas’, in which the well-being of a town’s residents is a direct and known function of the ongoing suffering of a child who is tortuously confined to a broom closet. There, she endures.

Scholars struggle over the relationship of endurance to indigeneity. Some time ago, a colleague – like me, a white woman – pointed to a book’s title that took the form, ‘The Enduring [name of indigenous group]’, and expressed frustration with the trope, explaining that indigenous peoples have done much more than endure. In scholarship about indigenous peoples (perhaps more than in post-colonial studies) the discourse of endurance threatens to produce people as remainders; conversely, and with as many shortcomings, it can minimize past and present violence and romanticize continuity. However, endurance is a potentially unsettling stance towards the world that deserves more careful analysis, and Povinelli points in the right direction. Povinelli emphasizes that endurance is unevenly

distributed across and within social fields. She considers what it feels like to live in times/spaces in between recognition and crisis and she asks, if not answers, the wrenching question of how to theorize why some people endure while others burn out. In a friendly and apt critique of theorists of immanence, Povinelli addresses the burden of enduring others' expectations for one's own potential.

As in her discussion of endurance, the economic action that most occupies Povinelli is distribution. Povinelli calls attention to the uneven distribution of harms, pleasures and obligations in late liberalism, writing throughout the book of intertwined macro-economic forces and day-to-day relationships. She tracks political economy with an extended discussion of neoliberal economics; unfurls the logic of sacrificial love and, implicitly, of the debt and deferred return that it implies; and notes the local economic impact of various moments of (non)recognition. Throughout, Povinelli calls on liberalism's beneficiaries to understand and then ethically act upon this distribution. I expect that, given her criticism of sacrificial love, Povinelli would resist figuring obligation – which she takes to be an immanent drawing towards – as debt. This leaves me wondering: what kind of economies can be produced by the obligations that operate within and beneath alternative social projects like green movements or drug-using religious observance or indigenous digital archiving? Too many critics shy away from the language of economy out of fear that economic logics are taking over the world or, alternatively, move towards the overly humanist language of 'human economy'. Calling less for a normative stance than a creative one, I would like to know where Povinelli's critique of late liberal governance and her exploration of possibility in the brackets of recognition could take us

towards a theory and politics of obligation that is not built on sacrifice or debt.

Povinelli works from the position of a critic and defends criticism as a form of action in the face of demands by normative theorists and policymakers alike that critics offer viable alternatives. She argues that such demands, like (or as a technique of?) late liberal governance, defer remedies and reinforce inequality by placing burdens on those who are harmed rather than on those who benefit from the order of things. This temporalization of critique strikes me as a more powerful rejoinder to normative demands than the paralysing, if true enough, claim that any normative project will usher in new injustice. Following her previous writing about alterity and engaging with theories of immanence, Povinelli describes the work of this book as an 'anthropology of the otherwise' (10); she takes the otherwise to be emergent, not remnant. Anthropology long has drawn analytical force, political edge and creative inspiration from the examination of social worlds not simply other but otherwise, not grist for the mill of cheering human diversity but potent reminders of the political and ethical ties that bind (even as they may bracket or abandon) ways of being and becoming. I'm left with questions about the relationship between critique and the anthropology of the otherwise. What tense does critique favour, and with what effects? What is the temporal and political relationship between critique and potentiality/immanence? When does the very spectre of critique halt alternative projects – from fear of sharks in the water – or instead fuel them?

In the acknowledgements for *Economies of Abandonment* Povinelli refers to her editor's hope that 'my prose will one day reach beyond the whirligig of my mind' (xiv). Whirligigs add festiveness and whimsy, emit soothing sounds, convey weather information, or even transmit

vibrations for the purpose of repelling rodents. It can take a whirligig of a mind to build an anthropology of the otherwise. Still, this book would have benefitted from a more expansive rendering of the lived ‘otherwise’ that compels Povinelli’s arguments, not for the sake of ethnographic thickness but in order to motivate and strengthen her critical–theoretical project. I hope and suspect that this is just where the trilogy’s next book, an exploration of an indigenous mixed-media mobile project, will take us.

JESSICA CATTELINO

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES,  
USA

## Response

One should never take for granted the generous stewardship shown by *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* that makes an exchange like this possible, nor the careful and insightful readership Ken George and Jessica Cattelino exemplify. And so I would like to reciprocate by addressing not only George and Cattelino’s specific critical commentary but also the worries of others who, since the publication of *Economies of Abandonment*, have pushed me to clarify one or another aspect of my thought. And so let me say a few things about the analytics of the trope of abandonment; the paradox of the hope of immanent critique; and the tense ethics and politics of the otherwise.

- (1) Why do I foreground abandonment, given its discursive function in late liberal governmentality; namely, that the world historical difference of liberalism, across all of its governmental variations, is its

desire to care for (save) the disadvantaged and abandoned? Characterizing the spacings and immanent forms of life that interest *Economies* as ‘abandoned’ implies I believe that care is the self-evident ethical and political response to them. Clearly, if I were saying this I would have to unwrite much of what I have written over the last two decades. Instead, my emphasis on abandonment (and other cognate conditions: disregard, neglect, exile, extinguishment) means to puncture the grounds on which liberals make claims about liberalism’s historical exceptionalism – namely, that it seeks to better everyone’s life; that it abandons no one even when it intentionally or unintentionally lets or makes certain forms of life die. How does late liberalism accomplish this trick – transforming a disregard into a form of care-giving – thereby creating it as a world historical form of governance? The book provides some answers: the brackets of recognition; the location of harm’s source; sacrificial imaginaries. But if the first task is to puncture late liberalism’s self-accounting, the second is to show how alternative forms of obligation, belonging and endurance proliferate within late liberal forms of abandonment. And this second task changes the optics of analysis. When we ‘open the brackets’ we do not see ‘the abandoned’. We see a multiplicity of life forms each with their own immanent forms of belonging, enduring, disregard and obligation. The child in the broom closet, Stan, and those of us on and off the boat characterize different tactics by which late liberalism converts harm into care – the creation of a degree zero (closet, bracket); the capitalization of difference (the wages of

whiteness); and the territorialization of power (settler colonialism) – and different forms of life within, beside and emerging from these tactics.

