

A Critique of Postcolonial Reason does not simply announce the conceptual bankruptcy of a US-based postcolonial theory, but encourages its implied academic reader to engage in an ethical reading practice that is more appropriate to articulate the contingent and non-systematic social agencies of disenfranchised groups. Such a call for an ethical response to the trace of the other is crucial to the future horizons of contemporary materialist thought. However, this ethical promise remains more speculative in its necessary refusal of a stable epistemological standpoint, and would need to be supplemented by a more substantive articulation of the everyday lives and social practices of the contemporary subaltern groups that Spivak invokes.

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Perhaps it's the ubiquity of the word "community" in the mouths of insincere politicians and naively wishful social activists on both left and right that makes me squirm a little when I hear it. Raymond Williams's observation from years ago that the term "never seems to be used unfavorably" is, like so many of Williams's observations, still true. Community is what we all seem to want. But what is it anyway, and would we want it if we had it? Is the phrase "intentional community" an oxymoron? Is a community made up of others just like us, or rather others we live with despite our differences? Can't tightly-knit communities be more like straitjackets than cosy sweaters? Did our grandparents and great-grandparents really have what we often miss, or have better lives in consequence? Why do we wax nostalgic about other people's communities, whether Amish or Amazonian?

This fine collection of essays, which comes out of a 1992 conference at the University of Saskatchewan, will give readers of various disciplinary and (dare I say) community backgrounds ample space to reflect on such questions; I highly recommend it.

Not that all the essays escape nostalgia. George Melnyk, for example, writes out of a "sense of loss" (103) for Doukhobor communities now that

the Doukhobors live peaceably amongst their non-Doukhobor neighbours without bombings or nude protests (the Doukhobors were communalists who emigrated from Russia to Western Canada in 1899). His article provides interesting capsule histories of the Doukhobors and another group with some similarities, the Hutterites — along with a sketch of a state-supported Co-op farm project as a comparison. And yet Melnyk never articulates what made life so good for the communal Doukhobors, or asks whether, if we apply the word “community” to northern British Columbia, the absence of violence is not a community gain rather than a loss. He develops a formula by which one might measure a communal project’s chances of survival, without considering whether all communal projects are equally emancipatory. Here T. D. Regehr’s essay is more balanced: while Regehr obviously admires many traits of Mennonite tradition, he does recognize that the changes of the 1940s and 1950s in that community reduced gender inequities, freed people from sometimes coerced conformity, and also led to the development of new Mennonite traditions such as their now-famed international development and disaster relief organizations.

To be fair, part of Melnyk’s argument is that collision with the state produced the dissolution of Doukhobor communities; hence comes some of his anger; and this collision is documented in different contexts by other authors in this book. Daniel Ish shows how the Canadian courts have consistently run roughshod over the stated intentions of co-operatives, siding always with management and never with members. Ish calls for more education about what cooperatives are, but his other message is, “keep your head down” — solve your problems at home — something the Doukhobors didn’t do, to their peril. Maria Campbell’s people, the Métis, didn’t even have to raise their heads to attract the controlling hand of the state. In a short but immensely powerful piece, Campbell remembers the spring ritual of the “Indian burn,” a family and spiritual celebration as much as an agricultural practice.

When Campbell was nine years old, the burn was outlawed, and she reports that subsequently, environmental reports and old farmers alike praised it. But consistent in her volitional conception of memory, Campbell says “I don’t remember what the reasons were” (88). Nor does she remember all the songs the grannies sang. Some forgetting is forced, other forgetting is chosen, but the bits and pieces are enough for rebuilding, she asserts. Community is never reified for Campbell, even if its loss is a constant refrain. Perhaps this is because she is Métis: and Louise Halfe-Skywalker’s poems in this book remind us that the Métis, born in mobility, hard work, desire, and violence, could never see community as something pure and primordial.

Of the four explicitly theoretical pieces in the book, I found Linda Hutcheon’s and Alan Campbell’s the most thought-provoking. Hutcheon offers an acute commentary on the controversy over “Into the Heart

of Africa," a 1989 exhibit at Toronto's Royal Ontario Museum. She argues that the curators misconstrued the community to which they were speaking: they foregrounded the imperialist assumptions that shaped the ROM's African collection, which was mostly donated by ex-missionaries in the nineteenth century. But promotion for the show, and parts of the show, suggested it was a show about Africa itself, and African or African-Canadian viewers were shocked by the racist attitudes represented in the exhibit. This was a sad case of differing community norms; in fact, both the protestors and the curators were critical of imperialist attitudes, but the way the curators framed the show made it impossible for them to talk with each other.

