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British and African Literature in Transnational Context

Simon Lewis

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Simon Lewis's *British and African Literature in Transnational Context* is an ambitious but timely book that engages in a comparative analysis of British and African

texts. The table of contents alone attests to the geographical, generational, and generic scope of this study, which takes readers “[f]rom Igboland to the East End,” from Equiano to Emecheta, and from Eliot to Soyinka. Lewis draws on Edward Said’s model of “contrapuntal” textual pairings and takes Chinua Achebe’s famous critique of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* as a point of departure. Appropriately for a twenty-first century study, Lewis indicts both Conrad, for his nineteenth-century colonialist representation of Africa, and Achebe, for reinforcing dated binary constructions of Africa in his twentieth-century novel *Things Fall Apart*.

The books aim to “make the case that if we are to look to literature as a truly liberating force for Africa and Africans, we must move beyond both the Africanism of colonialist discourse *and* the Africanism of pan-Africanist rhetoric” (4). In order to explore the possibilities for this progressive Africanism in contemporary literature, Lewis examines a range of case studies, which “include canonical writers (Achebe, Emecheta, Soyinka, T. S. Eliot, Caryl Churchill) and not-yet canonical writers (Gurnah, Hollinghurst, Van Wyk, Christiansë) from both African and British traditions” (2). Lewis lays the foundation for this project effectively in the introduction, defining key theoretical terms like “transnational” and invoking the voices of Said and Anthony Appiah to contextualize the book’s place in literary criticism. Instead of making overly broad claims about the very different groups of texts that he examines, Lewis modestly promotes “readings” that “un[do] some of the damage” (17) of the two aforementioned Africanisms.

The readings themselves are organized into three overarching sections: postcolonial geographies, colonial histories, and the new transnational South. The first section strikes a counterpoint between “the masculinist indigenist poetics of the Achebe of *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* and [Buchi] Emecheta’s Black Atlantic affiliationist poetics” (39). Lewis argues that Emecheta’s novel *Kehinde* illustrates “the artificiality of national identity in the nation-state of Nigeria” (40), “how expatriation facilitates a pan-Nigerian national identity that can trump intra-Nigerian difference” (40), and “the heterogeneity of English culture” (40). This section also examines the work of the more obscure Tanzanian writer Abdulrazak Gurnah, whose “immigrant” novels feature “never-quite-indigenous natives” (62) and complicate any essentialist notions of place and belonging.

The second section of the book shifts the focus to two contemporary white male British writers, William Boyd and Alan Hollinghurst, and their respective historical portrayals of East Africa. Lewis reads Boyd’s *An Ice-Cream War* against Gurnah’s *Paradise* to illustrate that “even well-meaning British writers about Africa cannot fully free themselves from the confines of colonial discourse” (76). Similarly, Lewis reads Hollinghurst’s *The Swimming-Pool Library* as a pioneering gay novel that nonetheless “creates a reified, monolithic idea of Africa typical of colonial discourse” (103). The last chapter of this section on colonial histories turns specifically to the genre of drama and places T. S. Eliot’s *The Cocktail Party* alongside

Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine* and Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*. The inclusion of Churchill, a white female British dramatist, and Soyinka, a Nigerian Nobel Laureate, adds greater depth to this section and the emphasis on drama provides yet another counterpoint to the earlier emphasis on novels. However, Lewis frames the plays in question as once again troubled or troubling for "permitting the repetition of stereotypical, historically incurious representations of Africa" (109). Soyinka is distinguished in this chapter for his more nuanced treatment of African experiences and for what Lewis identifies as his problematic exclusion from the English canon.

The final section of the book "shuttles" to the transnational South and considers works from South Africa and Zimbabwe, which arguably speak to the trope of re-storying Africa or "bringing back" Africa as the popular activist slogan and Lewis's section title "*Mayibuye iAfrika*" heralds. Lewis foregrounds South African Nobel Laureate J. M. Coetzee, whose novels *Life and Times of Michael K* and *Elizabeth Costello* are the respective counterpoints for K. Sello Duiker's *Thirteen Cents* and Chris Van Wyk's *Shirley, Goodness & Mercy*. Coetzee is ultimately indicted for "the Eurocentrism of his abstract intellectualism and his disengagement with South Africa's contemporary racial politics of human geography" (139). By comparison, Duiker and Van Wyk are positioned as more successful in re-storying Africa, in part because their works demonstrate a greater political and geographical stake in South Africa and its future. Lewis concludes the section by focusing on three women writers, Yvonne Vera, Zoë Wicomb, and Yvette Christiansë, whose fiction interrupts dominant nationalist and masculinist discourses, albeit in different ways. Where Vera's *Nehanda* is presented as a visionary feminist text that evades Western influences, Wicomb's *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* and Christiansë's *Castaway* are read as coloured texts that destabilize any simplistic notions of Africa and its return.

Lewis's study is a valuable contribution to black Atlantic scholarship and the works in question are examined with a creative eye and a deft hand. His contrapuntal readings afford the necessary structure and organization to what would otherwise be a very busy discussion of too many texts. What seems to be missing is a more thorough conclusion to tie the different sections together and to remind readers of whether a new Africanism is thriving in Anglo-African literature. The overall indication is that some of these texts succeed in negotiating between colonial Africanism and nationalist Africanism, whereas others fail. But the book certainly sheds light on the possibilities for literature as "a truly liberating force for Africa and Africans" (4) and reiterates the "transnational" nature of African identities and representations.

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