(2) Is *Economies of Abandonment* a hopeful and redemptive sociography – and does this hope uncover a paradox in immanent critique? *Economies* argues that immanent critique locates the source for new political thought in the spacing of radical undecidability and indeterminacy – say Rancière’s distinction between politics and policing; or Agamben’s between *zoe* and *bios*. It *also* argues that immanent critique is cosseted rather than wrong. On the one hand, it can be too certain of who is the part who has no part (who is and is not the ‘lumpen-proletariat’; and what potential the lumpen-proletariat once had); on the other hand, it does not consider the phenomenological conditions of dwelling in, or being, radically undecidable. As a result immanent critique can seem hopeful, even redemptive – that there is a part and that it *will* play a part. George’s point about the plotless narratives that proliferate in *Economies of Abandonment* and the methodological shift to sociography is critical here. To be neither one thing fully nor another, even as the sustaining sources of life depend on being so, can be exhausting. It is for this reason that politics and ethics in these spaces are often situated within practices of endurance. (Note: many alternative projects don’t seek to endure – they practise an ethics of the ephemeral.) The plot-starved nature of these narratives mirrors my argument. Things go along and then they stop. Very little builds up. Very little resolves. This condition of non-resolution (rather than the irresolute) is the condition in which people I know live

(rather than *all* indigenous people or *all* radical environmentalists). And so it is little wonder that the theories I gravitate towards play against the sense of an ending.

But my quoting of Rancière doesn’t mean I am advocating his political theory anymore than my engagement with Agamben and Deleuze signals my allegiance to their writing. They indicate where I think we need to apply critical pressure – thus my interest in tense and quasi-events (rather than the spectacular instances of the Musulman or Karen Quinlan); in endurance and exhaustion (rather than undecidability alone); and in the ethical intuitions of immanent obligation (rather than normative adjudication). To be sure, enduring is not simply a dreary state – cold and grey and lifeless. It can be exhilarating. (In other words, enduring is more than ‘merely’ enduring even when it is only enduring – *à la* Cattellino’s colleague.) But even when it is not, acknowledging that spacings of radical undecidability are, at one and the same time, spaces in which a new political thought *would* emerge and a space in which nothing is likely to emerge is not a contradiction. If these spacings can endure, then thicken, expand and become a dominant form of circulation, then, in being unable to be either one side or another of a ‘division’, these spacings will be the source of a new political space. But everything is stacked against them. This may be a paradox from the perspective of thought; but from the perspective of world building it is merely a material fact.

So is George right to see *Economies* as hopeful – and redemptive? My main response is: definitely not! Hope seems too weak and uncompromised an affect and redemption demands some form of deliverance. All sorts of affects circulate through these spaces. And

they can be very lively. But they are also, almost by necessity, as compromised as they are exhausting. They are, as George puts it, ‘messy localized visions of justice’ that ‘take shape in people’s everyday struggles to persevere’. But there is another reason it would be wrong to see these spacings as redemptive. When an alternative social project emerges as an alternative social world it necessarily extinguishes the previous world. To deliver itself it must alter, if not kill, its mother, which makes it hard to feel anything as muscular as redemption.

- (3) And this takes me to the tense ethics and politics of the otherwise. Cattelino pointedly asks, ‘I would like to know where Povinelli’s critique of late liberal governance and her exploration of possibility in the brackets of recognition could take us towards a theory and politics of obligation that is not built on sacrifice or debt.’ Answering such a question demands unpacking some first assumptions – herein between immanent understandings of multiplicity and liberal politics of pluralism. Theories of multiplicity posit that, in any given arrangement, multiple potential otherwise exist internal to that arrangement. In this sense the multiplicity of the otherwise is in the actual – e.g. the glass that could fall once it is elevated; the shove back that could happen when a police shoves. The question critical theory asks is what releases one or another of these potential otherwise into the actual. Theories of political pluralism (pluralization), on the other hand, focus on how a set of existing diverse social groups can be related in such a way that they can coexist peacefully side-by-side – and so that one can imagine that dominant and emergent forms never touch each other. *Economies* assumes that if immanent social projects

succeed in changing the world then they *change* the world – the form of life that previously existed in it is more or less altered and pluralization is revealed to be a form of denial. Moreover, it assumes that the world that is unmade has as equally valid a right to persevere in being as mine, even if it sees mine as detestable and seeks to eliminate me. One form of life can ‘sacrifice’ itself for another, but even in this case something is made and unmade. This is exactly why, *Economies* argues, the problem of adjudication is important. Those who assail immanent critique as having nothing to stand on are right that our deepest ethical intuitions and political reflexes are thoroughly saturated by normative commitments and prescriptive futures such that the form of ethics and politics that lacks these grounds and does not allow itself to be blinded by them to its own acts of unmaking and extinguishment is deeply disturbing. ‘Tell us’, they say, ‘where this will take us.’ How can this be answered when ‘us’ is no longer, because the world that made ‘us’ has been unmade? The quasi-concept of immanent obligation is meant to signal a space in which we might begin to cultivate a different form of ethical intuition and political orientation that presupposes a deep co-substantiality of social being knowable only in the belated discovery of commitment.

A postscript on whirligigs. I had a chuckle when reading Cattelino’s reading of my loving jab at my longstanding editor at Duke, Ken Wissoker. Clearly, I don’t think my mind is a whirligig. Nor do I think Ken does – though we could ask him. What I am saying to him is much deeper and more personal – an acknowledgement of affection in difference. But even if he or I did – what a lovely thought that would

be. How could anyone refuse the thought of a whirligig? It is at one and the same time the most simple and most complex of dynamic models for the forward motion of return – and how this return returns as a threat. It is a material that must be wound up, and ends only to be wound again. As the Bard wrote in *Twelfth Night* – ‘And thus the whirligig of time brings in his revenges’ (act 5, scene 1, 372–8).

ELIZABETH A. POVINELLI  
COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY, USA

## Reviews

.....  
*The Postcolonial Low Countries: Literature, Colonialism, Multiculturalism*. Edited by Elleke Boehmer and Sarah De Mul. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2012. Pp. 260. ISBN 9780739164303. \$70 (hbk).

.....  
In recent years it has been argued that postcolonial theory based on poststructuralist understandings of narrativity and textuality offers little in the way of a heuristic apt for the study of lived experience in the post-9/11 world. The need to move away from narrativity and textuality towards more materially and historically grounded analysis has been put forward by critics like Neil Lazarus and Benita Parry. At the same time, postcolonial studies has increasingly become described by scholars working outside of English literature as a field that is remarkably anglocentric (and to a lesser extent, francocentric) considering its focus on voices from outside the western hemisphere. The anglocentrism of postcolonial studies is of course not to be confused with the closed ideological circuits of Anglophone canonical literature, which have been an object of study

within the field since its formative years. It is an effect of the combination of most referenced works in the field having been produced within Anglophone academia and the tendency to conceive of diverse colonial and postcolonial contexts in accordance with theory developed in the study of the former British Empire. This has oftentimes led to insensitivity to context-specific aspects in studies of non-Anglophone contexts.