Alan Campbell closes the collection with an engaging essay about the dangers of oversimplifying the way we, or others, construe identity. His reference point is an isolated community in the Brazilian rain forest which challenges Benedict Anderson's now-ubiquitous idea of "imagined communities": their self-definition would be, Campbell says, "obdurately positivistic, obdurately commonsensical, and final. . . . What you've got is a vast expanse of forest. In the middle of it there is a tiny group of 150 people — they speak their own language, they wear red loin clothes, they have bows and arrows. What could your question [about identity] be?" (184). Campbell argues passionately that today's pop psychology yen to figure out what it "really is" to be a "fill in the category blank: race, gender, class, ethnic group, national category, even academic specialization" (196) is an utterly irresponsible compromise to the unfortunate human tendency to divide the world into categories. A distorting nostalgia for the innocent ethnocentricity of the people in the rain forest, it actually erases the particularity of the way they might think about themselves, and allows us to naturalize categories we should be imagining ourselves out of.

My use of the words "us," "we," and "ourselves" raises the question of who this collection is addressed to. The introduction positions the book as an academic project; in fact, non-academic readers will probably want to skip the introduction and the first article, which dwell rather thickly on the university as a community and as a site for understanding community. (I'm all in favour of self-consciousness, but putting it first can be as exclusionary as not doing it, and I found the editorial descriptions of the articles to be rather heavy-handed for a book that celebrates multiple sites of meaning.) But the thing that really makes this book work is that each writer uses the language of a particular community — Métis, analytical philosophy, history of co-operatives, "theory," etc. — while making an effort to demonstrate the relevance and comprehensibility of their ideas to those other than the people they usually talk with. These essays don't cohere, but they do talk to each other, and thus they model a realistic and complex understanding of "community."

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Annie Gagiano. *Achebe, Head, Marechera: On Power and Change in Africa*. London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000. Pp. 307. \$59.95.

Annie Gagiano's book *Achebe, Head, Marechera: On Power and Change in Africa* is a highly lucid account of fifteen works by these three authors. Gagiano undertakes close readings of the texts, in a dense but deft style, with the effect that we encounter or revisit the texts with a sustained sense of their specificities — of the specific knowledges, themes, images, philosophies and political languages that they embody. It is a refreshing approach which recentres the texts beyond critical orthodoxies that may have the effect of fracturing or silencing the novels themselves, and it is one that is very deliberately undertaken.

Gagiano argues that particularly in the case of texts that are not sufficiently well known such as those she has chosen (this is debatable, particularly in the case of Achebe) and in the context of an ongoing battle for African self-worth and recognition, it is important to listen for the authors' own communications rather than to perform theoretical readings which are often in her view based on superficial engagements with the texts. Such readings, she asserts, are more about the staging of critic's preoccupations than about learning from the texts themselves. Gagiano is adept at exposing what she calls the "arrogance of theory" (31), and unfashionably attempts to adopt an approach which is "appreciative rather than critical," placing herself in the role of "serving the texts" and writing a text which she says is "not untouched by theory, [but] is not of a primarily theoretical nature" (36). It is an approach which the author herself acknowledges is risky and would hardly gain ground given the potency of so many "theoretical readings," if it were not for two things — first, the fact that Gagiano knows the texts she writes about so well, and second, that she has read the theoretical material (for the most part) thoroughly.

One of the features of the book is that, beyond a brief engagement with "theorists" in the introduction, very few references to the works of critics appear in the text. We are spared the litany and deferential incantation to what she calls "famous scholars" that beleaguers so much critical writing and makes it tedious and uncomfortable to read. Instead Gagiano uses extensive endnotes to engage briefly with some critics or enlarge on or extrapolate, like "fingers on a hand," from the main body of the text. We are to a large extent presented with what Gagiano describes as "a delight in and a sense of the value of these writers' skills," and her own attempts to create a space in which these novelists are "allowed" independently "to demonstrate their profound recognition" of the workings of various forms of power and change. Gagiano even goes so far as to decline, beyond what she calls the deliberate "fluidity" of her two overarching themes, power and change, to establish comparative themes between the texts she discusses, anxious to avoid interference with the full

attention she wishes to accord each text. Gagiano decries the title "post-colonial" in relation to her own work, preferring nothing more than "African English Fiction" (21) to designate her area of study. In a brief engagement with postcolonialism in the introduction she offers her views on critical work emerging from this field. She sees: a) a subordination of indigenous, local realities; b) an unstated assumption that human beings are monolingual; and c) not enough respect to the insights of creative writers, citing an over-emphasis on generalisation, condescension and failure in "sympathy and due respect" (30) towards African writers (here she cites Appiah's readings of Achebe), and a "deductive" rather than her own preferred "inductive" approach to reading texts (31).

