identifies as a weakness of theatre studies—their over reliance on textual and thematic rather than spatial and material aspects—though this weakness can be expected as a result of the scarcity of surviving information on the spatial characteristics of performances. Nevertheless, in working out the ways in which the theatre, as a predominantly spatial art form, simultaneously comments on and participates in some of the most pressing debates of the period, this book will be especially useful to those interested in the position of the theatre in early modern social reality.

Karen Walker


Tricks with a Glass consists of an Introduction, fourteen essays, and two interviews that attempt to investigate what Rocío Davis calls “the diverse ways in which Canadian writers have negotiated identity and space in terms of the realities of ethnicity” (xiii). The essays analyze literary texts by writers such as Michael Ondaatje, Neil Bissoondath, Rohinton Mistry, Nino Ricci, Antonine Maillet, Janice Kulyck Keefer (who also contributes a memoir/essay to the volume), Rudy Wiebe, SKY Lee, Joy Kogawa, Lee Maracle, and Rachna Mara; the two interviews, which function as a coda to the volume, provide a sympathetic and resonant dialogue between Rocío Davis and Wayson Choy and a somewhat flat exchange between Rosalía Baena and Linda Hutcheon. The collection ranges widely and eclectically over contemporary Canadian writing almost exclusively in English: white ethnic writers, writers of colour, First Nations writers, and francophone Acadian writer Maillet (the only writer in French discussed in the volume)—all fall within the bounds of this volume’s investigation of “ethnicity in Canada.” Despite being published in Europe, the collection follows the prevailing biases of English literary studies in Canada by proceeding as if Québec does not exist.

In such an eclectic collection, one might reasonably expect the Introduction to make sense of the topics addressed and the possible theoretical or conceptual issues under investigation. Davis asserts in the Introduction that “The conceptualization of ethnicity is currently undergoing a radical change based upon the increasingly complex politics of representation,” but she sidesteps a further theorization of this “radical change” through an appeal to plurality: what Davis calls “The multifarious ways in which ethnicity is registered
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and articulated in literature,” which, she argues, “make it virtually impos-
sible to offer a single working definition of the term” (xiv). So while Davis
acknowledges that “theorizing on ethnicity is a valuable critical enterprise,”
she asserts that “this collection will centre instead on the actual inscription
of ethnicity in concrete texts; together, these essays, it is hoped, match at least
the central pattern of Canada’s mosaic” (xiv). My central quarrel with the
collection’s Introduction is not with its side-stepping of “theorizing” ethnicity
as such, although I would have hoped for a more thorough engagement with
the theoretical debates that have animated critics in Canadian literary studies
throughout the 1990s. My quarrel is rather with the Introduction’s appar-
ently unselfconscious recirculation of Canadian multicultural ideology (such
as the clichéd image of the mosaic) and the conceptual fuzziness of the critical
terms it puts forward. These two problems come together near the end of the
Introduction, where Davis writes: “The appreciation of ethnic culture and
the recognition of variety only serve to enhance the richness of Canadian lit-
erary life. The images created by the diverse ‘tricks with a glass’ performed by
writers are the shaping stones in the multicultural mosaic” (xxiii–xxiv). The
specific terms of “appreciation” and “recognition” and enhanced “richness”
all call out for closer critical scrutiny than the Introduction provides, while
the assertion that “images” are “shaping stones in the multicultural mosaic”
remains thoroughly unclear to me as a description of the work performed by
the essays and interviews that follow.

Readers should note that the Introduction and the majority of the essays
in Tricks with a Glass do not cite any works published after 1994, a limitation
that seriously compromises the ability of a collection published in 2000 to
contribute to and extend contemporary scholarly debates. Important scholar-
ship published before 1994 also remains unacknowledged: Kathleen Firth’s
analysis of Neil Bissoondath’s novel A Casual Brutality (1988), for example,
makes no mention of incisive critiques of Bissoondath’s work by M. Nourbese
Philip and Dionne Brand (see Philip; and Brand), critiques that have circulat-
ed widely and would have productively cut across the essay’s banal conclusion
that Bissoondath’s novel suggests that “all human beings live ‘lives cut hope-
lessly adrift’” and “that all of us are wayfarers, very far from home” (69). Eva
Darias Beutell’s more theoretically sophisticated analysis of the “centrality of
the historiographical” (191) in Joy Kogawa’s novel Obasan (1981; incorrectly
listed as 1983) and SKY Lee’s novel Disappearing Moon Cafe (1990) likewise
proceeds without acknowledging the fact that such concerns have been dis-
cussed time and again over the past twenty years in the scholarly record sur-
rounding Obasan (for an influential uncited example, see Goellnicht). Typos
abound: ‘Trent University Canadian Studies scholar James Struthers is re-
ferred to as “James Struther” (16); The Empire Writes Back (1989) is cited as being published in 1993 (33); and Sister Vision Press is referred to as “Sisters of Colour Vision” (252). My purpose in making these points is not to scold critics for omissions and errors but rather to underline the uneven and sometimes inadequate manner in which these essays participate in contemporary scholarly debates over ethnicity in Canadian literary studies.

Taken as a whole, Tricks with a Glass provides a few instances of fairly dense theoretical writing (particularly in the essays by Beautell) and many straight-ahead close readings of contemporary Canadian literary texts in English. In reading these essays one after another, I found myself missing a more sustained meditation on the question of *how critics might analyze and discuss texts considered to be "ethnic"*—not how critics might trace thematic tropes within these “ethnic” texts (an approach well represented in this volume) but rather how critics might engage with and attempt to realign the act of criticism itself. In this sense, Davis’s appeal (which I quoted above) to “the actual inscription of ethnicity in concrete texts” (xiv) seems to forestall the necessary and genuinely difficult project of reworking the disciplinary codes that govern the ways we might write literary criticism dealing with questions of ethnicity, an ongoing project being undertaken in Canada by critics such as Roy Miki, Fred Wah, and Smaro Kamboureli, amongst others (see Miki; Wah; and Kamboureli). Tricks with a Glass records how certain scholars have approached the topic of “writing ethnicity in Canada” in the 1990s but it stops short of showing us possible ways to rethink and push forward future critical discussions of “cultural difference” in Canada.

**Works Cited**


Guy Beauregard