Against this backdrop, this recent anthology about the postcolonial present and the current state of postcolonial studies in the Low Countries is, in contrast to what the title may suggest, of interest not just to Neerlandophone academics but also to the field of postcolonial studies at large. The anglocentrism of postcolonial studies and concomitant theory has, as Boehmer and De Mul point out in an introductory chapter, ‘exacerbated the derivative way’ in which postcolonial concepts have been taken up outside of the Commonwealth and the former French colonial empire (4). This is true not only in the case of European countries like Belgium and the Netherlands, but also in that of countries like Norway and Sweden, whose colonial claims were of a different kind and closer to home.

In their co-written chapter on ‘Postcolonial Studies in the Context of the “Diasporic” Netherlands’, Boehmer and Frances Gouda identify some aspects in which the colonial history of the Netherlands differs markedly from that of nations like Great Britain and France. In Dutch East India, they point out, native languages rather than Dutch were used for administrative purposes, and according to Dutch colonial policy, colonized peoples’ cultural ‘authenticity’ was maintained. This may be one reason why the Netherlands has not seen large-scale immigration from its former colonies. Boehmer and Gouda show

that this particular connection between the colonial past and postcolonial present has consequences for postcolonial pedagogy and theory in academia in the Netherlands.

The relation between the postcolonial, multicultural present and the colonial past(s) in the Low Countries is also at the fore in Sarah De Mul's meticulous analysis of US journalist Adam Hochschild's use of the Jewish Holocaust as a paradigm for the atrocities in the Congo Free State in *King Leopold's Ghost* (1998). Hochschild's book has often been credited for having thrown light on a 'forgotten' chapter of colonial history and served to generate debate about Belgium's colonial past in the late 1990s. However, according to De Mul, *King Leopold's Ghost* is largely based on works that served to spur similar debates and outrage in the 1950s, 1970s and 1980s. Thus, De Mul writes, 'the memory of the Congo atrocities has continuously been buried and rediscovered' in Belgian as well as international debate (177). She argues that the humanitarian narratives that Hochschild 'appropriates, extends, transvalues and reformulates' have come to dominate Belgian discourse about the Free State, and points out that these narratives can be traced back not only to discourses about the Jewish Holocaust, but also to the end of the nineteenth century and the critical writings of the international movement against King Leopold II's Free State regime.

Like Boehmer and Gouda, some of the contributions examine the specific circumstances of Neerlandophone postcolonial literature and politics and postcolonial debates in the Low Countries, while others constitute more general theoretical discussions that take the Low Countries as their point of departure. Two examples that may illustrate these two perspectives are Muryat Aydemir's and Elisabeth Hoving's respective texts. Hoving's

chapter about the (im)possibilities of 'Polderpoko', or Neerlandophone postcolonial studies, is an example of a text in which the historical and political contexts of the Low Countries are foregrounded. Hoving examines the rationale behind negative attitudes towards postcolonial studies in Neerlandophone academia and shows how postcolonial studies have been framed as a 'foreign' paradigm that has little to offer to the study of Dutch literature. Anyone who wants to take stock of the present status of postcolonial studies outside British and North American academia will find this chapter particularly valuable.

In contrast to Hoving's contribution, Muryat Aydemir's chapter can be understood as an intervention into the complexities of intersectional theory. Aydemir studies the debate ensuing in the Netherlands after the 2005 hanging of Iranian teenagers Mahmoud Asgari and Ayaz Marhoni, who were sentenced to death by the Iranian government for having had homosexual relations. The focus in this chapter is on the debate in the Netherlands, in which the sexual identity ascribed to the two men was contrasted to Moslem culture that, because of its alleged aggressiveness towards non-heterosexuals, was seen as emphatically non-modern and unable to be assimilated in the western hemisphere. However, from this analysis of the regionally situated debate, Aydemir moves into a sophisticated theoretical discussion about intersectionality, which has bearings outside of the particular political and discursive context that Aydemir studies.

*The Postcolonial Low Countries* is of interest not simply to scholars in Neerlandophone literary studies precisely because many of the contributors explore the particular circumstances of the postcolonial present and colonial past in the Low Countries. It can partly be

read as a contribution to the development of theoretical interventions that are needed to study diverse (post)colonial histories in their own right, rather than as versions of the histories of British and French imperialism. From the point of view of non-Anglophone postcolonial studies, *The Postcolonial Low Countries* serves to emphasize the need for a (re)turn to history-sensitive readings that have been pointed out as a necessary revitalizing step for postcolonial theory and studies.

NICKLAS HÅLLÉN  
LINNEAUS UNIVERSITY, SWEDEN  
© Nicklas Hållén

.....  
*Intimating the Sacred: Religion in English Language Malaysian Fiction.* By Andrew Hock Soon Ng. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011. Pp. 281. ISBN 9789888083213. \$25 (pbk).

.....

The constitutive role of religion remains relatively unexplored in postcolonial studies (Scott 2012). Andrew Hock Soon Ng's study is a significant intervention as it illustrates the complex representation of religion, race, language and the nation-state in Malaysian English-language fiction in a post-1969 racially fractured national landscape in which Malay Muslims are designated as the *bumi-putras* or 'sons of the soil'. Extending Bahrum Rangkuti and Chelva Kanaganayakam's work among others on the pervasiveness of religion in Malaysian fiction, the book asks: if religion is a constitutive element in the lives of Malays, how does Malaysian Anglophone fiction respond to the challenge of state-imposed religiosity as well as to the fluidity of people's everyday religiosity? Moving away from

sociological and anthropological approaches to the study of Malaysian fiction, Ng employs a psychoanalytical approach to explore the 'unsymbolizable' in the traumatized psyche of individual subjects.