These, then, are some of the most valid and compelling aspects of Gagiano's book. The main body of the text is written with such close attention to the specificity of particular character's trajectories, particular verbal and symbolic echoes and overlays, that any overarching summary would be useless. Suffice to say that Gagiano draws out the skill, power, integrity and reach of these texts, and that such chapters would be a vital antidote for students (as well as critics and researchers) overexposed to theoretically dense readings. To a reader who was trained in, but largely came to disavow, the fish-bowl effect of New Criticism, Gagiano's text has been a valuable reminder of the importance of reading texts closely and in context. While she rejects the excesses of literary theory for well argued reasons, her book does also provide us with ample space for debate about what Africa represents, about so-called African realities and about how we elucidate the thematics of power and change in the African context.

Gagiano begins with a question and a number of observations about the place of Africa and Africans in relation to the world. Her framing question, and what she identifies as "the most crucial question of our time," is "how are the perceived inequalities of the global system to be addressed?" (2). She places her study, too, in the context of an "ongoing primitive resistance in the minds of many first World academics against associating the notion of civilisation with the lives of black Africans" (here she cites for instance the concerted attacks on Bernal's *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilisation* and the fact that a number of publishers' lists produced in 1998 of the century's best one hundred books in English did not cite a single African author). For Gagiano, the need to achieve "an acknowledgement of the non-Western world in the victorious West" (8), the need to "integrate the world" remains the paramount context for African intellectuals.

In her contextualisation of contemporary Africa she draws on three critics in particular whose work, as she puts it, resonates, with her own. First, she quotes Amílcar Cabral on cultural freedom as constituting fundamentally "a return to the upward paths of [their] own culture, which is nourished by the living reality of its environment." Second, she draws on

Frantz Fanon writing of "meaningful liberatory change." She quotes his view that the "education of the masses" is and must be based on the insight that the "demiurge is the people themselves and the magic hands are finally only the hands of the people" (35). Third, she finds useful the work of Abiola Irele, including his view that an African text's "legitimacy . . . come(s) from its original African quality and its relevance to contemporary African existence" (45).

The problem with these approaches is that each in its own way assumes what the dimensions of African reality are, and what might be good or bad for Africans by framing them in the general terms of neo-colonialism. Yet this is only one possible frame within which to view contemporary African reality, and one which has its limits. Moreover, the critical statements which Gagiano finds most useful all beg numerous further questions. She often turns to Achebe as a cultural commentator and quotes him in the introduction as saying: "an African creative writer who tries to avoid the big social and political issues of contemporary Africa will end up being completely irrelevant." Which issues are these — and what is relevant and irrelevant? What would Achebe see as being "irrelevant"? And Irele? And Gagiano? Gagiano relies on other such statements which affirm the value of "relevance." She argues for what she calls a participatory understanding on the part of the reader, a "committed" reading, based on a belief that the issues raised in the novels "matter" (37). Can we be so sure "what matters"? Do we know, when it comes to Africa (or elsewhere) what matters? Gagiano might have considered an even wider range of framing questions for her study. When she, and those writers and critics she enlists in her introduction, rely on overly general statements about the African world and African identity, they risk a reliance on dichotomous categories which miss the range of interstitial identities and alternative intellectual topographies of which these identities and worlds also speak. One of the results is a somewhat defensive stance in some of the readings Gagiano offers.

In one of her endnotes, Gagiano takes critic Rob Nixon to task for his reading of Bessie Head in a well known essay. She quotes Nixon as referring to "Head's fondness for generating men with whom to fall in love. Her mythically resonant male leads tend to serve simultaneously as fathers and lovers, they also stand, paradoxically, as the offspring of female creative desire and the catalysts of female power." Nixon, Gagiano avers, "is condescending towards Head and the important political and sociocultural purposes of her work. To write about her work in this way is to 're-duce' the author who overcame so many handicaps, to those very handicaps themselves — as if they explain what and why she wrote" (195). This seems to me a dangerous path to take. By emphasizing the "political and sociocultural purposes" of Head's work, Gagiano insists on what looks like a narrowly political reading. Gagiano might have more convincingly pursued her much stronger point of contention with Nix-

on, which is his failure to discuss Head's own frequent and "ocularly self-deprecating references to 'love affairs'" with male characters in her work.

