# Book Reviews

Kevin Grant, ed. *The Art of David Dabydeen.* Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 1997. Pp. 221. £12.99

*The Art of David Dabydeen* is the first comprehensive assessment of the literary achievement of Dabydeen, a leader of the "second generation" of West Indian writers in England. The book includes thoughtful interviews with Dabydeen by Wolfgang Binder (1989), Frank Birbalsingh (1991), and Kwame Dawes (1994); it also includes nine critical essays, most of them new, on Dabydeen's three books of poetry and his first two novels. Although there are no essays on the more recent novels *The Counting House* (1996) or *A Harlot's Progress* (1999), still, the collection is a pleasure to read in that it gives approximately equal attention to the works surveyed and offers inter-related discussions that, in effect, create an emergent critical discourse on the nature of Dabydeen's literary achievement.

Dabydeen's unusual life and writing career naturally give rise to questions of postcoloniality. In 1969, at the age of fourteen, he left his home in rural Guyana and immigrated to London, where he eventually entered Cambridge and earned a doctorate in English literature. Consequently, he has many postcolonial identities: he is an East Indian native of the West Indies; a West Indian (or "black") writer in England, who speaks on behalf of Afro-Caribbeans as well as East Indian Caribbeans; an English don, fully aware of postcolonial discourse, who admires the very eighteenth-century English culture that endorsed the worst of the slavery system in the Caribbean; and a literary artist who not only emulates his mentors Samuel Selvon, Wilson Harris, George Lamming, V. S. Naipaul, and Kamau Brathwaite, but also pays homage to Shakespeare, W. B. Yeats, D. H. Lawrence, and T. S. Eliot. "I'm . . . a three [or] four-footed creature, a kind of latter day Anancy," Dabydeen says (188). "Sometimes I feel . . . that I am an allusion to an allusion to an allusion" (210).

Dabydeen's relationship to postcolonial discourse dominates the discussions in this anthology. In the interviews Dabydeen shows self-conscious awareness of postcolonial theory, although he rejects the assumption by critics that writers like himself need to be "politically correct," by which Dabydeen means consistent, linear, rational, and sense-making in defense of "the race" (209). Instead, Dabydeen say, he and other writers are at times more interested in "transgression, and abandonment, and the confusion of metaphor, and opaqueness, and multiply-fused yet contradictory perspectives, and reveling in contradictions, muddle, wrong-headedness, hydra-headedness" (209). He does not want to write literature that is a "manifesto of colonial feelings" (220) or a "parade of grievances" (195). Instead, he wants to capture "contemporary individualities" (173).

In "Self-Consciously Post-Colonial: The Fiction of David Dabydeen," Mark McWatt finds Dabydeen to be less successful in subverting postcolonial correctness than Dabydeen would apparently like to be. McWatt first asks, what effect does Dabydeen's knowledge of postcolonial theory have upon the quality of his writing? It is an important question that should be asked of the increasing number of writers today who work self-consciously with postcolonial theory in mind. McWatt finds the narrators in both *The Intended* (1991) and *Disappearance* (1993) to be problematic from this point of view: the nameless narrator of the former exhibits "an explanatory power that surpasses his years" (to cite Norval Edwards), while the narrator of the latter is so obsessed with "political and theoretical correctness" that it "robs the narrator of life" (121). *The Intended* is redeemed by its stories, but *Disappearance* is sabotaged by stories that end in the "literary gamesmanship" of contradiction, affirming only "the political correctness of postcolonial theory" (122). McWatt does not suggest that Dabydeen may thereby be aiming at more of a postmodern than a postcolonial effect, but he does hint that perhaps Dabydeen is implying that any "self-consciously postcolonial text" has little substance apart from enacting "theoretical paradigms" (121).