The book is divided into five chapters and each of the chapters engages with Malaysian Anglophone writers representing a particular ethnic/religious/racial/linguistic community. Religion, Ng explains, is 'intimated' as a subtext in these writers. The first chapter analyses Lloyd Fernando's novels – *Scorpion Orchid* (1976) and *Green is the Colour* (1993) – emphasizing issues of religious/racial disunity among various ethnic groups. Employing Levinas and Derrida's deconstructive reading of religion, Ng contends that Fernando's first novel optimistically foregrounds religion as a source of hospitality in a troubled nation: 'religion alone that has the capacity for hospitality, and is able to inspire transcendence over symbolic boundaries such as race, that persists in violently distinguishing self from other' (45). Ng is particularly astute in observing that Fernando's second novel highlights religion's ominous potential once it is secularized through its co-option as a state idiom. The crisis is more acute for those who convert to Islam from other racial/religious communities. Ng's inventive psychoanalytical reading demonstrates that the converted, Neelambigai, as an 'abject' figure destabilizes the rigid boundaries of race/religious allegiance, thereby producing anxiety for the Malaysian state. The contested issue of religious conversion is discussed in chapter two as well in an analysis of Lee Kok Liang's 'Ibrahim Something' (92–102), a story that illustrates co-imbrication between religion, race, sexuality and the crisis of masculinity. The converted Ibrahim feels that his masculinity is 'under perpetual siege' (98) in

comparison to the 'whole' body of the Malay Muslim.

The second chapter additionally explores Lee's use of irony in his treatment of the sacred. Ng contends that Lee's novel, *Flower in the Sky* (1981), demonstrates the juxtaposition of traditional 'magical' elements of mystical Buddhism and the practical/material religiosity among the immigrant Chinese against the backdrop of increasing religious piety. In a Lacanian reading of the novel, Ng points out that the monk Hung's failure to achieve salvation is a consequence of the 'gaze of the other under which Hung unconsciously operates' (78). Here the gaze is that of nostalgia for Buddhism as practised in the mother country, China. The third chapter further explores the theme of religious crisis among the Hindu immigrants through an analysis of K. S. Maniam's narratives that deal with the uprootedness of diasporic sensibility. While Ng draws effortlessly on both Shaiva and Vedantic traditions to explain the theme of asceticism, he does not sufficiently account for a lower-caste woman's practice of the Vedantic tradition, considered to be a Brahminical school of philosophy. Contrasted to Lee's fiction, Ng rightly argues that in Maniam's fiction religion acts as an anchor in a racially/religiously fraught Malaysian geography, despite the fact that the symbolic structures of Hindu tradition gradually disappear.

The last two chapters of the book illustrate the collusion of patriarchy and religion in the lives of Confucian, Christian and Muslim women to produce 'constant surveillance, strictures against sexual matters and emphasis on social correctness' (164). Through an analysis of Shirley Lim's fiction, Ng demonstrates the discrepancy between Lim's own feminist politics and her representation of Confucian and Christian women who live by the traditional Confucian ideals of submission

to the 'right order'. Ng persuasively questions Lim's own ideological motivations in portraying Chinese women's position as unchanging and submissive, thereby negating any liberatory possibility that religion might offer (192). The Confucian and Christian women appear to circumvent the regulation of their body and sexuality through 'mimicry' (Irigaray) and 'strategic essentialism' (Spivak). The last chapter – on Malaysian Muslim writers who write in English because of their 'commitment to modernity' (195) – is by far the most interesting. Ng claims that the Malay writers face a dilemma while negotiating their Malay Muslim identity and modernity. Ng, however, unproblematically equates modernization with a western ethos and writes in the binary of Islam and modernity, preferring to overlook how modernity is redefined in Islamic terms in Malaysia. As Che Husna Azhari and Karim Raslan write on polygamy and homosexuality, respectively, their narratives show how faith in Islam is renegotiated contingently at multiple levels in Malay Muslim everyday life.

Through an impressive range of scholarship, Ng's study explores how women's bodies – be it the figure of a prostitute, a university lecturer, the unclaimed body of the converted, the mute temple-help, the docile Confucian housewife, or an enterprising Kelantanese woman – become sites for narrative exploration of religiosity in the works of contemporary Anglophone Malaysian writers. In highlighting women's ritually marked bodies in the service of religion, and, in turn, as metonymic substitute for the fractured nation, Ng contradicts his own premise of 'veering away from the sociological and anthropological models' (2) that privilege the depiction of race politics and idea of the nation. In the final analysis, Ng's own study of religion and religious experiences in Malaysian Anglo-

phone fiction tends to privilege the frame of the nation for an understanding of crisis of religious subjectivity. Moreover, by not engaging with the limitations that the form of the novel imposes on representations of religious experience, Ng's study overlooks the secularizing impulse inherent in the genre of the novel. Yet, through a deployment of post-structuralist, postcolonial, feminist and psychoanalytical theories, Ng succeeds in representing 'the complexities of practicing religion in a country increasingly transformed by (post)modernity and globalization' (24), notwithstanding the fact that the discipline of psychoanalysis itself emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century as a way of explaining transcendental religious experience in rational terms through an exploration of the individual psyche.

MOSARRAP HOSSAIN KHAN  
NEW YORK UNIVERSITY, USA  
© Mosarrap Hossain Khan

## Reference

Scott, Jamie S. (2012) 'Religion and postcolonial writing', in Ato Quayson *The Cambridge History of Postcolonial Literature*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 739–70.

.....  
*A Joint Enterprise: Indian Elites and the Making of British Bombay*. By Preeti Chopra. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011. Pp. 293. ISBN 9780816670376. \$27.50 (pbk).

.....

Preeti Chopra's *A Joint Enterprise* is a detailed, well-researched, illuminating work that makes a clear argument: 'colonial' cities are far less 'colonial' than we imagine. She sup-

ports her case with densely narrated examples from various contexts, such as late nineteenth-century Bombay Parsi philanthropy, the life story of an important though forgotten Parsi engineer, debates about architectural style and the merits of 'public' institutions such as hospitals, and other contexts pertaining to the built environment in British Bombay. The book is written with an audience of graduate students and professional academics in mind. Undergraduates will be overwhelmed by the book's density. That said, the book will be of major interest to diverse readerships, including South Asia regional specialists, urban historians, architecture scholars and postcolonial scholars.

Arguing persuasively that the so-called colonial city is not simply a result of some 'colonial mind' acting in a top-down manner, Chopra shows how Bombay, especially as it took shape in the aftermath of the rebellion of 1858 – or, the first war of liberation, as many Indians see it – was the product of a joint enterprise between colonial administrators and local people. Specifically, as Bombay and the rest of British India were taken over by the British Crown following 1857–8, the city witnessed a building boom focusing on public buildings – hospitals, railway stations, civic halls and monuments. The dominant architectural style of each major Indian city, moreover, differed from that of the others. In Bombay, Gothic Revival was paramount; in Calcutta, the Classical style; in Madras, the Indo-Saracenic; in Rangoon, the Renaissance style (54). Chopra's discussion, focusing on stylistic debates in Britain and on the ways these translated into the Indian built environment, will especially please architectural historians and scholars of colonial cities.

