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Susheila Nasta and Mark U. Stein, eds., *The Cambridge History of Black and Asian British Writing*

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Susheila Nasta and Mark U. Stein, eds. *The Cambridge History of Black and Asian British Writing.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. E-book. 759 p. ISBN 9 7811 08164 146. £99.99

1 The scope of the volume is substantial as it encompasses almost four centuries of British writing from the colonial and postcolonial "margins" of Asia, Africa and the Americas. In the introduction, the authors acknowledge a kinship with C.L. Innes's previous monument (*A History of Black and Asian Writing in Britain, 1700-2000*, published in 2003). However, their own critical engagement, as well as the table of contents, indicate how thoroughly scholarship has re-thought methods, as well as embraced new textualities, in the span of twenty years. Taken as a whole, the volume both confirms its titular ambition, in presenting an overview of "Black and Asian British writing," and operates a multi-scalar deconstruction of those very categories, showing how unstable and questionable they might be. This Cambridge compendium gathers 39 chapters and relies on the expertise of over 40 scholars (some of the chapters being joint contributions). The two editors have carried out a remarkable task of retracing kinships, connections, genealogies and legacies of writers who have shaped British sensibilities. Racist biases and exoticizing impulses in the reception of these texts are also taken into consideration (see chapters 24 by Nicola L. Abram, on anthologies and collectives, and 35 by Sarah Brouillette and John R. Coleman, on marketing strategies), while no attempt is made at forcing comparisons between authors stemming from widely different parts of the "Empire."

2 The volume compiles 39 chapters, which fall into three main parts: "New Formations: The Eighteenth to the Early Twentieth Century," "Uneven Histories: Charting Terrains in the Twentieth Century," and "Writing the Contemporary." The volume opens on the earliest transcultural texts written in English as Markman Ellis proceeds to a re-reading of the narratives authored by former slaves (Sancho, Cugoano, Equiano and Prince, mostly) during the long eighteenth century, against the backdrop of Enlightenment ambivalences. The following chapters excavate a range of voices that had long remained confidential, alongside others which are already canonical. Most importantly, the opening chapters of the volume initiate what appears as a ceaseless concern, that of interweaving a multiplicity and diversity of writerly interventions. Such is the case for instance with the remarkable third chapter, which diachronically connects the dots between Dean Mahomet's 1794 *Travels*, Sarojini Naidu and Tagore in the early twentieth century, and Kureishi's *Buddha of Surburbia*.

3 Some of the chapters deal with intellectual history, as is the case for instance with chapters 6 and 8 (on inter-war networks of Caribbean, African and Asian writers, and their material literary platforms, respectively) and chapter 17 (on similar artistic networks in post WWII London); some chapters appraise the role played by British mainstream institutions (see chapter 9, authored by James Procter, about the BBC as "contact zone," 148 *seq.*). Other chapters tackle the question of artistic movements, as does chapter 15 in which Chris Campbell recontextualises the Caribbean Artists' Movement (CAM), whose brevity (1966-1972) must not obfuscate its key role in "negotiating symbolic and political fields" (249). Some chapters focus on an event or a community, as does chapter 12 (Alison Donnell on the "Windrush generation"), while in chapter 13, J. Dillon Brown examines representations of "double displacements" (Lamming, Selvon, Braithwaite, Brathwaite, Naipaul, mainly). Among other threads, the reader is invited to think of migratory and diasporic writing as experimental by definition, with mobilities forming a theme but also a form for textual practices (see in particular chapters 26, 34 and 39).

4 A few chapters can be singled out as particularly original, if not wholly unexpected. In chapter 11, for instance, Colin Chambers looks at some early Black and Asian drama, tracing forms of resistance in the "fissures" of an otherwise almost consistently stereotyped representation of racialized otherness. Through an informed overview of moments of Black and Asian performances, Chambers shows how a practical shift was operated from within British theatre over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

5 The publication of this volume signposts an encyclopaedic enterprise, without the descriptive method which often derives from such a totalizing ambition. Some names, titles, events and places recur from one chapter to the next, in a play of perspectives which only feeds the reader's discoveries. Quite a few of the contributions compiled here hinge on a critical re-assessment of literary experiments. Thus, chapter 16 opens up the boundaries of "British" literature by using Clifford's understanding of the "translocal" in order to read such performing poets as Soyinka, Kitchener, Moares, Markham and Figueroa, while chapter 14 pushes the boundaries of literary categories by re-assessing a wider, global modernity, also called "new modernism" (and stands as a continuation of chapter 7, where Anna Snaith emphasizes the "distinctly multicultural and multiracial" [116] nature of British modernism).

6 Each in its own way, the chapters in the volume map out agencies and positionalities which tend to be increasingly recognized and examined. This new *Cambridge History of Black and Asian British Writing* will be greatly useful to students and teachers in a variety of fields beyond postcolonial and decolonial studies: intellectual history, literary theory, performance studies, Black Studies, area studies, print culture studies, media studies, diaspora studies. The numerous contributions to this landmark volume form a constellation of focuses on moments, texts, meetings, and artistic endeavours in the long history of writerly experiments on the part of what Caryl Phillips called, after Shakespeare, the "extravagant strangers." It complements and augments Innes's own pioneering work (and, to a lesser extent, John McLeod's *Postcolonial London* – McLeod authoring chapter 27 on "reinventing the nation") and will surely help students and teachers further their reflections on the topic and in the field. It invites readers to re-consider the asymmetries at the heart of the colonial power relation, but also to consider the blurred lines between what could be seen as strictly European and what is clearly transnational, transcultural and diasporic.

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