Benita Parry, the distinguished postcolonial critic who was a colleague of Dabydeen's at the University of Warwick, admires his poetic achievement in both *Slave Song* (1984) — which won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize — and *Coolie Odyssey* (1988), but faults his occasionally sexist representation of women. She objects to the assumption, in a few poems in *Slave Song*, that women actually welcome rape. She objects also that in *The Intended*, the narrator regards a prostitute as a mere "commodity that changes hands" (97). According to Parry, this "deliberately and provocatively implicates the [works] in a discourse shared by the master's culture and beyond" (55). In her second essay, Parry expresses concern that by the end of *The Intended*, the narrator seems not to have fully displaced his early aspiration toward mastering and assimilating into his English heritage. Her feminist critique may be, in part, what Dabydeen had in mind when he told Binder that "politically correct theorists" would denounce the lust of the black slaves in *Slave Song* as "pernicious; but what do they know about that kind of living?" (168). He might ask the same question in defense of the Oxford-bound, quasi-assimilated narrator of *The Intended*, whose history resembles Dabydeen's own.

What are the function and value of the notes, summaries and prints added to the Creole language poems in *Slave Song*? Dabydeen says that he intends them as "playful," "spoof" elements in the tradition of Alexander Pope and T. S. Eliot, both of whom annotated their own poetry. McWatt, in "His True True Face," argues that the appendages create a peculiarly postcolonial effect and meaning. McWatt admires the emotional power inherent in the personas of the fourteen poems written in a version of Guyanese Creole. He sees the appendages — all written in Standard English — as being, in effect, attempts by the official voices of colonizing translators, critics and visual artists to control the utterance of subaltern Creole voices. The strength of the Creole poems thwarts such control, with the result that the gaps between the poems and their appendages cause the reader to query the colonizing mind that lies behind the would-be controlling appendages. Although Sarah Lawson Welsh, in "Experiments in Brokenness," acknowledges this postcolonial possibility, she prefers to see these varied "voices" in terms of postmodern playfulness, parody and self-reflexivity, which cause the reader to question all textual authority.

Margery Fee, in "Resistance and Complicity," analyzes *The Intended* as a semi- autobiographical *bildungsroman* in which the narrator's conflicting impulses toward assimilation and resistance are embodied, respectively, in Janet, his English girlfriend who dresses him in a symbolic white shirt to go to Oxford, and in Joseph Countryman, a fellow "nigger" and would-be artist who commits suicide but whose memory sustains the narrator at Oxford. The novel itself may be the result of the narrator's assimilation to the Oxford educational system, but it is also a reflection of the mature narrator's hybridity in that it also resists the system. In discussing "Psychic Divisions" in Dabydeen's writings, Mario Relich says little about Janet; rather, Relich studies the narrator's alternating attraction and repulsion to his peers — Joseph Countryman, who is a pure but failed artist (and suicide), and Shaz, who is a financially successful pornographer and pimp. The narrator avoids both extremes of art divorced from reality and art as debased commodity. Relich also studies the psychic conflicts between purity and despoliation in *Slave Song* and between Dabydeen as a Guyanese as opposed to an English writer in *Coolie Odyssey*. Jean Popeau considers *Disappearance* as a re-writing of *Heart of Darkness*, in which a black in England, the colonial center, visits a very traditional village in search of the essential England but, like Conrad's Marlow, finds only darkness and unresolved mystery.

Finally, Karen McIntyre studies Dabydeen's long poem *Turner* (1994) as the "Embodiment of Postcolonial Creative Decolonisation."

She finds that the author-speaker is fully successful in avoiding the colonizer-colonized binary, thereby arriving at a condition of "full creative decolonisation" (142) which makes possible a "creativity untainted by the dis/ease of colonialism" (141) — the very condition that Dabydeen, in condemning postcolonial political correctness, has said he coveted. However, McIntyre's discussion is so overladen with postcolonial theory and jargon that the poem itself — one of the most important and most difficult recent long poems in English — seems neglected or overwhelmed by theory. If McWatt raises the important question of how postcolonial theory affects creative writing, then McIntyre's essay raises the equally important question of how helpful postcolonial theory is in interpreting its textual subjects. McIntyre seems more concerned to make the poem fit postcolonial theory than to explicate the inherent genius of the poem, which might best be achieved by first giving it a close structural reading.