Chopra's theory of the meanings of architectural style, and its inflection by what the architecture critic Dell Upton calls 'artifactual

modes' – the unifying versus the distinguishing, the 'pervasive' versus the small-scale – focuses rather more on processes of signification, what people say and think about architecture, than non-significatory processes (see esp. pp. 61–6, 165–6). While delving into the latter would have made her case for Bombay's joint character stronger, it is nevertheless an illuminating discussion of the nuances in the colonial perception of ostensibly European architectural styles.

The third chapter, 'The Biography of an Unknown Native Engineer' – Khan Bahadur Muncherji Cowasji Murzban – and the fourth chapter, 'Dividing Practices in Bombay's Hospitals and Lunatic Asylums', are the book's strongest and make the most focused, contextually rich case for the joint enterprise. Taking issue with Jürgen Habermas's 'idealized model' of the public sphere, Chopra makes a well-grounded argument in these chapters for a locally specific 'public realm', as she terms it, that arose in Victorian Bombay and that owed its contours, to a significant degree, to a public architecture negotiated by British and local actors, especially Parsi and other (e.g. Baghdadi Jewish) philanthropists. The Parsi case is particularly interesting for it shows, through examples such as Murzban's projects geared towards a specifically Parsi public – that Bombay's public realm was not identical to a Habermasian public sphere. Rather, this public realm was both 'in theory, owned by and open to all of Bombay's citizens' but also a 'landscape of contradictions ... a fractured landscape that distinguished communities from one another as well as a cohesive landscape that brought people from diverse ethnicities, races, and religions together' (xxi).

While acknowledging these strengths, *A Joint Enterprise* is nevertheless at times vague. To this reader, trained as he is in sociocultural anthropology and with his Geertzian bias, Chopra's case would have benefited from

more ethnographically 'thick' contextualization. This makes me ultimately ambivalent about the main point of the book. 'Arguing against the popular notion that a colonial city is the product of the singular vision of the colonial regime ... a variety of colonial cities resulted as much from contributions of local populations as from contributions of the colonial regime or settlers' (xxiii). Chopra takes issue with Anthony King's view that (as she characterizes it) 'sees global influences at work in colonial cities' (2), a view, she suggests, that is inattentive to local forces. Local 'influences and politics ... were equally determinant forces in the making of colonial cities' (2). Chopra's detailed examples are generally successful in supporting her case, even more so in showing how the case of an important 'colonial' city in the period of the highpoint of imperial centralization – the British Empire post-1858 – is a far more nuanced, negotiated, politically diverse reality than is usually imagined. Nevertheless, based on the evidence presented, 'equally determinant' might be too strong a term, while 'contributions' is rather vague. In what ways, for example, are such terms inflected by the different structural realities and relations of race, colonizer–colonized, gender, structures of feeling, and class in which different Bombay actors were situated? Did British bureaucrats, Parsi philanthropists, Hindu and Muslim minor engineers, construction workers, the Bombay 'public' etc., all contribute 'as much as' each other? How so? Chopra's case is rather stronger with respect to the relatively powerful class of Parsi intermediaries – a group favoured by the British after they took Bombay over from the Portuguese in the late seventeenth century. But this was a small group, accounting, according to figures Chopra cites, for 6 per cent of the city's population in 1901 (175). Other groups are scarcely

mentioned in the book, aside from a few scattered mentions of Parsi stereotypes. How far, in short, can the nuancing of the category of the ‘colonial’ go before we lose focus with respect to which social groups and political-economic positions predictably benefited, and which did not, under the colonial pattern of rule? That being said, *A Joint Enterprise* is a major accomplishment, clearly the product of intensive research over many years by a scholar deeply committed to and knowledgeable in her chosen field. In the acknowledgements, Chopra suggests that the research on which the book is based can sustain another book-length project. I, along with other readers, I am sure, look forward to more work by her on this important world city.

AHMED KANNA

UNIVERSITY OF THE PACIFIC, STOCKTON, USA

© Ahmed Kanna

.....

*Women, War, and the Making of Bangladesh: Remembering 1971.* By Yasmin Saikia. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011. Pp. 336. ISBN 9780822350385. \$24.95 (pbk).

.....

Yasmin Saikia’s *Women, War, and the Making of Bangladesh* is one among several monographs that will be released to coincide with the fortieth anniversary of the independence of Bangladesh. It considers 1971 not through accounts of guerrilla battles, political intrigue or refugee migrations, but by presenting ethnographies of women whose bodies became a battleground on which war was waged. Turning her attention to those who, by virtue of their undeniable structural vulnerability, were particularly targeted as objects of violence, Saikia points out a major lacuna in

the official archive – what we might call the open wound, from which nationalist histories of Bangladesh have averted their eyes. Though the prevalence of rape has been contested by some, including Sharmila Bose in *Dead Reckoning: Memories of the 1971 Bangladesh War* (2011), few scholars of the region contest its deployment as a weapon during the war. Indeed, at the war’s end, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Bangladesh’s first president, proclaimed that Bengali women who had been raped would henceforth be known as *birangonas*, war heroines. The translation of sexual violence against non-combatants into a military idiom of expected sacrifice proleptically attempted to make sense of the seemingly unthinkable and to offer it a recuperative future. These daughters of the nation were to be hallowed alongside their *mukti bahini* brethren as having made possible, through their noble suffering, Bangladesh’s freedom. Ironically, these women have fallen out of the official historical archive, and Saikia aims to clear a space from which they might speak.

*Women, War, and the Making of Bangladesh* is divided into three sections: the first section traces the methodological stakes of the project, the epistemological challenges posed by the historical and cultural silences around women’s experiences of violence during the war. Saikia suggests that paying critical attention to the ways in which rape dehumanizes both its victim and its perpetrator might offer a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of war and its memorialization. What would it mean for Bangladesh to acknowledge the rapes of the women who it holds as its national metonym? The book’s second section, entitled ‘Survivors Speak’, begins an attempt to answer this question by compiling first-hand accounts of women who have lived to see the aftermath of sexual violence in war. Though individually framed

by Saikia's descriptions of locating research subjects and the questions that guided her study, the narratives themselves far exceed and excitingly destabilize her academic disciplining efforts. As such, they are, undeniably, the book's most compelling contribution to the field. The final section, 'A New Beginning', briefly draws together excerpts from interviews with former Pakistani soldiers and a philosophical consideration of the possibility of a humanist closure.

