

Book Reviews

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Susheila Nasta and Mark U. Stein, editors. *The Cambridge History of Black and Asian British Writing*. Cambridge UP, 2020. Pp. xxiv, 732. US\$130 (cloth).

[Note from the *ARIEL* editors: This review was commissioned and accepted by Reviews Editor Kit Dobson independent of the special issue guest editors.]

*The Cambridge History of Black and Asian British Writing* is a welcome compilation of recent critical work in this important area of literary and cultural studies, which, until the 1980s, suffered the same ill that it now historicizes: the invisibility of Black and Asian writing. Arranged chronologically and divided into three parts by editors Susheila Nasta and Mark U. Stein, the book deals with a large time frame ranging from the eighteenth century to the contemporary moment. This organizational choice showcases the increasing complexity of Black and Asian British writing and highlights the growing body of academic work that engages with it. The essays in the volume are generally well written and balanced. Some essays, however, are particularly striking in their ability to open up critical horizons and deepen readers' understanding of cultural and historical contexts.

Part I of the collection presents overlapping histories of prominent authors like Dean Mahomet and Ignatius Sancho and positions eighteenth-century Black writing as an important archive of resistance to and rebellion from slavery through autobiographical and travel accounts. Antoinette Burton's discussion of the number of travel books that narrativize heroism by upending stereotypes is an important corrective to the official version of Britain that the Empire propagated abroad. In these texts, Burton writes, Britain emerges as a fugitive destination and "the metropole itself may be thought of as every bit as multiracial as Britain's extraterritorial possessions" (42). If in many classic eighteenth-century texts Britain is seen and represented as exclusively white, Burton's essay is an important corrective that helps readers to view England from another angle.

Part II broadly deals with works from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but two essays focusing on modernism stand out for their important insights into how the definition of British modernism expands and deepens when Black and Asian British writing is read within the otherwise narrowly defined and predominantly white canon. Anna Snaith writes of "mobile modernisms" (116) that show the versatility of writers like Una Marson, G. V.

Desani, and Aubrey Menon. Reading the work of these authors alongside the traditional British canon, Snaith contends, undercuts modernism's latent Eurocentric focus and brings its multiracial and multicultural facets—hitherto ignored—to the fore. Mpalive-Hangson Msiska alerts readers to what he calls “wide-angled modernities” (227) and further tilts the viewing glass to show that interpreting the work of authors like V. S. Naipaul, Sam Selvon, and Wilson Harris as modernist allows new ideas, genres, and perceptions to alter our understanding of modernism. This retrospective colouring of the canon is an all-important first step in setting the direction for what is still to come in British writing.

The 1948 arrival of the SS *Empire Windrush* in England is often positioned as the genesis of Black Britain; refreshingly, Nasta and Stein's volume interrogates this notion both historically and literally. In her essay “Looking Back, Looking Forward,” Alison Donnell argues that not only did many ships before the *Windrush* bring Black people to England but that there is a need “for an expanded and pluralized account of black British subjects and the impact they have made” (197). Donnell points out the masculine bias inherent in the Windrush canon and shows the emergence of new women writers that is beginning to receive much deserved critical attention. At the same time, she restores a “mobile dimension” to the Windrush narrative so that “creative negotiations around the production of identity are not solely focused on Britain” (207), effectively pluralizing codes of literary study and introducing some much-needed heterogeneity.

The volume's focus on materiality is a crucial element in its contributors' pursuit to establish the anti-colonial and anti-racist aspect of a number of writers, genres, and forms; in doing so, they critique the British Empire and the vision of race that emerged through its metropolis—London. Contrary to the image of the city presented in the traditional canon, the collection's contributors draw on a number of resources to demonstrate how a pluralistic London offers space for the emergence of a vibrant anti-establishment literary ethos. Pallavi Rastogi's essay on print and photojournalism, Ruvani Ranasinha's piece on the establishment of platforms like little magazines, Gail Low's focus on materialist histories, and Nicola Abram's work on anthologies and collections exemplify this important historicist-materialist reading of literature.

The historical developments, complexities, and entanglements of forms and genres like life writing, novels, poetry, and drama are well-represented in this *History* and offer what Nasta and Stein rightly call “multifaceted lineages” that generate “layered and intricate topographies” (6). Contrary to

what one might imagine, supposedly traditional works present important political ideas that often stake a claim in the way their authors wish to be received in the British imagination and, in the process, reconfigure what it means to be British.

How should Britain imagine itself? How can Black and Asian British writing help Britain to reevaluate itself in the Brexit era? John McLeod's focus on Bernardine Evaristo's reimaginings of London's colonized past along with Caryl Phillips' and Hanif Kureishi's writing serves as a starting point for the collection's interrogation of the nation as a category of thought. The developing body of work like McLeod's complicates the possibility of viewing Britain's origins "in terms of national or racial purity or to think of migration to the country as a modern phenomenon" (463)—or, as Bénédicte Ledent observes, of the "futility of authenticity" (308). She notes that it is paramount that "a transcultural optic" (309) be used to review Britain's relationship with all those it considers racially, ethnically, historically Other. This volume's ability to highlight this concern is one of its many successful features. However, the absence of any substantial engagement with or critical comment on the work of authors like Kamila Shamsie, Tahmima Anam, Neel Mukherjee, and Imtiaz Dharker is a gap that alerts us to ongoing need for academia to engage in conversation with the dynamic creative output of the South Asian diaspora. Their inclusion would enrich the panoramic vista that the volume sets up.

Part III, which deals with the twenty-first century, raises questions that are as important as those presented in the previous two sections. The essays underline the constant threat posed by the "refurbishment of prejudice" (454), to use McLeod's memorable phrase, and highlight new works—particularly works of pop culture—that signal light at the end of tunnel. Whether it be in film and new media, children's literature, queer expression, or the crime novel, the increasing presence of Black and Asian voices and accents are productively contaminating what Britain consumes and what it assumes to be its own. Sarah Upstone's sobering warning that we have not yet arrived at a post-ethnic fantasy will indeed keep the spirit of critical reflection alive as we chart new futures and look back at the ground we have covered thus far.

The editors' aim, as set out in the text's introduction, is to be heterogenous, historicist, plural, and porous; they wish to focus on the material conditions of production and reception with the desire that the collection will interrogate established frameworks. They hope that the volume will "go some way towards setting a critical agenda, opening dialogues and imagining a future

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which will be unstable but productively and creatively so” (20): this they have achieved resoundingly.

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