One larger, nagging problem that arises in this anthology, as well as in other postcolonial criticism, especially of Caribbean literature, concerns the nature of language — especially Creole English — and its presumed meaning. For instance, Dabydeen says that Creole English is a "naturally tragic language . . . no doubt reflecting the brokenness and suffering of its original users" (28). In being a synthesis of English and African grammatical features, Creole is no more a "broken" language than Standard English is a "decayed" language due to having lost its inflections in the Middle English period. Nor is Creole a "naturally tragic language." In fact, one of its most persistent uses in literature has been for comic effect. No language is tragic; only the experiences of its speakers may be. Languages are merely useful tools of expression that have evolved to meet the needs of their speaking communities. No meaning inheres in their grammars, although *particular uses by their speakers* may communicate brokenness or tragedy or comedy.

Some of the critics echo Dabydeen. Fee refers to "the rational order enforced by Standard English" and "the apparently haphazard one of Creole" (86). In fact, the grammar (system) of Standard English is no less arbitrary (haphazard) than Creole, and the grammar of Creole is no less regular (rational) than is Standard English. Welsh, who builds on Dabydeen's notion of "brokenness," says that Creole English is "an informal emotive language strongly associated with intimacy and group solidarity rather than distance or divisiveness amongst speakers, able to offer a refreshing directness in place of the abstraction of sophistication [sic] of 'Standard English'" (32). Here, Welsh obviously confuses language with the kinds of lives and attitudes found in *some* of its speakers. And, of course, any poet of distinction knows exactly how to use Standard English for "refreshing directness" of statement. If Standard English seems more "abstract" than Creole English, this is because Creole has fewer words for abstract ideas, because thus far its speakers have been constrained from using Creole in learned discourse. Like all languages, when its speakers find it necessary to use abstractions, the vocabulary of Creole will expand, whether by means of its well-established word-formation processes or by borrowing and adapting words from other languages.

Of course, this is too large a subject for a book review. But such essentializing representations of language — more "perceptual" than "descriptive" linguistics — do weaken the authority of essays in which they are found, communicating impressionism, ideology and cultural chauvinism rather than defensible, reasoned positions.

Despite such occasional lapses, Kevin Grant's anthology is a fine introduction to the work of an important diasporic writer whose work is too little known outside of England, where his poetry and fiction have been published.

ERVIN BECK

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Helen Gilbert. *Sightlines: Race, Gender, and Nation in Contemporary Australian Theatre.* Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1998. Pp. x, 274. $49.50 hardcover, $21.95 pb.; Helen Gilbert, ed. *(Post)Colonial Stages: Critical & Creative Views on Drama, Theatre & Performance.* Hebden Bridge, West Yorkshire: Dangaroo Press, 1999. Pp. 279. £14.95 pb.

These two volumes of theatre and performance analysis clearly establish Helen Gilbert as one of the most insightful critics in postcolonial studies. *Sightlines,* with its sharp and perceptive Australian focus, complements the enormously useful *Post-colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics* that Gilbert co-authored with Joanne Tompkins (Routledge, 1996). *(Post)Colonial Stages* opens up the debate of these earlier books through a rich and productive collection of writing by some of the other well-known scholars in this field. Moreover, *(Post)Colonial Stages* brings critical writing into provocative juxtaposition with creative and related work.

*Sightlines* takes as its subject the last 20 years of Australian drama and explores, as Gilbert describes it, "the ways in which diverse playwrights have articulated responses to imperialism as the major historical force still shaping Australian society" (2). She sees her work, and rightly so, as a much-needed, extended study of the many different types of plays that constitute contemporary Australian theatrical production. Her methodology is grounded firmly in the practices and inquiries of postcolonial studies, with Gilbert reminding us that "postcolonialism is both a textual effect and a reading strategy. Its theoretical practice often operates on two levels, attempting at once to elucidate the postcoloniality that inheres in certain texts, and to unveil and deconstruct any remnant colonialist power" (7). She does