The book's focus, the collected narratives of the women – victims of rape, social workers and soldiers – resists the nationalist histories that have elided or erased their very presence. As ethnographer and historian, Saikia resists offering much in the way of interpretation in her framing, but the nature of the stories and their presentation articulate an argument about gendered violence. The accounts of women who were raped during the war are wrenching, and often hard to read, but they refuse any easy diagnosis of victimhood. Instead, they articulate the intimacy and insidiousness of sexual violence: that rape became a weapon of war precisely because of the deep structural vulnerability of women, across ethnicity, religion and class. In each account a transgenerational, or perhaps more aptly, a matrilineal history of subjugation and violence is evoked. The state's designation of *birangona* depends upon a temporal condensation whereby a single act (though it might have been repeated) of violence fixes an individual (though she might have been one of many) into a representational trope. The accounts of Nur Begum and her daughter Beauty, of Firdousi Priyabhasani, of Taslima's mother who is never given her own name, of the Bihari women who speak in a cacophony of collective anonymity, refuse the *violence* of singularity; they refuse the ideological violence

by which rape, imprisonment, destitution and disenfranchisement are figured as exceptional conditions of war.

The collection of narratives gathered in the book stands potentially to change the field of study on Bangladesh and the subcontinent, and offers a rich archive to scholars for future study. However, Saikia's ethnographic methodology opens up several problems. While the account of violence against Biharis, an Urdu-speaking community targeted for violence during the war as collaborators with the Pakistan army, is but one of the ethnographies, it fundamentally structures the project. Saikia's attention to the subjugation of Bihari women during and after the war importantly makes visible the attendant violences of Bangladeshi ethnolinguistic nationalism. However, Saikia so vigorously condemns the systematic and reprehensible persecution of Biharis as to construct an equally problematic dialectic in its place – the designation throughout of 'the Other' against whom harm is directed, and 'the perpetrator' of said harm – and subsequently refuses the preponderance of violence towards Hindus and other minority populations. This is a troubling ideological simplification in Saikia's analysis, but one that is ultimately destabilized by the narratives she has compiled. Moreover, it is incongruous with the book's commendable and important project of complicating histories of Bangladesh's birth. The recorded histories in the book are a powerful counterhistory, standing in abeyance of the official accounts that would deny their existence, and repudiate their calls for justice: they are necessary reading for any scholar of the region.

POULOMI SAHA  
BROWN UNIVERSITY, USA  
© Poulomi Saha

.....

*Gender, Nation, and the Arabic Novel: Egypt, 1892–2008*. By Hoda Elsadda. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2012. Pp. 261. ISBN 9780815632962. \$39.95 (hbk).

.....

Hoda Elsadda's *Gender, Nation, and the Arabic Novel* is a remarkable work of interdisciplinary scholarship, weaving together postcolonial theory, gender studies and literary history, with particular reference to the emergence and development of Egyptian fiction. The book follows a simultaneously chronological and thematic structure, dividing its content into three parts, preceded by an introduction and concluded with a postscript. Part One of the book traces the beginnings of literary and historical discourses on gender and nation, defined by the author in terms of 'the *nahda* narrative', in selected texts by women and men writers and public figures of the late nineteenth century into the twentieth century. Part Two includes three chapters which follow stages of the development of the national narrative and the gradual defeat of the *nahda* ideal from the mid-1950s. Part Three is devoted to the fiction of the 'New Writing' of the young generation whose work has gained in volume and prominence since the 1990s, with particular attention to feminist dimensions and postcolonial nomadism, as well as 'liminal' spaces and identities.

Hoda Elsadda opens her book with the two assumptions underlying her project: (1) the canon 'reflects and constructs the ideas of nation and national identity in the modern period'; (2) the nation is in itself a gendered 'imagined community' (xiii). The dialectical relationship between identity, the imaginary, nation, gender and the canon seems to under-

lie the project and defines what she describes as 'the overriding question' of her book: 'implications of integrating gender as a category of analysis for Arab literary history' (xxxv) – a point further developed in her postscript as she lists the 'guiding questions' directly related to various aspects of 'gendered nationhood' and 'the idea of a national canon' (213). Thus, apart from the title's three main threads weaving the book (gender, nation and fiction), the overall structure seems to me to be governed by three theoretical concepts: identity, the imaginary and the canon.

The book offers a unique discussion of literary representations of masculinity and femininity. It introduces the concept of the fictional '*nahda* hero' as the equivalent of the modernist New Man. Thus in late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century writings, particularly those of Qasim Amin and in Abdallah al-Nadim's *al-Ustadh*, both the *fellah* and the Egyptian woman stand for backwardness, while the westernized, educated men and women represent the new national ideal and the *nahda* fictional hero. Yet, it is two women, Aisha Taymur and Malak Hifni Nasif, who offer critiques of modern men, for having shed the virtues of traditional manhood and adopted the vices of modern masculinity. The writer's discussion centres on the New Man rather than the New Woman, asserting that the notion of the New Man emerged before that of the New Woman and stating that the construction of the New Woman was a necessary consequence for the formation of the new nation and the New Man. The *nahda* heroes of the early twentieth-century writers Mohammed Hussein Haikal, Ibrahim al-Mazini and the more conservative Mustafa Sadiq al-Rafii have been subjected to their authors' and the readership's criticism for being ambivalent, effeminate and/or wes-

ternized. On the other hand, in his fiction, novelist and dramatist Tawfiq al-Hakim discusses the ideals of femininity and masculinity through a direct East–West encounter, through his male protagonists’ encounters with western (French) women and westernized (Egyptian) women. Turning to Naguib Mahfouz’s Cairo Trilogy, Hoda Elsadda describes the text in terms of ‘a *canonical* national allegory in as much as it typifies the national, modernist discourse of the liberal *nahda* elite’ (79).