There is nevertheless an important point which emerges here, one which has wider consequences for the way we read literary — and other — texts. Gagiano sees no point in "going beyond" what the authors have to say, in their texts or in their critical pronouncements. Many contemporary literary critical readings, on the other hand, have found it useful to articulate what writers don't or can't or are unwilling to say. The silences of texts, in other words, become new points of entry for a complex understanding of author and text. This way of reading has come in particular from psychoanalytic criticism and post-structuralism, and Gagiano displays an impatience with both. Gagiano contends that "symptomatic" readings (readings of the unsaid in the text) become acts of projection. The trouble is that Head and Marechera, in particular, engage with issues of identity via the psychic world — this is part of their radical questioning of African subjectivity and "reality." The text themselves stage an engagement with the unconscious, an engagement that must revolve around a dialectic of that which is seen and that which is hidden. Is it useful, then, to disavow a critical method that aims to expand our understanding of African subjectivities via both psychic and realist trajectories? Both Head, in her powerful and famous text *A Question of Power*, and Marechera, in most of his work, write about sexuality in deeply complex ways. Gagiano, though, gives only passing attention to this aspect of the texts, and subsumes the sexual in an unsatisfactory way within her overarching theme of "power." The Medusa figure who so haunts Elizabeth in Head's book, Gagiano reductively says, "mainly represents African xenophobia" (159). Marechera's persistent image of the "GREAT CUNT" is relegated to one of many images of "engulfment" on which Marechera draws (228). Gagiano seems reticent to discuss the complexity of such images on their own terms, relying largely on what the authors themselves have said. Here, again, she seems anxious to avoid critical voyeurism. The result is a desire, rather confusing to the reader, of not wanting to risk the "integrity" of the writers' overall projects by moving into areas the meanings of which neither authors nor critics may be fully able to control — at least within the paradigm in which they have so far chosen to speak. It seems significant that Gagiano does not consult the important work of psychoanalytic critic Jacqueline Rose on sexuality and madness in Head's texts.

Gagiano's concluding remarks build on her introductory framings and are, in some of their manifestations, somewhat disappointing. She uses the rather tired reference to *The Tempest* to make overarching concluding statements about "equal kinship," the recognition of Africans as not "things of darkness," the founding of "responsible complementarity," and about the need to end the confrontational standoff between the Afrocentric and Eurocentric claims to civilisation and to strive for a balanced

inclusivity (275-78). In her very last sentence she draws on a quotation from Bessie Head: “largeness of heart,” Head wrote, “is what we need for a civilisation and big, big eyes, wide enough to drink in all the knowledge of the heavens and earth” (278). This, certainly, is the challenge, and Head’s words restore what is best in Gagliano’s project — the chapters which focus on the texts themselves. I have suggested that these, too, suffer on occasion from an overly narrow definition of the relationship between writing and politics. Anxious to set up the writers as theorists-in-fiction, she nevertheless sometimes limits where the writing leads or where she as reader might be taken. Notwithstanding the above, this is a detailed, well researched and competent work which deserves to be consulted by all scholars in the field.

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Rachel Rubin. *Jewish Gangsters of Modern Literature*. Chicago: U of Illinois P, 2000. Pp. 189. \$29.95.

Some of the most indelible screen images of what might be called America’s ethnic heroes are portraits of gangsters. The mafiosi of Francis Ford Coppola’s *Godfather* sagas, the Jewish no-goodniks of *Bugsy* and *Miller’s Crossing*, convey the transgressive power of criminality, along with the possibilities presented by a life of crime for assimilating into the American mainstream. This paradox — the gangster as a rebel who longs to fit in — is at the core of Rachel Rubin’s *Jewish Gangsters of Modern Literature*. The book’s title over-reaches, since the authors under discussion are three American novelists of the 1920s and ’30s, along with Isaac Babel, whose life and work Rubin uses as touchstones in essays on Samuel Ornitz, Mike Gold, and Daniel Fuchs.

Rubin argues that Babel’s tales of Odessa, starring the indefatigable gangster Benya Krik, are archetypal texts that help us examine “how the figure of the Jewish gangster has functioned as a metaliterary tool for experimental Jewish writers concerned with finding their artistic place in an era characterized by artistic and social experimentation” (119.) Like many other aspects of this study, the relationship between Babel and the Americans could be clearer: we’re never sure if Babel was a direct influence, or if Rubin simply seeks to find similarities between him and the trio of Ornitz, Gold, and Fuchs. Another problem she must overcome is the rather glaring difference in quality and staying power between Babel’s work and that of the others under discussion. Because the Americans — as Rubin admits — are little read today, readers may find the comparisons drawn in *Jewish Gangsters* difficult to credit. Unfortunately, the excerpted material from Fuchs, Ornitz, and Gold will not likely send readers back to their novels.