The chapter on Latifa al-Zayyat presents her ‘as a role model and inspiration to women writers in search of a tradition of women writing in Arab culture’ (97–8). Her novel *Al-Bab al-maftouh* (The Open Door) published in 1960 occupies a prominent position in the history of Arab women’s writing, as it interweaves the struggle for national independence with women’s liberation. Layla, the novel’s protagonist, is involved in three inter-related battles: ‘a feminist battle... a Marxist battle... and the larger anticolonial battle’ (102), with the national battle for independence directing the narrative. It is in her later fiction, drama and autobiographical writing that al-Zayyat is more concerned with socio-economic conditions, where the roles of men and women are set within a framework of gender and class power relations.

Part Three opens with the critical response to the new generation of writers, who started publishing in the 1990s, for having focused on the self at the expense of *al-qadaya al-kubra* (the big issues). Hoda Elsadda critiques this critical response that manifested itself in the undermining notion of *kitabāt al-banat* (girls’ writing) and the misconceived notion of *kitabāt al-jasad* (writing the body). The chapter entitled ‘The Personal is Political’ focuses on two texts, Nura Amin’s *Qamis wardi farigh* (An Empty Pink Shirt) and May

Telmissany’s *Dunyazad*, arguing that both texts foreground the personal feminine experience and subvert mainstream representations of femininity and masculinity. On the other hand, the novels of Somaya Ramadan and Husam Fakhr ‘exemplify a postcolonial nomadism’ (166), where identities are constructed along East–West encounters. Somaya Ramadan’s female protagonist in *Awraq al-narjis* (Leaves of Narcissus) and Husam Fakhr’s male protagonists establish their identities as nomads who consciously ‘resist pressure to take sides, to choose one place over the other, one identity over the other’ (188).

While the book opens with early representations of ideal manhood and *nahda* heroes, the chapter on Sunallah Ibrahim marks the replacement of this ideal by the ‘defeated masculinities’ of his anti-heroes. Ibrahim addresses socioeconomic oppressive conditions, yet his *Tilka al-ra’iha* (The Smell of It) published in 1966 ‘constitutes a significant break with earlier texts, particularly as regards representations of masculinity’ (120). In another masterpiece, *Dhat*, the protagonist is a woman representing the daily struggles of ‘every Egyptian middle-class woman whose life was transformed by the open-door economic policies’ (128). Interestingly, Hoda Elsadda notes that ‘Ibrahim’s tragic but unbeatable protagonist is a woman, not a man’ (130). The last chapter of the book, devoted to men writers of the last two decades, presents mostly ‘defeated masculinities’ with ‘liminal identities’ occupying ‘liminal spaces’. Hamdi Abu Golayyel, Ahmed Alaidy and Muhammad Ala al-Din explore definitions of manhood and womanhood, and investigate the crisis of masculinity in their protagonists who belong to the *ashwaiyat* sub/culture – impoverished communities living at the margins of urban centres. These protagonists’ floating

identities and defeated masculinities manifest the defeat of the national project and ideal manhood.

Hoda Elsadda’s book is a fine work of interdisciplinary scholarship. It offers many insights to scholars and readers interested in gender studies, Middle East studies, postcolonial theory, cultural studies and literary theory. Apart from the vast yet focused scope of this book, I personally found particular pleasure in the fact that in addition to the key issues profoundly addressed, the author managed to shed light on aesthetics of writing: allegories, metaphors, symbols, narrative structures and techniques, experimental stylistic features, and generic intersections. And finally, in her awareness of processes of canonization, Hoda Elsadda deconstructs the Arab literary canon while simultaneously contributing to this same canon.

HALA KAMAL  
CAIRO UNIVERSITY, EGYPT  
© Hala Kamal

.....  
*Courtly Encounters: Translating Courtliness and Violence in Early Modern Eurasia.* By Sanjay Subrahmanyam. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012. Pp. 336. ISBN 9780674067059. \$29.95 (hbk).

.....

The sixteenth century brought much discovery to the world. The plagues and droughts of earlier centuries, many believed, had threatened the very existence of humankind. In the midst of these environmental crises came a spiritual one, one that encouraged the emergence of vernacular languages as people outside the religious hierarchy sought to

understand a world that was guided by a religion with a doctrine that was normally written in a language they did not understand. The Protestant Reformation of the early sixteenth century was but one response to the spiritual crisis of that earlier period; the Counter Reformation was the other. The need for goods and markets as well as the search for souls would trigger what eventually became known as the Age of Discovery. What happened when Europeans set out into the world, to parts foreign? Whom did they meet and on what terms did they meet them? Sanjay Subrahmanyam attempts to answer these questions in his *Courtly Encounters*.

The introduction begins with mention of a letter from Sir Thomas Roe to James I in 1622. On mission to Constantinople, Sir Thomas writes that he is having difficulty establishing himself with the sultan. This was not the first time this had happened; he had had similar difficulties elsewhere. Subrahmanyam explains that such encounters occur because of ‘incommensurability’, a difference of cultural norms that, he asserts, characterizes much writing about discovery and exploration. The chapters that follow provide examples of these cultural encounters.

Chapter one, ‘Courtly Insults’, opens with a poem from the Brahmin Kurmanatha Kavi, then proceeds to the focus of the chapter: the historiography of a sixteenth-century battle in the Deccan, South India. A significant event in the history of India, Subrahmanyam credits the publication of Robert Sewell’s *The Forgotten Empire* in 1900 with its promotion. He explains that Sewell’s novelty lay in his use of – what were then – recently discovered Portuguese primary sources. This he follows with extended presentation and analysis of two major chronicles: *Gulshan-i Ibrahimi* by the Indo-Persian author Firishta and *Estado*

*da India*, a multi-authored work from the official archives in Portugal. An example of incommensurability, the chronicles highlight the political rivalries between Hindu and Muslim states of the Deccan which, according to Subrahmanyam, stemmed from their very familiarity with one another. After reading his analysis of the chronicles and his references to sources from different centuries, however, the ideas get lost. It is only on reading the end of the chapter and then rereading the beginning that one sees a possible connection.

Chapter two, 'Courtly Martyrdom', presents what appears to be a general discussion of Christian and Muslim martyrdom. Unlike the first chapter, the setting is not India exclusively but includes the Arabian Peninsula, Indonesia and Malaysia. Mentioned in chapter one, Subrahmanyam refers again to the battle of al-Ksar al-Kabir, a sixteenth-century battle between Portugal and Morocco, as a way of introducing Portuguese ideas about Christian martyrdom in an Islamic context. One quickly realizes, however, that the focus is really on the Portuguese narratives of trial and travail; what began with a description of a Gujarati among Ottomans in the Arabian Peninsula, a Shi'i and Sunni Muslim division, becomes a discussion of the Portuguese in Muslim lands and never quite returns. What one imagined would be the incommensurable encounter, the meeting of Christian and Muslim martyrs in Asia, never happens. There is no sense of why Christian and Muslim martyrdoms are significant to the idea of 'the encounter'. A very brief mention of Muslim *shahid* (martyr) in the beginning is followed by a more extensive treatment of Christian martyrs in Asia, but with no clear link.

The last of the substantive sections, chapter three, 'Courtly Representations', presents the idea of Asian-European cultural encounters

through an examination of artwork. Subrahmanyam notes that by the sixteenth century, Europeans were developing a general interest in Moghul art and that interest eventually led to a mutual influence among European artists and their counterparts in Asia. European artists incorporated elements of Moghul style into their paintings, and Asians introduced European styles into their works. The effect of this contact, we learn, was slow and, as Subrahmanyam adds, only really gained hold in the eighteenth century with the arrival of the East India Company in Asia. As with martyrdom in chapter two, however, the discussion is more about Europeans and much less about Asians, making it seem incomplete. The book concludes with comments that should have been made much earlier.

Understanding cultural differences as a way of forging diplomatic ties and avoiding warfare is key to life in any century. In *Courtly Encounters*, however, the lack of a sound essay structure – a clearly developed thesis followed by a discussion and conclusion – makes it difficult to see an argument, let alone draw a conclusion. Maybe, as Subrahmanyam says, one cannot have 'a comprehensive account of the encounters' because the book is a compilation of discrete lectures. However, because the encounters are not properly presented, it is difficult to see why they are significant. A book with a clearer treatment of its topics put into shorter chapters and set in the context of Portuguese imperial expansion or the Age of Discovery would make for a much easier read. As it stands, it is not.

MADIA THOMSON  
INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR  
© Madia Thomson

.....  
*Geographies of Philological Knowledge: Post-coloniality and the Transatlantic National Epic.* By Nadia Altschul. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012. Pp. 264. ISBN 9780226470788 \$45 (hbk).  
.....

At the centre of Nadia Altschul's *Geographies of Philological Knowledge* lies the figure of Andres Bello, a Venezuelan grammarian who began a new critical edition of the Spanish epic *Poem of the Cid* while on a diplomatic mission to Great Britain in 1810. As Altschul recounts, his project was nothing if not ambitious: though in Britain to agitate against Spanish authority in South America, his philological work sought nothing less than the elevation of Spain's neglected Cidian epic alongside the national poems of Britain, France and Germany, the great imperial powers of the day. And while he did not immediately succeed, the means by which he attempted the feat speaks volumes, as Altschul shows, about the problems of criollo subjectivity in Spanish American history, the geopolitics of philological knowledge production, and the relationship between postcolonial theory and Latin American studies as a field.

Much of the book is therefore a rereading of criollo subjectivity as understood within the context of Latin American studies. Though Bello's project was unquestionably part of the project of Occidentalism – he sought to make Spanish America part of a broader western cultural sphere – Altschul also undertakes to understand Bello's subjectivity through the concept of 'Occidental resistances' (13), which names for her 'a form of struggle with coloniality that is carried out from within the Occidental frame of mind' (13). Bello's Occidentalism is thus both for and against

itself, a means of securing the cultural superiority of Spain and its colonies by way of working against the marginalization of Spain by the West at large. Here, for Altschul, criollo subjectivity is therefore best understood as another form of settler colonial subjectivity as described by settler postcolonial studies, a perspective otherwise lacking within Latin American studies as a field. Internally heterogeneous, metropolitan and colonial, colonizing and colonized, Bello's case shows the complex colonial tensions that animate criollo subjectivity in the Spanish American sphere.

As Altschul makes clear, however, the ambiguities implicit in Bello's positions *vis-à-vis* colony and metropole are, at the same time, part and parcel of a broader anxiety in Bello's work over the geography of philological knowledge production in the Euro-Atlantic world. Altschul's account of the complexity of criollo subjectivity is thus also one about the 'coloniality of knowledge' (9), a term that names, in this case, the ways in which French, German and British scholars tended to depict Spain as incapable of producing a national epic. As she argues, Spain in the eyes of the European powers of the nineteenth century was often regarded as little more than an 'intra-colonial land' (11) whose decidedly 'Oriental' (203) character made it unable to produce a national epic on a par with those of England, Germany and France. Hence the particular character of Bello's efforts at elevating the Castilian poem to national status – he goes out of his way to show its essentially Christian character, refusing to acknowledge any Islamic inheritance in its verse – as well as the resistance of later German-trained philologists to acknowledging the significance of his work. As she shows, generations of scholars have tended to downplay his importance in favour of critics of European extraction, while

many other European scholars have doubted the ability of Spanish American universities to produce scholars of any relevance to the field.

The story of Bello's work on *Poem of the Cid* is thus much more than a fascinating piece of intellectual history, though it is certainly that. It becomes, in Altschul's hands, a vehicle for exploring the relations among the nineteenth-century European powers and those living under the auspices of the Spanish post-metropole, as well as a means of integrating the concepts of postcolonial studies and the concerns of Latin American intellectual history. But while her work on Spanish American criollos as settler-colonial subjects is certainly important for its nuanced understanding of 'Occidental resistances' and the subjects who live through them, the book's contribution to the debate over the place of postcolonialism in Latin American studies more generally is somewhat harder to discern. Altschul repeatedly refers to criollo subjects 'colonized and colonizing' (20), calls Spain either an 'internal colony' (109) or an 'internally colonized' (124) part of Europe, and makes abundant use of the phrase 'coloniality

of knowledge' to describe the ways in which Spain was marginalized by Europe at large. The 'colonialism' at work in these terms, however, is never explicitly defined, the result being that 'colonialism' in the book names little more than 'marginality', a definition that, as definitions go, is not saying much at all. This will no doubt bother those invested in the idea that colonialism refers to a specific set of practices by which one sovereign people lords itself over another, but Altschul's purpose in using the term is, to be fair, one of provocation anyway. As she explains, referencing the work of José Rabasa, 'the most productive results stem from the discussions on the inapplicability of postcolonial theory to American culture' because of the way it generates 'debates leading to a deeper understanding of the specificities of Spanish American colonialism' (21). As long as *Geographies of Philological Knowledge* furthers this debate, it will have succeeded in its aims.

BRADY SMITH

UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO, USA

© Brady Smith